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Irrevocable Futures: Tracing the Dynamics of Conflict, Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday

The killing of 14 unarmed demonstrators by the British army in Derry in what became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ (30 January 1972) has been seen as a turning point in the history of the Northern Irish conflict insofar as it epitomised the gulf between Northern Catholic-nationalists and the British government. For example, one historian has written of how the events of the day pushed Anglo-Irish relations to ‘breaking-point’ and that the subsequent ‘lies, evasions and blatant propaganda’ on the part of the British state were only remedied in the judicial inquiry process announced by Tony Blair in 1998 and concluded in the summer of 2010.1 This chapter traces how that particular framing of history arose and how it is being mapped on to contemporary academic and political projects.

The invocation of events such as Bloody Sunday within narratives of callousness, self-sacrifice and, ultimately, retribution and redemption serves also to reveal, however, surreptitiously the counter-balance of violence, division and self-serving justification. The chapter points to the fact that the stories of British oppression and terror can serve to mute events that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) were responsible for such as the Claudy massacre (21 July 1972) (where a few months after Bloody Sunday car bombs ripped through the heart of a village in south County Derry killing nine people – five Catholics and four Protestants) or Bloody Friday (31 July 1972) (where a series of no-warning bombs exploded around Belfast city centre resulting in nine deaths and over 130 people injured). The key theme of this chapter is therefore not only to trace how this muting occurs but to argue that it is present in the history-making that (rightly or wrongly) foregrounds other events as political important or symbolically rich and that in that history-making process, self-sacrifice and self-flagellation is often accompanied with self-emolument and selective amnesia.
Bloody Sunday and the accumulation of trauma

The force of Bloody Sunday as a catastrophic and obscene event has given rise to an almost totalising narrative that ignores historical distinction. A key feature of that narrative is the teleological notion that Bloody Sunday directly inspired, sustained and provided a moral foundation for the ‘war’ of the PIRA against the British state. I argue that archival evidence suggests rather different conclusions including and notwithstanding the fact that while many nationalists were alienated from the British government, their response to political developments was in many ways more nuanced than the repression-mobilisation model suggests. This is illustrated in nationalists’ reactions to events such as the ending of the devolved majoritarian and Ulster unionist-dominated government (24 March 1972) and the PIRA’s destruction of Belfast city centre on Bloody Friday. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry (2000–10) has emphasised the need to attend to historical detail, however, I argue that that aspiration together with the underlying rationale behind the Inquiry – namely, that insofar as it recovered truth(s) about a pivotal juncture the Inquiry was necessary for fostering peace – have been and continue to be endangered by the politicisation of narratival representations of the day’s legacy.

The literature scholar, Shane Alcobia-Murphy has remarked that one of the key problems that the Bloody Sunday Inquiry had to contend with was the ‘intensely mediated nature of the event itself’. The passage of time, coupled with the ‘necessarily disparate and fragmentary nature of the information’ added serious technical and methodological problems to the already considerable political ones for the Inquiry’s chair, Lord Saville. In fact, one line of argument states that the representation of Bloody Sunday in literature, drama, film, poetry, political rhetoric and collective commemorations has been central to the process of coming to terms with the trauma of British troops shooting dead unarmed British citizens. Thus, Dave Duggan, whose fictionalised play, Scenes from an Inquiry, mirrored the dramatic treatment of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, has remarked on how

[t]he legal process is vital and essential, but I think there are other processes, in particular those that use the imagination, that can assist in a wider salving of the hurts that an event like Bloody Sunday has left with individuals and the community.

Certainly, I do not dispute the possibility that at an individual level, recounting personal reminiscences of shocking and distressful experiences may