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Columnists

A British, rather than Northern Irish, atrocity

Friday, February 16, 2007

By Eamonn McCann

The production of a play and broadcast of a documentary about Bloody Sunday last week prompted a number of commentators to wonder whether some people in Derry will ever give over about the suffering of this particular group of victims.

Why Bloody Sunday? There have been bigger death tolls. Fifteen Catholics in McGurk's Bar in Belfast in December 1971. Eighteen soldiers blown to bits at Warrenpoint in August 1979. Eleven Protestants on Remembrance Sunday in Enniskillen in November 1989. Etc. What about the families of these victims?

A number of things made Derry different. It was the biggest single killing by State forces in the Troubles. The offence was compounded by Lord Widgery proclaiming that no crime had been committed. And the conjunction of circumstances made Bloody Sunday a plot-point in the historical narrative in a way which wasn't true of McGurk's, Warrenpoint, Enniskillen, etc.

As well: Bloody Sunday wasn't a sectarian atrocity. Evidence at Saville relieved some of us of a belief that the paras killed Bogsiders in the interest of unionism. British political and military chiefs cared not a jot for unionism or unionists. This was a very British, not a Northern Irish, atrocity.

I had an involvement in both the play and the documentary. Over the years, I have got to know some of the Bloody Sunday families. They are aware of the uniqueness of the event which robbed their lives of ease. They are conscious, too, that their grief is not unique. None believes that there is a hierarchy of victimhood in which their feelings have precedence over others'.

Here's some of the things some of them have said to me:

"The English Government should take a real hard look at how they handled 30 years of violence here. This city is more divided now than it was 30 years ago. I don't think there's any more understanding. I would say it's worse. One of the things I found since I came back is that in everyday life I'm not meeting people from another community. I think about that. It distresses me" - Jean Hegarty, whose brother, Kevin McElhinney (17), was shot dead as he crawled away from the shooting in Rossville Street.






"You would see them on the news, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, and you'd say: 'That's what happened to us. There, look. That's exactly what happened to us.' It's happening to them people now" - Bernard Gilmour, brother of Hugh (17), shot dead as he ran along Rossville Street.

"We weren't and aren't unique. There are countless Bloody Sundays in ones, twos and threes, and those families experienced the same pain. In fact, in recent times, probably worse. When the Tribunal was looking into Bloody Sunday, these people had to go in and close the door behind them ... Many people lost their lives in 1972 after Bloody Sunday. I have a fear that I contributed to that because, if something happened, I might have said in anger: 'Good enough for them, they deserve all they get'. When people are standing around listening, you are encouraging them in a way that you wouldn't be aware of. I think we are all guilty of that to a degree. Once you go down the line of taking human life, it sometimes becomes very easy to justify it, or to play the role of an idealist and say that it is for Ireland. That's a lot of nonsense. It only compounds the hatred" - Liam Wray, brother of Jim (18), shot in the back as he lay wounded in Glenfada Park.





"I don't believe that anybody has a right to go into a cafe and blow people up because they are Jewish. I don't believe the Israelis should go into a camp and kill Palestinians either. It's the same as Bloody Sunday. We were shot because we were Irish and because we were Catholics. That's the reason. That's the same thing as putting a bomb on a bus of Israelis or Americans or Iraqis or blowing up street markets with car bombs. In a war, soldiers should fight soldiers" - Joe Mahon, wounded in Glenfada Park.

"I suppose, in a way, we were lucky. You can look now at other things happening, here or anywhere in the world, and say: Yes, those people deserve an Inquiry. But you know they are not going to get one. Not one like this one, anyway. I don't think they'll ever grant another Inquiry like this" - Eileen Green, widow of Paddy Doherty (31), shot dead as he lay on the ground in Joseph Place.

"A lot of pride has to be swallowed in Northern Ireland, on all sides. There's nobody going to have everything they want out of all this. If the soldiers and the Government were to stand up and take responsibility, that, too, would go down in history. They would show themselves to be better people. The

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Bloody Sunday soldiers are going to have to stand before God. I believe there will be a final judgement. My father will be justified" - Regina McKinney, daughter of Gerry McKinney (35), shot dead as he faced the soldiers with his hands in the air in Glenfada Park.

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