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17 May 2007
12:47

Channel 4 goes inside the mind of Bobby Sands

By Arifa Akbar in Cannes
Published: 16 May 2007

He was a towering figure of the Republican movement who had one of the most controversial lives - and deaths - of Northern Ireland's long and troubled history.

Now, Bobby Sands, the hunger striker who starved himself to death 25 days after being elected as a member of Parliament, is to be the subject of a Channel 4 film made by the Turner Prize-winning artist, Steve McQueen, it was announced at the Cannes Film Festival today.

In a production likely to rekindle bitter feelings in Belfast, Hunger will focus on the IRA man's last six weeks inside the Maze Prison, where he was serving a sentence for possession of arms.

Channel 4 said the decision to dramatise Sands' death, which prompted several days of riots in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland and drew 100,000 people to his funeral, was motivated by an attempt to examine the mind of a man who was prepared to "die for a cause" rather than to glorify him in any way.

A Channel 4 spokesman said: "Steve McQueen aims to create a highly visual and evocative film that conveys the ordinariness and extraordinariness of life in the Maze at a pivotal moment in Anglo-Irish relations.

"His film will give an emotional insight into what it is like to die for a cause and is a serious examination of the human cost paid by everyone, when fundamental conflicts cannot be resolved through politics and negotiation."

McQueen, who won the Turner Prize in 1999 in competition with Tracey Emin among others, and whose film installations include footage of a tape recorder drifting off beneath a balloon and a house collapsing, said he was fascinated by the concept of using the body as a form of "political warfare". "It will be a film with international contemporary resonance. The body as site of political warfare is becoming a more familiar phenomenon. It is the final act of desperation; your own body is your last resource for protest. I want to show what it was like to see, feel, hear, smell and touch in the Maze at this time," he said.

Sands was born in Co Antrim and joined the Provisional IRA in 1972, the year the Troubles were at their most violent - leading to a record death toll. In September 1977, he was convicted of possessing firearms, including a revolver from which bullets had been fired at the police after a bombing the previous year, and was sentenced to 14 years in prison. He served his prison term at the Maze, living in its notorious "H-Blocks" reserved for inmates

belonging to paramilitary organisations.

In prison, Sands began writing and publishing articles in the republican Irish newspaper An Phoblacht and on 1 March 1981, he started refusing food and spurred other prisoners to join the strike, which was instigated to gain status as "political prisoners". A month later, Sands was nominated to become MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, a seat he won. Three weeks later, he was dead from starvation after 66 days of striking, and nine others who were involved in the hunger strike died after him.

In response to his death, Margaret Thatcher, then prime minister, said he was a "convicted criminal who chose to take his own life, a choice his organisation did not allow to many of its victims." His death sparked a new surge of IRA activity and an escalation of the Troubles.

McQueen, who is directing the film as well as co-writing it with the award-winning writer Enda Walsh, will start filming in Northern Ireland in September.

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