



Half of History: Remembering the Women of Armagh

Peer into any Republican gift shop or glance at any number of Belfast or Derry murals and it becomes clear that the story of Bobby Sands and his male comrades' hunger strike in 1981, including their preceding years of protests, in the Long Kesh/Maze Prison is integral to the Northern Irish Republican identity. Angered by the British government's revoking of Special Category Status to IRA prisoners in 1976, Republican prisoners embarked on the blanket protest as a means of obtaining political status. This protest was followed by the dirty protest in 1978 and culminated in the first hunger strike in 1980. After the first hunger strike failed to reinstate Special Category Status, Bobby Sands led a second hunger strike which received world-wide media attention and led to his election to Parliament. After his death and the deaths of nine of his fellow strikers, nearly all of the original demands were met by the British government, marking a victory for the Republican movement which has been remembered and memorialized ever since.

What's been described is a male-dominated story and has been commemorated as such in Republican mythology and celebration. But the story completely ignores the integral role women played in the hunger strike and the events leading up to it.

The documentary *Bobby Sands: 66 Days* failed to interview a single woman regarding the hunger strikes and cultural interpretations, like the film *Hunger*, continue to promote the male narrative absent of female participants. Women are largely missing from Republican murals while parades and commemorations of 1981 treat the male H-Block strikers as the genuine political actors in the hunger strike. At best, women make small cameos in an event that they were irrevocably a part of.

The reality of the hunger strikes tells a far richer and compelling story than the one depicted in commemorations and movie screens. Beginning with the elimination of their Special Category Status, imprisoned female IRA members participated in acts of defiance from their cells in Armagh Gaol Prison, often enduring unique and inhumane treatment specifically designed to exploit their gender. Throughout the seventies, the women were subjected to cruel strip searches, a humiliating and often violent assault on their body and dignity. Their first act of protest entailed refusing to partake in prison work. Female prisoners then joined their male counterparts in the dirty protest, having to contend uniquely with their own menstrual blood in the process. When the IRA decided to undergo the first hunger strike in 1980, the women at Armagh were eager participants. As hunger striker Mary Doyle explained, "The women were determined to participate as we felt we had an equal stake in achieving the five demands." Doyle was joined by two other women on the hunger strike for nearly three weeks until the IRA called it off prematurely for various, contested reasons.

The failure to commemorate women throughout history is emblematic of the Republican movement's patriarchal make up.

It is also representative of a greater societal ignorance of women within Northern Ireland and beyond. Lynn Carvill, project manager of the "A Century of Women" project, elaborated on the forces that keep women out of the text books and, therefore, out of commemoration. "Women were invisible from the history books because history was written largely by men and we sought to change this," Carvill said, "We want to tell the story of their lives and their determination to have their voices heard in a closed, patriarchal society." In Northern Ireland's conservative culture in which abortion remains illegal and religion reigns supreme, acknowledging women as equal participants in its history remains a controversial act.

The neglect of Republican women in Ireland's commemorations has not gone unnoticed. Sinn Fein politician and Republican activist Breige Brownlee strives to commemorate the role women have played within the pursuit of independence through parades and special ceremonies. As Brownlee states, "The contribution of women in our struggle has brought us to where we are today...the role of women has to be put on par with the role of men." Various organizations have endeavored to celebrate overlooked stories from the Republican movement's past. Resources such as the Prison's Memory Archive, which seeks to capture the stories of those once imprisoned in Long Kesh/Maze and Armagh Gaol, have been established with the intention of treating male and female narratives in the conflict with equal respect. The "A Century of Women" project seeks to celebrate women in Northern Irish history from a variety of backgrounds, including the prisoners from Armagh Gaol. Artistic interpretations such as the film *Silent Grace* convey the stories of women imprisoned in Armagh. Despite these efforts, most commemoration in Northern Ireland is still beholden to the narrow, male dominated myths of the past.



As the fortieth anniversary of the hunger strike approaches, it is crucial that women are inserted into the narrative where they rightfully belong and commemorated accordingly. Female prisoners suffered alongside their male counterparts, often enduring a

brutality tailored specifically to their gender, such as degrading strip searches. Their experience demands acknowledgment by the greater Republican community and their sacrifices should be celebrated alongside those of their male contemporaries. As Bobby Sands wrote, "There is so much I would like to say about them, about their courage, determination, and unquenchable spirit of resistance." The need to properly honor these women is urgently needed. Many of these former prisoners are aging while the reminders of these past struggles are disappearing. New generations are growing up unaware of the contributions made by their predecessors for the rights enjoyed by Protestants and Catholics alike in Northern Ireland today. With most of Long Kesh/Maze Prison demolished and poised for residential housing, the preservation of Armagh Gaol as a museum for the hunger strike and the role women played in the Republican movement would have been an excellent, forward thinking idea. Instead, the soon to be redeveloped prison, once home to excrement covered walls, starving prisoners, and rule-defying women, will begin welcoming guests as a luxurious boutique hotel just in time for the strike's fortieth anniversary.

by Christian Wimmer