

Britain's media glorify convicted killer

Julie Hyland
2 August 2003

Convicted killer Tony Martin has been released from jail and afforded a hero's welcome by much of the media.

Martin was jailed for 25 years on April 19, 2000 after opening fire on two burglars at his farmhouse home, Bleak House. The jury rejected his plea of self-defence after hearing that the farmer, described in court as "eccentric in the extreme," had set booby traps around his virtually derelict home and had laid in wait night after night with a pump action shotgun ready to fire on any intruders.

In 1999 the farmer caught Fred Barras, 16, and Brendan Fearon, 30, in his home, "like rats in a trap," the court was told. Barras was shot in the back from 12 feet as he attempted to flee the property. Falling through a window into the garden below, he died within minutes. Fearon was seriously wounded as he fled the scene, but managed to drag himself to safety.

The jury decided that Martin had gone beyond the defence of "reasonable force" and convicted him of first-degree murder in the case of Barras and of wounding Fearon with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. He was also found guilty of possessing an illegal firearm.

Martin is a severely psychologically disturbed man. Even friends and neighbours at the time of his trial described the farmer as "weird" and "strange"—a depiction only reinforced by Martin's decision to take his four-foot teddy bear to court with him every day.

Without heating or electricity, save one light bulb, he seemed to do little if any farming, but became convinced that he was being "targeted" by intruders, usually gypsies. Norfolk police report only one previous break-in at Martin's farmhouse prior to his murderous assault on Barras, rather than the 30 or so routinely claimed by the media. A spokesman for Norfolk constabulary told this reporter that other incidents claimed by Martin generally involved children taking apples from his orchard or other incidents of petty vandalism such as a tractor battery theft.

In a recent interview Martin's mother said that she had passed the farm on to him following his father's death "to give him structure to his life. But it didn't seem to cure his moodiness.... If you know Tony, you will have seen that he is prone to moods. He can get so cross about the slightest

thing you say."

"Cross" is something of an understatement. Even before Barras's killing the farmer had a history of firing off guns. As far back as June 1976 Martin was reported after he turned up at a friend's house, in great distress, firing his revolver in the air. In December 1987 he was again reported after he used a shotgun to break windows in his home during an argument with his brother. In 1994 Martin's gun license was revoked after he opened fire on a man he thought was taking apples from his orchard.

The original trial heard how Martin had spoken approvingly of Hitler's genocide of gypsies and of how he would like to gather all travellers together in a field and "gun them down." Such sentiments were no doubt influenced by his uncle Andrew Fountaine, founder of the fascist National Front, who had warned, "Within a generation, the Norfolkman, his culture, purpose and ethnic succession will be biologically extinguished." Barras and Fearon were both travellers.

Martin's sentence was reduced on appeal to manslaughter, with five years imprisonment, after the court accepted he had the emotional and mental age of a 10-year-old. This, and the farmer's refusal to express any remorse for Barras's death, meant that Martin's request for even earlier parole were rejected on the grounds that he remained a danger, so the farmer served out two-thirds of his sentence before release.

In a different time and place, Martin would be universally regarded as a damaged individual, someone to be pitied perhaps and helped, but certainly not held up as a sterling example to the rest of the population. Not so in the noxious atmosphere that masquerades as political discourse in Britain's media.

For sections of the political right, the farmer has long been the figurehead for a law-and-order crusade aimed at whipping up fear and prejudice amongst the middle class over the consequences of growing social deprivation and poverty in order to strengthen the repressive powers of the police and courts.

In their propaganda Martin represents the righteous property owner, forced to take matters into his own hands

amidst a tidal wave of crime and an ineffective legal system, doing battle against Barras—the traveller and prime example of an encroaching criminal “underclass.”

Martin’s backers include Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, which donated £100,000 to the farmer’s defence, and the Tony Martin Defence Campaign, whose web site rails against a “flabby justice system” that provides comfort for the “evildoer” and promotes the views of right-wing American sociologist Charles Murray.

POW Trust, described as an independent “benevolent and social welfare charity,” provided legal services to Martin’s defence campaign. POW is currently selling badges carrying Martin’s face with a picture of two crossed rifles and the words, “Warning—This Property is Protected by Tony Martin Security Services.” It boasts that it has “teamed up with Artnik Books to publish the jailed farmer’s story provisionally titled, ‘My Right to Kill ... In Defence of My Life and Property.’”

Amongst POW’s patrons are the Earl of Portsmouth (chairman of Basingstoke Conservative Association and non-executive director of property investors Grainger Trust plc), Lord Noel-Buxton (a landowner said to divide his time between his Scottish estate and a suite at Claridges), Sir James Cayzer Bt (a multimillionaire listed in Burkes Peerage), Conservative MP Henry Bellingham, Teresa Gorman (hard right Tory Europhile, suspended from the Commons in 2000 for misleading the Standards and Privileges Committee over the extent of her property involvement) and Count Nikolai Tolstoy-Miloslavsky (historian and chancellor of the Monarchist League, dedicated to the “restoration of the monarchy” worldwide).

The supporters list confirms the appraisal made by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time of Martin’s conviction: that the farmer’s glorification by Conservative politicians such as then Tory leader William Hague and others was “rooted in the vast social polarisation of the past two decades. This period has seen an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from working people to the rich. Beneath the surface of political life, social tensions are acute. Those privileged layers, which have benefited from the policies pursued by successive governments—cutting taxes for the wealthy, slashing welfare payments, lowering wages—refuse to countenance any reversal of these trends. Instead, they demand ever-greater repressive measures against the poor.”

The intervening years have only made clear the extent to which this agenda has now been taken up by Labourites and sections of the so-called liberal establishment. Amongst Martin’s defenders, for example, is Civitas, the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, led by Dr David Green, a former head at the Labour-backed Institute of Economic Affairs

think tank.

The pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* has also emerged as a champion of Martin’s case to the extent that it brokered a reported £125, 000 exclusive interview with the farmer on his release—an arrangement that is to be investigated by the Press Complaints Commission, whose code bars newspapers from paying criminals except in the public interest.

The *Mirror* has defended its scoop on the basis that Martin is regarded as a hero, albeit an unlikely one. Editor Piers Morgan claimed, “Martin has come to symbolise something important about the state of Britain today ... the citizen who fought back against the wrongs of an increasingly desperate society,” whilst the paper’s editorial proclaimed, “It is the stuff of movies when the lone citizen who feels he has had enough fights back.... Tony Martin went too far. But how far is too far?”

This eulogy to the “lone citizen” is deeply sinister. Martin was convicted of shooting an unarmed teenager in the back as he sought to escape. Yet the *Mirror* asks whether this is “too far.” Morgan has said, “Like a lot of people, I have a lot of sympathy for the circumstances which led up to the actions he [Martin] took.... In a dishonourable world, Tony Martin was honourable”.

Morgan is not alone in his glorification of vigilantism. Writing in the *Guardian*, David Aaronovitch opined on “The Tony Martin in all of us”:

“Martin quite probably wanted to shoot a burglar, and may have fantasised many times about doing it before the night that Fearon and the late Fred Barras broke into Bleak House in search of God knows what.

“A lot of us would quite like to do the same, providing we could avoid the reality of a boy slowly bleeding to death in an orchard. Most non-criminals hate burglars more than we hate paranoid farmers.”

Here is the essence of the matter. A psychologically sick man has become the figurehead of a politically sick social layer, who identify with Martin because they see in him the means to legitimise their own preparedness to go to any lengths to defend their property and wealth from the “have-nots” symbolised in their nightmares by the predatory burglar. For these elements, in pursuit of this goal nothing goes “too far.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact