

Memories of 5th October 1968 in Derry

Hilary Reeve

I arrived in Derry on the afternoon of 5th October 1968, after having spent a few days with a friend in Donegal Town. She dropped me off where Victoria Road meets the end of the Craigavon Bridge so that I could get to the shoe shop at the end of Duke Street managed by a friend Oliver Kennedy who was expecting me. I was surprised to see the crowds of people as I had forgotten about the planned, and banned, civil rights march.

I stood on the east (Waterside) end of the bridge and surveyed the scene. The marchers were corralled in front of me in Duke Street by a line of policemen while on an embankment to my right in front of a large advertisement hoarding, where Spencer Road met the Craigavon bridge, a group of men were hurling stones and other objects at the marchers. The marchers were a sitting target as they could go neither forwards nor backwards. Today it would probably be called 'kettleing'. Just as I was preparing to cross the road on the bridge one of the marchers broke away from the corralled group in Duke Street, followed in pursuit by a policeman who was batoning him about the head and shoulders. To my horror he ran straight over to my side. I was terrified and afraid to move in case I, too, would be batoned. I froze and can't recall what happened to the man.

Before I could make a second attempt to cross the road to get to Duke Street a cry erupted from the crowds in Spencer Road that a water cannon was coming. This was the first time to my knowledge that such a thing had been used in Northern Ireland and people in Spencer Road and on the bridge started running away from it towards the city. I, too, started running, but then I thought that this was foolish as it was only a bit of water, so I stopped where I was, turned my back to the water cannon and pulled up the collar of my coat. The pressure of the water was not great and it just squirted a bit across the top of my back. However, the really frightening thing was that in the general panic, if anyone had fallen to the ground no one would have stopped to pick them up.

After the water cannon drove across the bridge the stone throwers had fled so I thought that I would make a concerted effort to get to the shop in Duke Street. I hurried there and pushed my way to the door of the shop where Mr Kennedy had been anxiously awaiting me. He sent me upstairs to the ladies department where the shop assistants were all gathered. From there I had a ring-side view of what was happening below. On the same level in the buildings opposite were cameramen and the press who must have taken up these posts earlier in the hope of catching some of the action.

My only experience of the R.U.C. to this point was the friendly sergeant in our local police station. I was therefore horrified to see the brutality meted out on the corralled marchers by the police, and in particular by a senior R.U.C. police officer who was wielding a vicious blackthorn stick. It looked like a red

mist had descended on him and he did not care what damage he did to the marchers. The event was an eye-opener for me and blew away some of my naivety about the R.U.C. and the Stormont government. It had a profound effect on the way I viewed Ulster politics in the future.

Account written by Hilary Reeve on 11 October 2012.

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