

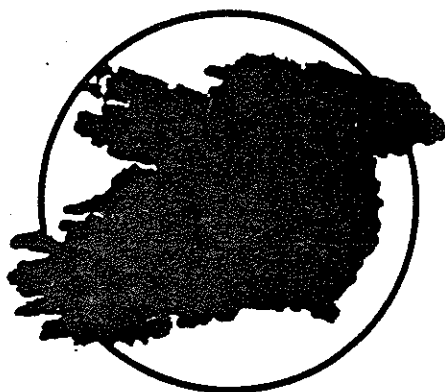


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what we saw of **THE IRISH WAR**



report of the Irish Freedom Movement delegation
to Derry and Belfast ~ Easter 1982



NORTH LONDON IRISH FREEDOM MOVEMENT

EDITORIAL

Britain's other war

At Easter one hundred young people visited the Six Counties on the Irish Freedom Movement's 1982 Youth Delegation. The delegation split into two, one half going to Belfast, the other to Derry.

In this pamphlet we have printed the impressions of two delegates from North London. What comes across vividly is the immediacy of the war, the brutalisation of the nationalist people and the enormous support for the liberation struggle.

At a time when the eyes of the world are directed towards Britain's actions in another war in the South Atlantic, we should not forget the Irish war, the present phase of which has been going on in Ireland since the end of the 'sixties. When Thatcher or Foot talk about the inviolability of the principle of self-determination, we should remember the contempt with which they treat this issue in Ireland. It is easy to see why the majority of Irish people have no sympathy for Britain's war against Argentina.

The Irish Freedom Movement has put together a slide-show of the Easter delegation. If you would like to see it or hear a report-back from the delegation, write to this address: North London Irish Freedom Movement
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234 Camden High Street
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June 1982

Belfast - a city divided by British imperialism

For the first time visitor, the Six Counties presents many contradictions. The very idea that this little corner of Ireland is quite naturally a part of Britain is brought immediately into question, because of the extraordinary measures that are employed to make it 'British'. The Easter Youth Delegation organised by the IFM provided an opportunity for young people to see some of the realities of the North of Ireland.

The journey north from London and Manchester was by coach. We then made a short crossing from Stranraer to Larne by ferry. The security checks on their side of the crossing indicated that we were entering a special part of the U.K. As our driver commented, it was remarkably similar to a border check. Foreign nationals and black people had to produce their passports. Others were selected at random to produce identification. Everyone had to fill in embarkation cards yet we were merely crossing a stretch of water that separates one part of Britain from another. The RUC decided to give us a special welcome. One by one we filed through an inspection booth so that our baggage could be searched, and male delegates were frisked by a security guard. In addition to this, the occupants of an unmarked car parked opposite the coaches seemed particularly interested in our movements.

In all, we were delayed by several hours. After going through such lengthy formalities it was rather strange to be back on 'British' roads, with their customary signs and road markings. The RUC are unlike regular British police, with their stylized green uniforms, and no-nonsense manner. Also, they carry guns.

We arrived in Belfast at lunchtime Saturday. The centre of the city was closed to traffic, and as we approached a security gate an RUC officer signalled us to stop. He boarded the coach and asked where we were going. After some words were exchanged with the driver he gave instructions how to reach the Falls Road.

As we approached West Belfast the scenery changed dramatically. We seemed to pass through a sort of no-mans land - derelict buildings and vacant lots. I noticed massive steel and concrete security barriers that were positioned so that they could be quickly moved into place. We were now in the predominantly Catholic part of Belfast - a very different picture from the comfortable and well serviced residential areas that we passed as we entered the city from the East. Although I had some previous knowledge of the way Catholics have been discriminated against, it is difficult to conceive of the absolute separation that exists between the two communities, without actually seeing it. The housing estates are of a much lower quality, in both appearance and construction. Municipal services such as road maintenance and upkeep of public spaces seem not to extend to the Catholic areas. Neither do these phenomena appear to be the result of the war, but rather a long-term legacy of discrimination and 'ghettoisation'.

Two things stood out very clearly from this run-down environment. One was British soldiers on patrol. They stalk the footpaths, stopping every few hundred yards to see the vicinity through the view-finder of their rifles. The other was the signs of resistance of the people. Anti-British, pro-IRA slogans cover nearly every wall. Also elaborate murals in rich colours depict various phases of the war, what the nationalist population have had to endure - torture, interrogation, internment. The newest murals, some still being worked on by teams of children and youths, were about the hunger strikers, with the sinister Long Kesh and Armagh prisons in the background.

We were taken to a community centre in Andersonstown to drop off our luggage. The rest of the day was spent looking around West Belfast. It didn't take long before the signs of the war became much more apparent. Army forts are strategically located near housing estates, so that they can be easily patrolled and observed. At regular intervals, large armoured saracens - change to start their patrols. They are rather squat but very wide; soldiers are able to see out through a narrow horizontal slit, which

can be used to fire from. Patrols are also conducted by the RUC, but only in safer areas. They use armour-plated landrovers to cope with the unfriendly response their presence evokes. They are frequently stoned by the nationalist youths.

It was very obvious that the whole community resented and opposed British rule. The war conducted by the IRA against the British occupying forces is one aspect of that opposition. The measures which the British forces use to subdue and pacify the Catholic population show that they are at war against all the nationalist people, not just its organised armed resistance. For example, every public building - including Post Offices and libraries - because of the fact that it is a symbol of British administration, has to be protected by metal spikes and barbed wire. The murals are systematically defaced by soldiers on night patrols.

What of that section of the population that does want to keep the Six Counties under British rule? Conversations we had with local youths, in Andersonstown, showed that this rift between Catholics and Protestants, has nothing to do with religion. The political consciousness of young people, some as young as 10 and 11 years old was amazing. After we had explained to them why we had come and why we support their struggle for self-determination we were able to discuss complex questions such as the reasons for sectarianism. A boy of 11 years put it very simply: 'We're not fighting the Protestants because of their religion, we're fighting them because they're Loyalists - they side with the British'. We asked why this was so: 'Because they will always get a job before a Catholic gets a job, and the same with housing. When the Brits leave, the Protestants will lose all their privileges, and only then will we be able to live together.'

Other children told of their experiences with the British soldiers - of brutal house raids, involving intimidation and destruction of property. Counting on the uprisings in Britain last year, they were wholeheartedly behind them, but suggested that they should be more organised next time! There was no doubt in their minds that they were fighting against the same enemy as the black youth in Britain - the British State.

We were not all aware of the fact that Andersonstown was the home of Kieran Doherty, one of the ten hunger strikers who died in Long Kesh. So it was an unexpected surprise when Mr and Mrs Doherty came to give us a personal welcome. They invited us to spend the evening in the local social club of which Mr Doherty is manager. We were lucky enough to hear one of the best Republican bands I have ever heard. They sang songs dating back to the 1916 rising, and some very recent ones, such as "Bobby Sands from Belfast". The memory of the hunger strikers is very fresh in the minds and hearts of the nationalist people. One of the first things we saw as we approached Andersonstown was a huge notice saying: 'Andersonstown supports the hunger strikers!' The song, by the Irish Brigade tells of what they stood for:

An Irish soldier to the last
A criminal he would not be classed
And so began the long death fast
Of Bobby Sands from Belfast

Proud Britannia hide your face
Throughout the world you are disgraced
How many more must take the place
Of Bobby Sands from Belfast.

Sunday, the day of the Easter Commemoration March, was the next exciting part of the visit. The event commemorates the Easter rising of 1916, led by James Connolly. This year's march was imbued with the spirit of defiance of the hunger strikers.

The IFM delegation walked all the way down the Falls Road to Beechmount Street where everyone was assembling to join the procession. The number of people on the streets, let alone those who actually marched, was

astounding. It must have been tens of thousands. The march is organised by Provisional Sinn Fein and led by an IRA detachment. Outsiders usually look at the IRA as if it was an organisation distinct from the Catholic population. Infact, the IRA is simply the most organised and forceful part of the widespread opposition of the whole community to sectarian discrimination and British rule. The enthusiasm of thousands of onlookers showed that no artificial line can be drawn between the people and the armed struggle.

The march consisted of many contingents - various youth clubs and Republican organisations, as well as numerous flute bands. One contingent was led by a man wearing nothing but a blanket.

The procession marched back up the Falls Road to the cemetery. Between the most recent graves of the hunger strikers and a monument to IRA volunteers killed in action, an impressive ceremony took place. The IRA guard of honour fired several shots into the air on command.

Later in the afternoon, the delegation had a more formal meeting with PSF representatives and Sinn Fein Youth. Members of the delegation told of their experiences building sympathy and support for the Irish struggle on the British mainland.

We left Belfast for home with many strong impressions of the war in Ireland, none perhaps stronger than that of a people prepared to fight until they achieve their just aims.

Derry - war in an Irish town

On the road to Derry we noticed slogans painted in every conceivable place - IRA OK! and SMASH H BLOCK. The coach was stopped twice: once when we passed an RUC barracks at Toome and again at an army checkpoint half an hour from Derry. The second time the soldiers subjected us all to a bout of questions while the officers handed out printed cards bearing the message 'Help save lives and end terrorism' with 'confidential' phone numbers on the rear. The same message appears on the huge billboards throughout Derry and at the top of Loyalist newspapers.

We arrived in Derry from the predominantly Protestant East side of the River Foyle. In this section many of the pavements are daubed red, white and blue. Descending towards the Craigavon Bridge we saw that most commercial properties are boarded up. We then crossed the river to enter the nationalist Bogside. This immediately strikes you as shabbier than the Loyalist areas. On the way we passed Free Derry Corner - a white wall with the words 'You are now entering free Derry' painted in black. This is a monument to nationalist resistance to Britain dating from the battle of Bogside in 1969.

We were first shown around the nationalist ghetto by local youths. Walking around there is a sense of freedom and safety: local people say they only have anything to fear when the security forces appear on the scene. The first landmark we saw was the place where two undercover Brits were ambushed as they drove down Creggan Road in a mini-van. Our hosts proudly pointed to the bullet holes. Only a few yards further on our guides showed us the spot where two of their friends were crushed by a British landrover in 1981. We then walked down William Street - lined with green, white and orange flags - to the Rossville flats. There we were asked to complete a mural which had been outlined by local people with the slogan 'They may kill the revolutionary, but never the revolution'.

Later that evening we visited a republican pub. I talked to three sisters who had a brother in jail. Most people have a friend or relative in either Long Kesh or Armagh - many have more than one. It was clear why nationalist people chose to fight - most have no choice, because they are the direct victims of British oppression.

The highlight of our stay was the Easter Rising Commemoration. On the fringes of the nationalist ghettos there was a strong army presence intimidating and searching the crowd as it gathered. We assembled in files of three - a measure necessary to prevent infiltration by plain clothes policemen and soldiers. Suddenly the colour party appeared, marching down the hill. There is a great excited rush through the crowd as people surge forward to see it. The fact that volunteers can march publicly showed us just how much support they have in the broad Catholic community and how unsuccessful British attempts to portray them as criminals have been.

Our last evening was spent at a Republican club. Outside one boy showed us a deep scar on his skin where he was hit by a plastic bullet. His friends describe how the soldiers often tamper with them - putting batteries or explosives inside. One told of a boy whose hands were blown off when he picked up a bullet which had been doctored. Nobody who is injured by a plastic bullet will risk going to hospital, as they will inevitably be arrested by the RUC. They might then be dumped in a Loyalist area or held in an RUC barracks and forced to sign a confession.

The youth of Derry have endless stories of the brutality of the army and the RUC. They shoot plastic bullets at the windows of prisoners friends and relatives. Sometimes they're more subtle - stopping a small child and scrawling 'Fuck the Provos' over his copy of An Phoblacht. For the whole nationalist community British violence has become part of their way of life. They feel that to find any peace they must fight back - either by rioting or by joining the armed resistance.

North London Irish Freedom Movement is actively campaigning for

- * the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Ireland
- * Self-determination for the Irish people
- * Political status for anti-imperialist prisoners

In addition we hold regular meetings and street activities. We campaign in local trade union, Labour Party and labour movement organisations for support for the Irish liberation struggle.

Among the issues that we want to highlight:

- * the use by the British army of plastic bullets which have so far killed 12 children and maimed many more.
- * Sean McKenna, one of the original hunger strikers, who is now blind and in extremely poor health.

Vigils in remembrance of the hunger strikers

Kilburn Square, 8pm-9pm Organised by Provisional Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Socialist Party.

- 8 July: Joe McDonnell
- 13 July: Martin Hurson
- 1 August: Kevin Lynch
- 2 August: Kieran Docherty
- 8 August: Tomas McIlwee
- 20 August: Micky Devine

Telephone 274 3951 for more information

I would like to know more about the Irish Freedom Movement

Name.....	Trade union/organisation.....
Address.....	Telephone.....
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