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Hunger: The real maze men speak

Last week Sean O'Hagan interviewed director Steve McQueen about his powerful film *Hunger*, which depicts the IRA hunger strikes of the 1980s. Here, our writer returns to the streets where he grew up during the Troubles, and speaks to prisoners who lived through the protests in the Maze Prison that culminated in the deaths of 10 men

Sean O'Hagan

The Observer, Sunday October 19 2008



A prisoner daubs the walls of his cell with excrement in a picture smuggled out of the Maze.
Photograph: Peter Marlow/Magnum

It must have been sometime in 1979, or maybe 1980, when I saw Freddie Toal on the evening news. I remember that I was sitting in the living room of a flat in Kensal Rise, north London with some friends, when someone shouted out his name and I looked up and there he was, bedraggled and barely recognisable; a lad from home.

Hunger

Release: 2008

Countries: Ireland, UK

Cert (UK): 15

Runtime: 90 mins

Directors: Steve McQueen

Cast: Liam Cunningham, Michael Fassbender, Stuart Graham

More on this film

He was not someone I knew very well, but I distinctly remembered him from the early years of the Troubles when we had both been involved in the rioting that was part of daily life in the Nationalist areas of Armagh. Back then, Freddie Toal had longish black hair and wore the young, working class uniform of denim jacket and jeans. On the news that night, though, he was wearing only a blanket, and was standing in a cell in the Maze

prison. His hair was long, his face gaunt and the walls around him were smeared with his own excrement. He looked familiar but utterly altered.

'For a long time, when I was on the blanket, I had no real idea what I looked like,' he says, some 30 years later, his long hair now gone, his speech quiet and measured. 'The only time I ever saw my face was this one time when the screws were sweeping piss into our cells. The sun suddenly shone through the window and, for a few seconds, I saw my reflection in a pool of piss. It sounds funny but it took me a while to register it was me. I looked like a wild man.'

In Steve McQueen's much anticipated film, *Hunger*, which opens at the end of the month, there is a scene that must surely have been based on that image: two young men, scared but defiant, standing in a shit-smeared cell. It is powerful but not nearly as haunting as the footage that inspired it. The film tells the story of Bobby Sands, the leader of the IRA hunger strike of 1981, and the most iconic Republican figure to emerge out of the Troubles. It does not tell the whole story though, ending instead at the moment of Sands's death. The nine men who followed his example are mentioned only in a footnote. The mass protest that attended their deaths is never alluded to, nor the murderous violence that occurred across the already beleaguered province at the time.

Both Freddie Toal and his close friend, Sean McGerrigan, were in the Maze prison at the same time as Bobby Sands. Having seen the film, I wanted to hear their story. We arranged to meet in a community centre near the Roman Catholic cathedral in Armagh, the town that we all grew up in and where, to varying degrees, we were politicised by the early years of the Troubles. I never graduated beyond the rioting stage, though, nor did I embrace hardcore Republicanism. I guess I was too interested in girls and rock music, and could not wait to leave Armagh. And, besides, I was scared of guns, and of those that wielded them. Back then, the Brits - and the RUC - were the enemy but I did not hate them enough to even think about killing them. Nor did I really believe in dying for Ireland; it just did not enter my mind.

At that time, you only found out for certain who was 'involved' when they were 'lifted' by the British army in a dawn raid, or went 'on the run' across the border, or, in some cases, were shot dead while on what the IRA called 'active service'. Freddie Toal was 20 when he was arrested on a dawn raid in 1977. He was subsequently charged with, as he casually puts it, 'possession of rifles and carrying out some knee-cappings in the town'. Sean McGerrigan followed him into the H Blocks the following year. He was just 17 when he was 'lifted' from his family house in nearby Callan Street in 1978; he was subsequently charged with attempted murder and possession of firearms.

In a way, his arrest was not that surprising. His brother, Peter McGerrigan, whom everyone knew by his nickname, Jake, was shot dead by a single bullet fired by a British soldier on the Windmill Hill housing estate in 1973. He was the first IRA volunteer to be killed by the British army in Armagh. He was just 18 years old. 'Jake McGerrigan was the year above me in school,' remembers Freddie Toal. 'He was the first of my generation to die fighting for Ireland. At his wake, I knew I had to avenge his death. The first thing I did was join the *Fianna Éireann* [Young IRA]. Before that, I just rioted and threw stones, but then I wanted the gun. If you had told me back then, at 17, what was ahead of me, I would not have believed you.'

The blanket protest was already under way when he entered the H Blocks in January 1977, and he went straight on it. In 1976 the British government had decided to phase out special category status for convicted terrorists as part of a bigger process known as 'criminalisation'. Both Republican and Loyalist prisoners, who had until then been granted special category status, were now to be treated as common criminals. The

protest began on 14 September 1976, when Kieran Nugent, the first IRA man to be convicted for terrorist offences under the new policy, reputedly said to a prison guard: 'If you want me to wear that uniform, you're going to have to nail it to my back.' He was given a blanket and escorted to his cell. Other IRA prisoners followed his example, and in 1978 the mass blanket protest turned into the dirty protest when IRA prisoners refused to leave their cells following another violent dispute, this time over a demand for extra towels in the communal washrooms. The prisoners' policy of non-cooperation meant that they were often confined for days on end in their tiny concrete cells with just a blanket, a mattress and a Bible. Refusing to wash or slop out, they began emptying their urine out over the floor and smearing their excrement on the walls.

Another emotive scene in *Hunger* shows two prisoners sleeping on dirty mattresses while maggots wriggle in the mounds of rotting food and excrement that have been pushed into the corners. Was it, I ask Toal, who remained on the blanket for four years, really that bad? 'It was worse,' he says. 'For years afterwards I had nightmares about it. I'd wake up drenched in sweat, thinking I was back there.'

Back then, the most vivid description of their conditions came from Cardinal O'Fiaich, the then-Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland, who visited the prison in 1978. 'I was shocked by the inhuman conditions prevailing in H Blocks 3, 4 and 5, where over 300 prisoners are incarcerated,' he said. 'One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions let alone a human being.' O'Fiaich compared the H Blocks to 'the slums of Calcutta', adding: 'The stench and filth in some of the cells, with the remains of rotten food and human excreta around the walls, was almost unbearable. In two of them I was unable to speak for fear of vomiting.'

His public statement prompted a response from the Northern Ireland Office, which began: 'These criminals are totally responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. It is they who have been smearing excreta on the walls and pouring urine through the cell doors. It is they who by their actions are denying themselves the excellent modern facilities of the prison.'

The conflicting tone and message of those two statements, the one emotive and outraged, the other detached and clinical, prefigured the coming battle of wills between Republicans and the British state. In the eyes of the British government, led by Margaret Thatcher, the prisoners were simply murderers and gangsters and were to be treated accordingly. To the Nationalist population of Northern Ireland, who were becoming increasingly agitated about conditions inside the H Blocks, they were political prisoners standing up for a defining principle of Republicanism. To complicate matters further, word was filtering out of the Maze about the often violent ill treatment of the Republican Catholic prisoners by their mainly Loyalist Protestant prison officers.

Toal and McGerrigan also talk quite calmly about the beatings they say they received 'on a regular basis' from their mainly Loyalist prison officers. They often occurred, they say, when they were being returned to their cells after Sunday Mass, or after a visit from someone on the outside.

The IRA leadership inside the prison communicated with their counterparts on the outside through 'comms', tiny rolled up pieces of paper inscribed with minuscule writing that were secreted in prisoner's mouths, anuses, or underneath their foreskins. Toal describes how he was often 'grabbed by my hands and feet by four screws and spread over a mirror on the floor like a chicken, while a so-called medical officer officer stuck his fingers inside my ass.'

Did they ever feel like giving in, abandoning their protest? 'What you have to

understand was there was incredible camaraderie in there,' says McGerrigan. 'You always took strength from the fact that there were so many men on the protest. After a beating, the prisoners would often start singing Republican songs though the doors just to do the screws' heads in.' Toal concurs, though at times he has a haunted look when he talks about his experiences. 'It never entered my head to give up but I was always afraid of breaking under the beatings. You always had to be strong, not show weakness, keep your principles.'

They tell me there were some 'decent screws' but that most of them were, as McGerrigan puts it, 'just plain sectarian'. One senior prison officer in the Maze at that time was a man called Paddy Joe Kerr, one of the few Catholics in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. He grew up close to where Sean McGerrigan did, and joined the prison service before the Troubles started. 'He had the power to stop the beatings but he never did,' says Toal. 'He was systemised against us,' adds McGerrigan. In 1985 Paddy Joe Kerr was shot dead by the IRA on the steps of Armagh cathedral as he and his young son were leaving Sunday Mass.

By 1980 there were over 400 IRA prisoners on the blanket in the Maze and in Armagh women's prison. Their conditions and harsh treatment had now become a major focus of protest. More chillingly, the IRA had responded to the brutality inside the prison by targeting prison officers on the outside. By January of that year, 18 had been killed. As the dirty protest dragged on, and morale among the beleaguered prisoners began to waver, certain influential IRA men inside the H Blocks began to put pressure on the Army Council on the outside to be allowed to use the most extreme tactic of all: a hunger strike.

The hunger striker has an almost mythological status in the annals of Irish Republicanism. Before 1981 the most celebrated hunger striker was Terence McSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who died in Brixton prison in 1920 after 74 days. One part of his inaugural speech could just as easily have described the Republican mindset half a century later: 'The contest on our side is not one of rivalry or vengeance, but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.'

On 27 October 1980 the first IRA hunger strike inside the H Blocks began. It ended in confusion on 18 December in what the Irish writer and historian Tim Pat Coogan called 'a burst of prison poker, which the authorities at first believed they had won'. No lives were lost but Republican prisoners realised quickly that they had been outplayed, and that none of their demands for special category status had been met. In November the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had spelt out the British government's stance: 'Let me make one point about the hunger strike in the Maze Prison. I want this to be utterly clear. There can be no political justification for murder or any other crime. The government will never concede political status to the hunger strikers or to any others convicted of a criminal offence in the province.' The stage was set for the second and final round of what would be a bloody and protracted battle, and one in which Thatcher would face someone even more intransigent than herself.

Freddie Toal recalls the moment he met Bobby Sands. 'It was 18 December 1980, the day the first hunger strike ended. He came into our cell. I remember he was stroking his beard as he spoke and you could see by the look of him that he was shattered. There were screws behind him so he spoke in Irish. He just said "Ni bhfuair faic" ("We got nothing"). Then he told us that there was going to be another hunger strike, and this time it would be to the end. He said: "I will lead it, and I will die." That was the last thing he said to us.'

The second IRA hunger strike, which began on 1 March 1981, was planned by Sands to develop in ever more dramatic stages, one man following another to his death. Sands himself was the first to die after 66 days without food. By then he had become a British MP, having famously taken the Fermanagh and South Tyrone seat on 9 April 1981. In death he became, for a time at least, an icon. An estimated 100,000 people attended his funeral in Belfast on 5 May, streets were named after him in Paris and Tehran, and according to Tim Pat Coogan: 'The French government offered the Dublin government two gestures of solidarity, which Dublin declined. One was to boycott the British royal wedding, the other that President Mitterrand attend Bobby Sands's funeral.'

Another nine IRA prisoners would starve themselves to death before the hunger strike was called off in October 1981. In the tense seven months it lasted, violence in Northern Ireland reached a pitch that recalled the dark days of the early Seventies: 61 people died, over half of them civilians, including a girl of 11 hit by a plastic bullet; 30 members of the security forces were killed by the IRA.

I went home to Armagh for a short family visit in the late summer of 1981, and I can still remember the mood of dread, anger and simmering violence that seemed to have taken hold of the place. In a bar frequented by middle-class Catholics, school teachers, doctors and the like, I heard a collective hiss of pure hatred turn into a tumult of abuse when Margaret Thatcher appeared on the television in the corner. There was a cheer when the bar manager reached up and switched channels. Thatcher, it seemed, had galvanised the Catholic middle classes into voting for Sinn Féin. They have continued to do so, in ever-increasing numbers, ever since.

Before the hunger strike, Sands had collected the names of over 70 IRA men who were prepared to fast until death. I ask Toal and McGerrigan if either of them considered putting their names forward. 'No, never,' replies McGerrigan. Freddie Toal just shakes his head.

The following day I travelled up to Belfast to meet a man who did volunteer for the IRA hunger strike. His name is Pat Sheehan. He spent 55 days without food, and was approaching death when the hunger strike was called off, mainly because of intervention from relatives of the starving men. Sheehan is currently, he says, 'self-employed', and lives in a well-off, middle-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of west Belfast. He has a degree in philosophy, obtained while in the Maze Prison. The night before, he had watched *Hunger*, and was eager to talk about what he called 'the weird mixture of feelings it brought up'.

Did the film, I ask, chime with his experiences of the H Blocks at that time? 'Most of the time, it did. The camaraderie was missing, though. But everything else was pretty accurate, the conditions, the beatings, the grimness of the blocks. It brought it all back.'

Sheehan was arrested in February 1978 and charged with causing an explosion in the centre of Belfast. He received a 15-year sentence and moved to the H Blocks in March 1979. 'You were given a blanket and you went down to your wing,' he says, smiling at the memory. 'I was feeling apprehensive, a bit scared, and half expecting a beating from the screws as a welcome. It seemed very quiet, then I heard someone shout in Irish, "New man on the block!" and all hell broke loose. There was cheering and shouting and men banging the pisspots on the doors. I thought, the morale is high, the lads aren't cowed. It was,' he says, grinning, 'like walking out on to Croke Park to play for your county in an All-Ireland Final.'

Sheehan said he put his name down for both IRA hunger strikes 'without hesitation'. He agrees now that this was 'a brutal thing to do' to his family. 'Absolutely, absolutely,' he

says, nodding, 'but the thing was, and this came across in the film, we were absolutely focused. You had to be. So that nothing could deflect you.'

When his parents and his older sister came to visit him, he waited for the right moment to break the news to his father. Instead, his father broke some bad news to him. 'He hung back after the others left, and whispered to me that my sister had just been diagnosed with leukemia and given five years to live. Looking back on it now,' he says, quietly, 'it might seem very callous of me to have gone ahead with a hunger strike in those circumstances, to take that decision when they were going through this awful moment. But I had made up my mind. I could not let the other men down.'

How did his family react to his decision? 'They were devastated. Absolutely devastated. I can still remember the look on their faces when I told them. It was a terrible thing to see.' He says that his father 'became politicised during the hunger strike even though he was anti-violence to the day he died'.

Nine men had already died when Sheehan began his hunger strike, and the 10th, Mickey Devine, died soon afterwards. 'In a way, you couldn't let their deaths affect you too much. I wasn't surprised when Bobby [Sands] died because we all knew he was going to go the whole way. It was more the inevitability of it that was terrible, but we stayed strong because we had to.'

Was there a moment during his own hunger strike when he had any doubts about his decision? He thinks for a moment. 'Well, I was going into uncharted territory, so of course I had some doubts. Would I be able to carry it through to the end? I was as sure as I could be but, strangely enough, as time went on and I grew weaker physically, I became stronger psychologically until there was no doubt in my mind. Day by day, I became more certain.'

Sheehan talks with remarkably little emotion of what he went through in the 55 days he inched closer to death. He says the worst part was 'the terrible realisation that you were not just feeling sick but becoming seriously ill, your own body rebelling against you'. In the last few days of his ordeal, he says, he was 'still lucid and very, very calm' but could only 'see shadowy, ghostly figures coming in and out of the room'. One of them was a doctor, who told him that even if he ended his fast, he would be permanently damaged and, in fact, might not even live.

He tells me proudly that he has 'no lasting effects' from the hunger strike, and, in fact, 'recovered remarkably quickly'. In this, he is the exception: other surviving hunger strikers have had severe problems, usually with their eyesight and kidney function. Sheehan was 'almost totally blind' and 'lapsing in and out of unconsciousness' when the hunger strike was called off. A priest had granted him absolution, given him Communion, and performed the Last Rites over his bed.

Can he describe how it felt to be pulled back from the brink of death? He sighs and shakes his head. 'To be honest, I had mixed emotions. On a purely personal level, I was glad that I had survived, but on another level I have to say I felt somehow disappointed, especially as the days went by and I received medical attention and started to recover. I think I had what is called survivor's syndrome. I felt guilty, definitely, about the lads who had died, about their families. And, in terms of the bigger political picture, I felt that stopping the hunger strike would demoralise and undermine the whole struggle.'

The year after the hunger strike ended was, according to Sheehan, 'the most demoralising time for Republican prisoners'. Both Toal and McGerrigan had said the same thing. The following year, though, the prisoners had achieved all their aims, and more besides. Segregated from their Loyalist counterparts, and wearing their own

clothes, they effectively ran the prison. 'When I was brought into prison in 1990,' the Republican activist and author Danny Morrison told me recently, 'a prison officer asked me if I had everything I needed. Then he said goodnight to me in Irish. Mad!'

Why then, one has to ask, did those 10 men die? In one way, as Steve McQueen remarked recently: 'It was as if the whole history of the Troubles, and of Britain's relationship to Ireland, was distilled in that moment. It came down to two opposing and immovable forces: Margaret Thatcher and Bobby Sands.' Morrison, who was an envoy between the Sinn Féin leadership and the prisoners in 1981, concurs. 'I remember saying to Bobby, Thatcher will not back down. I came away knowing that his mind was set, too, though. He knew what he had to do and how it would end.'

'Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart', wrote WB Yeats in his poem, 'Easter, 1916', about the death by execution of Irish Republicanism's founding heroes, among them Pádraig Pearse, whose belief in blood sacrifice and martyrdom seemed at the heart of the IRA hunger strike of 1981. In retrospect, though, the tumultuous events of that time and in particular the election of Bobby Sands, can be viewed as a pivotal moment in Republican thinking, when Pearse's dark ideology reached its terrible crescendo then finally faded. It was the moment when, to paraphrase Danny Morrison, belief in the ballot box began to replace belief in the bullet. Everything that has happened since, including the Good Friday Agreement and Sinn Féin members taking their places in the Northern Irish Assembly as democratically elected representatives, has emerged out of that terrible summer of 1981.

'Things change very slowly,' says Sean McGerrigan, 'and not in the way you expect. People might say that those men died in vain, but they died as part of a greater struggle. There will be a United Ireland but not in the way we envisaged it happening years ago.'

Freddie Toal nods his consent. 'It was inevitable what happened,' he says. 'The environment we grew up in politicised us, and the H Blocks politicised us even more deeply. And if you came though what we did on the H Blocks, you have a special bond with the other men who did the same. Maybe it's hard for you to relate to that, just as it is hard to understand why we had to take up the gun, or why someone would choose to starve themselves to death for a principle.'

He is right, of course. I have not been through what they have been through. And, despite our shared upbringing, and all that has happened since, I still do not fully understand what drove them to take up the gun or fuelled their monumental endurance, their unshakeable certainty. Nor, though, can I understand why, whatever their reasons for being imprisoned, they were treated in captivity as if they were less than human. Perhaps that is the unanswered question that still echoes most loudly, and alarmingly, in our fragile democracy in these still troubled times.

The toll - Hunger's strike dead

Bobby Sands, aged 27

1 March-5 May 1981 (66 days on strike)

Francis Hughes, 25

15 March-12 May (59 days)

Raymond McCreesh, 24

22 March-21 May (61 days)

Patsy O'Hara, 23

22 March-21 May (61 days)

Joe McDonnell, 29

9 May-8 July (61 days)

Martin Hurson, 24

28 May-13 July (46 days)

Kevin Lynch, 25

23 May-1 August (71 days)

Kieran Doherty, 25

22 May-2 August (73 days)

Thomas McElwee, 23

8 June-8 August (62 days)

Michael Devine, 27

22 June-20 August (60 days)

Northern Ireland - a history of protest

1965 The Prime Ministers of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland meet for talks, a move which provokes tension among Unionists.

1966 Loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) forms in response to the perceived revival of the IRA, on whom they declare war.

1968 Protests by the newly formed Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) descend into violence with loyalists attacking demonstrators.

1969 12 August Simmering tensions erupt during the Battle of the Bogside which sees violent confrontations in Londonderry between police and nationalists and lasts three days. Following riots elsewhere in Northern Ireland, the British Army is brought in. Militant splinter group the 'Provisional' IRA forms with the intention of taking up arms to achieve a unified Ireland.

1972 30 January 26 civil rights protesters, 14 of whom die, are shot by the British troops on Bloody Sunday.

21 July The Provisional IRA detonate car bombs in and around Belfast on Bloody Friday, killing nine people and injuring 130.

1976 1 March The British government announces the end of special category status for imprisoned paramilitaries; they are treated as ordinary criminals and required to wear a prison uniform.

14 September Kieran Nugent opts to wear a blanket rather than prison uniform, starting the 'blanket protest'.

1978 March Republican prisoners launch the 'dirty protest' to demonstrate against beatings by guards. They refuse to wash and smear their cell walls with excrement.

1980 27 October Seven Republican prisoners begin a hunger strike to protest at the withdrawal of special category status. The strike ends after 53 days.

1981 1 March A second hunger strike begins with Provisional IRA prisoner Bobby Sands refusing food. More prisoners join the strike one at a time at staggered intervals.

9 April Bobby Sands is elected as an Independent Republican MP at a by-election for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

5 May Sands dies, at the age of 27, after 66 days on strike. The announcement of his death prompts riots, and more than 100,000 people line the route for his funeral.

21 May Two more hunger strikers die, leading Tomás O'Fiaich, Primate of All Ireland, to criticise the British government's handling of the situation.

Margaret Thatcher restates her refusal to negotiate during a visit to Belfast in late May, saying: 'Faced with the failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card.'

3 October The strike is called off following 10 deaths. Three days later, the strikers are granted partial concessions.

1984 12 October The Provisional IRA detonates a massive bomb in the Brighton Grand Hotel where Margaret Thatcher and other Conservative MPs are staying for the party conference. Five people are killed.

1998 10 April The Good Friday Agreement establishes a plan for devolved government in Northern Ireland. A subsequent referendum shows support both in the North and Republic for its implementation.

2005 28 July The IRA Army Council announces an end to the armed campaign.

More than 3,600 people lost their lives during the Troubles, of whom approximately a third were members of the security forces.

Ally Carnwath

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