

Bloody Sunday

Bloody Sunday covers a turning point in Northern Ireland's recent history: January 30, 1972, when, during a peace march in Londonderry, British troops fired on demonstrators, killing 13 and wounding 14 more. It was a crucial watershed in hardening antagonistic positions in the troubled province for years to come.

Writer/Director Paul Greengrass, an Englishman, recreates that grisly day in tense, documentary style, using washed-out color and a bustling hand-held camera that relentlessly tracks several key players of that day. On one side is the parliamentarian Ivan Cooper (James Nesbitt), a Protestant who believes in non-violent protest (he is influenced by American civil rights practices) and serves as a lead organizer for a principally Catholic movement. Cooper is portrayed as an earnest dervish, handling major statements and gently fending off constituents, loudly cajoling crowds and quietly working the phone. His counterparts are the British occupying forces, represented by the visiting heavy, General Ford (Tim Piggot-Smith), and local commander, Brigadier McClellan (Nicholas Farrell). The imperious Ford is looking to teach the local riffraff a lesson, while the more guarded McClellan looks to show restraint and avoid outbreaks of violence. To humanize this mass event, Greengrass focuses, too, on the intimate stories of two other antagonists, one a young Catholic boy who gets caught up in the street violence, and the second an almost as young British paratrooper troubled about what kind of enemy he really faces.

The work is utterly compelling, its rough-and-ready style just right for the movie's tone. Greengrass's stuttering camera (sometimes it jerks a tad *too* much) acts, in turn, like the unblinking eyes of either an eager assistant trailing the parliamentarian or a lurking aide observing his military betters. The performances throughout are terse and vital, full of the prickly nervousness of the event itself. A surprise is Nesbitt, better known to American moviegoers as a comic actor in films like *Waking Ned Divine* (he was the "pig man") and *Lucky Break*, but here convincing in a role demanding a range from euphoria to heartbreak.

You can't always hear what everybody is talking about in *Bloody Sunday* (and the ripe accents further mask some of the dialogue), but you have no difficulty getting the sense of things, especially the inexorable trend to massacre through the piling up of little misreadings and misunderstandings from both sides. The film also avoids stereotyping and special pleading by cutting constantly between the marchers and the military units. There is an understandable tilt to the side of the peace demonstrators, perhaps, but the British forces are not portrayed as inherently evil but rather as frustrated and bedeviled occupying forces in a land more alien than they thought. Neither side, it seems, knew how to avoid the worse sides of their nature.

("Bloody Sunday" is rated "R" for tense violence and ample profanity.)

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