

Poignant tale of a brutal murder

Martin Townsend talks to the woman whose diaries are the basis of a film about her troubled young brother

IT HAS become one of Ireland's most notorious murders and the facts could scarcely be more horrifying. In early May 1994, in the middle of County Clare's beautiful Cregg Wood, a young man named Brendan O'Donnell shot dead a priest, a young mother and her three-year-old son.

O'Donnell had abducted all three from their homes and would later claim in court that he'd been in a relationship with the woman, Imelda Riney. He also told the court that "voices" had instructed him to kill the priest, Joseph Walsh, because he was about to christen the Devil's baby...

Beyond the horrors of O'Donnell's crimes, though, lay a very different story and one which, eventually, would lead to O'Donnell being moved from prison to a psychiatric hospital where, just over a year later, he would be found dead at 23.

The whole extraordinary and powerful narrative is played out in a new film, *Property Of The State*, which receives its London premiere this week.

Based on a diary written by O'Donnell's elder sister Ann Marie, it does not plead for sympathy but simply lays out the bare facts of his short, grim life in the hope of a little more understanding.

A difficult and disturbed child, Brendan was on Valium at the age of four and passed between more than a dozen institutions during his lifetime, according to his sister.

On a phone line from County Clare, where she still lives with her husband and son, Ann Marie remains firm in her belief that her brother could have been helped and does not hesitate when asked where she lays the blame for his actions.

"The State," she says, simply. "I blame the State. I know it was a different time and all that but there should have been somebody able to do something. He died at 23; had been held in 13 or 14 different places and I can't understand how nothing could be done."

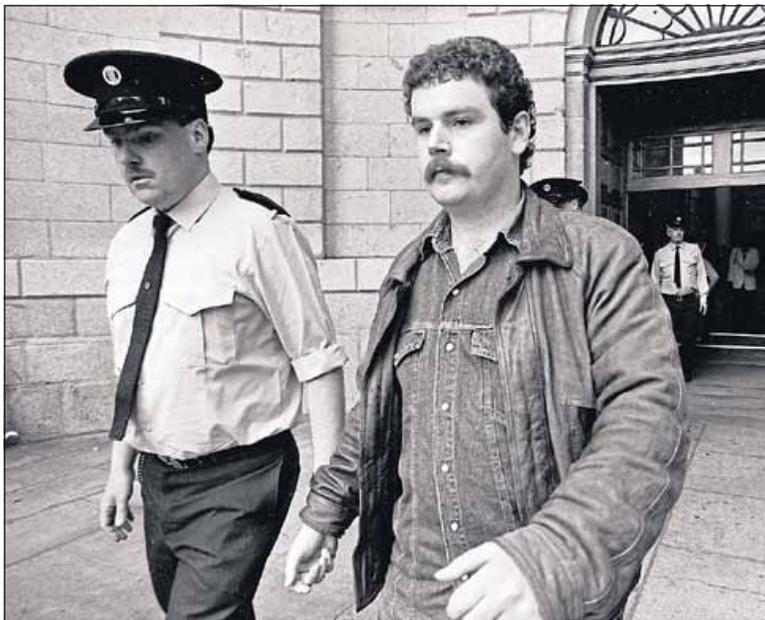
The film unflinchingly depicts Brendan being regularly punished by his father who, explains Ann Marie, simply "couldn't understand him". When she tried to intervene she was punished, too.

Her father is still alive, she says, "but I don't speak to him. I know that he knows about the film and I know he won't be very pleased about it but I don't care. I know I have done the right thing".

Her mother suffered from terrible depression, was in and out of hospital and died when Brendan was nine and Ann Marie 14. Finally abandoned, grief-crazed Brendan spent several nights sleeping on her grave.

Ann Marie had been sent to live with her grandparents a few years before and would only see her brother at weekends (Brendan himself would later be taken in by foster parents).

Already "giggling a lot" from the drugs he'd been prescribed he would eventually suffer psychotic hallucinations and hear voices. He fell



CONVICTED: Brendan O'Donnell received life for murder, kidnap and arms offences

into a life of petty crime, stealing and burning cars and increasingly fooling with guns.

Committed to a young offenders' detention centre he was abused, repeatedly, by the warders and also, as the film shows, by a priest. He tried to take his own life.

In perhaps the most terrifying incident, he went to Ann Marie's flat demanding a sandwich and when she explained she had to feed her baby first he tried to stab her, cutting her leg, then threatened to stab the child. Later he came back to the flat to try to borrow washing-up liquid.

"The landlady said to him, 'You know what you've done to your sister, now go away'. And he said, 'Why? What happened? Sure I'd never hurt her'."

After that, his sister says, she managed to commit him to a mental hospital, "but two weeks later they let him out and, seven months after that, he did what he did".

She believes his life would have been different if he'd been committed to a mental hospital when he was with his foster parents but the first wouldn't take him because he had absconded from a detention centre and the second required consent from his father.

"And his father wouldn't come down to Galway to do it," she says quietly. "He said he couldn't leave work to go..." When she first

heard about the murders her brother had apparently committed, Ann Marie could not believe it: "I never actually thought he had it in him to go as far as he did," she says. "But then... over time, there was no doubt."

"I spoke to him about the murders when he was in prison and he said very little. He just said it was something that shouldn't have happened but, you know, 'my head wasn't well'. As if he was completely different at that time. You'd be trying to talk to him and he'd be wiping the table when there was nothing there or he would just laugh at nothing."

AT HIS 53-day trial, the longest for murder in Irish history, Ann Marie gave a heartbreaking account of her brother's life. During the film, when Brendan claims he took her to see his pet fox in the woods and Ann Marie says she couldn't see anything there, the court dissolves into laughter. Outside an angry crowd shouts and huris insults at her.

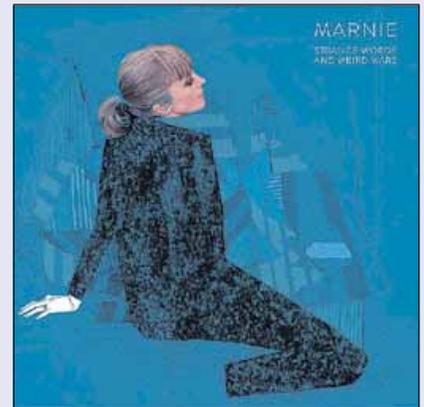
At the end we see Brendan (at this stage of his life brilliantly played by Patrick Gibson), bloated with drugs, dribbling, broken and scarcely able to speak or raise his eyes.

Brendan died, officially, from a cardiac arrest having injured his arm with broken glass. Ann Marie is not certain of the exact circumstances of his death but is certain about what she would like the film of his appalling life to achieve.

"I hope it will raise awareness of mental health because I wouldn't want anyone to go through what I did. I'm not saying, even for one minute, that he shouldn't have been put away for what he did because, of course, absolutely he should. Of course I have sympathy with the families and I know how much people have suffered. I do know that. "But to see him referred to in the media as 'evil' and 'Satan' and all this, when nobody ever questioned why it happened... To me he was not well and he was never well, and the whole thing - it was all tragic."

● *Property Of The State* is released in Northern Ireland on Friday. For screenings throughout the UK, visit propertyofthestate.film.

NEW CD RELEASES



ALBUM OF THE WEEK

MARNIE

Strange Words And Weird Wars ★★★★★

(Disco Pinta)

Singer and keyboard player with Ladytron, purveyors of superb electronic pop, Helen Marnie's solo work brings a rare power and poignancy to the genre. The excellent opening track *Alphabet Block* sets up a template of swirling and layered textures over hard rhythms but it's the off-beat touches she brings elsewhere that make this second album so good. The mournful *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* is both touching and vaguely disturbing; *Lost Maps* and *Summer Boys* an eccentric mix of The Pet Shop Boys and Lana Del Rey. Irresistible.

NERINA PALLOT

Stay Lucky ★★★★★

(Idaho)

Six albums into her career, Jersey-born, French/Indian singer Pallot scales new heights of songwriting excellence here. If the opening *Juno* is not a hit for her then surely the likes of Adele will come knocking: wonderfully subtle and achingly melodic, it's one of the ballads of the year so far. *Come Into My Room*, *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* and *Man Didn't Walk On The Moon* are not far behind, the latter boasting the sort of swooning, once-heard, never-forgotten chorus that Fleetwood Mac specialise in.

BOB BRADSHAW

American Echoes ★★★★★

(Fluke)

Irish-born Bradshaw based himself in America, enrolling in the Berklee College Of Music to hone his songwriting craft. The result, on this seventh album, is a frequently spellbinding blend of country and nuanced rock with a winning lushness in the instrumentation and backing vocals. The opening *Exotic Dancers* Wanted owes more than a nod to Tom Waits but *A Bird Never Flew On Just One Wing* and the genuinely funny *My Double And I* showcase a highly original talent.

REISSUE OF THE WEEK

CHINA CRISIS

Flaunt The Imperfection ★★★★★

(Caroline)

The 1985 album on which a seemingly lightweight pop band from Liverpool suddenly threatened to be Britain's answer to Steely Dan. The wonderful *Black Man Ray* gave them a hit single but every track has a grace and maturity that has stood the test of time.

EMERSON, LAKE & PALMER

Fanfare: 1970-1997 ★★★★★

(BMG, 11 vinyl albums)

The deaths of Keith Emerson and Greg Lake might add a fresh poignancy to these re-mastered, reissued recordings but there was always more quiet power and ingenuity to ELP than they were credited with. The first three albums up to *Trilogy* are uniformly superb, the bulldozing *Brain Salad Surgery* (1973) announcing a much heavier sound. But later albums, particularly the two *Works* volumes, still have plenty of magic moments.

MARTIN TOWNSEND



LOYAL: Ann Marie's diaries are the basis of *Property Of The State*, starring Patrick Gibson