

Bobby Sands

Bobby Sands

Nothing But an Unfinished Song

New Edition

Denis O'Hearn



Pluto Press
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2006
New edition published 2016 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3633 6 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7837 1809 2 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1811 5 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1810 8 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made
from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
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Printed in the European Union

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Growing Up in Utopia

Rosaleen Sands held her baby on her knee, nursing him. They were in the living room in their home at Abbots Cross and the radio was playing in the background. The song was a Perry Como hit from a couple of years before called “Because.” The words of the song obviously affected Rosaleen very deeply, because she remembered it all many years later. She was full of hope for the young child, but she also remembered the difficulties she and generations before her had endured. The Second World War was not long over. And although things were relatively quiet now, conflicts broke out periodically between the Irish Republican Army and Northern Ireland’s Protestant state.

Rosaleen looked down at the newborn child and spoke to him.

“Bobby, if there’s ever a war, you and I will go down to the South where you won’t be conscripted. And if the Troubles ever flare up here, and the IRA gets going, we’ll go to the South.”¹

Rosaleen had plenty of reasons to worry. Northern Ireland—its six counties were carved in 1920 out of the northeast corner of the island of Ireland by the British—comprised the largest piece of that corner that contained an assured majority of three Protestants for every two Catholics. Protestants ran the state, ultimately giving their loyalty to the Queen of England. Most Catholics and a few Protestants refused to recognize it, instead aspiring to a united Ireland. In 1922, its first prime minister, James Craig, called the local government at Stormont, east of Belfast, “a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.” The current

Prime Minister Basil Brooke once told people not to employ Catholics, boasting, "I have not a Roman Catholic about my own place."²

Protestants ran the police forces, both the regular Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the state-sponsored paramilitary "B-Specials." Rosaleen remembered the B-Specials invading her neighborhood when she was a child. And now, in 1954, the industries that had assured jobs for working-class Protestants were rapidly falling apart. Places like the Harland and Wolff shipyard, whose proud Protestant workers built the *Titanic* in 1912, were shedding workers by the hundreds. What an explosive mix! A dominant population that was losing its economic advantages but which still had its police and plenty of guns, and a marginalized population with a history of rebellion.

Perhaps the most immediate social threat in Ireland's harsh climate, however, was the region's housing. After decades of neglect, three out of every ten houses were uninhabitable.³ A higher proportion of Catholics lived in Belfast's overcrowded slums: the lower Falls, Ardoyne or Rosaleen Sands's childhood district of the Markets. Their labyrinths of narrow streets were lined by rows of two-story brick houses with outside toilets. The children slept several to a bed, head-by-toe, like sardines packed in a tin.

So when Rosaleen Kelly married John Sands on March 28, 1951 and they moved into a nearly new private house in a countryside village at 6 Abbots Cross, five miles north of Belfast, they thought they had a better future to look forward to. Both had come from Belfast working-class backgrounds. Rosaleen's father, Robert, worked as a groom in the Catholic Markets district. John's father, Joseph, was a "spiritgrocer," a fancy name for a bartender. Yet John's mother, Elizabeth Forsythe, was a Reformed Presbyterian, a particularly conservative brand of Protestantism that harkened back to Puritanism. John lived among Protestants until after he moved out from his parents' home and got work in McWatters's (later Inglis's) bakery in the Markets district where Rosaleen Kelly lived and worked as a weaver.

Abbots Cross was one of five experimental "garden villages" that were nestled in a scenic valley between Ben Madigan (now called Cave Hill) and Carnmoney Hill. Just south of Abbots Cross, the Glas-na-Bradán River flowed from between the two hills down to the Belfast Lough. The immediate surroundings were a far cry from the repetitive brick-terraced streets back in Belfast. Country roads were dotted with rural farmhouses. Within a stone's throw of the Sands's new house was "The Abbey," the

magnificent country house of Sir Charles Lanyon, the architect who built most of the great buildings of nineteenth-century Belfast. The Sands family would eventually have a close association with two of them: the Crumlin Road Jail and Courthouse.

The Sands house was the second in a neat terraced street of twenty-four white houses, built in an open plan, with no fences or walls to divide the front gardens. The estate was neatly planned, incorporating features of the existing Irish landscape and built around a brand-new shopping center. Its utopian plan was so precise that the number of houses numbered exactly one hundred.⁴

But not everything was well within this utopia. Despite its stylish modernism, Abbots Cross was deeply sectarian. Directly behind the Sands's hedged back garden was a large, modern Presbyterian church. Directly across the street from the clean, white shopping center were a Congregational church and a brand-new Protestant elementary school. There was a Church of Ireland, Free Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Plymouth Brethren churches. There was a *community* for everyone . . . except Catholics.

The discomfort of Abbots Cross for a woman like Rosaleen Sands, brought up among anti-Catholic police actions in the 1920s and 1930s, was heightened by the numbers of policemen and state-sponsored paramilitaries (the B-Specials) living in the estate.

So Rosaleen Sands lived a fiction in Abbots Cross. She never let on that she was a Catholic. Sands, a good Ulster-Scots name, blended well among her neighbors: the Meekes, the Bairds, and the Craigs. Everyone took Rosaleen to be a Protestant because she was so quiet and did not bother with the neighbors.⁵

On March 9, 1954, two years after they moved to Abbots Cross, Rosaleen gave birth to their first child, a boy who they named Robert Gerard. She prayed that Bobby would never get caught up in the violence that she had known as a child. But it was not long before the IRA "got going" again, opening a bombing campaign along the Irish border in 1956. Sectarian tensions rose between Protestant and Catholic, or Unionist and Nationalist. The Sands family were unaffected as long as they could live quietly without discussing religion with their neighbors. They succeeded for several years, during which Marcella was born in April 1955 and then Bernadette in November 1958.

Eventually, however, the woman next door found out Rosaleen's religion.

She began taunting her when John was away at work. She hammered on the walls incessantly during the day. When Rosaleen took her washing out to hang it on the line, the neighbor put similar clothes on her line. If Rosaleen cleaned her windows the neighbor did, too. Rosaleen could *feel* her sneering across at her. Things got so bad that she took the children out for long walks during the day to avoid the neighbor. Eventually Rosaleen became ill. Her doctor took John aside and told him if he wanted his wife to regain her health, either take the neighbors to court or give up the house.

"So," recalled Bernadette years later, "my parents being so quiet and not wanting to bother anybody, they gave up the house."



For six months when Bobby was seven, the Sands family lived with relatives. In December 1961, they finally got a house in the new estate beside Abbots Cross. In the 1950s, the northern Irish government had begun building big public housing estates for some of the thousands of working-class families who urgently needed somewhere decent to live. The first estate, called Rathcoole after the Irish *rath cúil*, meaning "ringfort of the secluded place," was built in phases, working its way up the foot of Carnmoney Hill. By 1961, Rathcoole comprised three square miles of public housing for fourteen thousand people.

Rathcoole was planned as a model estate for the "respectable working class,"⁶ with jobs in nearby industrial projects. It was to be another utopia. But unlike Abbots Cross, a third of its new residents were Catholics. Among them was the Sands family, in a spacious house at 68 Doonbeg Drive, at the foot of Carnmoney Hill.

Bobby was surrounded by huge open green spaces. He and his sisters could go out their front door and climb up the Carnmoney mountain on trails that wound through dense gorse and nettles. They visited adventurous places on the mountain including the remains of ancient Celtic forts and monuments. It was thick with birds, which Bobby learned to identify.

Kids from the surrounding streets joined them. They would build a hut while Bobby built a fire. He took out his mother's pots and some food and they toasted bread or potatoes, imagining they were camping out. When Rosaleen caught them, says Bernadette, she would "half kill" them.⁷

Bobby was always doing something. He faced regular fights with the neighborhood kids with a degree of stoicism, bordering on stubbornness. If he got hit, he hit back. If he was badly beaten, he walked around the corner before he cried. He often turned his stubbornness on his mother. If Rosaleen sent him outside to play as punishment, he refused to come back when she called.

Yet he was very protective of his sisters. If anyone hit them he jumped to their defence. He was smaller than the other kids but he stood up for his sisters, no matter what the consequences.⁸

Bobby's education began at Stella Maris primary school, a mixed gender Catholic school close to his house that also served the surrounding districts of Glengormley, Bawnmore, and Greencastle. Later, he attended Stella Maris secondary school, next door to the primary school. He was never a very serious student, instead concentrating on organized sport. According to schoolmate Dessie Black, he was intelligent but lazy in school.

"All we wanted to do was just play football. More time was spent round picking football teams for matches and that than doing school-work and that."⁹

Outside of school, Bobby played soccer with a religiously mixed group of local boys, always including his best mate Tommy O'Neill. Together, they joined the youth team of Stella Maris, the local amateur soccer club. Stella Maris was a remarkable institution for the north of Ireland, where religious sectarianism was rampant. Although the team trained in the gym of Bobby's school, it attracted Protestant boys from surrounding areas. Terry Nicholl, a Mormon, joined Stella Maris because he had just one interest, soccer, and would have played for anybody.¹⁰ Willie Caldwell and Geordie Hussey, two more Protestant "football fanatics," also joined. Nobody asked if you were Catholic or Protestant. If you were a half-decent soccer player, you were on the team.

Dennis Sweeney never liked Bobby Sands much. He thought he was an insecure person who tried to cover it up by showing off, sometimes even using violence on the soccer field. "Certainly not a leader by any means, more a person who was led," he thought.

But others describe Bobby Sands as an amiable teammate. Their recollections also reflect a trait that others would notice in his later life: extreme enthusiasm, sometimes expressed in behavior that went "over the top."

Geordie Hussey says Sands was "a bit of a grafter" who did his best at

his position of left half. He didn't score many goals but he could be counted on to get the ball and he was a good tackler. What he lacked in natural ability, he made up in enthusiasm.

His enthusiasm extended into other sports. Bobby loved swimming but cross-country running was his real sporting passion. He won cross-country medals¹¹ and his love of running came through later in his prison writings. In *The Loneliness of a Long-Distance Cripple*, he compares his strength as a teenager winning a cross-country race to his deteriorating physical state in prison. In the story, Sands describes a long-distance race in the cold Irish winter that "bites deep into the lungs and reddens the nose and cheeks." He is excited by the race but surprisingly aware, even sad, at how the incursion of the runners scars the countryside. He is at once part of the environment and against it.

"Bang." The thrush fled and I sprang forward. The marshy ground churned and sucked and squelched as hundreds of foreign spiked feet mutilated and scarred its face. Across an open field we charged in a bunch. My mind was racing as I tried to weigh up the situation and opposition as the lay of the land was seen then gone in a matter of a few strides.

Sands struggled to overcome the challenges both of the environment and the other runners until, finally, "I broke the finishing line, breathing like a racehorse in deep vast gulps." Although it was only a schoolboy race, "Victory was mine and I felt like an Olympic champion."



As Sands grew into his teens, his circle of friends widened. He went to the Alpha picture house or to dances at the local church hall. There was roller-skating in the religiously mixed Floral Hall in Bellevue near the Belfast Zoo. Weekend dances there were mainly Protestant but mixed. On Sundays a more Catholic but still mixed group attended dances in the Star of the Sea hall in Rathcoole or St. Etna's hall in Glengormley. Bobby's friends at the time remember him as a "happy-go-lucky" boy who loved dancing and the socializing that went with it.

Things were beginning to change, however, in the society around him. Systematic sectarianism was emerging. By 1966, Rathcoole was sitting on

a powder keg. Many Protestants worried about losing their marginal advantages as traditional sources of employment dried up in the shipyards and elsewhere. Either they or someone they knew had lost a job. They responded by excluding Catholics. Protestants clung onto cultural advantages that assured them that they, and not Catholics, could fly certain flags, walk certain streets, and call on the support of the police and B-Specials. But a liberal unionist prime minister named Terence O'Neill (Protestant, despite his Irish name) began talking about reforms that looked a bit too much like civil rights to many Protestants. O'Neill did such provocative things as visiting a Catholic school and inviting the southern Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) to visit Belfast. While O'Neill's image as a reformer scared many Protestants, it raised Catholic expectations that discrimination would finally be addressed.

Simultaneously, 1966 was a highly emotive year for Protestants because it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. Although Catholics also died there, some Protestants held them responsible for treason against Britain because the mostly Catholic Irish Republicans launched an independence struggle while their forefathers were fighting and dying for Queen and country. Loyal Protestants were, therefore, on high alert for public manifestations of Republicanism. This was a problem, since 1966 was also the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Dublin, the most significant event in the history of Irish Republicanism. Protestant paranoia increased after the IRA blew up the huge statue of Admiral Nelson that stood on an imposing pillar in the middle of Dublin for many years.

You did not have to go far from the Sands's front door to find the center of Protestant intolerance. Ian Paisley, whose power base was in the area around Rathcoole, freely mixed his religion with his politics. He was the head of his own church, the Free Presbyterians. During 1966, while Paisley preached against treason and popery,¹² the re-formed Ulster Volunteer Force¹³ launched a series of attacks on Catholic homes, schools, and shops. Late at night on May 7, the UVF killed an old Protestant woman who they mistook for a Catholic. On May 27, a UVF unit went to the Catholic lower Falls area and shot dead the first Catholic they could find. A few weeks later, some UVF men went for a late-night drink and shot dead a Catholic as he left the bar.¹⁴

About this time, Sands later told a friend, he noticed some of his Protestant friends starting to withdraw from his social circles. The parents

of a Protestant friend from the Stella Maris football club told him not to bring Bobby around to the house. Sands wondered why some of his mates no longer treated him as a friend. He was still naïve about the virulence of sectarianism, and he had only a distant memory of how his mother was treated at Abbots Cross. Over the next few years these divisions would intensify, until things erupted after the rise of a Catholic civil rights movement in 1969. For Bobby Sands, this would be an education in sectarianism.

Violence and Anger

Society was splitting apart. For Catholics in mixed areas, the most immediate worry was the emergence of violent racist gangs. Rathcoole's were among the worst. Years later, Bobby Sands wrote that his "life began to change" after 1968.¹ Civil rights marchers took to the streets and he watched as the television news showed the police attacking them. Sands was particularly impressed in early 1969, when a group of students from Queens University in Belfast set off on a civil rights march to Derry. Along the way they were repeatedly ambushed and the police blocked them from entering towns. The RUC were often observed chatting amiably with the attackers. As the students reached Burntollet Bridge outside of Derry, several hundred B-Special paramilitaries viciously attacked them. "My sympathy and feelings really became aroused after watching the scenes at Burntollet," he wrote. "That imprinted itself on my mind like a scar, and for the first time I took a real interest in what was going on . . . I became angry."

Bobby's anger grew throughout 1969 as the conflict heightened. In April, the police banned a civil rights march in the Bogside area of Derry. During the rioting that followed, a group of RUC men burst into a house and beat the Catholic owner to death. In August, a huge crowd of Protestants attacked Unity flats in Belfast. When local Catholics resisted, the RUC went on a violent rampage, beating one man unconscious and batoning another to death.² Three people had now died from the recent outbreak of "the troubles." All were Catholics. All had been beaten in the head by police batons.

By August, the trouble spiralled. In Derry, some older Republicans set up a defense committee to confront the trouble that always accompanied an annual Loyalist march around the city's old walls. They set up barricades at the entrances to the Bogside and when the marchers threw pennies at them the Bogsiders threw stones back. When the police attempted to invade the Bogside, Catholic missiles drove them back. Soon, they were firing petrol bombs and CS gas at each other. After two days of intense fighting, the British government sent in its army for the first time since the end of the IRA's 1950s campaign. Catholics like Bobby Sands watched the "Battle of the Bogside" on their TVs at home, encouraged by the feeling that they were recognized internationally as being "in the right."

Back in Belfast, the police patrolled the Catholic lower Falls district in armored cars mounted with .30-inch Browning machine guns. Catholics used stones and petrol bombs against the big machine guns while groups of Protestants and B-Specials took advantage of the melee and attacked Catholic houses. The RUC drove around Catholic streets, firing randomly. When they were done, nine-year-old Patrick Rooney lay dead in his bed with his brains scattered against the wall. In north Belfast, police shot dead one man as he sat in his front room and another as he walked along the road. Ten others were injured, eight of them by police bullets. All were Catholics.

To Catholics, many of whom initially welcomed them to their streets as protectors, the British army made a bad situation worse. They stood by while Protestant crowds burned out hundreds of Catholic homes. The violence went down in the memory of an increasingly angry and militant Catholic community as "the pogrom."

These events had a significant impact on Bobby Sands. Not only did he begin to link the police with violence against Catholics, he also began to view the British army as the enemy. Catholics generally began to feel that they must defend themselves. Yet they had no weapons and even the IRA had failed to stand up to their attackers. A famous wall slogan went up: "IRA=I Ran Away." By Christmas, a group of militants broke from the IRA and formed the Provisional IRA Army Council and an associated political party, Provisional Sinn Féin (the old movement became known as the Official IRA and Official Sinn Féin).³ The Provisionals promised to protect the Catholic community, and eventually organized an all-out offensive against British occupation.⁴

This was the recipe for a powerfully popular movement. To angry