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Bobby Sands still has the power to stir controversy 27 years after his death

EDITOR'S CHOICE

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Film about the IRA hunger striker fuels argument over Sinn Fein 'sell-out'

By David McKittrick
Sunday, 18 May 2008

Bobby Sands, the subject of the controversial new film *Hunger*, shown at Cannes, is hardly a hero to everyone in Ireland, but to republicans he is a potent symbol of self-sacrifice.

While republican factions continue to debate whether he would have supported the present peace process, they are united in regarding him as a martyr who died an agonising death for their cause after a 66-day hunger strike.

The film, the debut feature by the Turner prize-winning artist Steve McQueen, pulls no punches in its portrayal of the bitter dispute between prisoners at the notorious Maze prison in Northern Ireland and the Government.

It details the last six weeks of Sands's life. He died aged 27 in 1981 during IRA protests over the political status of prisoners. Michael Fassbender, who plays Sands, starved himself for two months in preparation for the role. With little dialogue, vivid images of prisoners being beaten and one 22-minute shot, the film is both controversial and innovative.

Primarily, Sands is claimed as one of the foremost symbols of mainstream Sinn Fein, whose leader, Gerry Adams, was imprisoned with him in the Maze prison in the 1970s. A large mural of Sands is emblazoned on the wall of Sinn Fein headquarters on Belfast's Falls Road, and he has been commemorated every year since his death.

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

Sands is also claimed by dissident republicans who make up the breakaway Real IRA and its tiny political wing, the 32-county Sovereignty Movement. Although the Adams-led republican movement is more influential than the dissidents, they have the advantage of having his sister, Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, as a prominent member.

She argues that Adams has sold out republican principles. She declared: "Peace is not what our people fought for. They fought for independence." Her husband, Michael McKevitt, is behind bars for attempting to put this into practice, serving a 20-year sentence for terrorist offences. He and other alleged leaders of the Real IRA are being pursued in a civil action by relatives of those killed in the 1998 Omagh bombing.

But the majority of the republican movement regards Sands as playing an important early part in the peace process. When the IRA declared last year that it was going out of business it nominated Seanna Walsh, who had been a cellmate and friend of Sands, to make the announcement. He lauded Sands as a "poet warrior, the indomitable spirit of the republican prisoner".

Sands features in an ongoing political dispute, since many unionists oppose the idea of turning the now defunct Maze prison into a sports stadium. This is primarily because they fear it would incorporate a "shrine" to the dead republican.

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