

Politics in the Streets

The origins of the
civil rights movement
in Northern Ireland

by
Bob Purdie
(1990)

Originally published by
The Blackstaff Press, Belfast

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'Worse was to come: a little further on two groups of attackers, armed with cudgels, lengths of lead piping, crowbars and iron bars were concealed in and around Ardmore Road at its junction with the Derry-Claudy road, just before it reaches Burntollet Bridge. Since the police were grouped at the head of the march, they offered little or no protection when these attackers leaped out and assaulted the marchers. The attack was brutal and relentless: the unresisting marchers were beaten, knocked down and kicked, prevented from seeking shelter, pursued and further assaulted.'

The civil rights movement of the 1960s profoundly transformed the political situation in Northern Ireland. Exposing injustice at the very heart of the Northern Ireland state – political favouritism, gerrymandering, sectarian discrimination in housing and job allocation – the civil rights protests were a militant but constitutional challenge to Unionist domination.

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Cover photograph: student civil rights demonstration,
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ISBN 0-85640-437-3



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