
Unruly Squaddies in Derry

ON SUNDAY 30TH JANUARY 1972 members of the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment shot 28 unarmed civilians in Derry, thirteen of whom died. At the time it was British policy to support the Government of Northern Ireland and Protestant privilege by all means at its disposal. Consequently, in 1972 the British Lord Chief Justice defended the killings. It was not until twenty years later, during the premiership of John Major, that British policy began decisively to gravitate towards establishing equality for all. And, it was not until 1998 that Tony Blair appointed Lord Saville to chair a new inquiry into the killings. The report of this inquiry was published last week – twelve years in the making and 38 years after the massacre.

Finally, it has concluded what many of us had known and argued all along, that those killed on that day, mostly shot in the back, or whilst lying on the ground, were entirely innocent victims of British military repression. This repression was being meted out at the time in order to crush those who were fighting for equal civil rights for the Catholic population.

Britain had carved the 'province' of Northern Ireland out of the island of Ireland in order to preserve six of the nine counties of Ulster for Protestant rule when the Irish Free State was established in 1922. This autonomous Protestant statelet within Britain had been maintained by routinely denying equal citizenship, and equal access to resources, to the Catholic minority who, because they were thought of as intrinsically disloyal to British rule, had to be kept in check by heavily armed police, and by the political and economic domination exercised by Loyalist Protestants.

It was this form of rule, which was breaking down in the late 1960s, and it was the peaceful and lawful actions of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association

that led directly to the events of Bloody Sunday and to the decades of war that followed it. The Government of the North of Ireland, their police and auxiliaries met the demands for civil rights with batons and considerable brutality; this resulted in the reactivation of the historic armed struggle against British rule in Ireland. The Government of Northern Ireland, and the British Government in London ordered Internment – this was the procedure in which many thousands of Catholics in the North of Ireland were literally dragged from their beds and thrown into prison camps, brutalised and intimidated for indefinite periods of time, without specific charges and without trials of any kind.

The demonstration led by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association on Sunday 30th January 1972 was called to demand the release of those detained in British prison camps. The march was declared illegal because the authorities feared losing control of the whole of Derry - the British had already lost control of large parts of city as the people rebelled against the increased repression meted out by the police and soldiery. However, Chief Superintendent Frank Lagan, the police commissioner, said that in the interests of peace it would be better to let the march go ahead. Brigadier Patrick MacLellan, the Commander of the 8th Infantry Brigade, then occupying Derry and its environs, agreed with the police superintendent – the centre of the city – particularly Guildhall Square – should be blocked off with barricades manned by soldiers, but otherwise the march should be allowed to go ahead unmolested.

Unfortunately this view was not shared by the British Government in London or by Major General Robert Ford, Commander of Land Forces in Northern Ireland. He advocated, that after “clear warnings” soldiers should be ordered to “shoot selected ringleaders”. Consequently, he ordered the transfer of the 1st Battalion (1 PARA), The Parachute Regiment, from Belfast to Derry. They arrived on the morning of the 30th January ostensibly to carry out an “arrest operation” later in the day. Brigadier MacLellan of 8th

Infantry Brigade was still in overall charge, but 1 PARA were operating directly under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Derek Wilford.

Colonel Wilford apparently exceeded his orders by ordering paratroops and armoured vehicles through the barricades. It was these paratroopers under the command of Wilford that shot all those killed and injured on the day.

Lord Saville concluded that Bloody Sunday was “a catastrophe for the people of Northern Ireland”. He is to be congratulated for definitively establishing the sequence of events, and for declaring after twelve years of exhaustive inquiry, and thirty-eight years after the event, the innocence of all those murdered by the paratroopers.

More troubling though is the manner in which Saville apportions blame for these events. He finds the Government of Prime Minister Edward Heath, Lieutenant General Sir Harry Tuzo (the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland), Major General Robert Ford, Brigadier Patrick MacLellan, and Lieutenant Colonel Derek Wilford, entirely innocent of the killings. In fact he found that the plan for the day – blockading the city centre and using paratroopers as ‘snatch squads’ – was sensible. Indeed “it was not unreasonable of the authorities to seek to deal with the march in this way”. Saville also found that Major General Ford, who had earlier advocated shooting “selected ringleaders”, and had ordered the deployment of the paratroopers on the day, “had no reason to believe and did not believe that the soldiers of 1 PARA would fire unjustifiably”.

It is true that Colonel Wilford jumped the gun so to speak by ordering his paratroopers through the barricades twelve minutes *before* he was ordered to by Brigadier MacLellan, and that he had deployed vehicles, and sent his troops further into the nationalist area where they would be unable to distinguish between peaceful demonstrators and rioters. Neither did Wilford inform the officers under his command about MacLellan’s orders or concerns. Despite all this,

Lord Saville believes that Colonel Wilford could not have been expected to know that his soldiers would fire upon unarmed civilians.

So Lord Saville could find “no evidence” of the “toleration or encouragement of the use of lethal force” by the authorities. The use of unwarranted lethal force “was neither contemplated nor foreseen by the United Kingdom Government”. Indeed, “genuine and serious attempts were being made at the highest level to work towards a peaceful political settlement in Northern Ireland”. Lord Saville does not explain how Internment without trial, or the deployment of heavily armed troops, to prevent Derry’s citizens from entering their own city centre was meant to contribute to a “peaceful settlement”, but perhaps that was beyond his remit.

What does remain all too clear is that the British upper class has decided to blame the privates and non-commissioned officers for the murders. None of the senior officers or politicians is to be held accountable. Those who advocated shooting citizens in the streets, those who sanctioned the transfer of front line battle-ready troops to police a civil rights demonstration, those who did all in their power to prop up the Protestant statelet and to deny equality to Catholics are found to be entirely innocent. Only the panicky or brutal squaddies are to blame. It was they that killed unarmed civilians without just cause, and it was they that lied to cover up their wrongdoing. Of course, there was muddle and confusion on the day, but British military and political leaders were innocent of malign actions or intentions on all counts.

Saville nowhere discusses the shift in British policy, which has resulted in those killed and injured as armed rioters in 1972, becoming innocent victims in 2010. The British Prime Minister has finally apologised for the killings of unarmed civilians, “which should never have happened”, but the culpability of the British political and military establishment for these crimes has been stoutly denied. This, of course, is normal conduct for oppressors anytime, anywhere: sacrifice the pawns in defence of the great and the good.