



# BOBBY SANDS



WRITINGS FROM PRISON

FOREWORD BY GERRY ADAMS

# ***Bobby Sands***



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Foreword by Gerry Adams  
Introduction by Seán MacBride



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# *Foreword by* **Gerry Adams**

Bobby Sands was twenty-seven years old and sixty-six days on hunger strike when he died in the H Blocks of Long Kesh, on 5 May 1981. The young IRA Volunteer, who had spent almost the last nine years of his short life in prison, was world-famous by the time of his death, having been elected to the British parliament and having withstood pressures, political and moral, for him to abandon his fast which was aimed at rebutting the British government's attempts to criminalise the struggle for Irish freedom by criminalising Irish political prisoners.

Apart from all of the very obvious historical and political contradictions for the British in pursuing such a strategy, they had one other immediate problem: hundreds of prisoners were held in Long Kesh under a regime of political or special category status. This status had been introduced by the British government in June 1972 after a successful hunger strike by republican prisoners in Belfast jail. But now as part of its ridiculous new strategy, the London government dealt with this anomaly by introducing legislation which classified all prisoners arrested and sentenced after 1 March 1976 as criminals. Those arrested after midnight, 1 March, were deemed to be criminals, but before midnight they were political!

I first met Bobby in the cages of Long Kesh where we were held with special category status as political prisoners. From our cage, Cage 11, we could see the building site where the H Blocks were being constructed to

house prisoners sentenced under London's new criminalisation legislation.

In those days Bobby was a slightly-built young man with a mane of long hair, an intense manner whether engaged in a game of football, a political discussion or a guitar lesson. He read extensively, and wrote quite a few arrangements and songs for his guitar.

But who was Bobby Sands? He was an ordinary young Irish man who lived and died in the extraordinary conditions which exist in the occupied part of Ireland. In the course of his short life he came to challenge these unjust conditions in an extraordinarily heroic and unselfishly courageous way.

He was born in 1954 in Rathcoole, a predominantly loyalist district of north Belfast. He always had an interest in Irish history and when the Civil Rights Movement burst on to the streets in 1968 the reaction of the RUC to peaceful protest evoked a nationalist response in the hearts of most Catholic youths.

Bobby left school in June 1969 and worked as an apprentice coach-builder for the next three years. He never expressed any sectarian attitudes. In fact, Bobby ran for a well-known Protestant club—the Willowfield Temperance Harriers. But at work he came under increasing intimidation and by 1972 the Sands family were forced out of their home by threats and attacks.

They moved to Twinbrook—a new housing estate in nationalist west Belfast. Eighteen-year old Bobby was the eldest in a family of four children, the others being Marcella, Bernadette and John.

Bobby joined the Irish Republican Army in his late teens and in 1973 at the age of eighteen he was arrested and sentenced to five years' imprisonment on an arms charge. That was when I met him. I had been caught attempting to escape from Long Kesh internment camp, was charged and was now a sentenced prisoner. We shared Cage 11 with a

large number of other men including some who would go on to play pivotal roles in the H Block struggle: Brendan Hughes, Brendan (Bik) McFarlane, Larry Marley and Pat Beag McGeown among others.

Bobby was released from Cage 11 in April 1976 and rejoined the struggle. As well as engaging in IRA activity he worked within his local community in Twinbrook. He helped to form a tenants association and a youth club. He was also married with a three-year-old son, Gerard.

However, six months after his release, Bobby was arrested on active-service following a bomb attack on a furniture warehouse. There was a gun battle between the IRA unit and the RUC and two of Bobby's comrades were wounded. One shortarm was caught in the car and the four occupants were all charged with possession of this one gun. Bobby was taken to Castlereagh where he was interrogated for seven days. He refused to talk to the Special Branch detectives and refused to recognise the court when charged. One of those also arrested with him was Joe McDonnell who replaced Bobby on the hunger strike after his death and who himself eventually died after sixty-one days on 8 July 1981.

Bobby was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment in September 1977. This time, in keeping with Britain's attempts to project militant Irish republicanism as a criminal conspiracy, he was denied special category or political status and was imprisoned as an "ordinary prisoner" in the H Blocks of Long Kesh.

For over a year the British government had been attempting to force the political prisoners in the H Blocks and in Armagh prison to conform to regulations, to wear a British criminal uniform and carry out compulsory menial, often degrading, prison work.

The Irish republican prisoners who had been arrested under special laws, interrogated in special interrogation centres and sentenced in special non-jury courts refused to

be criminalised, to wear the prison uniform or to carry out prison work. In order to keep themselves warm the prisoners wrapped themselves in a blanket—and so the blanket protest began.

For years the prisoners were held in solitary confinement and subjected to beatings, although eventually, due to overcrowding, many came to share a cell with another blanket man. In Armagh prison republican women also resisted the criminalisation programme and they too were persecuted by warders.

In March 1978 the prison authorities in a further attempt to break their will refused the H Block prisoners access to toilets and washing facilities and forced the prisoners to live in filthy conditions. This no wash/no slop-out protest continued until March 1981.

Shortly after he arrived in the H Blocks, Bobby Sands was selected as PRO of the blanket men. His statements from the Blocks traced developments within the prison: the build-up of the blanket protest, the beginning of the no wash protest, the beatings, cell shifts, and mirror searches, and throughout it all the determination and dignity of the blanket men, who, despite the violence and the propaganda of the British government, continued with the longest prison protest ever by Irish republicans.

The policy of attacking and demoralising a struggle by attacking prisoners had been employed before by the British against past generations of republican prisoners—against the Fenians in English prisons and against IRA Volunteers following the 1916 Rising. (Indeed, Britain, which first invented the concentration camp in South Africa, had also attempted to criminalise nationalist movements in its restless colonies.) In resisting criminalisation IRA volunteers had resorted to the hunger strike protest, the most famous case being that of Terence MacSwiney MP, Lord Mayor of Cork, who died on the

seventy-fifth day of hunger strike in Brixton prison in 1920. (MacSwiney's protest directly inspired Mahatma Gandhi.)

In 1980 despite the best efforts of a broad based campaign of support and after years of prison protest the British government persisted with its criminalisation strategy. In Autumn of that year a number of H Block men and Armagh women began a hunger strike which lasted for fifty-three days and which ended without fatalities when the British government promised to introduce a more liberal prison regime. Bobby, who was not on this hunger strike, had succeeded Brendan Hughes as the Officer Commanding of the prisoners.

It was the failure of the British government to live up to the settlement of the first hunger strike and to implement a promised enlightened prison regime which directly forced Bobby and his comrades on to a second hunger strike. He led the hunger strike on 1 March 1981, two weeks ahead of Francis Hughes, hoping that the sacrifice of his life and the political repercussions which it would unleash would perhaps force the British government into a settlement before any more of his comrades would have to die.

Shortly after Bobby went on hunger strike, the independent MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Frank Maguire, who was a champion of the prisoners' cause, died of a heart attack. In the ensuing by-election Bobby stood on a "political prisoner" ticket and was elected as MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone in a blaze of international publicity.

The result of this historic action showed the extent of support for the prisoners among the nationalist people—British propaganda had described the prisoners as having no support—and should have been the occasion for the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, to settle the hunger strike crisis. Instead, the British not only refused to negotiate but enacted legislation to change the electoral law and prevent another republican prisoner candidate

from standing for election. So much for British democracy! The election, held against a background of harassment and intimidation of his election workers by British crown forces, was unique, not least because of pressure put upon the nationalist electorate by the SDLP leadership, the Catholic hierarchy, and British politicians. Despite these pressures, Bobby Sands received 30,492 votes, a clear sign—for those who doubted it—that the nationalist people recognised republican prisoners as political prisoners and supported their prison struggle.

But despite the election result, the British government remained intransigent.

On 5 May, IRA Volunteer Bobby Sands MP died on the sixty-sixth day of hunger strike. His name became a household word in Ireland, and his sacrifice, like that of those who followed him, overturned British propaganda on Ireland and had a real effect in advancing the cause of Irish freedom.

By August 1981, nine other blanket men—Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Patsy O Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee and Micky Devine—also died on hunger strike.

On Saturday 3 October 1981 the prisoners reluctantly abandoned their hunger strike after a series of incidents in which families, encouraged by a campaign waged by the Catholic Church, sanctioned medical intervention when their sons or husbands lapsed into unconsciousness. The prisoners were effectively robbed of the weapon of the hunger strike and so decided to end the historic fast which had lasted a marathon of two hundred and seventeen days.

As well as being the leader of the blanket men and of the second hunger strike, Bobby Sands was also the most prolific writer among the H Block prisoners. He not only wrote press statements, but he also wrote short stories and poems under the pen name “Marcella”, his sister’s name, which were published in *Republican News* and then in the

newly merged *An Phoblacht/Republican News* after February 1979.

Bobby's writings span the last four years of his life in H Blocks 3, 4, 5, or 6. They were written on pieces of government issue toilet roll or on the rice paper of contraband cigarette roll-ups with the refill of a biro pen which he kept hidden inside his body. He also wrote as "a young West Belfast republican" and as PRO of the blanket men in the H Blocks 3, 4, and 6.

This collection contains creative pieces—writing of an extremely high standard—as Bobby describes penal life in a compelling and graphic manner. When one recalls that all of his writing was accomplished in almost impossible conditions, one cannot but admire his achievement, an example of the ingenuity and determination of the republican prisoners about whom he writes.

There is a premonition of personal tragedy running through his writings: that his H Block cell will, literally, become a tomb. His admiration for his comrades and his feelings for supporters and for oppressed people outside of prison emerge in the words which he expertly uses as a weapon against a regime which tries vainly to break and dehumanise him. Bobby's diary is a unique piece of literature, his last written words.

During his formative years Bobby, as he says himself, was "a budding ornithologist." As one well-known H Block ballad goes, "... A happy boy through green fields ran/And kept God's and man's laws." He also read and was influenced by the nationalist poet Ethna Carberry (Anna McManus) who coincidentally also grew up in Belfast.

So Bobby put many of his own thoughts into verse. My favourite is "The Rhythm of Time," but his H Block Trilogy must surely rank with Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and has recently and very brilliantly been staged as a drama by H Block prisoners. Two of Bobby's songs, "Back

Home in Derry” and “McIlhattan” were also recorded by Christy Moore.

In his own poetry Bobby asserts that the spirit of freedom and injustice has been innate to humankind from the beginning. In tracing this spirit he demonstrates an exceptional grasp of history and memory recall. (He was denied books, newspapers, radio or TV, and mental stimulation for the last four years of his life.) Wat the Tyler, for example, was an English peasant who in 1381 challenged and led an uprising against the English monarchy. The persecuted early Christians, slaves, peasants, native American Indians and Irish republican freedom fighters share the stage of history against tyranny. And the driving force against oppression, as Bobby concludes, is the moral superiority of the oppressed.

As Danny Morrison wrote in an introduction to an earlier collection of Bobby’s poetry:

*It has been said that were Bobby alive to see these poems today he would have rewritten or changed some of the simpler rhyming words. But that is to miss the point. These poems were written by a young man under the most depressing of conditions. More importantly his poetry is the raw literature of the H Block prison protest which hundreds of naked men stood up against their cell doors (in the late of night when the Screws left the wings) to listen to and to applaud.*

*It was their only entertainment, it was a beautifully rendered articulation of their own plight. Out of cruelty and suffering Bobby Sands harnessed real poetry, the poetry of a feeling people struggling to be free. . . .*

I could not have put it better myself. Bobby Sands lives in these pages.



***Gerry Adams, Belfast, Ireland, January 1997***

*Introduction by*  
**Seán MacBride, S.C.**

O Wise Men, riddle me this:

What if the dream come true?

What if the dream come true?

And if millions unborn shall dwell

In the house that I shaped in my heart,

The noble house of my thought? . . .

Was it folly or grace?

No men shall judge me, but God.

Pádraig Mac Piarais

The pages that follow are a human tale of suffering, determination, anguish, courage and faith. They also portray frightening examples of man's inhumanity to man. They make sincere, but harsh, reading.

Why then publish them? Is it really necessary to read them? It is to the answer to these two questions that I propose to address myself in this introduction.

The reaction to the hunger strike and the death of Bobby Sands and his comrades<sup>‡</sup> [see over] has been varied and contradictory. To the British establishment which rules that portion of our country known as Northern Ireland it appeared a victory in a contest of wills between “Irish terrorists” and a strong-willed British prime minister: “By God, we have taught them a lesson! They will now know that we mean what we say. We have broken their morale!” To the IRA and their supporters it was a triumph of endurance and courage. If proof were needed, it was evidence of their determination to pursue unflinchingly their campaign of violence until British forces and administration were withdrawn from Northern Ireland. It was a morale booster for their cause, a cause that depended more on integrity and courage than on what politicians and lawyers term “reason and common sense.”

To the bulk of the Irish people it was a tragedy that tore asunder the strings of their heart and their conscience. Many of them disagreed with the methods used even though they had sympathy for the objectives that the men of violence were seeking to achieve.

There were also some Irish people who through some perverted form of intellectual snobbism had become hostile to the concept of a united and free Ireland; there were others too who, for reasons of personal advancement, still hankered after the trappings of British influence in Ireland. These were comparatively few and indeed did not include the majority of those who had given allegiance to the former pro-Treaty party. Be it said in fairness to the Fine Gael rank and file that probably the majority of them are by now supportive of a united Ireland and were sympathetic to Bobby Sands. Fianna Fail was clearly sympathetic; so were

the Labour supporters with the exception of two or three anti-national mavericks.

Centuries of oppression, bribery and duplicity have led to a certain ambivalence in a section of our people: this is best described as “the slave mentality,” or the “gombeen” psychosis. This makes it difficult to assess the real sentiment of some of our people on certain issues.

The majority of the ordinary decent people of England are not really interested in what happens in Ireland. Their knowledge of Anglo-Irish relations is minimal. They have been taught to regard the Irish people as impossible and irrational, even if somewhat amusing and gifted. They could not care less as to what is happening in Ireland. They are oblivious to the fact that the partition of Ireland has been created, imposed and fostered by the British establishment. They have been led to believe that the British presence in Northern Ireland is essential in order to prevent “those impossible Irish from killing each other.” They conceive their role as that of an honest broker who is keeping the peace in this turbulent island. They ignore, and do not particularly wish to know of, the grievous sufferings which have been inflicted on the Irish people in the course of the British conquest and occupation of Ireland. Whenever this is mentioned, they just complain that our memories are too long and that we should forget the past.

They are not aware, or do not admit to being aware, of the brutal repression and injustices from which Ireland suffered right up to the Treaty of 1921. They are not aware that the settlement which they imposed on the Irish people under threat of “immediate and terrible war” in 1921 caused a Civil War in Ireland which lasted for several years and which prevented any normal political development. They are not aware that the enforced partition of Ireland has resulted in a virtual state of continuous civil war, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, since 1922.

The reality, however, is that the partition of Ireland by Britain in defiance of the will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people has disrupted the life of Ireland—North and South—for over sixty years. It has cost thousands of Irish—and indeed British—lives. Irish jails have been continually filled to bursting point. Several hundred thousand Irish men and women have passed through Irish and English jails over the last sixty years because of partition. The normal application of the rule of law has been disrupted since 1922 in both parts of the country. The Statute Books contain every conceivable form of coercive and repressive legislation. The normal protection of human rights under the law is subject to so many exceptions and qualifications that we cannot adhere to the international standard without constant derogation.

Worse still, successive Irish governments have been placed in the absolutely false position of attempting to justify and defend partition. It is upon the Irish governments that the task of manning and sealing an impossible border which is unacceptable to the majority of the Irish people falls. The army and the police have to be constantly augmented in order to maintain this unwanted border. This puts Irish governments, opposed as they are to partition, in an increasingly difficult position *vis-à-vis* their own constituencies as they have to jail and oppress their own young people in order to protect British rule in the north-east corner of our island. The subversive organisations naturally trade on this situation and are able to obtain the support of the younger generation. Thus the cycles of violence and repression continue to escalate; this weakens the authority of the government, the courts and the police. The financial implications resulting from this situation are incalculable; it has been said, probably correctly, that the cost of partition to the Irish government in terms of increased security measures, prisons, special

courts, compensation, extra police and military, amounts to twenty percent of the total state expenditure.

There are a number of responsible persons in England who do appreciate Britain's responsibility in trying to correct the workings of history. One such person is a leading Anglican theologian Dr John Austin Baker<sup>‡</sup>, who was the chaplain to the Speaker of the British House of Commons. During the hunger strike, in a sermon in Westminster Abbey on 1 December 1980, he pointed out:

*No British government ought ever to forget that this perilous moment, like many before it, is the outworking of a history for which our country is primarily responsible. England seized Ireland for its own military benefit; it planted Protestant settlers there to make it strategically secure; it humiliated and penalised the native Irish and their Catholic religion. And then, when it could no longer hold on to the whole island, kept back part to be a home for the settlers' descendants, a non-viable solution from which Protestants have suffered as much as anyone.*

Our injustice created the situation; and by constantly repeating that we will maintain it so long as the majority wish it, we actively inhibit Protestant and Catholic from working out a new future together. This is the root of violence, and the reason why the protesters think of themselves as political offenders.

In Northern Ireland itself, the ordinary laws were abrogated and a police-state regime was installed. Because the British authorities and those who supported British rule in Northern Ireland feared that the nationalist minority would increase more rapidly than the pro-British population, which was generally Protestant, a regime of wholesale discrimination was installed. The reason for

installing a draconian system of discrimination, based on religious beliefs, was that by preventing Catholics from obtaining employment or housing, their numbers could be kept down. They would not be able to get married and they would not be able to obtain employment. This would force them to leave the area, thus ensuring that the Catholic population would decrease.

A new generation of young people, however, resented the discrimination that was being implemented to their detriment. They could get neither employment nor housing. All employment and promotion within all services was strictly reserved to non-Catholics. Notices were displayed outside factories proclaiming: "No Catholics employed here."

Gradually, as was inevitable, the rising generation of young people resented a situation in which they were treated as third class citizens and were precluded from obtaining employment or housing. They became dissatisfied and disillusioned with existing political parties in the North as well as in the South and they started a perfectly legal and constitutional civil rights campaign demanding an end to the discrimination which prevailed and insisting on their civil and political rights. They obtained the support of the majority of the nationalist population in the North and indeed the active support and sympathy of the population in the rest of the country. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey became one of their leaders and swept aside the existing more moderate politicians. The rise of this new Civil Rights Movement was met with violent repression by the British forces and the police. Their members were arrested, interned and subjected to systematic police harassment. Their meetings were broken up by the police. This culminated in the killing of thirteen civilians by British soldiers at a perfectly legal public demonstration on 30 January 1972, now known as Bloody Sunday, in Derry city.

These acts of oppression by the British forces had two results. In the first place they solidified and increased the support for the Civil Rights Movement, and on the other hand they influenced the young people to turn more and more towards the IRA and physical force. The IRA availed of this situation to become the defenders of the Catholic population against the attacks of the police and the British military forces. The methods used by the British forces became more and more indefensible. Prisoners were systematically tortured by means of sophisticated methods imported from England. This was fully exposed and condemned in the course of legal proceedings brought by the Irish government before the European Commission of Human Rights in Strasbourg, and assurances were given by the British government that these methods would be discontinued. It is claimed by the IRA that these methods have not been discontinued, but are now being applied more secretly.

As the extent and nature of the oppression grew, so did the IRA reaction to it, and we have had a constant escalation in what is now a fullblown guerrilla war, in the course of which some 628 members of the British forces have been killed and 7,496 wounded in the period 1969-June 1981. In the same period, 1,496 civilians were killed and 16,402 wounded. The total number of persons killed in this small area over the last ten years is 2,124, and the number wounded is 23,898. There are at present in Northern Ireland 1,244 Republican prisoners. These are variously described by the British authorities as terrorists or criminals; by the nationalist population they are regarded as political or Republican prisoners.

As a result of this situation there were, on 11 June 1981, 1,244 male prisoners serving sentences in British prisons in Northern Ireland for what the British describe as terrorist-type offences. In addition, there were on the same date approximately fifty women prisoners also serving



sentences. It must be borne in mind that none of these prisoners were convicted after trial in due process of law. They were tried by single-judge courts without any juries. These courts are known as “Diplock” courts. These are courts which follow procedures that do not conform with those applicable to normal trials under the rule of law. Of some 1,300 prisoners serving sentences in British jails in Northern Ireland, 328 have been receiving what the prison authorities describe as “special status treatment.” The balance of some 966 have been denied this “special status treatment” because they were convicted on a date subsequent to the withdrawal by the British authorities of the “special status treatment.” In effect, what the hunger strikers in the H Blocks at Long Kesh were demanding was that they should receive special status treatment. This had been spelled out by the hunger strikers and the other prisoners in five specific demands concerning:

- 1. The right to wear their own clothes at all times.*
- 2. The prisoners requested that they should not be required to do menial prison work; they were prepared to do all the work required for the maintenance and cleaning of the portions of the prison occupied by them. They also asked that study time should be taken into account in determining the amount of work which they were required to do.*
- 3. They requested the right to associate freely at recreation time with other political prisoners.*
- 4. They requested the right to a weekly visit, letter, or parcel, as well as the right to organise their own educational and recreational pursuits in the prison.*

*5. The right to remission of sentences as is normally provided for all other prisoners.*

The prisoners believed that the refusal of the British authorities to grant them the “special category status” which obtained in regard to other prisoners was a political decision taken in order to criminalise their status. Several hundred of them went on what is called “the blanket protest,” from September 1976. This protest consisted of refusing to wear prison clothes and wearing a blanket instead. As from March 1978, they escalated their protest to a “no-wash protest.” A number of them went on hunger strike in October 1980 and the hunger strike ended on 18 December 1980 on the basis of an agreement put forward by Cardinal Tomás O Fiaich and Bishop Daly. In the course of the negotiations between Cardinal O Fiaich and Bishop Daly, the British government had agreed substantially to the demands made by the prisoners provided that they were not described as “an acceptance of political status.” This proviso was accepted by the prisoners. However, the British government failed to implement the recommendations that had been made by Cardinal O Fiaich and substantially accepted by them. This caused considerable bitterness and distrust among the prisoners. They considered that they had been tricked into giving up the hunger strike by subterfuge in which the British government availed of the good offices of Cardinal O Fiaich, but then reneged on the agreement they had made with him.

Cardinal O Fiaich and Bishop Daly also considered that they had been misled by the British government. It is in this atmosphere that the later hunger strike was started on 1 March 1981. However, on this occasion, the prisoners started the hunger strike with the preconceived determination that they were not going to allow the British government to trick them again, or to use intermediaries;

they insisted that they would continue the hunger strike, until death, in relays until such time as the British government gave categorical assurance to them concerning the future treatment of prisoners, and the granting of the five requirements which they had specified.

In the meanwhile, a succession of well-intentioned intermediaries, including a number of members of the Irish parliament, representatives of the European Commission on Human Rights, representatives of the Irish Commission on Justice and Peace and representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross sought to mediate, but the attitude of the British government throughout had been:

*We cannot accept that mediation between the government and convicted prisoners, even by international bodies of the highest standards, is the right course.*

They also refused to negotiate directly with the prisoners. In reality, the attitude of the British government had been to avail of all the intermediaries in an effort to break the determination of the prisoners and to avoid negotiating with the prisoners, thus not binding themselves to alterations in the prison rules. The prisoners accused them of playing a cynical game of brinkmanship, waiting for one prisoner after the other to reach the dying point, hoping that this would break the morale of the other prisoners. Indeed, in the course of a press interview given by Mr Michael Alison, British minister of state for Northern Ireland in the British embassy in Washington, he made the startling but candid admission that negotiations about the hunger strikers was like:

*the efforts of authorities to keep plane hijackers occupied while plans are developed to subdue them.*

(Irish Times, *13 July 1981*)

The death of Bobby Sands and his writings are but a fallout resulting from the cruel interference by Britain in the affairs of the Irish nation. I wish it were possible to ensure that those in charge of formulating British policy in Ireland would read these pages. They might begin to understand the deep injuries which British policy has inflicted upon this nation and now seek to heal these deep wounds.

As was pointed out by the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, "For over sixty years partition has not worked, and it is not likely to work now." Why not face up to this situation now without any further strains on Anglo-Irish relations?

No one in Ireland would wish to impose any discrimination or injustice upon any minority, religious or political, that may exist in any portion of Ireland. In a united federal Ireland I am sure that special guarantees could be ensured that would protect any religious minority that felt threatened. I am sure that, within the context of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, special mechanisms could be instituted to ensure the administrative and judicial protection of any minority within the Federated Republic of Ireland.

However, such a solution will only become possible when Britain finally relinquishes any claim of sovereignty over any portion of this island. The withdrawal of British forces can, if necessary, be phased over a period of years. More important, and more urgent, would be the immediate cessation of overt and covert British secret service operations in any part of Ireland; these are now commonplace, and are a grave source of danger. Such secret service operations can only aggravate the situation and cause an added complication in the already difficult relations which exist between our two islands.

Lest this introduction by me to these harrowing pages be construed as a tacit endorsement of violence I should explain my attitude. I do not agree with violence. Throughout the hunger strikes I did not participate in any of the H Block Committee activities lest this might be construed as an approval of violence. This was a difficult decision for me to make as I was only too conscious of the provocation and intolerance which was a feature of the policy of the British authorities *vis-à-vis* the hunger strike. I did make my views known to the British authorities in no uncertain terms but did not do so publicly. Because of persistent misrepresentation of the facts involved in the hunger strike by the British authorities in the United States I did make one speech in New York under the auspices of the American Irish Unity Committee on 22 July 1981 in order to set the record right.

In their own country and in countries which they do not seek to dominate, the British are reasonable, fair-minded and even lovable. It is otherwise in areas which they regard as their preserve. In regard to Ireland, the British government and establishment are just incapable of being objective, fair-minded or just. A typical illustration of this was provided recently.

The British forces in Northern Ireland have been using rubber or plastic bullets indiscriminately for a number of years. They have argued that they were harmless. Over fifty people—mostly children—have been killed or permanently maimed in Northern Ireland by these plastic or rubber bullets. This was denied by the British who maintained that they were harmless. When extensive riots broke out recently in Britain the possibility arose of using rubber or plastic bullets for crowd control. An alarmed Conservative British Home Secretary said immediately that he would oppose their use “in mainland Britain because they are lethal!” (*Irish Times*, 11 July 1981) It is all right to use them

in Ireland and to kill women and children there—but not “in mainland Britain”!

In the early stages of the last decade, Paul Johnson, one of Great Britain’s most distinguished journalists, editor of the *Spectator*, and one of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s most ardent supporters, wrote in the *New Statesman*:

*In Ireland over the centuries, we have tried every possible formula: direct rule, indirect rule, genocide, apartheid, puppet parliaments, real parliaments, martial law, civil law, colonisation, land reform, partition. Nothing has worked. The only solution we have not tried is absolute and unconditional withdrawal.*

Why not try it now? It will happen in any event!

Some had no thought of victory  
But had gone out to die  
That Ireland’s mind be greater  
Her heart mount up on high;  
And yet who knows what’s yet to come.

William Butler Yeats

***SEÁN MacBRIDE, 1982***

**Seán MacBride (1904-88)**