

Hughes, Brendan

by Patrick Maume

Hughes, Brendan (1948–2008), IRA activist, was born at Blackwater Street off the Grosvenor Road in west Belfast in June 1948, the second of six children (five boys and one girl) of Kevin Barry Hughes, a builders' labourer. A great-grandfather was an IRA member in Co. Louth wounded in the war of independence; a great-uncle was murdered by loyalists in Belfast in May 1921. Both Hughes parents were active in the IRA in the 1930s, as were one set of grandparents (a grandfather was imprisoned); during the second world war Kevin Hughes was interned (from 1942) for IRA activities.

After his wife's death at age 31, Kevin Hughes left the republican movement and concentrated on bringing up his children. (He refused to send them to orphanages, and never remarried.) Kevin Hughes retained republican views, venerated the social republican Liam Mellows (qv), and taught his children to admire IRA veterans such as his friend Billy McKee (later Belfast commander of the Provisional IRA), but as a socialist supported the Northern Ireland Labour Party. Brendan always stated his father's intense sacrificial love for his children made him 'my hero'. Hughes had extensive social contact with local protestants (the Grosvenor Road was a mixed area until its protestant population left in late 1969 during the massive population shifts which accompanied the outbreak of the troubles), though their relations were marked by sectarian tensions, especially in the July 'marching season'.

Hughes was educated at St Comgall's school on the Falls Road, which he left aged 15. After short-term jobs, including abattoir work, he joined the National Nautical School in Sheerness, Kent, at age 16 to train as a merchant seaman. He was further radicalised by witnessing poverty and racial discrimination in ports in South Africa and Portuguese-ruled Mozambique.

In the Belfast IRA In August 1969 Hughes participated prominently in resistance to loyalist mob attacks (including the burning of Bombay Street on 15 August). He recalled his initial response as driven by collective communal defence; only later did he develop fully secular revolutionary socialist beliefs. As the split between the Official IRA and the nascent Provisional IRA began, Hughes was recruited into the PIRA by a cousin, Charles Hughes (d. 1971), who commanded D Company of the 2nd Battalion of the Belfast Brigade in the Lower Falls Road. From 1969 until 'Operation Motorman' in July 1972, the Falls was largely a 'no go' area, with paramilitaries moving around openly and security forces entering only in force. Hughes rapidly became training officer of D Company (nicknamed 'the Dogs'), and evaded arrest during the Falls curfew of 3–5 July 1970. From then until the late 1980s, he was one of the central figures in the developing IRA political and military campaign.

Hughes was one of the IRA's leading urban guerrillas, mounting incessant attacks on state forces. From 1970 he lived on the run, sleeping in a different house every night. Hughes acquired the nickname 'Darkie' or 'the Dark', coined by the British because of his swarthy complexion and later taken up by republicans. He recalled this period as a time of danger and collective heroism: a people's struggle in which he never shirked a dangerous task. As company quartermaster, he used contacts made as a merchant seaman to establish arms smuggling routes. He became company adjutant, then commanding officer, before transfer to the 2nd Battalion staff as operations officer, implementing attacks planned by the battalion OC. He also visited America to establish arms supply routes for the Belfast Brigade independent of the Dublin-based IRA GHQ, which was distrusted by younger Belfast militants. The resulting inflow of American-supplied weapons included the first Armalite rifles to reach the IRA.

On 21 July 1972 Hughes organised and oversaw the detonation of numerous car bombs in Belfast city centre on 'bloody Friday'; with so many warnings, emergency services were overwhelmed, and eleven people were killed and 130 wounded as crowds running from one blast were caught in another. In later life Hughes expressed regret over those killed and injured (whose fate the IRA had not anticipated), but stated that those who planned the operation should share responsibility with those (led by him) who carried it out. On 2 October 1972, after a lengthy counterintelligence operation involving personally interrogating informers uncovered within the IRA, Hughes oversaw a major attack on British military intelligence operating in west Belfast under cover of the Four Square Laundry. Hughes's lifelong interest in others' thought processes (in 1969–70 he chatted to British soldiers in pubs, and in the early 1980s struck up an unlikely prison acquaintance with the 'Shankill butcher' Robert Bates (d. 1997)) made him an effective interrogator, analyst and propagandist. He always saw himself as a soldier and executant rather than a political leader or strategist.

After Séamus Twomey (qv) moved to Dublin, Hughes became Belfast Brigade operations officer under a new commander and adjutant, and helped organise the first IRA London bombings (8 March 1973). On 19 July 1973 he was arrested in the Iveagh district of the Falls Road with other activists, including Gerry Adams (b. 1948), subsequently leader (from 1983) of Sinn Féin, whom Hughes had known since 1970 and with whom he was closely associated. They were interrogated and beaten at Springfield Road RUC station and Castlereagh interrogation centre before internment in Long Kesh.

On 8 December 1973 Hughes escaped from Long Kesh in a rolled-up mattress inside a rubbish truck. Returning to Belfast ten days later, he reorganised the Belfast IRA, serving as brigade commander from February 1974. He operated from the middle-class Malone district of south Belfast, posing as a travelling toy salesman. On 10 May 1974 Hughes was arrested, and was later sentenced to fifteen-years' imprisonment. (He received a separate two and a half years for handling stolen

money.) While awaiting trial, Hughes was OC of IRA prisoners in Crumlin Road jail, and became embroiled in a black propaganda incident, whereby informers planted by British intelligence to be uncovered, 'confessed' that named IRA members were informers, thus manipulating the IRA into an internal witch hunt involving violent interrogations and massive dissensions.

Prison struggle On returning to Long Kesh as a sentenced prisoner, Hughes was prominent among those prisoners, centred in Cage 11 (including Adams, now a sentenced prisoner after trying to escape; he was released in February 1977), who developed opposition to the Dublin-based IRA leadership and its supporters in the prison leadership. The dissidents believed the British were using informers and selective arrests and releases to take the most dangerous IRA men out of circulation while leaving more malleable figures in command, and that the Dublin leadership, by entering negotiations leading to a truce (9 February 1975–20 January 1976) in the mistaken belief that British withdrawal was imminent, had fallen victim to British manipulation leading to demoralisation and increased British infiltration of the IRA. The dissidents engaged in 'political education' to build support, and contested elections for authority positions, while taking care to avoid being expelled. After the end of the ceasefire, as supporters of the Belfast group moved into positions of authority, the IRA replaced its 'one big push' strategy with preparations for a 'long war' lasting many years, replacing its military-style organisation with a structure of largely self-contained cells.

The 'long war' strategy had personal implications for Hughes. He and his wife Lilly (who married c.1970) had a son and a daughter, but their relationship was undermined by his life on the run. While Hughes was in prison she formed a new relationship: 'I called her to the jail and told her there was no problem – she was young and deserved a bit of happiness ... When I got out of jail ... I shook her partner's hand' (*Sunday Tribune*, 16 April 2006). His subsequent relationship with his children was intermittent (he renewed contact with his daughter in later life).

Hughes's appointment as OC of IRA Maze prisoners at the end of 1977 marked the final victory of the dissidents. He replaced the older, top-down prison command structure, which emphasised military-style discipline, with one emphasising 'political education', based on such models as Che Guevara, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and the Vietnamese struggle. At the same time, Hughes was charged with participating in a prison riot in which a warder was injured, and received an additional five-year sentence. Since special status had been withdrawn from newly sentenced prisoners, Hughes went to the H-blocks in 1978 and joined the 'blanket protest', in which prisoners refused to wear prison uniform and consequently were confined naked to their cells. This protest developed added dimensions over time (including the 'dirty protest', smearing excreta on cell walls). Hughes initially suggested that prisoners should nominally conform and then make the prison unworkable by obstruction. After the prisoners rejected this suggestion, Hughes developed an orchestrated strategy to coordinate and escalate the protest and

publicise prison conditions, combining tactical flexibility (protesting prisoners were told to accept prison visits, although this required them to wear uniform, since visits were necessary to smuggle contraband and messages in and out of prison) and ruthlessness (he targeted for assassination prison officers regarded as particularly brutal).

In mid 1979, Hughes and Bobby Sands (qv) discussed a hunger strike as the next stage in escalating the conflict, and after Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich (qv) failed to secure concessions on prison conditions from British PM Margaret Thatcher in March 1980, they decided it was the only recourse. On 27 October 1980, seven prisoners, led by Hughes, went on hunger strike. (One IRA hunger striker was chosen from each county of Northern Ireland; the seventh represented the INLA.) This structuring of the protest had the disadvantage that all the hunger strikers would go into crisis around the same time and their decision would be influenced by the needs of the weakest striker. The hunger strike ended on 18 December after fifty-three days when Hughes decided that he could not risk the life of the weakest hunger striker, Seán McKenna (d. 2008), by waiting for a detailed examination of proposed British concessions (which were later rejected as unsatisfactory).

The hunger strike left Hughes with extensive lifelong health problems, including arthritis, a weakened immune system, poor eyesight, and heart trouble; he also suffered from suicidal impulses and feelings of responsibility for the prisoners under his command. He opposed the second hunger strike, arguing once again that prisoners should conform en masse and then make the prison system unworkable from within (this strategy was later taken up with considerable success). He was subsequently critical of the post-strike prison leadership's drive to segregate republican prisoners from loyalists, arguing that it would be preferable to develop contacts with them.

Post-prison career After leaving jail in November 1986, Hughes returned to the IRA as a member of GHQ staff, and believed in the coordination of republican military and political strategy. As assistant director of intelligence, he oversaw a hunt for spies within the organisation, and by his own account oversaw massive electoral personation in Belfast in the 1987 Westminster elections and 1989 local elections. In 1987 Hughes became a member of the IRA army council, and pushed for the IRA to scale back until it reorganised its military capacity while launching more attacks in England.

He found it hard to adjust to deinstitutionalisation: 'I went for a walk, just to be on my own. The old streets were gone and I got lost in the new streets. A man had to bring me home' (*Sunday Tribune*, 16 April 2006). Hughes came to believe that the IRA, especially in Belfast, was riddled with corruption and informers, and was being manipulated by the British to move it away from armed conflict into politics; colleagues to whom he voiced his fears told him his long experiences had made him paranoid. He came to believe that the prominent informer Joe Fenton (who died in

February 1989) had been killed before Hughes could interrogate him so as to protect more deeply placed agents. Fearing for his own safety, Hughes moved to Dublin (c.1990); he returned to Belfast in 1991 but was marginal to the IRA thereafter. Hughes came to believe that old hardliners whom he had helped to marginalise, such as Harry White (qv), had been correct in predicting that the new leadership whom Hughes had helped to install were moving towards compromise with the British, and was upset to see veterans such as Séamus Twomey 'thrown on the scrap heap'.

On returning to Belfast, Hughes worked in low-paid jobs, mainly as a barman or in the building industry, and discovered that the republican movement was reluctant to support him in exposing below-standard wages paid to former prisoners by building firms with Sinn Féin connections. (Hughes, like many other ex-prisoners, lacked skills or qualifications, and for his own safety could not work outside west Belfast.)

Hughes saw the 1994 IRA ceasefire and the subsequent peace process as defeat disguised as victory. He believed the leadership had exploited the bonds of personal loyalty formed in the streets and the prisons to manipulate volunteers in the interests of their political strategy; he was particularly bitter about the role of Gerry Adams, whom he had regarded as a brother. Although he accepted that the armed struggle had failed, Hughes complained that Sinn Féin had become a new conservative group working the existing system, while the problems of urban poverty remained and large numbers of IRA veterans were left impoverished and suffering health problems, as happened to their predecessors in earlier conflicts. He was particularly distressed by the lonely death of the first blanket protestor, Kieran Nugent, from alcoholism in 2000, and predicted that this social exclusion would lead to a new wave of troubles in a few decades.

From 2000 Hughes became increasingly outspoken in his denunciations of the Sinn Féin leadership. He associated with a loose network of critics centred on ex-blanketmen who had left Sinn Féin and the IRA over political disagreements in the 1980s and 1990s and who tried to promote political debate and strategic understanding within the republican movement. (Their record with the movement gave them some protection in voicing their views.) Prominent members of this milieu included Anthony McIntyre, to whose webzine, *The blanket*, Hughes contributed several articles, and Tommy McKearney, who had been on hunger strike with Hughes in 1981. In addition, Hughes was active in campaigns for various left-wing and pro-Palestinian causes.

An attempt to run a small business with friends was short-lived, and a relationship with a girlfriend (formed after his prison release in 1986) also broke up. For his last seven years, Hughes lived on disability benefit in a small, sparsely furnished flat in Divis Tower on the Lower Falls, suffering social phobia, clinical depression ('Sometimes I've sat here crying for a week ... The faces of the hunger strikers are always before me' (*Sunday Tribune*, 16 April 2006)), and a drink problem. He

underwent heart surgery but grew increasingly frail, and died in Belfast City Hospital on 16 February 2008.

His funeral was a major republican event; Adams attended, and it was suggested in some quarters (but denied by Hughes's friends) that they had reconciled at the end. Hughes had long been an atheist, and shortly before his death told the journalist Suzanne Breen that instead of the IRA being disbanded, the catholic church should be disbanded because of clerical child abuse; the requiem mass celebrated at his funeral indicated communal loyalties rather than any change in this attitude. After cremation, Hughes's ashes were scattered at three separate sites: on his parents' grave, at the Falls Garden of Remembrance (a memorial to the Belfast Brigade), and in the Cooley mountains of north Louth where his family originated. (The exclusion of the republican plot in Milltown cemetery, focus of official Sinn Féin commemorations, was deliberate.) His friends and sympathisers continued to commemorate and debate his legacy, while the Irish Brigade, a republican folk group, produced 'The ballad of Brendan Hughes (the warrior from west Belfast)'. It soon transpired, however, that Hughes had left another legacy.

Voices from the grave Hughes consistently wished to document his experiences to assist later generations' political development. In 1991 he was one of a number of republicans interviewed for the Australian documentary *Behind the mask* (dir. Frank Martin), and in his last years he regularly gave interviews to journalists and students of the Northern Ireland troubles in his Divis flat. He spoke regularly of writing memoirs but failed to do so even with friends' assistance.

In 2010, however, it was revealed that between March 2001 and August 2002, before his final decline set in, Hughes had given extensive, tape-recorded interviews to Anthony McIntyre in which he spoke frankly of his life and IRA activities. This had formed part of an oral history programme sponsored by Boston College, USA, and intended to document the thought processes and experiences of combatants on both sides of the troubles; participants were guaranteed that their testimonies would be kept secret until their deaths. Hughes's insistence that his story should be told had played a significant role in getting the project off the ground. His testimony, and that of loyalist David Ervine (qv), formed the basis of the book *Voices from the grave: two men's war in Ireland* (2010) by the journalist Ed Moloney, and an associated RTÉ documentary of the same name (dir. Kate O'Callaghan). It was noteworthy that, whereas Ervine was guarded about his extra-legal activities, Hughes was so outspoken that his testimony needed extensive editing to guard against libel suits.

Hughes was particularly outspoken about Gerry Adams, who he claimed was betraying Hughes and other ex-combatants by denying his own role in their activities. Hughes alleged that Adams had been the strategist who planned many operations carried out by Hughes in the early 1970s (including 'bloody Friday') and that Adams was responsible for 'disappearing' some of those kidnapped and killed by the IRA for allegedly being informers (including Jean McConville

(qv), whom Hughes claimed had indeed been a spy for the British). After an RTÉ documentary (November 2013) on the 'Disappeared' played the tape of Hughes describing Adams's role in McConville's fate, Adams responded: 'Brendan is telling lies' (*Observer*, 2 November 2013).

The oral history project subsequently ran into difficulties when the PSNI formally requested material from the archive relating to McConville's murder through the US federal courts; a long legal wrangle ensued, not only between the courts and Boston College, but also between the college and Moloney and McIntyre; by April 2014 the future of the archive was unclear.

In assessing *Voices from the grave* it is important to differentiate between Hughes's account of his personal experiences and his suspicions and deductions (e.g., that the republican leadership might have deliberately undermined its military campaign in order to facilitate its political strategy). Nevertheless, it provides irreplaceable insights into the circumstances under which Hughes was drawn into the Northern Ireland troubles and became a republican legend, the deep bonds and strong suspicions which developed among republicans through their combat and prison experiences, and the consequences which Hughes, and many others, eventually suffered.

Peter Taylor, *Provos: the IRA and Sinn Féin* (1997); Laurence McKeown, *Out of time: Irish republican prisoners, Long Kesh, 1972–2000* (2001); Ed Moloney, *A secret history of the IRA* (2002); *Sunday Tribune*, 16 Apr. 2006; 24 Apr. 2008; *Independent* (London), 18 Feb. 2008; *Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2008; *An Phoblacht*, 21 Feb. 2008; *Ir. Times*, 23 Feb. 2008; 'Brendan Hughes interview on Radio Free Éireann, New York' (transcript (2009)), National Irish Freedom Committee: *Irish Republican News* archive, www.irishfreedom.net; Ed Moloney, *Voices from the grave* (2010); Anthony McIntyre, 'Brendan Hughes: a life in themes', 30 Apr. 2011 (lecture transcript), Boston College Subpoena News: background information, bostoncollegesubpoena.wordpress.com; *Observer*, 3 Nov. 2013; Beth McMurtrie, 'Secrets from Belfast', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Jan. 2014, online at chronicle.com; 'Brendan 'Darkie' Hughes 1948–2008', dorcha.webs.com (internet material accessed Apr. 2014)