

# **The BBC's 'Irish troubles'**

Television, conflict and Northern Ireland

ROBERT J. SAVAGE

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## Introduction

On 14 August 1969, ferocious rioting broke out in Derry, Northern Ireland, and quickly spread to Belfast, marking the beginning of 'the Troubles': a thirty-year period of political and sectarian strife that resulted in over 3,600 deaths, countless injuries, and deep emotional scarring for many citizens of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. During the nights of 14 and 15 August Belfast witnessed frightening levels of violence. Seven people were killed and scores of homes burned as angry gangs terrorised inner-city neighbourhoods. During two nights of mayhem, 745 people were injured, 154 with gunshot wounds, and close to 1,800 people were forced from their homes. Approximately 1,500 of those that abandoned their homes were Catholic, many fleeing Belfast and heading south to the Irish Republic. BBC Television was in Belfast on those fateful nights, transmitting throughout the United Kingdom material that was carefully 'sanitised', censoring coverage of seminal events in contemporary Irish and British history. No comprehensive description of the unrest was allowed and interviews that might contain emotional outbursts or inflammatory accusations were banned. In the aftermath of the carnage the BBC Controller for Northern Ireland, Waldo Maguire, defended the BBC's handling of events. 'In the present atmosphere of hatred and fear, we have to recognise that the broadcasting of violently opposed views, passionately and offensively expressed, could have direct and immediate consequences on the streets of Belfast and Londonderry.'<sup>1</sup>

McGuire argued that when the violence broke out the BBC had two options. It could treat Northern Ireland as a foreign country and produce 'the same kind of uninhibited programme which would be made if the shooting, rioting, looting and arson were taking place in a foreign country: and then ensure it is not carried on Northern Ireland transmitters', or it could 'modify to some extent the presentation ... in a way designed to avoid extreme provocation'. The BBC chose the latter option, refusing to inform viewers fully of what was taking place

in Northern Ireland. The veteran BBC correspondent Martin Bell, who spent many years covering the conflict, later reflected:

We made a mistake ... in 1969, in August of that year when Catholics were burned out of their homes in the Falls by Protestants who attacked them from the Shankill. The BBC reports then gave no indication of who these refugees were. They just spoke of refugees. The public was not to know whether they were Catholic or Protestant or who was attacking whom. That has been seen as a grave mistake.<sup>2</sup>

This early episode of censorship at the very start of 'the Troubles' illustrates the dilemma that grew more pronounced as broadcasters and the State struggled to come to terms with how the conflict in Northern Ireland should be presented to regional, national and international audiences. During a conflict that stretched over three decades, Government-imposed censorship, together with self-censorship practised by anxious broadcasters, complicated the BBC's efforts fully to inform viewers of events taking place in Northern Ireland.

This book seeks to address how news and information about the conflict in Northern Ireland were disseminated through the most accessible, powerful and popular form of media: television. It will focus on the BBC and consider how its broadcasts complicated 'the Troubles' by challenging decisions, policies and tactics developed by Governments trying to defeat a stubborn insurgency that threatened national security. I will consider the development of the BBC in Northern Ireland from its origins as a modest regional broadcasting service through some of the darkest days of 'the Troubles'. What began as a timid radio service determined not to upset the status quo evolved to become a determined force that challenged the foundations of the British State. Both the regional service and the national network emerged to provide a critical voice that chronicled thirty years of turmoil, thereby becoming an integral part of the long and harrowing conflict. Programming critical of the Stormont Government helped destabilise and ultimately undermine a regional Parliament that had long governed without consensus. Broadcasts that questioned British policy in Northern Ireland enraged Labour and Conservative Governments alike throughout the 1970s and 1980s and eventually provoked Margaret Thatcher to intervene directly by imposing a crude form of censorship in an effort to deny subversives the 'oxygen of publicity'.

Throughout the conflict British Governments tried to shape the way in which television depicted the struggle against paramilitaries, especially the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). However, its relentless presence undermined Government efforts to present a simple picture of the forces of law and order trying to defeat savage terrorists hell-bent on a campaign of murder and mayhem.

All those involved in the conflict hoped to produce a narrative for both domestic and international audiences to justify their role in an increasingly bitter and violent struggle. The propaganda war that ensued created much consternation for officials in London, Belfast and Dublin who understood that the conflict presented a real and immediate threat to social order. Rules, regulations and policies that tried to suppress, shape or 'spin' coverage of the conflict were intended to marginalise extremists. Governments were acutely aware of the power of television to encourage sympathy or support for the very organisations they sought to destroy.

This study will explore the incessant wrangling that took place among political elites, civil servants, military officials, broadcasting authorities and journalists concerning what should and should not be featured on the BBC's regional and national networks. In many cases the anxiety and controversy created by these political skirmishes ultimately challenged the ability of the medium accurately to inform citizens of important events taking place within the United Kingdom, thereby undermining the BBC's role as a public service provider. This project seeks to address how the crisis in Northern Ireland tested the integrity and independence of the BBC, one of the most trusted and respected media outlets in the world. As violence continued, the BBC was attacked, threatened and bullied by a variety of actors, but did its best to stand its ground and maintain editorial independence and journalistic credibility. This was true of senior managers, editors and journalists who worked for the London-based network and those who worked for BBC Northern Ireland. In spite of the infamous broadcasting restrictions put in place in 1988, professional staff were determined to provide audiences with informed news and information about the conflict. Senior broadcasting officials pushed back against clumsy Government efforts to silence voices that, although unpalatable, were critical to comprehending and eventually resolving a long and bloody conflict.

In writing this book I have been fortunate to have access to valuable primary sources in Britain and Northern Ireland. As a historian I've tried to use a variety of archival sources to develop this narrative but because of restrictions on access to this material I've ended this study in 1988, almost a decade after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister.<sup>3</sup> Historians will soon have access to material that extends well into the 1990s enabling a comprehensive exploration of broadcasting and Northern Ireland in the years leading up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In writing this book I have used a wide range of secondary sources and I am indebted to those who have already explored the role of the media in addressing the Northern Ireland conflict. A number of impressive volumes have been published over the years including Rex Cathcart's pioneering *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984*; Liz Curtis's

# 1

## The origins of the BBC in Northern Ireland

Richard Francis, one of the most respected Controllers of BBC Northern Ireland, once told a story about the first radio broadcast from Belfast. He recounted that on 15 September 1924 Tyrone Guthrie, who later became one of the most famous theatre directors of his generation, was at the microphone when Northern Ireland's first radio service was inaugurated.

Guthrie's opening announcement 'Belfast Calling! Belfast Calling!' was immediately followed by the playing of *God Save the Queen*. Next morning the local Nationalist newspaper complained of the announcer's 'English accent' and of the Belfast station's determination to be 'more English than the English', even playing 'that good old party tune' at the beginning instead of at the end of the evening's programmes. By contrast a correspondent in one of the Unionist papers, having missed the start of the programme, demanded to know why the evening broadcast had not been closed with the National Anthem, 'as in other British stations'.<sup>1</sup>

Francis told this story more than fifty years after Guthrie's opening remarks in order to explain that that broadcasting had been contentious in Northern Ireland ever since Guthrie's words were first transmitted in 1924.

Television came to Northern Ireland in 1953, the year of the coronation of Elizabeth II. Figure 1 captures an image from the BBC programme *Coronation Day across the World* – and the contribution from the new BBC Northern Ireland station. Television newsreel from the province recorded square dancing on the sea front in Bangor. Rex Cathcart's seminal study of the BBC in Northern Ireland, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984*, points out that when BBC Television arrived in the province programmes about Northern Ireland were for the most part complimentary. This created unrealistic expectations from unionist politicians, who believed that agreeable broadcasts such as *The Pattern of Ulster* and a feature in the series *About Britain* would be typical of future programmes.<sup>2</sup> There was certainly a degree of naiveté in official thinking

# 2

## 'The Troubles' arrive

Londonderry witnessed intermittent battles between police and residents of the Catholic Bogside from the start of 1969. As historian Marianne Elliott points out, pressure had been building in the city for months, but nothing had been done to defuse an increasingly dangerous situation. With tensions running high in the province the provocative Apprentice Boys parade of 12 August put a match to the fuse. The annual event attracted thousands of unsettled loyalists determined to follow tradition and march through the predominantly Catholic city. Elliott maintains 'the trigger seems to have been the tossing of pennies by the Apprentice Boys, though a longstanding tradition, from the walls onto the Bogside below. It symbolised hundreds of years of Protestant contempt, and the area exploded.'<sup>1</sup> As rioting developed along the parade route Catholics forcefully defended their neighbourhood from the RUC with barricades, paving stones and Molotov cocktails. They were determined to keep a hostile police force they considered sectarian out of the Catholic quarter nestled beneath the imposing city walls. Earlier that year the RUC had gone on a violent rampage in the Bogside attacking residents and destroying property in an effort to frighten and intimidate the community. Catholics were resolved to prevent a recurrence.

BBC Television images of the standoff were broadcast into homes throughout the UK, Ireland and much of the world highlighting the city's descent into near anarchy. The chaos that engulfed Derry quickly spread to Belfast forcing 3,000 Catholics and 500 Protestants to flee their homes. Confused images of burning streets and frightened refugees were transmitted internationally, as were reports that members of the security forces either stood by and watched or actually participated in the mayhem. Reports of arson, shootings and killings were transmitted across the world causing acute distress for Governments in London, Belfast and Dublin.

On the evening of 13 August the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, James Chichester-Clark appeared on television and radio to warn that all necessary force would be used to restore order, but added, 'We want peace not vengeance. If the rioters withdraw peacefully to their homes and observe the law no attempt

# 3

## Balance? The BBC in Northern Ireland, 1972–1978

The suspension of the Stormont Parliament removed a layer of local political administration that had dominated the northern state during its fifty-year existence. As has been noted, initially the BBC was strikingly deferential to the Unionist Government and this was particularly true of the regional service based at Broadcasting House in Belfast. This relationship evolved under Controller Waldo Maguire, who carefully moved the regional service out of the shadow of the Stormont Parliament. Unionist politicians grew increasingly hostile towards both regional and network programming that criticised decisions and policies developed by the Government at Stormont. Up until the suspension of Stormont the BBC NI Controller played an important role in managing the BBC's relationship with the regional Parliament. With its prorogation this dynamic changed. Although the Controller was still an important and influential voice, the Director-General and Editor NCA became more active in representing the BBC with both the Home Office and the new Northern Ireland Office.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring and early summer of 1972 it appeared that the IRA might respond to the suspension of Stormont by declaring a truce. Leaders of the republican movement believed that they had the momentum to initiate negotiations that would end the conflict on favourable terms. The IRA had secretly met with the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Harold Wilson, and his shadow secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees, in Dublin that spring. In June the IRA held a remarkable press conference in Derry (shown in Figure 14) and its leadership publicly offered to enter into a ceasefire if the new Secretary of State, William Whitelaw, would agree to a meeting in an effort to negotiate an end to the conflict. Dáithí O'Connell, accompanied by Martin McGuinness, Seán MacStiofáin and Seamus Toomey, announced the Provisional IRA's proposal to the print and broadcast media and challenged the Northern Ireland Secretary of State to meet. While the British Government refused, maintaining it would not talk to terrorists, it quietly began negotiating both a meeting with the IRA and a ceasefire.



# 4

## Roy Mason, the BBC and the 'Second Battle of Culloden'

Roy Mason (shown in Figure 20) was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in September 1976; he had served as Secretary of State for Defence before moving to the Northern Ireland Cabinet post. While at Defence he had advocated getting tough with terrorists and had been responsible for deploying the elite though controversial Special Air Service (SAS) in the notorious 'bandit country' of South Armagh where the IRA was a powerful force. Mason proved an aggressive Secretary of State who could be incredibly abrasive. Under him, the British Government continued to try to redefine the conflict by pursuing the policy of 'normalisation'. This was intended to present the conflict



Figure 20 Roy Mason, Northern Ireland Secretary of State, 1979.

# 5

## Margaret Thatcher, the IRA and the 'oxygen of publicity'

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, proving to be one of the most dominant yet divisive political figures in post-war Britain. The 'free market' policies she introduced were highly controversial and dominated British political discourse throughout the 1980s. During her time in office she introduced massive cuts in public spending, challenged and then crushed the powerful coal miners' union, led a successful military campaign to win back the Falkland Islands from Argentina, and pursued a policy designed to destroy the IRA.

Throughout her tenure as Prime Minister, her relationship with the BBC was fractious and marred by confrontation. Like many members of the Conservative Party she believed the BBC had a strong left-wing bias. After the General Election the Prime Minister insisted that her first formal television interview would be with ITV, not the BBC. Gordon Reece, the Conservative Party's media advisor, grew concerned that waiting for ITV could be problematic as its workers began a prolonged strike in the summer of 1979. Reece raised the possibility of scheduling an extended interview with the BBC's *Panorama* but Thatcher forcefully rejected this. In a memorandum shared with the Prime Minister he accepted that BBC 'interviewers are hostile' and knew that making Britain's public service television service wait was what she wanted as it 'would serve notice on the BBC that they are *one* of the broadcasting services and not the self-appointed tribunes of the people.'<sup>1</sup> The Prime Minister's first formal television interview took place after the ITV strike had ended. The interview with ITV's *Weekend World* was broadcast in January 1980, eight months after the General Election. The BBC's *Panorama* had to wait until late February for its interview with Margaret Thatcher.

In March 1979 at the very start of her ultimately successful election campaign the INLA assassinated her close friend and advisor Airey Neave. His death left a lasting mark on the Prime Minister and coloured her attitude towards Northern Ireland, and, one might argue, towards the Irish. Neave had a strong interest in Northern Ireland and believed harsh measures should be employed to defeat