

Sands, Robert ('Bobby')

by Patrick Maume

Sands, Robert ('Bobby') (1954–81), IRA hunger striker, was born 9 March 1954 in Rathcoole, north Belfast, eldest of four children of John Sands and Rosaleen Sands. In 1961 the Sands family moved back to Rathcoole from Newtownabbey after anti-catholic harassment. At Stella Maris primary and secondary schools Sands was academically undistinguished but an enthusiastic sportsman. He played on a religiously mixed soccer team; two members were later jailed for UVF activity. Sands left school at 15, worked as a barman, and became an apprentice coachbuilder. In 1972 Sands was driven from his job by loyalist paramilitaries, who repeatedly attacked him; the family were expelled from Rathcoole like the rest of its catholic population. Some attackers were acquaintances.

The family moved to Twinbrook, west Belfast, where Sands joined the Provisional IRA. He was imprisoned 1973–6 for possessing weapons; he married (3 March 1973) Geraldine Noade while awaiting trial. They had one son, Gerard. At Long Kesh prison near Lisburn (later fitted with H-shaped cellblocks and renamed the Maze), in cage 11 where Gerry Adams was OC, Sands learned Irish, joined historical and political discussion groups, and wrote verse modelled on Ethna Carbery (qv) (whom he believed to be a contemporary), Kipling, and Oscar Wilde (qv). He absorbed defences of revolutionary violence by Fanon, Guevara, the Colombian guerilla priest Camillo Torres, and George Jackson, the radical black American prison writer.

Released from prison on 13 April 1976, Sands became a community worker and led a newly formed Twinbrook IRA active service unit. On 14 November 1976 he was arrested with three other IRA men (including Joe McDonnell, the fifth hunger striker to die) after bombing a furniture store. Each received a fourteen-year sentence for possessing a gun; they experienced violent interrogation at Castlereagh holding centre. Geraldine suffered a miscarriage after a house search; the marriage, already stormy, broke up.

From 1 March 1976 the British government refused special status (conceded after a hunger strike in 1972) to newly convicted paramilitaries. From September 1976 republican prisoners who defied prison discipline and refused prison clothing went naked except for prison blankets; when forbidden to wear blankets outside cells from 1978 they refused to wash, performed bodily functions in their cells, and smeared excreta on the walls. Their nakedness, sufferings, long hair, and beards were employed in visual and literary propaganda (not least by Sands) to link them with Christ, combining traditional devotionism with the collective self-deification of liberation theology.

As deputy IRA OC in the H-blocks, Sands orchestrated letter-writing campaigns for political status (summed up after 1979 in five demands: their own clothing, free association, freedom from prison work, a weekly parcel and visits, and restoration of remission). He urged the leadership outside to 'broaden the battlefield' by developing tactics to build mass support.

Sands published poems and articles in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* under the pen name 'Marcella' (the name of one of his sisters). These show a talented autodidact with a deep vein of anger and frustration. It is debated how far Sands's writings reflect his own experiences or portray a composite 'typical prisoner'; their violent imagery and invocations of past republican heroes are political statements as well as reflecting Sands's own sensibility. Ex-prisoners recall that verse-writing was seen as 'unmanly' before he set the example. Two songs, 'M'Ilhatton' (humorous, about a poteen-maker) and 'Back home in Derry' (nineteenth-century convict ship as metaphor for H-blocks), were recorded by Christy Moore. Sands also oversaw political education and could recite Leon Uris's novel *Trinity* from memory. Prisoners' recollections present him as quiet, intense, committed, and good-humoured.

In October 1980 Sands became OC when his predecessor led a seven-man hunger strike for political status. This was called off (December 1980) when an apparent compromise was offered. After the compromise was diluted by prison authorities, Sands prepared a second hunger strike. In January 1981 he stood down as OC. He began fasting on 1 March, the fifth anniversary of the withdrawal of political status; other prisoners followed at intervals. When Frank Maguire (qv), Independent Republican MP for Fermanagh–South Tyrone, died on 16 March, Sands was proposed as an anti-H-block candidate. Other nationalist candidates were persuaded to stand down; the campaign was presented as a chance to save Sands's life. On 9 April Sands defeated Ulster Unionist Harry West (qv) by 30,493 votes to 29,046. This result shattered depictions of the IRA as criminals lacking significant support; many unionists saw it as the catholic community endorsing murderers. ('They chose Barabbas', complained the *Church of Ireland Gazette*.) Many prisoners underestimated the determination of Margaret Thatcher's government; some believed an MP would not be allowed to die.

Descriptions of 'blanket men' as ordinary convicts were further undermined by the visits of high-ranking dignitaries (including three TDs and the pope's secretary) attempting mediation, and worldwide coverage, mostly sympathetic to the hunger strikers. Unionists contrasted the lack of publicity for local victims of the IRA. Sands died 5 May 1981 after sixty-six days on hunger strike. 100,000 people attended his funeral in Belfast; the Iranian government renamed Churchill Avenue, Tehran (site of the British embassy), after him.

The hunger strike and Sands's election brought many new recruits to the republican movement and deepened Sinn Féin electoral involvement; the prisoners were subsequently granted most of the hunger strikers' demands (giving them

considerable control within the prison). Sands became a republican icon. A mural portrait (based on a 1976 jail photograph) decorated Sinn Féin headquarters on the Falls Road; his slogans (e.g. 'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children') were widely quoted, his emblem of a lark in barbed wire to symbolise republican prisoners was regularly reproduced.

During the 1990s peace process republican supporters of the Belfast agreement called it the fruit of Sands's sacrifice; opponents (including Sands's sister Bernadette) claimed it betrayed the principles for which he died, and denounced the denial of political status to imprisoned dissident republicans. Some commentators see Sands and the hunger strikers as trapped by personal traumas and a provincial culture of catholic devotionism and sacrificial republicanism; these writers emphasise the drawn-out conclusion of the hunger strike, with outside leaders overawed by 'tunnel-visioned' prisoners. Others (particularly ex-prisoners) see Sands and the prisoner community developing a calculated political strategy, employing symbolism rather than being defined by it, and the hunger strike as part of an ongoing process of individual and communal self-empowerment.

Nine other republican hunger strikers died in the Maze prison after Sands: Francis Hughes (qv) (12 May 1981); Raymond McCreesh (21 May 1981) from Camlough, Co. Armagh; Patrick 'Patsy' O'Hara (qv) (21 May 1981); Joe McDonnell (8 July 1981) of Belfast, who was defeated by 315 votes in Sligo-Leitrim during the June 1981 general election; Martin Hurson (13 July 1981) of Galbally, Co. Tyrone; Kevin Lynch (1 August 1981), a member of the INLA from Dungiven, Co. Derry; Kieran Doherty (qv) (2 August 1981); Thomas McElwee (8 August 1981) of Tamlaghtduff, Co. Derry; and Michael Devine (20 August 1981) a member of the INLA from Derry.

Starry Plough/ An Camcheachta, June 1981 (IRSP) obit. (see http://iris.org/general/history/starryplough/bobby_sands.htm); *Skylark sing your lovely song: an anthology of the writings of Bobby Sands*, intro. by Ulick O'Connor (1982); Tom Collins, *The Irish hunger strike* (1986); David Beresford, *Ten men dead: the story of the 1981 Irish hunger strike* (1987); Liam Clarke, *Broadening the battlefield: the H-blocks and the rise of Sinn Féin* (1987); Pdraig O'Malley, *Biting at the grave: the Irish hunger-strikes and the politics of despair* (1990); Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, Felim O'Hagan (ed.), *Nor meekly serve my time: the H-block struggle 1976–81* (1994); Jonathan Stevenson, *'We wrecked the place'. contemplating an end to the Northern Ireland troubles* (1996); *Lost lives* (1999), no. 2308; Laurence McKeown, *Out of time: Irish republican prisoners Long Kesh 1972–2000* (2001)