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A woman of her times



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By Staff reporter

Mairead Farrell was everything that the rent a mob of Unionist women standing outside Stormont on Friday, are not and will never be.

A soft spoken attractive and intelligent woman, Mairead Farrell grew up acutely aware of the injustices in the lives of the people around her, injustices she perceived as a direct result of British/ Unionist religious intolerance and discrimination against the Nationalists community.

She was born in Belfast in 1957, into a family of strong traditional Republicans; her Grandfather was imprisoned in 1920, during the Tan War. She grew up in the abnormal situation that was Belfast in the late sixties and early seventies. She entered her teen age years as Brian Faulkner introduced internment and Reginald Maudling declared war on the IRA. In these extraordinary circumstances and given her family history of Republicanism, it was entirely natural that at eighteen she would join the IRA. She was arrested in 1976, during a bombing raid on a Belfast Hotel frequented by the British Armed forces. One of her companions on the raid was shot dead by British soldiers and she and the other volunteers were sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment.

In Armagh jail she led the women prisoners in the no wash; slop out protest against the British attempts to criminalise Republican prisoners and the strip searching of the women in what was a brutal prison regime. In a five month period, some 722 strip searches were carried out on forty women prisoners in Armagh Jail who were locked up in filthy cells for 23 hours of each day and had to endure frequent punishments and beatings. It was to protest the intolerable prison conditions that Republican prisoners in Armagh and Long Kesh embarked on a hunger strike in 1980.

Mairead Farrell with her comrade Mary Doyle led the women prisoners in Armagh on the hunger strike.

When the hunger strike ended after the deaths of ten Republican prisoners in Long Kesh, and the British conceded the five demands of the protesting prisoners, Mairead availed of the educational opportunities offered by the new prison regime and studied political science and economics in the remaining years of her sentence.

She was released from prison in 1986 having served almost eleven years and shortly after, was accepted into Queens University to continue the education that she enjoyed.

It was not to last. Two years after her release from prison, this intelligent, courageous woman with a wisdom well beyond her years was dead, brutally gunned down in a street in that other British occupied territory, Gibraltar, a place occupied by barbary apes and people more British than the British themselves.

Mairead Farrell was summarily executed at the hands of undercover soldiers, but even the brutal slaying of a young woman by a SAS death squad, was not the end of the matter. In the days following her death the political masters of the SAS, would vilify and denounce Mairead and her comrades, in the British House of Commons, for character assassination of the Irish is part of the stock in trade among Britain's arsenal of weapons.

They are good at it, as the people of this City in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday know only too well. The British know the importance of getting their version of events out first.

Hardly had the smoke cleared from the guns of the assassins in Gibraltar, when the House of Commons was being given the 'official version' of the execution along the lines that three 'terrorists' were killed in a gun battle while planting a bomb in a car in Gibraltar. The British claimed that the car packed with explosives had been driven into Gibraltar unnoticed and that the bomb was to be detonated by remote control.

It would take a while for the story circulating around the world to be discredited but discredited it was. In the months that followed the actions of the SAS death squads, the version put out by the Thatcher Government would be exposed as a tissue of lies and totally discredited.

Eminent groups such as Amnesty International and the International League for Human Rights alarmed at the manner of the slayings would call for a full enquiry into the circumstances, a request denied by the British Government.

Six months later, Thames Television showed the documentary, 'Death on the Rock' which not only exposed the British version of the incidents but also produced eye witness accounts of what really happened. The Chairperson of the Independent Broadcasting Authority was attacked by Thatcher for his fair minded defence of the programme. She later abolished the Authority.

Some months after the slaying, some of the more responsible British papers challenged the Government version. The New Statesman in an article entitled 'Why not gun down enemies of the State' asked the question, 'Should Britain be one of the few states which sends hit teams abroad to eliminate perceived enemies and then seek to deny it before world opinion'.

The article questioned why no attempt had been made to cordon off the area around the car until three hours later when the IRA team had been shot and if as alleged it contained a 500 lb bomb which the British had stated was to be detonated by remote control, why was the population put at risk.

They asked why, when the car had been examined and found to contain no bomb, no explosives, no radio equipment, why no attempt was made to correct a story carried by the entire British press that the

bomb had been defused by a Gibraltar bomb disposal squad.

The Guardian a week after the slaying reported that despite emerging new and different accounts of the incident by the Spanish police contradicting the British version, the Government was still sticking to their story.

The inquest into the deaths held in September 1988, while returning a verdict of lawful killing would further serve to discredit the British account of the murders and indeed many in the media asked the question that if as stated the IRA volunteers were carrying explosives why they were not stopped at the border.

As far as the British were concerned the inquest was the end of the matter and they consistently thwarted all attempts by the families of the dead volunteers, to have the case examined, by the issuing of Public Interest Immunity Certificates.

The families took their case to the European Court of Human Rights who seven years after the summary executions, found the British guilty of having unlawfully killed Mairead Farrell and her comrades. No one was arrested and no one was charged.

The slaying of the three IRA volunteers followed a pattern of similar executions carried out in the North during the eighties by the SAS and RUC death squads and which have been the subject of the Stalker and Stevens enquiries, whose findings have yet to be released.

As events in the long Gallery this week have shown, the matter has not ended for some Unionist and Nationalist politicians, who were enraged that Stormont would be the venue for a tribute to this young woman of Belfast, who had circumstances been different, would have enjoyed a normal life as a normal teenager in a normal City.

But the North of Ireland and Belfast in particular has never been normal. That she was born in an era and in circumstances beyond her control was a direct result of this abnormality.

She could have chosen to ignore the plight of the Nationalist community but she decided to do something about it as generations before had done when faced with the tyranny and barbarism of the occupiers of her country.

We should feel proud to celebrate the life of this remarkable woman on any day but particularly on International Woman's Day.

Those politicians both Unionist and Nationalist, who cried foul at the notion of such a celebration, would be better occupied addressing the right of the British to order the summary execution of any Irish citizen. Shame on those, women included, who vote such spineless, gutless politicians into power.

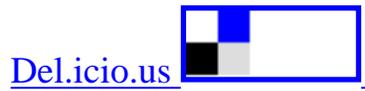
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