

EchoOpinion

An altogether different time

It was a different city, back then, more relaxed in some ways, more intense in others; but definitely less cowed and regimented. One still felt you could change things. Although Lennon had been shot five months earlier, who could have foretold that the spirit of the 60's was limping to closure, and would be finally laid to rest in '82 by the gathering plastic reality of the Reagan era.

Nonetheless, by May '81, a brooding exhaustion had set in on the Green Line outside the British Consulate. It was too late for Bobby Sands. We were resigned to the fact that he would die. Mrs. Thatcher had proven obdurate beyond belief. Though dubbed "the Iron Lady," she more resembled an ostrich with her head in the sand. And guess what part of her physiognomy we were beholding?

It had been a rough sixty days and now with three more hunger strikers gaining on Bobby, there was a feeling abroad that this thing might never end. But if there was doom in the air, there was also great faith and hope. Most of this came from the people I called: the tribe. By mid-April, the Green Line had been bolstered by celebrities and a cross section of decent Americans. But in the early days of Bobby's fast, and in the first strike in late '80, the tribe had held the fort. Down all the years, and the bitterness at the waste of ten vibrant young lives, I still think fondly of these people.

Many were descended from the famine survivors of Black '47 who had



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never forgotten, nor forgiven. They were joined by the children of Republicans who had left in disgust after the Civil War defeat of 1923, and by those who had fled the poverty of both body and spirit in the Ireland of the '50s. There were few young native Irish, at first, for it takes time and distance to break free from the brainwashing of the British media. The tribe hailed from various classes and backgrounds but had one thing in common, they had all come to protest the imminent death of a young chieftain; for, to them, Sands had more moral authority than any taoiseach in Dublin or cardinal in New York.

They were an odd bunch, serious and cerebral by times, chatty and cliquish at others. They didn't have a lace curtain between them and were unlikely to be found schmoozing with Ted Kennedy or Hugh Carey at some Irish Consulate soiree. Yet, they kept a dream alive in the back rooms of smoky pubs at Sunday evening socials. They were the hard core who forked over twenty dollar bills in the hope that one day a united Ireland might become a reality. And you can be damned certain that when all the shout-

ing and pious breast beating is done with on May 6th, you still won't know any of their names.

There was a majesty to these people that was humbling to the less committed of us. Day after day, by their presence on that Green Line, they declared that the travesty unfolding three thousand miles away should not be allowed to happen; just as there was a majesty in Sands, a talented but little known revolutionary, who paid the ultimate sacrifice for a point of principle. The tribe instinctively recognized that Bobby had invoked an ancient Irish

own children and the generations following.

It was a different city, a different country too. We didn't live in state sponsored fear; that was the province of the Iron Lady and her government. We didn't have cell phones or email but we had community; there was a warmth and solidarity on that Green Line that I've rarely felt since. Bobby Sands brought us together. His message was clear "no one can do everything, but everyone has their part to play."

The tribe personified that and I'll never forget them.

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tribal right: when wronged by your more powerful enemy, go sit on her doorstep and starve yourself to death until the shame causes her to relent.

They changed me back in 1981. They reawakened memories of a grandfather whose father had witnessed the horrors of Black '47. While watching them power that Green Line, I recalled promises I had made an old man back in Wexford and resolved to somehow do my own part. They changed Irish America, too, by politicizing a generation who would hand down a new folk memory to their

And what of Bobby Sands? One can only imagine what he would think of the force-feeding of prisoners denied habeas corpus in Guantanamo Bay? Was his sacrifice worth it? Not unless we can look squarely at ourselves, and our country, in that relentless mirror he created twenty-five years ago.

Black 47 will be commemorating Bobby Sands MP at the Bowery Poetry Club, 308 Bowery (at Bleecker St.) on Friday May 5th at 9 p.m. See www.black47.com for details or call (212) 614-0505.