

Bernadette: One women's journey from mass protest to hunger strikes to the peace process

Review of Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey

Andrew Flood

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The end of the 1960's in northern Ireland were a unique time when, as elsewhere around the world, mass popular protest emerged onto the streets with ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The unique circumstances of northern Ireland and the particular form the state backlash took there resulted in a military conflict that lasted some 30 years and dominated politics on the entire island and to a much lesser extent in Britain. Although tens if not hundreds of thousands of people made this history it can also be told as the history of some of the prominent individuals involved, including the Irish republican socialist activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey.

TG4 broadcast the excellent documentary 'Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey', the start of February. The film tells some of the story of and captures the optimism and hope of the civil rights struggle in northern Ireland of the late 1960s. Remarkably from the interviews, filmed over the last 9 years, Bernadette herself still holds some of that spirit despite the grim reality of the years since, including the loyalist attempt to murder her during the Hunger Strikes when she was shot 8 times and her husband also badly injured.

I want to highlight those aspects at the start of the review because the one word you come across again and again in discussions of Bernadette is 'bitter.' It's probably a description she almost encourages; she certainly has a blunt way of expressing herself. For instance in relation to the Peace Process and the Stormont Assembly she says she can't imagine walking up the steps as too much blood was spilt getting there. But then she also is open to a new generation doing just that and indeed endorsed the People Before Profit candidates in the 2011 elections. The interviews bring across that there is a good deal more complexity to her opinions than can be captured in bitter sounding sound bites.

The documentary concentrates on the early years when as a 19 year old working class woman from a small rural town she became the most iconic figures of the radical wing of the civil rights movement. In the footage and images of her delivering speeches and smashing paving stones (to provide missiles for rioters whose aim was better than hers) her small stature means she often looks to be a schoolgirl who has perhaps wandered into the scene and somehow got on the megaphone. She was far from the only woman involved in the movement but in those shots she is often surrounded by burly serious looking men, a visual reminder of how remarkable it was in those times for a women to be accepted in what was a de facto position of leadership. She tells her own story as that of an ordinary person transformed by extraordinary circumstances, even suggesting, were it not that the movement started so close to where she lived, that she mightn't have been pulled into it in the first place.

Missing elements

One of the unexplored themes of the documentary is how come she was so prominent at the time the emerging movement was new and a break with past traditions, but faded into relative obscurity as the struggle was pushed back onto traditional terrain. Part of that story is clearly the switch from mass mobilization of the late 1960's to the 'Years of (military) Victory' of the 1970's when the unknown gunman became the new image of struggle. Perhaps was it not for the murderous assassination attempt on her and her husband during the Hunger Strikes she would have returned and stayed at the fore of the re-invigorated political movement that emerged from its defeat.

One of the shortcomings of the documentary is that it doesn't really address the feminist angle of the story to any great extent. There are interesting snippets, in particular where Bernadette is talking of her fund raising visits to the US and how *"most of my good learning on feminism came from Black American women .. that was a privilege for me, not many people here had the opportunity to have that exposure"*. In general the American trip is under explored, the focus is on the (hilarious) denunciations of her by unionists as 'a Fidel Castro in a mini skirt', their attempt to appeal to anti-communist sentiments, but there would have been a fascinating story to be explored on the tensions and costs of her open identification with the Black Panthers, Young Lords and US left and union movements while there. It isn't mentioned but in 1971 she also refused to meet Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley because of his brutal treatment of opponents of the Vietnam War.

This was something only possible in the early years of the struggle. Later on when released prisoners were sent on fund raising tours they were given instructions on who to be seen talking to and what subjects should not be broached. The republican movement at the time was attracting the support of Irish American police forces in some US cities so the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, [until recently] on death row for allegedly shooting a police man was a particular no go area.

Likewise that she was unmarried when she gave birth to Róisín in 1971 was a very major statement for such a prominent women in what was still a deeply conservative country at that time, but the influence of the catholic church is only mentioned in passing. The most prominent hint of her views is actually given by unionist speakers trying to counter her North American tour by appealing to the religious conservatism of Irish American catholics. One refers to *"her mocking comment on her own head of the church, the pope"* and from the same counter tour Ian Paisley is shown quoting her saying *"the one way you would unite catholic & protestants is by trying to get rid of both churches at once"* and warning that this proves she is a Marxist. Presuming these quotes are accurate it would have been interesting to hear Bernadette outline her views on what remains one of the central political issues in Ireland. These shortcomings can perhaps be excused because there was only so much time to tell the aspects of her story that were told but they perhaps also result in a leaning towards a traditional nationalist historical narrative that avoids some of the questions that suggest a more complex story.

Civil Rights struggle

The story told is also inevitably the story of a section of the Civil Rights Movement and the extraordinary story that led in Derry from the Battle of the Bogside through to the murderous grimness of the Bloody Sunday massacre. Much of the documentary consists of footage from that period, in particular John Goldschmidt's 1969 TV documentary 'Bernadette Devlin' with the modern interviews with Bernadette providing context or on occasion interviews with her on the original soundtrack doing so. The strength of the documentary is that overwhelmingly the narration is provided by the interviews with Bernadette rather than the standard talking head 'experts' providing impartial context. That unfortunately is the format the Mna na IRA documentaries, which are also being shown on TG4, follow. Despite their subjects fascinating lives, they never get beyond the most shallow skimming of the surface of the story such is the weight of context and counter opinion.

That aspect has been criticized in some reviews as showing a lack of balance but Lelia Doolan the documentary maker does not hide behind a pretense of neutrality, indeed she told the Galway advertiser that Bernadette “has a straightforward addiction to liberty. Civil rights has always been at the heart of what she has done. She is a Republican-Socialist - somebody who is a citizen in a political system that represents individual rights and a socialist, because of the need to equally share the goods of that society. She is a woman of incredible eloquence and clarity.”

I’m quite critical of the ability of film to tell anything more than a fraction of a complex story; the few thousand words of script would after all make for a substantial article but not a book. And my personal collection of books on this period is around the two dozen mark. But the danger of the documentary form is that because it is so immersive it leaves the false impression with the audience that they now know everything, in particular when the small section of clips that made the final cut is designed to look unbiased. Which means I much prefer my political documentaries to be obviously taking a side and making an argument, as is the case here.

Some of the footage itself is extraordinary. Not so much the scenes of police and military violence from October 5th to Bloody Sunday as that footage is familiar; the same clips are played over and over at each anniversary. The more interesting segments include a People’s Democracy march singing ‘The Internationale’ as they pass through an unnamed northern town, perhaps in the aftermath of the Burntollet ambush. Also of interest is the segment of archive where the camera pans a curious but uncertain looking crowd as the narrator says *“her most novel and daring effort thongs is to convert protestants, daring the eggs and stones in their tougher strongholds areas like Moneymore and Sion Mills where she went last night.”* In fact in order to win her seat she had to win over a segment of protestant voters, it had previously been a unionist seat and returned to being so after 1974.

These clips bring home the difference between the struggle of the late 60’s, which had a radical, internationalist and left leaning perspective, and that of the 1970’s when, in particular in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, the agenda turned once more to the more traditional catholic nationalist militarism. Her speeches during the election campaign focus in on class and urge organization beyond the elections, for instance the clip where she is speaking in a factory car park and advises that *“everyone of you should be in the union and you should be making sure that the union leaders don’t forget about you.”*

The Battle of the Bogside & electoralism

The segment, filmed at the time, where she talks of her role in helping to organize the defense of the Bogside to keep the police out, is a practical and to the point description of organizing defense squads to defend an area from police attack. She says *“once you didn’t let the police in, you had to organize .. I organized . to break these bigger stones up into manageable stones so the people on the front line could throw them.”* Later on, and a couple of years later, she is shown making a statement at a press conference against rioting for its own sake. She presents her strength as being in organizing people to get things done and in elections.

As an anarchist it would be impossible to review this subject without touching at all on the issue of electoralism. Bernadette’s election as an MP in 1969 and the fact that winning the 1970 election allowed her to confront Reginald Maudling in the Commons are probably two of the strongest arguments by example for electoralism in Ireland. And unlike many radicals who end

up getting wooed by the trappings of power in the Dáil bar, she resisted that call. Again in an interview from the period where she is being criticized for rioting in Derry rather than being in parliament she says *"I have been to parliament .. I haven't joined the club, I haven't sat in the Strangers bar and chatted up all the stupid people who sit in it .. I didn't go there to join his bloody crew so its no importance to me if they don't like me."*

Lenin argued for parliamentary participation so that revolutionaries could use parliament as a dung heap upon which to stand to address the masses. The reality has been that generations of revolutionary parliamentarians have climbed onto the dung heap, perhaps intending to do so, but have quickly sunk into it and become indistinguishable. This is a common feature of Irish history and one repeated in recent years with both the Workers Party, Sinn Fein and, although from a different starting point, the Green Party. Of course with all but the most opportunistic the process of conversion is seldom instant and takes a couple of terms in office to become visible.

Her belief in electoralism as a tool clearly continues today, as shown by her endorsement of People before Profit candidates in the 2011 elections in the north. [video] Yet there has to be a question as to whether her very electoral prominence in the period from the Battle to the Bogside to Bloody Sunday is part of the story why a radical organised political movement that could offer an alternative to republicanism failed to organize in time to prevent the 1970's degeneration into militarism. It's a problem also observed elsewhere that when people have their TD or MP to fight their corner then their political organizing tends to atrophy into supporting their re-election.

This is certainly not how she sees it, her clearest statement is perhaps where she is talking of going to fund raise in North America and how her election and media exposure meant, *"I was given a profile, I was given an existence, I was given an image in America .. I looked pretty harmless when I was longhaired, short skirted .. I couldn't be disembodied from the mass movement I was part of, I rose and fell with that movement."* In the same segment she describes her contribution as *"I was an amplifier of the people's voice and so I could be sent to America to amplify what was going on."* There is an amusing segment where she talks of the weirdness of people congratulating her on her delivery of speeches but who say they *"don't agree with a word you say."*

There is a particular missed opportunity in relation to electoralism in not discussing the direction taken in the aftermath of the 1981 Hunger Strikes. At that time of course Bernadette was recovering from the murderous attempt to assassinate her, that attempt followed the murders on other occasions of four other members of the National H-Block Committee. But given the perspective offered by former IRA volunteers like Tommy McKearney that Sinn Fein choose an electoral road rather than a mass mobilisation strategy at that point it would have been interesting to hear Bernadette's response to that thesis. It was certainly a moment where the gap between electoralism and mass movement building was very visible.

After her return from America she was charged for her role in the three days of rioting during the 'Battle of the Bogside' during which that iconic image of her smashing a paving stone was taken. After the riots she had returned to London to demand an audience with the British Prime Minister. Afterwards she was to be singled out for prosecution and eventually, after being re-elected for a second time, was to spend five months in jail for her role in the riots. She lost her seat at the next election, as the turn to militarism saw a resurrection of the traditional communal politics where almost every catholic voted nationalist and every protestant unionist so, except where the vote was split, each constituency voted along the lines of a simple sectarian head count.

Bloody Sunday

One event more than any other ensured the return to traditional militarism, the massacre of civilian protesters by the British Army on Bloody Sunday. Bernadette was on the platform on Bloody Sunday when 13 unarmed men were shot dead by the British army in Derry. She went to Westminster the next day where she famously slapped Reginald Maudling, the Home Secretary who claimed the troops had fired in self defense. In the footage from the time when asked by journalists outside if she regrets slapping him, she says she wished she *"I'm just sorry I didn't get him by the throat"*. That attitude has obviously not softened as in her recent interview with the Derry Journal after the film was released she said *"I didn't slap him half hard enough. I should have caught him by the tie and choked him as well as hit him."*

The Derry Journal asked her how she felt about Cameron's apology for Bloody Sunday on the day the Saville report was released and given the controversy over that report her response is worth quoting at length. The day the report was released she says was;

"One of the loneliest days in my life. I was happy that the families were happy but it wasn't alright for me. The key part was Saville didn't tell us anything we didn't know. The core point is that the state killed its citizens and out of that day came most of the other deaths. We knew the dead were innocent, Derry didn't need vindication but we needed to learn all of the people behind the decision to enact Bloody Sunday.

"Saville made Bloody Sunday a decision of the soldiers on the ground to run amok, that isn't what happened. If I were the soldiers involved I would be as angry as I am at that finding. The government actions on Bloody Sunday created the situation which followed for decades in the North, many more people were killed and it all followed that day.

"The government had declared war on the people in the street and as a result more people thought we'll join the IRA, or if not join, many played a key role in sustaining the war, even at a minimum level. It also gave unionist paramilitary groups the green light to kill Catholics. Northern Ireland was militarised after Bloody Sunday and the government appeared to get away with it."

The Bloody Sunday murders allowed the British state to contain what had been a growing radical mass movement within the confines of a more traditional military struggle where the British army could get away with using military power to suppress it. Apart from the 13 killed on that day and John Johnston who was injured and died four and a half month later many of the thousands of people killed in the following decades dies because of the turn to arms that it made inevitable. As I wrote in a recent article to mark the anniversary for the French magazine *Alternative Libertaire* "Almost everyone who witnessed the events agrees with that perspective and indeed how could any other outcome have been expected. When an occupying army guns down over two dozen unarmed protesters it would be almost impossible to expect any response other than those who are still determined to struggle looking to arm themselves in defence and to seek revenge. In the three years to Bloody Sunday the escalating violence had killed 200 people. In 1972 alone, the year of Bloody Sunday 479 were killed, the vast majority after the massacre and as part of the reaction to it."

The taking up of arms

The interviews, which were conducted over several years from 2002, come across as very honest, particularly when she talks of the emotional demands and consequences of her actions. This includes a segment where she frankly discusses her relationship with the developing armed struggle. How, because some people took up arms to defend the catholic areas when they came under attack, meant that she didn't have to. She says in that context *"If there were areas under attack would I have taken up a gun to defend them? I never had to make that decision because some one else always did .. the fact that there is no blood on my hands is because the blood on my hands is on theirs .. we are protected from taking decisions by the fact we let other people do the killing for us. So I don't have a problem with being seen 'In the shadow of a gunman'"*

This is later put into context in the discussions of her role in the formation of the Irish Republican Socialist Party in 1974. She refers to a vacuum created by the fact the Official IRA had become partitionist and reformist and the Provisional IRA *"had no articulated politics at all"*. The IRSP formation in 1974 initially seemed to offer much promise to many on the left, I've even met members of the Socialist Party who were initially drawn to it. In part because of the murderous feud that quickly developed with the Workers Party / Official IRA, many of those initially attracted by the concept of a party that would combine republicanism & socialism soon left. The footage at this point includes a fight at a left unity meeting in the Mansion House in Dublin where some those involved in the scuffling appear to be quite prominent figures today. A reminder that one of the facts of politics in Ireland, north and south, is that the governments in both states include those who at the very least were members of political organisations with armed wings right into the 1990s.

She says she left the IRSP after only a year because she disagreed with the fact that it followed the traditional republican approach where the clandestine military wing (the INLA) really had the power. This was also the decision taken by many others. The 'IRPs' (as the IRSP & INLA combination was known) remained significant into the aftermath of the 1981 Hungerstrikes. But the militarist emphasis and hostility from other republican organisations, as well as murderous internal feuding, meant that they never came close to offering a genuine left alternative, whatever rhetorical hopes some placed in it.

The question of the 'Peace Process'

The documentary ends with a discussion of Bernadette's role in opposing the 'Peace Process.' This in particular focuses on the way that her pregnant daughter Róisín was imprisoned on suspicion of involvement in an IRA attack in Germany with the apparent intention of distracting her. I'd had some minor involvement in this campaign, taking part in protests in Dublin & Derry as part of the 25th anniversary of Bloody Sunday march. Róisín was to be eventually released without charge and even Amnesty International said of her imprisonment that *"she was detained in conditions which constituted cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. It was only through international protest that some of the restrictions were eased towards the end of her pregnancy."*

The cruel treatment of Róisín aside, this was the weakest part of the documentary as Bernadette's actual role in that key period and her reasons for opposing the Peace Process were not really explored. In the interviews used she distances herself from the militarist end of the

dissident republican movement by simply saying people wrongly assumed she was sympathetic to them. As she puts it *“At that point I was querying and putting forward too many ideas and ironically was the person being treated by the militarists as if there was some militarist part of my being that couldn’t envision peace.”* This assumption was however widespread even on the (anti ‘Peace Process’) far left at the time and it would have been interesting to explore the reasons why this was the case. Certainly in these modern interviews the analysis she offers, that the Peace Process is about “managing sectarianism” rather than solving it, is one I’d agree with and WSM argued at the time.

I was curious enough about her analysis of the Peace Process to turn to Google for further information. There is surprisingly little available from the period of the process itself. In 2007 she was the guest speaker at the eirigi James Connolly commemoration in Dublin where she declared that the people had the right to abandon the party but the party had no right to abandon the people. In the same year in a long interview with the (English) Independent she revealed *“I left Gerry Adams behind in 1994,” she says without any apparent bitterness. “I left him to it. I said, ‘I am not going to poke at your heels with a stick anymore. In fact, I am not going to say anything.’ And up to now, I haven’t. .. I decided to concentrate on this here,” and she gestures to the busy scene outside her office door. “If what you want works,’ I told Mr Adams, ‘then we will all be better off if we are building from the bottom at the same time.’ And if it doesn’t, somebody has to ensure that the failure does not allow for a momentum back to war. So a number of us have been slowly closing the war door.”*

This reminds me of a footnote to the start of the Peace Process talks. In the period after the breakdown of the first IRA ceasefire, where the British government was refusing to openly negotiate, Dublin saw at least one demonstration by independent radical students demanding that talks start. At the same time a number of radical NGOs came together to discuss how to push the need for talks, but talks that would not just be about the big men sitting down to decide all our futures (which is of course what happened). Out of that the short-lived Table Campaign arose. The concept was to set up a load of tables on O’Connell bridge and invite people passing by to sit down and discuss what peace should look like at those tables. There was some Sinn Fein involvement and they argued for a giant table as a striking press image. On the day of the event however all that appeared was a giant table, maybe 3m high, far too high in the air for anyone to sit at, dominating the bridge. The lesser tables for the ordinary people to sit and discuss what a popular peace process might look like did not appear. Symbolic, if perhaps accidentally, of the process as a whole where the rest of the population were limited to the role of watching the drama around the big table at Stormont.

In the same interview with the Independent Bernadette presented her alternative to the Peace Process we got as including *“buy up all the buildings and establish integrated schools tomorrow. It was in my manifesto in the 1960s.”* That remains one element of the sort of radical departure from the current sectarian headcount methodology that is at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. Instead we get more and higher ‘Peace walls’ to keep the working class communities of the North apart.

Tearing down the walls would hardly be simple. In the documentary Bernadette briefly mentions her work with the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEPs), her first area of paid employment since 1973 that she describes as coming full circle back to where she started. Elsewhere in a Guardian article STEP is described as a *“cross community organisation that advocates for immigrants, the disabled, and other minority or marginalised groups.”* In the Independent inter-

view she says of that work; *"I've been to meetings in Protestant villages and people sat with their heads turned away and would not look at me. And I say, 'Look, this is now about a different way of working. There are a number of things we have to get straight here. I am going to keep coming here. That's the thing that's not going to stop. We have shared work to do. And if you are going to sit looking away from me all the time, you are going to get tired before me because I don't have my neck turned. So you can either stop coming, or you can go back to the old ways and get someone to shoot me on the way here'. At that point, someone turns their head and says, 'I never had anybody shot in my life.' And he's now looking at me and we start to make progress."*

Overall this is a powerful and useful documentary that gives a hint of the sense of potential for radical social change that existed in Ireland in the late 1960's. What is missing is an explicit discussion of how the state channeled that potential into a more traditional and manageable nationalist conflict, in particular through the Bloody Sunday massacre and how in turn Bernadette and other political activists reacted to this. It is touched on but only in a fairly factual manner that jumps from Bloody Sunday to the Hunger Strikes and the briefest touching on the 'Peace Process'. It is clear now that she thinks nothing was got out of the war, *"what we got at the end of the process was a right to participate equally in British rule in the north of Ireland."* If the creation of the political activist 'Bernadette' is clearly credited by Bernadette herself at the start in terms of the extraordinary time and place she found herself in, there is less of a discussion about how she was trapped by the same conditions as the struggle was pushed back onto a more traditional path.

Lelia Doolin did an interview with the Irish Examiner who asked her about the potential for activism today. Her reply reminds us that the film offers more than a window on history, *"If you look at the Occupy movement, even though they may not be terribly intellectually coherent at the moment, they're saying 'No', which is, I think, a legitimate thing to say. They're making that real with their own lives. If you look at the people who sat down in the squares of Tunisia and Egypt and Libya and died for ideas that appear to be unclear, these are the kinds of things that were going on in 1968."* In the same vein the issues covered in this documentary are far from unique to Ireland of the late 1960's and so something would be gained by any revolutionary viewing it almost anywhere today. It should remain freely available for viewing on the TG4 website to the end of this month.

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