

Two films mark thirtieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday

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On January 30, 1972, soldiers from the First Parachute Regiment of the British Army opened fire on unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry, Northern Ireland. Thirteen were killed in the street and another 14 wounded, one of whom later died in hospital.

Two films have been made to mark the thirtieth anniversary of what became known as “Bloody Sunday” and were aired on British television. Jimmy McGovern’s *Sunday* was shown on Channel 4. *Bloody Sunday*, written and directed by Paul Greengrass, was shown on ITV1 and has been given a limited cinema release. It won Best Film at the recent Berlin Film Festival.

The conflict in Northern Ireland always provided the focus for British censorship and government interference in the media. Since the signing of the Northern Ireland Agreement in 1998 and with the launching of the Saville inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, however, it has become possible to present the case on television.

The Saville inquiry was convened as part of efforts to solicit Sinn Féin’s support for the Good Friday Agreement, and the power sharing structures it established. Britain’s Prime Minister Blair stated at the outset, “The aim of the inquiry is not to accuse individuals or institutions, or to invite fresh recriminations.” Notwithstanding the government’s efforts to limit any revelations (for example in not forcing soldiers to testify), the Saville inquiry has heard new evidence confirming that Bloody Sunday was a calculated act of murder by the British army. It also provides suggestive evidence that this was authorised at the highest level of the British government.

Both Paul Greengrass and Jimmy McGovern have used this new evidence in their films, as well as that previously denied by the British government and the army. (Some of the family testimonies are collected in Eamonn McCann’s book *Bloody Sunday in Derry: What Really Happened*, published in 1992 by Brandon Books, Dingle).

Greengrass presents an ultra-realistic, documentary-style presentation of the events of the day, beginning at midnight Saturday and moving through to the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) press conference in the wake of the butchery. McGovern, by contrast, tells the story twice. He shows events as they occurred. He then repeats them in the context of the inquiry, chaired by Lord Widgery, which the British government called to exonerate the army. There are strengths and weaknesses in both presentations.

Greengrass takes his time over events. By confining himself solely to the day, his cutting between different scenes builds up a thorough record of events.

Inspired by the American Civil Rights movement, NICRA had attracted the support of 10,000 mainly Catholic marchers who defied a ban on demonstrations in order to oppose internment and discrimination. The army’s response was deliberately confrontational. Derry’s Chief Constable, Royal Ulster Constabulary Chief Superintendent Frank Lagan, argued that the march should proceed to prevent further disturbances. The army insisted the march should not be allowed to reach its proposed

destination, Guildhall Square, in the city centre.

The organisers compromised, proposing that the march go instead to Free Derry Corner to hear speakers. This caused some confusion among the demonstrators, who were confronted with an army roadblock at the corner of William Street and Rossville Street. Minor skirmishes and stone throwing broke out. The army responded with water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets. The march had moved on and the speeches were beginning when the Paratroopers opened fire with live ammunition, beginning a brutal rampage that the Derry coroner described as “sheer unadulterated murder”.

All of this is shown in Greengrass’s film. Because of its piling on of details, *Bloody Sunday* has an astonishing visceral power. His reconstruction of the murders is probably the final word in their accurate representation. Every famous image of that day—Paddy Doherty shot as he crawled along the ground, Bernard McGuigan waving a white handkerchief just before being killed, General Sir Robert Ford’s television claim that the Paras had fired just three rounds—is recreated. The grainy camera style and lack of soundtrack heighten the realism. As we hear the muffled and shouted comments of soldiers, the firing of shots, the desperate attempts to get out of the line of fire, we get a sense of the panic and terror of the day. Cuts to a black screen between scenes serve not to emphasise the gaps in our knowledge, but to link disparate moments together into a linear thread.

This exhaustive approach is a good example of what is strongest in realist film-making. Greengrass elicits some superb performances, particularly among the soldiers. Nicholas Farrell as Brigadier McLellan and Tim Pigott-Smith as General Ford show the relationship between the professional soldier and the military commander as representative of the state. (McGovern shows this too. Christopher Ecclestone, his Ford, is as determinedly driven as Pigott-Smith’s, but McGovern shows more clearly the impetus for the army’s response coming from above). Greengrass uses the scenes between Ford and the RUC’s Frank Lagan (Gerard McSorley) to show effectively the rapid pace of tactical changes within the British ruling class and its representatives in Ulster.

By concentrating solely on that day, Greengrass can claim to have provided a thorough depiction of what happened, but he cannot place Bloody Sunday in context. Captions at the end of the film mention the whitewash that was Widgery, but that is all.

His film focuses on Ivan Cooper MP, a Protestant member of the moderate nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) who was a leading figure in the Derry NICRA. A proponent of non-violence influenced by Martin Luther King, he now describes himself as “an idealist ... who believed in working-class representation.”

In the context of the anti-Catholic discrimination in the North and the decades-long efforts of the British establishment and Unionist politicians to whip up sectarian divisions, the existence of such sentiment amongst the protestant population was an essential starting point for the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

It was precisely such a political radicalisation of the working class with potentially revolutionary consequences that was feared by the British ruling class and which led to their violent response.

But NICRA could not give anything other than the most limited political expression to this basic desire for working class unity because it was founded on a liberal appeal to the capitalist class and the British state for reforms in housing, education and job allocation. This could not fully challenge the Unionist parties' portrayal of the social advancement of Catholics as a threat to the jobs and social conditions of Protestants, because there was never a question of advocating a united struggle against the employers for better wages and social conditions for all.

Cooper is played by James Nesbitt, best known from the comedy drama series *Cold Feet* and himself an Ulster protestant. His is a reassuringly familiar face, which allows the director to draw in a new audience and then allow the actor to take them somewhere unexpected. Cooper is shown everywhere on the morning of the 30th, leafleting, chatting with local youths, trying to discourage IRA units from getting involved, always and everywhere urging non-violence. By the end of the film his non-violence has come up against the brutality of 1 Para and the British state. As youths queue up to join the IRA in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, Cooper tells a press conference that the British government has killed civil rights in Derry.

Bloody Sunday did lead to an upsurge in IRA recruitment and a deepening of the sectarian divide in the North. Both films show this. The IRA was practically moribund before the build-up of British troops in the late 1960s. By showing mass IRA recruitment as a response to Bloody Sunday rather than vice versa, both films effectively demolish the official pretext for the army's action. Greengrass, who clearly empathises with Cooper's liberalism, seems to have concluded that the heavy-handed response of the British army was simply a tragic error and an opportunity missed unnecessarily for peaceful reform.

The main strength of McGovern's film is in contextualising Bloody Sunday. Voice-overs from his main protagonist, Leo Young (whose brother John was one of the victims) establish the political and economic background to the day's events.

The 1960s had seen rising social tension, resulting in the growth of civil rights struggles against anti-Catholic discrimination that met violent opposition from pro-British loyalist Protestant groups. The British military presence steadily increased in the six counties. Ostensibly sent to protect Catholics from loyalist violence, the army was soon enforcing measures to suppress nationalist protest. The Special Powers Act of August 1971 made provision for internment without trial, as well as banning demonstrations and processions. It was this escalating oppression NICRA were protesting on Bloody Sunday. McGovern's film is explicit about these things where Greengrass can only mention them tangentially.

Bloody Sunday was decisive in the course of the British occupation of Northern Ireland. The British Army was prepared to meet what it considered to be a dangerous challenge to British rule. Parts of Derry were barricaded against the army and the RUC in 1971. "Free Derry", established in opposition to the rule of the Special Powers Act, became a no-go zone for British forces. General Ford, second-in-command of the army in Northern Ireland, expressed concern at the army's seeming impotence in the face of the "Derry Young Hooligans" (the nickname given to the pro-Republican youth manning the barricades of Free Derry). He proposed "to shoot selected ringleaders ... after clear warnings have been issued". To this end 1 Para were equipped with live ammunition.

Both Greengrass and McGovern show Ford's desire to provoke a confrontation, but McGovern's broader focus enables him to be much more explicit as regards the political responsibility for the murders and their subsequent cover-up. A scene with then Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath highlights the discussions at the heart of the British ruling class. McGovern in this way identifies the British state as being involved

at the highest level. His depiction of events seems almost rushed after the Greengrass's painstaking moment-by-moment collage, but it allows him the chance to return to the scene and develop it further. (It is McGovern who shows the wave of strikes across the Irish Republic in protest at the shootings, as well as the impact of the IRA's subsequent terrorist campaign).

Both film-makers utilise the soldiers' stories. Greengrass employed a former Para who was present. McGovern interviewed many of the soldiers. They each portray something chilling about these functionaries of the state. Greengrass's Paras sit champing at the bit until unleashed. McGovern shows the exultant Paras, drunk on murder and adrenaline, socialising after the violence. Greengrass's professional desk-bound tactician is appalled at the brutality, while McGovern shows a paratrooper prevented from testifying to Widgery lest he tell the truth. Here are the real relations of the military to the government. These are not good men gone bad. They are bound to uphold the requirements of the state.

The British state had to whitewash the army's actions. The Widgery inquiry backed the assertion of the soldiers that they had come under fire and were forced to defend themselves against gunmen and nail-bombers. Forensic evidence was produced, supposedly linking the dead to guns and bombs. Much of it was the crudest kind of smear. Lead traces found on William Nash's right hand, for example, were used to link him to bomb-throwing—despite his being left-handed.

The most notorious example is that of Gerard Donaghey, who was carried wounded to a nearby house where he was searched for details of his next of kin. No bombs were found in his trousers and jacket. He was then prevented from reaching hospital by an army roadblock. Examined there by an army doctor (who also did not notice any weaponry) he was then taken, still alive, to Foyle Road army base. Only after the army had examined him once again at Foyle Road base was he eventually taken, dead, to hospital. It was when his corpse was searched that hitherto supposedly overlooked nail-bombs were found jammed into his pockets. McGovern's treatment of this outrage, with forensic photographers filming the planted evidence in the back of the car, is particularly powerful.

The Widgery report cemented two lies about Bloody Sunday: that any deaths were the responsibility of the organisers of this "illegal march", and that all the victims were terrorists. McGovern's review of events exposes Widgery as a sham by running the witnesses' flashbacks against the soldiers' testimony. This is much more effective than Greengrass's captions.

There are two faults with McGovern's film. The first is an over-romanticising of some of the family members. This probably stems from much of his film developing out of interviews he made with the families, but it suffers by comparison with Greengrass's austerity. There are scenes where it works—Gerard Donaghey lying in agony on a front room floor while the women who had been watching television say their rosaries over him—but it often feels sentimental and forced.

The second is a similar problem of perspective to that which limits *Bloody Sunday*. After the murders and the subsequent whitewash, John Young's mother says that she will forgive the paratrooper who murdered her son in order to keep her other sons out of the IRA. Leo Young is shown queuing to join the IRA, but being unable to go through with it. Instead he tries to aspire to his mother's commitment to peace.

McGovern's film seems more optimistic as far as the future development of Ireland is concerned, but both film-makers see NICRA-style liberal reformism as the only possible guarantor against a return to sectarian conflict. Greengrass has described his film as "a bit of a warning from history since September 11". But, as the continued sectarian basis of political life since the signing of the Northern Ireland Agreement confirms, only a struggle for working class unity based on a socialist programme can provide a way forward.

Despite the limitations such a political outlook places on their work, it is to the credit of both Greengrass and McGovern that they have produced serious and emotionally charged films that go a long way towards exposing the political crimes of the British state in its oldest colony.



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