

Myra Hindley

In recent press coverage of the police search for two more children's bodies on Saddleworth Moor, the photograph most frequently used of Myra Hindley is one taken in 1966, the year of her conviction. Freezing her in time, it shows a pugilistic, bottled blonde with a sunken sullen stare. Those newspapers which continually reprint that photograph do so in the knowledge that Hindley will never go free as long as the public still hold to that caricature of Hindley.

Myra Hindley is now 44, and has served 20 years in prison - all in closed establishments. She was jailed in 1966 after being convicted with Ian Brady of the murders of Lesley Ann Downey, aged 10, and John Kilbride, 12. The bodies were found on the Pennine Moor.

Most accounts of her pre-prison life tell of a Lancashire working class childhood, but impute a sinister character to ordinary events and attributes - she liked sport, was a bit of a tomboy, had an above average IQ, was protective of her younger sister Maureen - because all are telling the tale of a monster in genesis. The beginning must explain the end.

Accounts are probably most accurate concerning Hindley's reaction to Brady, whom she met in 1961 when a typist in a chemical merchants in Manchester. To the unsophisticated 18 year-old, Brady was more than desirable. He was different; he had clean fingernails, wore business suits and spotless shirts, had a double vent at the back of his overcoat. It is rarely disputed that Hindley loved him deeply, would do or die for him. Convicted together in 1966, Hindley and Brady's romance *did* die and contact between the two is now non-existent.

What explains the continuing and ghoulish fascination of the Moors murderers, and Hindley in particular? It is much more than soap. As Mike Nellis, writing in the

prison journal *The Abolitionist*, has pointed out, the story has many elements of a gothic drama. The *bleakness* of it all - the death of young innocence, the wild moors, the urban grimness of Manchester, prisons, mental institutions, darkness. And then the possibility of a reshoot, with the principal characters returning to the scene of their crime ...

More prosaic elements explain the continuing public obsession. Since 1966 the crude headlines and cheque-book methods of several tabloids have meant the press have been as much makers as reflectors of news about Hindley and Brady. They have run a quite deliberate campaign to keep Hindley in the public eye, ensuring that suggestions of her release on licence remain deeply unpopular. Any woman who gets to know Hindley in prison knows that she has instant money on release, if she wants it. Ex-prisoners specifically name this phenomenon 'the 30 pieces'.

Press images of the soft life are also fictitious. Hindley has a harder time than most lifers. She is set apart from prison life, always vulnerable to new reaction, from officers and prisoners, to her reputation. Hindley has been beaten up often.

Although often described as the 'devil's disciple', the fact that Hindley is a woman has made her guilt qualitatively different and greater in the public mind. Part of it is because she has broken one of the strongest taboos: women don't harm children. But she also invokes the old stereotype of a cold and calculating femaleness in crime - and in the way she has taken her punishment.

While Brady is now in a special hospital and does not want to be free, Hindley does want release. And there is both public resentment and intimations of manipulation surrounding her every act: the fact that she is taking an Open University course, has



Myra: the myth lingers.

flowers in her cell, that friends talk of her as witty and intelligent, that people might like her. All is unforgivable.

And it is this idea of something or someone being literally 'unforgivable' which underpins it all. Hindley's case raises two distinct and opposing moral perspectives about the essential nature of sin - whether evil is something that you do or something that you are - and forgiveness.

One perspective, most publicly articulated by Lord Longford - the Catholicism he shares with Hindley has helped to frame the argument in moral terms - is that Hindley is a sinner who has repented and should now go free. She is also, ironically, the most public example of a 'model' rehabilitation. No-one seriously argues that Hindley would ever kill again. It is generally agreed that the person most physically threatened by her freedom would be Hindley herself.

Those who oppose Longford believe Hindley should never be forgiven. More than

that they want vengeance and retribution for what she has done. To them, Hindley is a symbol of where society draws the line, its outer limits. Any remorse shown by her, or acts that might be interpreted as forms of remorse - such as her late November offer to meet the mother of Keith Bennett - is only yet more evidence of her evil.

But there is more to it than that. Hindley has also become a justification - and her name a shorthand - for a range of retributive notions about crime and its punishment in general. The relatives of the dead and lost apart, it is no coincidence that the anti-Hindley campaign is run by people with an interest in keeping those retributive notions alive. And they do connect to something deeply punitive and fearful in people. It will be a brave politician who even begins to separate the meaning of Myra Hindley the person and prisoner from the meaning of Myra Hindley the national institution - and contemplates her release. •
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