Bloody Sunday is unique among the incidents considered in this collection in that it involves firing by the army of a democratic state at its own citizens. Such incidents are exceedingly rare, at least in the developed world. Partly for this reason, few would dispute that Bloody Sunday remains one of the most controversial and traumatic operational incidents in the history of the modern British Army. It has been subject to two official investigations under the auspices of the British government, each of which has become a byword—although for different reasons. It has also been investigated unofficially by the government of the Republic of Ireland, by a couple of NGOs, by various other bodies of varying degrees of partisanship, and in a large number of books and investigative reports in newspapers as well as television documentaries. It has been the subject of a feature film, and has even provided the title and chorus of an iconic rock song.¹ In historical terms, not just the incident itself, but the initial inquiry into the incident, have been attributed with changing the course of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ sharply for the worse: making the conflict more deadly, more intractable, and much longer than it otherwise might have been.

I will briefly consider the consequences of Bloody Sunday on the course of the Northern Ireland conflict at the conclusion of this chapter. The main focus of the chapter, however, is on the sharply contrasting official investigations into the incident. This chapter analyses the characteristics of the first inquiry that ultimately made the second inquiry necessary, as well as the forces, assumptions and political context that shaped the two inquiries. Finally, it considers whether the two inquir-


ies, taken together, teach us any broader lessons about the investigation of such incidents.

Bloody Sunday is notorious: almost everybody has some picture in their mind’s eye of what happened. For that reason, it is all the more necessary to outline the basic facts of what took place. Most people, when asked about Bloody Sunday will say something like, ‘On 30 January 1972, British soldiers fired into a crowd at a protest march in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, killing 13 unarmed civilians and wounding a similar number. There has been ongoing dispute about whether, at what point, and to what extent, the soldiers themselves came under fire’. The first of these sentences creates a mental image of the events that is fundamentally misleading, even before we consider whether or when soldiers were fired at. It is therefore necessary to briefly sketch the events of the day.

First, however, it is essential to grasp some of the immediate context in which those events took place. This is not the place to consider the centuries-old disputes and enmities, with their appalling litany of violence, which have shaped Ireland’s and Londonderry’s politics, society and culture, although these are crucial to the fundamental contours of the conflict and the construction of the attitudes of the protagonists—including the British Army—which has had a long and mostly inglorious history of involvement in Irish affairs.²

Carrying the burden of that history, and the attitudes that went with it, the British Army was deployed into the streets of Northern Ireland in August 1969 in an attempt to end sectarian violence between the Catholic and Protestant communities in the province’s two largest cities of Belfast and Londonderry (or, as Irish nationalists prefer to call it: Derry). The violence had seen numerous deaths, and the largest forced movements of population in Europe since the immediate aftermath of the Second