

# Breaking Free from the Lie

By

**Don Mullan**

From the first day I went to school I was in trouble with reading.

The year was 1961. It was a year that saw Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, become the first man in space and the year when newly elected John F. Kennedy promised the American people that they would win the race to the Moon. It was also the start of a decade when scientists and educators began to realise that specific learning disabilities, such as reading complications caused by dyslexia, weren't necessarily linked to a child's IQ.

Unfortunately for my generation, it would take a couple of decades more before their discoveries and innovative recommendations began to filter into the education system.

I do not hold any bitterness towards my primary or secondary school teachers. They were as ignorant as their pupils about dyslexia and its manifestations. With little awareness teachers engaged in a very flawed assessment process which assumed that reading ability was a barometer for measuring a child's intelligence. It was the beginning of a self-fulfilling prophecy that left an indelible mark of self-doubt on pupils who, like me, are dyslexic and which haunts legions of my generation to this day.

I went to St. Eugene's Boys Primary School, Rosemount, Derry. The same school which people of the calibre and celebrity status of John Hume, Joseph Locke and Eamon McCann attended. It was essentially a filter school, preparing pupils for a horrendous final examination called the eleven-plus. Those who passed were given a passport to the more academically inclined St. Columb's College, where university beckoned. Those who 'failed' were sent to a vocational 'Secondary School' where expectations led pupils generally towards factory work and the service industries.

From first grade to my final year at primary school I fluctuated between the last two rows on the teacher's left. Those to the teachers right were considered to be the 'brightest' or more intelligent and, inevitably, the best readers. As a child I very quickly learned my place in the stratosphere of intellectual giftedness. The system religiously adhered to a doctrine of predestination. There were some people born 'smart' and some born 'slow'. I happened to be in the latter. That's the way it was and there wasn't a lot I, or anyone associated with me, could do about it.

I still cringe at the thought of reading out loud before the class. Even though I would have spent hours the evening before with my mother learning the assigned homework pages from our reading book, 'Dick and Dora', the words presented themselves as a foreign language when I was in class.

The assumption, of course, was that my reading difficulties were simply due to a lack of grey matter. It was not a system that, unlike today, values the individuality

and uniqueness of the child. School was not a fun place to be. Learning was a chore, not a joy. Punishment for 'failure' reinforced the low self-esteem that characterises the dyslexic child. Struggling to read out loud, in the presence of children on the far side of the classroom who appeared to effortlessly excel, simply confirmed one's sense of stupidity. 'Dunce' was a word, thrown like a rotten egg in the playground, which shattered one's confidence and splattered one's self-image with negativity.

I learned in those early days the inherent power of words to wound or heal, especially when uttered by an adult. Teachers have immense power over children. Indeed, in my day, they were, along with certain other professions, placed on a pedestal that, to a child, made them seem like gods in suits. Teacher's should never underestimate how a throw away remark, either negative or positive, can leave an indelible mark. There are two teachers, in particular, who taught me the nobility and horror of the teaching profession at primary level.

My favourite teacher was Master Flood, the first male teacher I encountered in fourth grade. He had a compassionate and caring nature which I recall with gratitude and respect almost four decades later. There was never a sense of frustration or favouritism. When his eyes engaged you, you knew you were looking at an adult who liked and valued you. There was lots of variety, encouragement and laughter in our World War II maisonette hut, which, despite the freezing winters and coal stove, I recall as a place of warmth and welcome. To this day I am transported back to Master Flood's classroom when I hear many of the songs he taught us: the sighing laments of 'The Castle of Dromore' and 'The Spinning Wheel' and my favourite, the cheerful ballad, 'The Mocking Bird Hill'. Forty years later I do not recall any words spoken by John Flood. I only recall kindness.

I had just turned eleven in my final year at Primary School when our class was placed with Master G whose task it was to prepare us for the 11+ examination. We had him for no more than three weeks but his influence stayed with me for as many decades. I learned from him that the average intelligent quotient was measured at 100. In the pre-examination tests I was scoring an average of 76-84, reinforcing an already wounded self-image.

After our two or three weeks with Master G he drew up a list of those whom he considered capable of passing the examination. He duly read it aloud. He then asked if there was anyone else in the class whose name was not on the list but who wanted to sit the exam. I raised my hand.

With fixed gaze he looked at me. Then, with a pitiful smirk, he lowered his head and spoke the words, "You've no chance!" They were uttered with caustic cynicism and the laughter of my classmates, in response, indelibly recorded his words in my mind. Those words played over and over and over again, filling me with immense insecurities and self-doubt for almost thirty years. I still cringe with the memory of the humiliation they visited upon me at that moment.

Twenty-seven years later, aged 38, shortly after 2.30pm on Tuesday 16 March 1993, I met Sr. Thérèse Kennelly, a kinesiologist, who, after a short consultation, turned to me and spoke a life changing question: "Do you realise you are dyslexic?" The words

were felt like a knock-out punch. There was part of me that wanted to sit down and mourn the loss of a childhood of hope.

It was an extraordinary insight that set me on the road of reflection and exploration. Within five days a leading educational psychologist, trained in the area of specific learning disabilities, confirmed Sr. Thérèse's pronouncement. Yes, I was dyslexic but, contrary to my primary school experience, I was a person with a reasonably high IQ.

The report I received from the educational psychologist stated to my complete surprise and amazement:

*In order to get an independent and objective rating of Don's overall intelligence I applied the Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices. It was interesting to note that Don was not content with his success of Set 1 (11/12 correct) but insisted on completing Set 2 as well... On non-verbal items Don's intelligence lies somewhere on a par with the top 5% of the population.*

I offer this insight, not as a boast, but as a glimpse at my confusion and bewilderment. I have learned enough in life to realise that education should teach us how little we know, not how much we know. It should be a journey that ultimately leads to humility. But this assessment was indicating the very opposite of what I had been led to believe in Primary School. Even in Secondary School I had a Careers Guidance teacher who, on examination of my English and maths results, told me I should be thinking of a labouring job when I left school.

As the implications of the report began to sink in, the words "You've no chance" echoed in my head with renewed vigour. However, they no longer conjured feelings of self-doubt and dispondency but a volcano of rage. My first thought was the teacher who spoke them. I needed to confront him with the decades of damage he had done and the potential he had crushed. I turned to my favourite primary teacher, John Flood, a colleague of the teacher I was gunning for. "He's dead", he told me. "He died six months ago." "Lucky him!" I thought.

Nonetheless, I needed to confront the phantom of my childhood whose harsh words had squatted in the recesses of my memory. So, on my next visit to Derry I found his grave. It may seem strange but I visited his final resting place on three different occasions since I needed to get as close to eyeballing him as I could. In those private and silent moments I moved from malicious anger to a spirit of forgiveness for what I can only describe as his emotional and mental abuse of a child.

Several years before I had confided to a close friend, Fr. Jim O'Halloran, the author of several books, that I thought I might be dyslexic. I had watched a television documentary on the subject and thought I could recognise patterns in my own experience. "You couldn't be dyslexic," he replied. "How would you have got through college?" It was a good question. For so long I thought I had somehow managed to get through by default.

Jim's response is, however, indicative of the hidden handicap that dyslexia most certainly is. To those who don't have it and who are unaware of its invidious

influence on the individual who struggles with it, it is elusive and incomprehensible. Some refuse to accept its existence, preferring instead to cling to old notions that reading difficulties are generally a sign of laziness, daydreaming, inattentiveness or stupidity. Even worse, to the individual who struggles with it, without understanding or knowing its inhibiting nature, dyslexia is like walking through life in a perpetual fog of self-doubt.

Today I can honestly say that the moment Sr. Thérèse spoke her question it was the most liberating and unexpected of my life. It set me on a journey of self-discovery that led me in a direction I hitherto had never thought possible. Indeed, while I can still feel frustrated with the limitations which dyslexia imposes upon me, I nonetheless recall Sr. Thérèse's question as akin to the life changing revelation of Saul on the road to Damascus. And that is no exaggeration.

In its aftermath a whole new world opened before me and I found myself engaged in tasks and challenges I would never have had the courage to tackle before.

Unquestionably, the most remarkable was my chance encounter with a young man called Tony Doherty a few months later while visiting my widowed mother in Derry. Tony's father, Patrick, was one of the 14 people shot dead by British Paratroopers on Bloody Sunday. We stopped to chat during which Tony told me he had read my statement about the tragic events of 30 January 1972. "What statement?" I enquired. "The one you made the day after Bloody Sunday," he replied.

I had completely forgotten, but Tony's reminder brought back a flood of memories. At 15 I had witnessed the events of Bloody Sunday at close quarters. I was near the rubble barricade on Rossville Street, Derry, when the paratroopers made their advance. It was my first Northern Ireland Civil Rights march. 17-year-old Michael Kelly, one of the 14 killed, was just two feet from me when I saw him crumple and collapse, his cry filling the air with despair and disbelief. To my right I saw the bullets spit dust as they thundered into the barricade and I recall in the confused trauma others to my right gasping with pain as they fell to the ground.

The following day I retraced my steps with my best friend, Shaunie McLaughlin and later that evening I recounted my experience of Bloody Sunday to a mutual but older friend, Murray Gormley, who was the assistant manager of our soccer team, Derry Athletic FC. Murray knew that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the British National Council for Civil Liberties were taking statements from eyewitnesses and he thought I should, based on my experience, make one. Both he and Shaunie walked me through the sad and silent streets of the Creggan Estate to the Holy Child Primary School where I made my statement.

Almost 24 years later, I was curious as to what I had said. The following week I was back in Derry and Tony Doherty arranged for me to visit a Human Rights Centre where my statement was held. I vividly recall John Kelly, the brother of Michael Kelly, and Michael McKinney (whose brother William also died that day) searching an old battered filing cabinet. Eventually they produced a well-worn plastic supermarket bag, within which hundreds of statements had been carefully placed. "It should be amongst these," John said, as he handed the bag to me.

I took it to a table in the corner and began to sift through the hundreds of sheets of paper. As I searched for my statement I read many of the others. I was amazed at their clarity and the specific details they recounted about the events of Bloody Sunday. Suddenly I realised that I was in possession of primary source historical documents about one of the most shocking events of modern Ireland. And, of course, I found my statement. It was only six lines, given by a 15-year-old boy who clearly lacked confidence and the language skills to convey the full horror of what he had witnessed. However, the statement confirmed that I had been an eyewitness to one of the seminal events of modern Irish history.

With the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday approaching in January 1997, I approached the bereaved families for permission to publish the eyewitness statements. It seems that I was the first person in almost 25 years to read all of the statements as a whole. It was a major task.

As a dyslexic person, the act of reading a book is akin to running a marathon in hundred metre sprints. I am simply unable to sustain long periods of reading without feeling exhausted. I envy those who can take up a major work and read it to conclusion in hours or a few days. I just cannot do it. The art of reading requires immense concentration for the dyslexic person. In my case I need to steady the page and focus on the text - one word at a time. I am unable to read with a flow.

The testimonies were ideal in that I was able to read them two and three at a time over a period of a couple of months. As I did I began to see patterns emerge, particular around some 60 statements which clearly established that in addition to the paratroopers firing at ground level, so too were soldiers positioned on or near the old Derry Walls. I became curious and told a solicitor friend, Garrett Sheehan, that I had begun to suspect that some of the Bloody Sunday dead may have died in circumstances deliberately ignored by the Lord Chief Justice of England, Lord Widgery. Garrett told me that if I could build up a reasonable case I would have gone a long way towards mortally wounding the Widgery Tribunal Report.

Back in 1983, while working in Brazil, I had laboured through a book by a local Derry GP, Dr. Raymond McClean, called "The Road to Bloody Sunday." Dr. McClean had attended the post mortems of several of the victims and had noted that five had downward trajectory wounds. I called Dr. McClean about my growing suspicions. He told me at first he doubted my theory. However, he said, the more he tried to disprove it, the more convinced he became that I was right. Indeed, three of the dead had almost identical 45% downward trajectory wounds.

A US ballistics expert, Robert Breglio, whom I met on Staten Island, New York, later offered a professional opinion that the three were likely shot by a hidden marksman using a telescopic lens. It was, to say the least, sensational. Channel Four News based the first of several Bloody Sunday specials on our research. They later found a British soldier who, in silhouette, told them that he had been positioned on the Derry Walls and heard a hidden marksman, firing from the attic of derelict houses nearby shout, "Bloody Hell. I got two with three shots!" Photographic evidence also began to support the theory. Some time later forensic analysis of sound recordings made during the shooting was able to detect what sounded like three deliberate shots, fired

from a distance. The conclusion was that they were very possibly the shots of a marksman.

“Eyewitness Bloody Sunday”, my first book, was published in January 1997, a week before the Channel Four News report. I was extremely nervous prior to its publication. It was an entirely new world. A world I would never have ventured into if I hadn’t made the discovery that my reading difficulties were due to dyslexia and not due to intellectual deficiency. The book went on to become a bestseller and is credited as a primary catalyst in the decision of the British Government for the establishment of the new Bloody Sunday Inquiry chaired by Lord Mark Saville.

In addition, the book was the inspiration for the award winning movie ‘Bloody Sunday’, starring James Nesbitt who plays the part of Protestant Civil Rights leader, Ivan Cooper. I was invited to co-produce the movie alongside English Producer, Mark Redhead, and English Director, Paul Greengrass. The movie won the prestigious ‘Audience Award’ at the Sundance Film Festival, Utah, in January 2002, and the ‘Golden Bear Award’, the following month, at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival. Paramount Classics bought distribution rights to several territories, including the Americas.

I have since published two more books, have written scores of articles for several national and international newspapers and magazines and made twelve ‘20/20’ documentaries for TV3.

I tell this, not as a boast, for I am only too aware of the work of outstanding colleagues in the field of journalism which far outweigh and eclipse my recent contribution. But, more importantly, I tell it as an example of a flawed system’s capability to rob people of unimagined potential by setting limitations on their self-esteem and self-belief.

I was the boy who was told by a teacher at the end of Primary School that I’d ‘no chance’. I was the adolescent told by a Careers Guidance teacher that I should think about getting a labouring job after school because my English and Maths results were so poor.

Thankfully I survived and learned to cope. I owe much to so many people who shared encouragement and belief. Principally I owe so much to my mother who never failed to believe in me and who intuitively knew I had far more to offer than the school system seemed to suggest. We were a poor working class family but my mother went back to working in Derry’s famous shirt factories to help supplement my father’s wages. She arranged for me to have one-on-one English and Maths tuition with a wonderful young teacher called Sean Mellon whose home I visited on two evenings a week for two years. Specialised teaching is essential for dyslexic children. Sean, of course, didn’t know that I was dyslexic. But his patience and encouragement made up the difference. But the role of my mother was crucial. If a dyslexic child is to survive and succeed they need an anchorperson who, through thick and thin, imparts the magic of self-belief. My mother gave me that gift for which I shall be eternally indebted.

I love to read even though it is a challenge. Whether the legends of England's Lord Widgey or Switzerland's *William Tell*, the experience is the same. Reading in all circumstances, whether professional or for pleasure, requires enormous effort. I simply have to pace myself and know my limitations. For example, recently the Dublin radio station, newsTALK106 fm, asked me to do the morning review of the national newspapers. I have learned to say no, knowing that to accept would have put me under immense stress, not unlike diving into a raging river in full flood. I just can't read under pressure. Whereas before I would have made other excuses, I had no difficulty in telling the station that I am dyslexic and wouldn't, under the time restraints, be able to do justice to their requirements.

The most liberating insight is knowing that my reading difficulties, including my perpetual struggle with spelling and grammar, have little to do with intelligence. My mind works in a different way and, thankfully, I have been blessed with a creative imagination that never leaves me bored.

We all have strengths and weaknesses. We all have different gifts to share and much to learn. I've stopped beating myself up because I can't do certain things which I see others do with little effort. I have learned to celebrate the success of others and know that whatever success I have achieved is due, in no small measure, to the goodness, support and encouragement of others. Being dyslexic has taught me that sharing and caring is core to human happiness and fulfilment.

So, I am not ashamed to publicly declare that I am dyslexic. I do so in the knowledge that there are probably legions of my generation who have accepted the lie that their reading difficulties are due to a deficiency in intellectual attributes. I went through my adolescence and early adulthood doubting my intellectual capabilities. Discovering that I am dyslexic dispelled the lie and set me on a road to new and unimagined adventures. I have no doubt that there are thousands of adults who are underachieving and who are not reaching their full potential because, as children, they accepted, as a supreme truth, that lie.

Discovering that I am dyslexic quite literally set me free from it.

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**Don Mullan** is the best-selling author of 'Eyewitness Bloody Sunday' (Wolfhound Press 1997, Merlin Press 2002). The book was a major catalyst for the re-opening of the new Bloody Sunday Inquiry by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998. The book also inspired English filmmakers, Mark Redhead (Producer) and Paul Greengrass (Director) to make the award-winning movie 'Bloody Sunday'. Mullan was co-producer on the film. Since Mullan discovered his dyslexia in 1993, he has authored and edited several books and written for national and international publications. He has spent most of his adult life working for justice, peace and human rights around the world. In 1993 he was invited to South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to attend the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela. In December 2002 he received from the International League for Human Rights, at the United Nations, New York, their 'Defenders of Human Dignity Award'.