

Grenada—The Killing of a Revolution, Bruce Paddington’s Film Reviewed by Norman Girvan

I watched Bruce Paddington’s film last night. It is an excellent film; as far as it goes.

After thinking about it all night, I wonder if it goes far enough.

The two strongest features of the film are first; its portrayal of the achievements of the Grenada Revolution. Impressive here are its accomplishments in people empowerment in government decision-making; participation of women; and above all, the self-esteem and pride of the Grenadian people. Lickle but Tallawah!



Bernard Coard and Maurice Bishop

Nonetheless the views of its opponents and detainees, such as former Prime Minister Tillman Thomas, are also presented, in personal interviews recorded for the film.

The other strongest feature is the observer and participant accounts of the fateful events of October 19 1983. Especially of what happened at Fort Rupert, culminating in the murder of Maurice Bishop and seven his colleagues.

These interviews, and the recreation of events, take up a good portion of Paddington's film. Like the rest of the packed audience, I was transfixed; in turns horrified, unbelieving, angry, and sad. Very, very sad.

Worse still, frustrated. Because the verdict of the film as to who was really responsible was inconclusive. Inevitably so. It all depends who you believe.

Both sides of the story were presented; in personal testimony. And after 30 years; the accounts differ on certain very crucial details.

Who drew first blood at Fort Rupert? The Army unit sent by the Central Committee of the New Jewel Movement (read Coard faction) claims that the crowd of Bishop supporters, having acquired weapons from the Fort's defenders and its stockpile, opened fire on the three armoured cars of the unit sent to recapture the Fort. Soldiers sitting on top of the first car in full view of the approaches of the Fort, were hit. Four died.

Thereupon the unit returned the fire. Panic ensued among the crowd. The Fort was recaptured in short order.

Bishop supporters interviewed for the film assert that the soldiers opened fire first. Not fully explained by this side, by my recollection, is how the four soldiers in the first approach armoured car, were killed. Presumably, in this account, by return fire from the crowd.

The second crucial detail, on which there is no agreement, is who gave the order to kill Bishop and seven others in the top level Parade Ground of Fort Rupert.

Not in dispute is the fact that Bishop and the others had surrendered. Holed up in the Operations Room at the top of the Fort, Bishop's group had taken several casualties—at least one killed—when the OR had been hit by a rocket propelled projectile of some kind, fired by the soldiers.

Not in dispute is the fact that the eight—some had been with Bishop in the OR, some were brought from elsewhere in the Fort-- were lined up against the wall, and machine-gunned to death.

Not in dispute is that there was not even the pretence or semblance of a trial. The killing, therefore, cannot be dignified by calling it an "execution", not even by the Coard faction. It was murder.



The prosecution in the trial of Coard and others argued that the order for the killing came from the Central Committee of the NJM, headed by Coard, and meeting in continuous session at Fort Frederick (which is easily visible from Fort Rupert).

Coard and the CC members assert that the army unit at the Fort took the decision to kill independently. In fact, they argue, it was an act of vengeance taken in reprisal for the earlier killing of the four soldiers by Bishop supporters.

The film features a chilling interview with Callistus Bernard, who commanded the killing unit. Coolly—almost casually—he recounts how the killings took place. He answers all of Paddington’s questions.

Callistus Bernard insists that he had no orders from anyone else. He expresses sorrow at what took place.

I did not see remorse on Callistus Bernard’s face. I did not hear in his voice a man tormented by the memory of what he had done.

I saw a military man, who saw that a job had to be done; and did it.

You almost had to laugh—if that were possible—when he said that the bodies had to be burnt, in order to preserve them. Did I hear right?

So which side to believe? But on reflection, how important is the answer to these questions, to an understanding of the meaning of these events?

First, it should be noted that in an interview with Raoul Pantin published in the Trinidad Express on February 5, 2011, Bernard Coard said that he and his colleagues had in 1997 “apologised unreservedly “ to the Grenadian people and “accept full moral and political responsibility for everything that had happened”¹.

This fact is not mentioned in the film. Paddington was not able to interview Coard; although segments of an interview with Coard by a media house were shown.

What is widely known is that the killings were the culmination of a series of events which originated with the ideological split in the NJM. Paddington’s film needs to interrogate the interviewees more closely about the origins and nature of the split.

We know that the transcripts of NJM CC meeting, subsequently made available, show the deep and increasingly irreconcilable differences between the orthodox, Leninist-Stalinist line of the Coard faction; and the more populist, but less theoretically coherent, position of Bishop and his followers.

I believe that the Bishop faction dominated the Cabinet (government). But it is clear that Coard’s people controlled the Party—in reality, a cabal of less than 100 people—and importantly, they controlled the Army and the militia.

In all of the smoke, there are two incontrovertible facts that stand out.

It was the Central Committee of the NJM, headed by Coard, that took the decision to place Bishop under house arrest. In spite of the fact that Maurice Bishop was the undisputed leader of the Grenadian Revolution in the eyes of the people.

This was an act of unbelievable political stupidity; and of irresponsible political arrogance.

The extent of the disconnect from reality of those who took this decision is measured by their announcement that Bishop had been placed under house arrest, but continued to be Prime Minister. Seriously!

The second incontrovertible fact is that it was the Central Committee which took the decision to send the army units to recapture the Fort from Bishop and his supporters; and by this time it was overwhelmingly clear—if it had not been before—that Bishop was the people’s choice.

All over Grenada on October 19, we learn from the film, the cry was “No Bishop; No Revo”.

¹ http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/Exclusive_interview_with_Bernard_Coard-115360229.html

To this writer, the decision by the CC to use military force to recapture the Fort--rather than, say, to negotiate or seek mediation-- is irrefutable proof of the profoundly anti-people, anti-democratic character of the Coard faction, and of Coard himself.

As Dr Terrence Marrayshow says in the film, *they did not respect the wishes of the people*. And they had decided instead that they should—and could—rule by military force.

In this context, whether it was the crowd or the Army who fired first; or whether it was the Army unit or the CC who took the decision to kill Bishop and the others; is of secondary importance.

The stage had been set for violent confrontation and bloody conclusion. The people taking this decision had to have known this.

That is my view. Whether you agree with it or not, my feeling is that we might all make better sense of the events had the microscopic focus of Paddington's film been complemented by a wider macro exploration of context. That is to say; of ideological split and political difference.

We need to better understand how intelligent men and women, starting with the best of motives; could end up being so self-righteous, so stupid, so irresponsible and so criminal.

We need to understand how there could be such a bloody and tragic end to what had begun as a truly beautiful revolution.

A revolution of great promise. A revolution of great hope.

A revolution whose implosion set back the progressive movement in the Caribbean by perhaps at least half a century

We need to be able to explain it to ourselves. To others. To our children.

Grenadians need to understand. Caribbeans need to understand.

Especially, the Caribbean Left needs to understand, and to learn from the mistakes.

The Workers' Party of Jamaica played a role in all of this, that has never been fully explained.

For my part, I would wish to share with readers two articles that I have found especially insightful in coming to a better understanding of the factors involved in this tragic madness.

The first is by Professor Charles Mills, titled “Getting Out of the Cave: Tension Between Democracy and Elitism in Marx’s Theory of Cognitive Liberation”. It was published in the Journal *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 39. No. 1; 1990².

The second is by Professor Rupert Lewis, one of the most accomplished scholars of the Jamaican Left, in a paper he wrote in 2002 for a Conference held to honour Lloyd Best. Published in Selwyn Ryan (ed.) *Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom: Essays In Honour of Lloyd Best* (SALISES 2003) Professor Lewis’s paper is a candid, self-analytical, reflection on the dogmatism that characterised the Workers Part of Jamaica and the Coard faction:

In (Trevor) Munroe’s (critique of Lloyd Best) lay some of the epistemic problems of the radical movements, and the dogmatism that characterized the exchange of ideas and helped shape political organization and practice. These issues had significant consequences for the lives of many people throughout the region, and this was brought to a tragic end in Grenada in 1983 (R. Lewis 2003: 90).

Amen.

Port of Spain
1 October 2013

Bruce Paddington’s “Forward Ever: The Killing of a Revolution” was screened as part of the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival.

² See

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/27864921?uid=3739200&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21102705005807>