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Bobby Sands: maniac or martyr? A question more acute than ever in our suicide-bomber world...

by



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6 comments

By Medb Ruane

Saturday May 31 2008

[Margaret Thatcher](#)'s unique voice is the first human sound on the trailer for Hunger. "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence," she declares. "There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, criminal violence. There will be no political status!"

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She speaks as director [Steve McQueen](#) shows prison warders throwing a naked man against a wall while an anxious piano note repeats like it's stuck. That's all you can see yet about this week's [Camera D'Or](#) winner at the [Cannes Film Festival](#). The film about [Bobby Sands](#).

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He died on May 5, 1981, after his hunger strike won him a seat in [Westminster](#) and brought thousands of formerly uncertain people onto the streets. One of 10 men who suffered desperate deaths from starvation to prove a political point, Sands made his body a Guernica for the times, provoking shock, shame, wonder, horror in people who couldn't find his home on a map.

McQueen's movie, written by [Enda Walsh](#), examines discomfort up, down and sideways. It's about a moment in recent history when this dying man became an icon across the world. From a tiny, isolated cell near [Belfast](#) -- a place no one wanted to hear about because it was always bad news -- this man used his body to create a symbolic statement about what a life means and what a principle can entail.

Maniac or martyr? As zealots on either side rush to bury or praise him, a wider world is looking at McQueen's fictional Bobby and making links with [Abu Ghraib](#), [Guantanamo](#) and suicide bombers across the planet. Young men and increasingly young women offer themselves to death like lovers inviting embrace. You can call them zealots or claim they are manipulated: still, they choose to die.

"In Hunger there is no simplistic notion of 'hero', or 'martyr' or 'victim'. My intention is to provoke debate in the audience, to challenge our own morality through film," McQueen said.

With historians still out on how to process this undigested sinew of Irish history, there is no simple answer about Sands and his colleagues. [Liam Cunningham](#) and [Michael Fassbender](#)'s uninterrupted scene debating the morality of hunger striking is the most talked about and anticipated sequence in Hunger as the present tries to make some sense of this past, through Walsh's always powerful words.

The 1981 hunger strike was the second called by [IRA](#) leaders. The first, led and survived by [Brendan Hughes](#) who died in February this year, had been cancelled because the suffering was too much and the payoff not worth it.

Things changed by Sands's time, with him and the other men being encouraged, we know now, to keep going no matter what. We also know now that Mrs Thatcher did offer some concessions -- although at the time she was presented exclusively in black and white.

The hunger strike changed hearts and minds but not forever. A Belfast blogger (on an Amnesty site) writes about his childhood experience. "Large parts of Belfast, including the areas around my school, saw regular riots -- especially in the days that followed the death of a hunger striker.

"The road to school would be littered with burnt out cars and debris in the morning, while buses were regularly cancelled or detoured, necessitating long, tense and uncertain walks for those of us dependent on them for the journey home. Undoubtedly, some of my school colleagues (it had a thousand, all Catholic, boys) were playing their part in the night-time riots."

Steve was an 11-year old in [London](#) during the 1981 hunger strike. Bobby's happy smiley face filled the TV screen as Steve came home from school, with the days numbered beneath the picture in a macabre countdown stopped only by death.

What did it mean to die willingly? [Sam Beckett](#) had asked the same question years before and, thinking of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, reckoned that political convictions made it somewhat more bearable.

Artists such as [Richard Hamilton](#) and [Shane Cullen](#), as well as writers including [David Beresford](#), have tried to work through the difficult questions hunger striking provokes. You can call it a blatantly emotional appeal for human sympathy to a cause that may or may not deserve it, yet being left with no room for dissent except your body -- and using it -- cuts to the heart of what life is about, as well as death.

Sands is the classic image of a hunger striker, coming from a long line back to the Fenians and Hannah Sheehy Skeffington. (There were unacknowledged strikers too, such as the Afghans in St Patrick's Cathedral, whose actions were treated contemptuously as though there is a status in such matters).

McQueen says that, "When Jan Youngusband at Channel 4 approached me at the beginning of 2003 there was no [Iraq](#) War, no Guantanamo Bay, no Abu Ghraib prison, but as time's gone by the parallels have become apparent. History repeats itself, lots of people have short memories and we need to remember that these kinds of things have happened in [Britain](#)".

Used or abused, actor or acted upon? Meanwhile, Sands is dead, condemned to a virtual eternity where his shiny happy 1980's face becomes a mask for who he was and what he really experienced.
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- *Medb Ruane*

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Comments

THATCHER MURDERED THE HUNGER STRIKER;S
AS THE PM SHE COULD HAVE A STRUCK A DEAL
BOBBY SANDS WAS AN ELECTED POLITICIAN
IF YOU LOOK TO THE PRESENT ,IT SERVED
NO PURPOSE FOR A SOLUTION TO THE
TROUBLES IN IRELAND.MAKE A MOVIE ABOUT A BITTER
HATEFUL ANTI IRISH FEMALE SO CALLED POLITICIAN

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Posted by PHIL MURPHY | 01.06.08, 21:17 GMT



The Afghans pretending to go on hunger strike for more dole and free stuff are advanced dole spongers not political prisoners. Not a single one of those dole spongers had any intention of continuing their pretence for a minute past the cameras leaving.

Your trite notion that just because you think Ian Paisley is a big cuddly uncle and you don't like beards is hardly grounds for you to be making judgements on something you have no comprehension of

Posted by Sean | 01.06.08, 20:39 GMT



"There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence," she declares. "There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, criminal violence. There will be no political status!"

It's a shame that when it is the British carrying out atrocities it is war but when others protect themselves against these atrocities they are labeled terrorists and made to look like a common criminal.
Have the past 800 years of British murder and oppression of the Irish on Irish soil been "political murder, political bombing or political violence" or "criminal murder, criminal bombing, criminal violence"?
It's a two-way street.

Sands is a hero, as well as the countless others that have laid their lives down for Irish freedom.

'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.'

Posted by BigC | 01.06.08, 01:08 GMT



sands and the other hunger strikers were desperate men in a desperate situation, they were politically motivated both as free men and as prisoners. Thatchers comments were a bit rich consider ing she and her gov't sanctioned and or turned a blind eye to quite a few political murders in their time against irish republicans.

Posted by tony | 31.05.08, 23:50 GMT

why am i not surprised to find such an almost derisory debate on the sacrifice of the Hunger Strikers. Trust the indo hacks to roll out yet another anti-republican slanted debate, a thinly veiled attempt to rubbish and undermine the memory and great sacrifice of what were desperate men in desperate circumstances. Buried away behind great concrete walls they had nothing left to fight with but the threat of starving themselves to death in order to protect their correctly assumed political status.

There is no debate about their motivation, only another opportunity to debase the memory of these brave men by pro establishment cronies. They weren't protesting their incarceration but their 'criminalisation' at the hands of the british which they had correctly recognised as another undermining tactic of the british 'Dirty War'.

Posted by Gerry Wright | 31.05.08, 11:12 GMT

Bobby Sands sacrifice undoubtedly played a huge part in the Peace in Northern Ireland today. It is similar to Padraig Pearse's ideals which he also had to die to mark more steps to Irish Freedom.

In 1981, I was living in Dublin as I had all my life. I was affected by the 'Troubles' as what was going on in Northern Ireland was euphemistically referred to. I was glad to be able to carry a black flag for Bobby Sands and on behalf of people who were suffering in prisons and in their daily lives because of the lack of human rights.

I am happy that in my lifetime, peace has come to Northern Ireland.

Posted by Imelda Dyas | 31.05.08, 09:42 GMT

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