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Fourteen million words later ...

Richard Norton-Taylor has taken the drama of the Bloody Sunday inquiry and put it on stage. He explains why

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On a bright spring morning in March 2000, I walked through Derry's Bogside with Nicolas Kent, director of the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, north-west London's old Irish quarter, and Benjamin Zephaniah, then poet in residence at the chambers of the barrister Michael Mansfield.

I now feel I know every street, every corner where unarmed civilians fell dead or wounded, and every spot from which the Paras fired their rifles. Not because I have lived there or even because I have revisited Derry - I haven't. I feel I have come to know the place, and its ghosts, through hearing scores of witnesses and reading thousands of pages of transcript of the Bloody Sunday inquiry. This is the material - about 14m words spoken by more than 900 witnesses in the biggest investigation in British legal history - from which I have distilled the latest "Tribunal Play" at the Tricycle.



In the name of justice ...
British soldier and demonstrator during Bloody Sunday. Photo: PA

Most people know that British paratroopers killed 13 unarmed civil-rights marchers during 20 minutes of heavy gunfire on the streets and in the alleyways of the Bogside on January 30 1972 (a 14th died later from his wounds). Fewer of us know about the tensions between senior army officers, the confused orders, the cover-up and the lies.

Lord Saville, who hopes to report before the end of the year, will not refer to contemporary resonances, but we may. For a start, there is the perception in Britain that UK soldiers are so much better at peacekeeping than others, most notably the Americans, because of their experience in Northern Ireland. This is in spite of the allegations and evidence against British troops in southern Iraq that they have murdered and abused civilians.

There are also uncomfortable present-day resonances for the republicans, in the allegations against the IRA over the killing of Robert McCartney and the embarrassment this caused to Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, who admitted for the first time at the Saville inquiry that he was adjutant of the Derry command of the Provisional IRA at the time of Bloody Sunday. And then there is the controversy over internment without trial of suspected terrorists here - which is precisely what the Derry marchers were protesting against on that day in January 1972.

Prime minister Tony Blair agreed to set up a new inquiry into Bloody Sunday in 1998 after it became increasingly clear that the Widgery tribunal established by Edward Heath immediately after the shootings had not been told the truth and had turned a blind eye to inconvenient evidence. The Saville inquiry was, in effect, part of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, a peace process - still incomplete - that included the

reform of the police in Northern Ireland, power sharing, the decommissioning of weapons by the paramilitaries, and the closing down of British military garrisons.

The inquiry was seen as one way to put right an injustice to the Catholic community over an event whose significance is difficult to overestimate, one which radicalised a generation of young Catholics and at a stroke recruited many to armed struggle and the Provos.

Jean Hegarty, whose 17-year-old brother, Kevin McElhinney, was shot dead as he tried to crawl to safety in the stairwell of an apartment building, describes Bloody Sunday as the "defining moment in the Troubles". Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin) who at the time of Bloody Sunday was MP for Mid Ulster, told the inquiry: "What is very easy to forget about Bloody Sunday is the actual enormity of what it was. Before that day, although people were being shot, I did not have a belief that death was an integral part of the equation of seeking justice in this country. After Bloody Sunday, I believed that it was.

"I never for 30 years raised my voice against the ... taking of the war to the British government. For 30 years, as a consequence of Bloody Sunday, my policy was that death is part of this equation. The British army declared war on the people seeking justice in this country on that day. Three thousand and more coffins followed, and years of imprisonment and torture and pain. I cannot forgive the British government for that."

Saville was determined to force as many witnesses as possible to give evidence - soldiers and spooks as well as paramilitaries. He is likely to criticise the army - individual soldiers as well as senior officers. However, his conclusions are unlikely to satisfy those who want prosecutions.

When they were not giving evidence, relatives of the victims of Bloody Sunday followed the inquiry's course intensely as it sat in Derry's Guildhall and in Central Hall, Westminster - the soldiers refused to return to Derry to give evidence. Eamonn McCann, editor of the forthcoming book *Saville*, by the Bloody Sunday families, interviewed many after all the evidence had been heard.

Many, unsurprisingly, responded bitterly to the ex-Paras' testimonies. This is Liam Wray: "Take the fella that murdered my brother. I have no doubt that that boy probably wouldn't treat a dog the same way in his neighbourhood. But he doesn't feel he did any wrong because he was brought up in the system to see my brother as an enemy."

Michael McKinney told McCann: "My brother was murdered. Somebody must be brought to account for that and I mean from the top down, not from soldiers on the ground. Somebody must be held responsible for what happened on Bloody Sunday."

Kate Nash said: "My brother getting killed was hard to deal with ... but now through this inquiry when you have found out things, you just view everything differently and with suspicion."

For the relatives there were broader lessons to be learned, too, about the current "war on terror". Hegarty said: "While I have no sympathy for the terrorists, the establishment approach to them is not the right approach. I just find the whole Palestine issue so hypocritical. The US is over there doing these things because Saddam Hussein didn't live up to some sanctions that the UN imposed, while Israel just totally ignores tons of them."

"Governments are people who we all put in power and they don't divulge the truth to the public," said McKinney. "Iraq, Palestine, and wherever else. How many Bloody Sundays are there in Iraq? How many other isolated cases have there been in Ireland where the establishment walks free without accountability?"

Wray said: "It's like Iraq now. Why did we get into the war? And you see people now thinking, 'I don't want to talk about the war,' which is natural. So if Blair can ride that out for the next two months, he will have no problem with Iraq when it comes to the election because people don't want to know any more. And that's the same when it comes to Bloody Sunday."

So many years after Widgery, it became clear that some soldiers, and Ministry of Defence minders, were still prepared to cover up evidence. Like a chorus, soldiers at the inquiry, some of them teenagers at the time of Bloody Sunday, repeated the refrain "I cannot remember" - though a few described how they were bullied by military police into giving false statements after the implications of what they had done began to sink in.

However, much new evidence emerged, too. One paratrooper, identified only as soldier 027, whose serious allegations in interviews with the Belfast Telegraph and Channel 4 helped to persuade Downing Street of the need for a new inquiry, told Saville that on the eve of Blood Sunday, a soldier remarked: "Let us teach these buggers a lesson, we want some kills tomorrow." On the evening after the shootings, he told Saville: "We sat there and while the sounds of the incident had hardly died away, there was almost a recognition that there was a problem that had to be explained away ... It gave us a period to discuss alibis and ammunition ... There was some serious thinking going on by people wanting to cover their arses."

The brigade commander of British troops in Derry, General Andrew MacLennan, admitted the Paras disobeyed his orders not to charge down the Bogside in armoured cars. There is evidence from the inquiry that both the Official and Provisional IRA agreed not to use weapons, for to have done so would have been merely to shoot themselves in the foot, though a few Officials did try to fire back, and missed. One witness, Reg Tester, an Englishman and former sailor in the Royal Navy, who was a quartermaster for the Officials in Derry at the time, described how, "thank God", his rifle jammed.

"If you look carefully/ You will see the impression/ Of a body in the concrete," wrote Zephaniah in his poem Derry Sunday. Listening to the evidence and reading the words of the Saville inquiry is a reminder that we are still haunted by the ghosts of the people who were killed that day.

· Bloody Sunday, Scenes from the Saville Inquiry, is at the Tricycle Theatre, London NW6, from April 7.
Box office: 020-7328 1000.