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WOMEN FOR IRELAND: REPUBLICAN FEMINISM IN THE NORTHERN
IRELAND TROUBLES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

WOMEN FOR IRELAND: REPUBLICAN FEMINISM IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND TROUBLES

Laura Jacobsen

This paper studies the involvement of republican women in the Northern Ireland conflict, a struggle which defined life in Northern Ireland from 1969-1998. Too often, the Troubles, as the conflict is known, has been conceptualized as a struggle of men, while women are seen to be little more than suffering wives, girlfriends, and mothers. The image of “Mother Ireland” reinforces this notion: in this trope, Ireland is a woman begging for her sons to save her from British subjectivity. Similarly, contemporary feminist critics did not consider republican women to be equal to men. It was their belief that republican women were manipulated by their male counterparts to participate in a movement that did not recognize sexual equality. Neither of these images, however, reflected how republican women perceived themselves.

My thesis, based on the research and study of newspaper articles, memoirs, interviews with republican women, and prison reports, shows that many women were active participants in the republican struggle for a united Ireland free of British control. Women joined the IRA, were elected to parliament, and organized political protests. They were arrested, imprisoned, and sometimes killed; they were harshly criticized by the press and the public, abandoned by the larger feminist movement, and often misunderstood by their families and communities. This paper is based primarily on the

experiences, memoirs, and interviews of three republican women of the Troubles: Brigid Sheils Makowski, the activist; Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, the politician; and Mairead Farrell, the soldier.

Though these women participated in republican cause in different ways, their paths overlapped, and their ideologies were similar. These three women were representative of republican women in general. They did not see their position as being one of having to choose between republicanism or feminism; rather, they demonstrated their feminism through their republicanism. They refused to sit idly by in their homes and wait for their menfolk to save them; they were eager and willing to save themselves, no matter the risk. Sheils, Devlin, and Farrell—and the women they represented—were republican feminists.

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INTRODUCTION

War, violence, and weaponry have long been assumed to be the arenas of men. Women—as mothers, wives, and sisters—are often positioned as victims in many studies of warfare and conflict. Rarely does research focus on women as perpetrators of violence. This gap in knowledge extends to the history of the Northern Ireland Conflict; but why does this gap exist? Why has there been such hesitance to acknowledge that women, like men, can purposefully engage in political violence? Confronted with the same issues that plague Irish men, such as religious persecution and political underrepresentation, women in Ireland have had the additional burden of being considered the inferior sex. Irish women, therefore, have several reasons to be moved to active, even violent, protest. Only by acknowledging women's participation in violence will the complex histories of Irish conflicts be fully understood.

The Northern Ireland conflict, more commonly known simply as “the Troubles,” ravaged Northern Ireland for nearly three decades, from 1969-1998. Very simply put, it was a battle waged between predominately Catholic republicans, represented by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its political wing Sinn Féin, and all who supported the British crown, including illegal organizations like the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defense Association (UDA), the police force of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and British soldiers. Battles of the Troubles were carried out on the streets of Northern Ireland and the conflict was characterized by retaliatory violence from both sides. While republicans conceptualized this struggle as a war of independence, a war for freedom against an imperialist power, the British government characterized it as a long and unnecessary terrorist operation.

To understand the Troubles, one must understand the republican mindset. Chapter one deals with the historiographical context of the interrelated topics of republicanism, Catholicism, and gender. Chapter two details the components of the “Irish ethos” that drove the IRA and its sympathizers to shoot, bomb, and kill throughout the twentieth century. This ethos was Catholic, republican, and anti-British, and was shaped over the course of nearly a thousand years of Irish history. The Irish ethos rests upon a legacy of victimization at the hands of the British. This historical oppression continues to fuel Catholic and republican anger towards the British, and is commonly cited as a contributing factor of the escalation of violence during the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter three recounts the historical position of women in Ireland up to the start of the Troubles in 1969. It explores how Irish Catholic devotion of Mary influenced norms and expectations of womanhood and how women, as mothers, often passed on their republican views to their children. This chapter also details the emergence of republican women groups in the early twentieth century and their participation in the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent Irish War of Independence. The women of these groups were foremothers for republican women in the Troubles.

Moving into the era of primary concern of this paper, chapter four explores the two prevailing theories of the female experience during the Troubles: victimization and manipulation. Neither of these theories grant women much agency; nor do they reflect how republican women saw themselves. The chapter also delves into the self-perception of these women; they did not consider themselves to be mere victims of Troubles-related violence, nor did they accept the notion that they had been manipulated into committing acts of violence. These women maintained that they were no less than completely

devoted republicans. Chapters five, six, and seven focus on the lives of three specific republican women: Brigid Sheils Makowski, Bernadette Devlin, and Mairead Farrell. These women participated in the Troubles in varying degrees, and their biographies shed light on the motivations and mindsets of female republicans as a larger group. Their upbringings and early lives are common among Catholic families in Northern Ireland, and each woman, in their different roles as activist, politician, and soldier, demonstrate the variable ways in which women participated in the Troubles. Chapter eight focuses on the no-wash protest at Armagh Gaol, the women's prison, as a case study of female devotion to the republican cause. Here, women felt the greatest pressure to give up their republican dedication: the no-wash protest, in all its filth and squalor, was abhorrent to Irish conceptions of femininity and womanhood. Even so, the protesting women did not relent.

Finally, the ninth chapter addresses the relationship between feminism and republicanism. This paper utilizes Karen Offen's definition of feminism as "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and a movement for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society."¹ Many in the wider women's movement criticized republican women for allowing themselves to be made secondary to men within the IRA and their political movement. Disagreeing with republican politics, many feminists disregarded republican women. However, Brigid Sheils Makowski, Bernadette Devlin, Mairead Farrell, and the women of Armagh prison maintained that they were, indeed, feminists. They believed, however, that the oppression of Catholics and republicans in Northern Ireland was the

¹ Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 151.

issue that required their immediate devotion; sexual equality would follow the creation of a free and united Ireland— or so they hoped. As Northern Ireland today remains part of the United Kingdom, this free, united, and sexually equal Ireland has not emerged.

This study relies primarily on memoirs and interviews of women who participated in Troubles-era violence, politics, and protests. These firsthand accounts allow us to understand these women— their ideologies, their motivations, and their views of the situation in Northern Ireland— more than any secondary source can. I also draw from newspaper articles that detailed the crimes of IRA women. A critical reading of these articles illuminates public conceptions and views of these women and their actions.

Despite the prevailing images of the innocent Irish maiden and the grieving Irish mother, women in Ireland have not been the passive victims that history has made them out to be. From the very beginning of the twentieth century Irish conflicts, women have been at the forefront of active participation. Irish women, while perhaps not as recognized within the republican movement— both by the public at the time and by historians since then— participated in equal measure with men. These women deserve to be equally acknowledged for their bravery, as well as equally censured for their crimes; either way, their involvement in the violence that has plagued Ireland must be recognized in order to grant Irish women full agency in the affairs of their nation.

CHAPTER 1: Historiography

How have Irish women been excluded from historical narratives of violence and conflict? Monographs about the Troubles have largely focused on the hardships of the Northern Irish Catholics, epitomized by the image of the unemployed male breadwinner. Though they have been affected by the same issues, Catholic women have often been portrayed as men's suffering dependents. Why is this?

Linda Ahäll's *Sexing War/ Policing Gender: Motherhood, Myth and Women's Political Violence* addresses the widespread reluctance to "seriously engage with women's agency in warfare."² Because of their biological life-giving capacity, women have been assumed to be naturally peaceful and against violence. Under what Ahäll calls the "Myth of Protection," women are reduced to passive and defenseless victims whom men must fight for.³ When women do participate in violence, Ahäll argues, they are seen as either deviant and unfeminine, or as having "too much of the maternal impulse."⁴ In both cases, their motivations for violence are explained differently than men's: women kill for personal rather than political reasons, and are motivated by emotion rather than logic.

If men are moved to violence by logic and politics, what are their specific motivations in Irish conflicts? Marianne Elliott's *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* explains that longstanding oppression of Catholics has been a primary factor. Elliott's work is a comprehensive examination of the Irish Catholic experience in Northern

² Linda Ahäll, *Sexing War/ Policing Gender: Motherhood, Myth and Women's Political Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2015), i.

³ Ahäll, *Sexing War/ Policing Gender*, 50.

⁴ Ahäll, *Sexing War/ Policing Gender*, 24.

Ireland, from pre-Christian times to the twenty-first century. A Belfast Catholic, Elliott has been an active advocate for a cessation of conflict, in addition to a prolific historian on Irish history. She served on a governmental commission in 1993 and co-wrote its report, “A Citizens’ Inquiry,” to promote the peace process. Writing for an Irish audience to help different communities understand each other and contextualize the conflict, Elliott seeks to explain the roots of sectarian mistrust in Ulster.

Elliott argues that the largely Catholic republican movement in Northern Ireland has coopted pre-Christian Gaelic myths and legends to promote an organic link between ancient and contemporary Ireland, with Catholics— particularly Catholic men— playing the role of the tragic heroes, oppressed yet not defeated. This image of the Irish Catholic was crafted in the nineteenth century in the pursuit of two aims: first, to rationalize Catholics’ inferior position within Irish society, and second, to demonstrate that it was high time for Catholics to assert sovereignty over themselves and escape from the yoke of the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy, founded on years of a systematic effort to keep Catholics in the underclass.⁵

The desire to overcome British Protestant oppression led to the creation of the IRA. In his work *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, Richard English traces the goals, strategies, and influence of the Irish Republican Army from 1916 to 2002. While numerous works have been written about the IRA, most writing about the group “has been marred either by a hazily romantic approach or an unhelpfully condemnatory approach.”⁶ The historiography of the IRA, then, has been divided between IRA

⁵ Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 11.

⁶ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxii.

sympathizers and opponents, neither of whom truly address the questions of what the IRA has done, why, and with what consequences they have done it. *Armed Struggle*—drawing on sources as varied as correspondence, archives, parliamentary records, and memoirs—is an attempt to rectify this.

English argues that while the republican movement itself has not always been uniform, “there has been a traceable, coherent IRA argument which can be set out crisply and lucidly.”⁷ This argument rests on foundations of anticolonialism, defense of Irish Catholics, the illegitimacy of the Northern Ireland state, and the irreformability of the Northern government. As a Belfast Protestant, English is remarkably balanced in his assessment of the Catholic paramilitary group, neither excusing them for their violence nor indicting them without consideration for their motives. Where *Armed Struggle* is lacking, however, is in its treatment of women in the republican movement. English refers to the IRA as a “male affair,”⁸ comprised of “lads.”⁹ While this may largely be true, the failure to speak of any women in the IRA implies that women did not participate in the organization at all, perpetuating the “Myth of Protection.”

Kevin Toolis’s *Rebel Hearts: Journeys Within the IRA’s Soul* takes a more intimate approach to studying the IRA than English’s *Armed Struggle*. The book includes interviews with IRA members and their families, with a special emphasis on the Finucanes, a working-class Catholic family from Belfast. Of eight children, three boys were active IRA members, and one was a lawyer who defended many IRA cases, and was famously murdered by a loyalist paramilitary in collusion with British intelligence.¹⁰

⁷ English, *Armed Struggle*, 350.

⁸ English, *Armed Struggle*, 26.

⁹ English, *Armed Struggle*, 28.

¹⁰ Kevin Toolis, *Rebel Hearts: Journeys Within the IRA’s Soul* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 88.

In interviewing the surviving Finucane brothers (in particular, Seamus, Dermot, and Martin), Toolis attempts to understand the motives, beliefs, and souls of these radical and active republicans.

While English begins his investigation of the IRA in 1916, Toolis believes the roots of the Troubles and the IRA begin much farther back in history. He argues that “the tenacity of the struggle between the rebels and the Crown was older than all the ‘isms’ of the twentieth century... [i]t is the longest war the world has ever known.”¹¹ This enduring legacy of the struggle is a crucial component of the IRA’s “*Rebel Hearts*.” According to Toolis, there is no separating the Troubles from past historical events. He writes,

A great historic injustice was perpetrated in Ireland in the seventeenth century—the blueprint for all future campaigns of conquest, dispossession and colonization by the Crown. Ireland was the first English colony and it will be the last. The natives always resisted their subjugation violently, savagely; the land was always troubled. Ireland remains troubled today, not just through the burden of this history but by the failure of the Crown to relinquish its final hold on the provinces of Ireland.¹²

Similarly, based on his interviews, Toolis has concluded that the republican movement has created its own mythology of success by rewriting centuries of failures into tales of martyrdom.¹³ Present-day IRA members cite past Irish republican heroes as figures to be revered and emulated. And while Toolis’s interviewees acknowledge the participation and devotion of women— particularly Mairead Farrell, who aside from being an active

¹¹ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 6.

¹² Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 361.

¹³ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 81.

and well-known member of the IRA, was also Seamus Finucane's girlfriend—, women are not at the forefront of *Rebel Hearts*; they are girlfriends, wives, and mothers before they are republicans.

This relegation of women to passive roles, to positions relative to male republicans, is not unusual. The myth that women must be defended, protected, and kept safe by fighting men has deep roots in Ireland, as evidenced in Sarah Benton's "Women Disarmed: The Militarization of Politics in Ireland 1913-23" and Louise Ryan's "'Drunken Tans': Representations of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21)," both from *Feminist Review*. "Women Disarmed" explains how the "brotherhood," as the "ideal form of relationship in war," created both a myth and reality of female exclusion in Irish politics. Within the framework of republican soldiers as "warriors and brothers," women played the role of grieving mothers and wives.¹⁴ Benton argues that in Irish legend, therefore, "[w]omen's claim is... to be protected and revered as mothers; not to be making the nation in their own right."¹⁵

Louise Ryan's "'Drunken Tans'" argues that the symbolic "rape" of Ireland by Britain and the actual rapes of Irish women by British soldiers form part of a continuum in republican Ireland that has defined Irish women as victims, British men as aggressors, and Irish men as protectors.¹⁶ Like Benton, Ryan maintains that in conventional narratives of the Anglo-Irish War, women are often represented as "grieving mothers or passive, nameless victims."¹⁷ Ryan goes further, however, referring back to two

¹⁴ Sarah Benton, "Women Disarmed: The Militarization of Politics in Ireland 1913-23," *Feminist Review* no. 50 (1995): 148-149.

¹⁵ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 161.

¹⁶ Louise Ryan, "'Drunken Tans': Representations of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21)," *Feminist Review* no. 66 (2000): 92.

¹⁷ Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 74.

conventional iconographies of Ireland that contribute to the nation's Myth of Protection. In one image, the "beautiful and virginal 'Erin' or 'Roisin Dubh'" is violated by the British aggressor; in another, Ireland as a "Shan Van Vocht (Poor Old Woman)" is a mother grieving for her freedom, begging her sons to save her.¹⁸

Although Irish men saw their women as passive beings— as virgins and mothers— in need of protection, Ryan argues that active female republicans and unionists alike were "singled out for different, more sexualized treatment" by enemy soldiers.¹⁹ Elizabeth Shannon details this treatment of women in *I Am of Ireland: Women of the North Speak Out*. The majority of *I Am of Ireland* revolves around oral interviews with women of all persuasions: Catholic and Protestant, republican and unionist, non-active and politically or militantly involved. Through these interviews, Shannon seeks to understand how women experienced the Troubles differently than men.

I Am of Ireland relates several gripping examples of female victimization during the Troubles. In 1972, moderate politician Annita Curie was attacked in her home by three men; they beat her and carved "UVF" (for "Ulster Volunteer Force," a Protestant paramilitary group) into her breasts with a knife.²⁰ An unnamed Catholic woman told Shannon that when husbands were arrested, the "'Prods [Protestants] would stand outside your house on the street and sing 'Where's Your Daddy Gone?' or 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?'" It would make your skin creep."²¹ Despite these incontestable accounts of female suffering in Northern Ireland, however, there are also instances in which women

¹⁸ Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 75-76.

¹⁹ Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 77.

²⁰ Elizabeth Shannon, *I Am of Ireland: Women of the North Speak Out* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 67.

²¹ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 53.

are, in fact, perpetrators of violence. Shannon herself includes such instances in her book, but always seems to mediate these occurrences by stripping the women of their agency; she often claims that the women in question are under the direction of men. *I Am of Ireland* ultimately positions women in Northern Ireland as perennial victims.

Roger Sawyer's "*We Are But Women*": *Women in Ireland's History* contests the notion that Irish women have always been passive victims. In an attempt to rectify the obfuscation of women's influence on Irish history, Sawyer conducts a chronological investigation of how the role and conception of women in Ireland evolved from the legends of Gaelic Ireland to the close of the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on women's roles in political and militant organizations. Sawyer argues that much of women's participation and influence on the realm of Irish politics took place behind the scenes. Irish Catholics found female strength in the form of Mary. The "Marian Model" allowed wives and mothers to exercise considerable authority within their families.²² Nevertheless, Sawyer also argues that mythic heroines of Irish legends inspired generations of Irish women. In particular, Deirdre and Queen Maeve "stirred the imagination" of the Irish woman who "became aware of a heritage which included her in the front rank of a large caste of fabulous women."²³ Maeve demonstrated dominance in conflict, while Deirdre drew her power from her beauty and subtlety; both, Sawyer writes, assert that "despite the intervention of periods in which women have fulfilled apparently passive roles, fundamentally Ireland is not a man's world."²⁴

Maeves and Deirdres are in full force in Ann Matthews's *Renegades: Irish*

²² Roger Sawyer, "*We Are But Women*": *Women in Ireland's History* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 91.

²³ Sawyer, "*We Are But Women*", 3.

²⁴ Sawyer, "*We Are But Women*", 7.

Republican Women, 1900-1922. Renegades primarily focuses on Cumann na mBan, a republican “Irishwoman’s Council” that formed in 1913 as an auxiliary to the Irish Nationalist Volunteers, making Cumann na mBan the first women’s nationalist organization to ally itself solely to a paramilitary group. Matthews argues that Cumann na mBan’s involvement in republican politics affirmed their desire— and right— to participate equally in a new Ireland. Feminist critics disparaged Cumann na mBan for being “Nationalist slave women” because they deferred to the male Volunteers.²⁵ However, as Sawyer also argues, the Cumann na mBan agenda maintained that their primary goal was nationhood first, and reforms and suffrage later. Nationalist women proved their loyalty to the cause through many activities. Some were traditionally feminine, such as first-aid and feeding soldiers of the Irish Citizen Army. Other contributions were more dangerous; women were particularly utilized for purposes of arms concealment and transport and communications. Cumann na mBan’s dedication and contributions to the 1916 Easter Rebellion, in which Volunteer forces declared the Irish Free State, ensured that political equality of the sexes was an accepted aspect of the platform of the emerging republican party, Sinn Féin.²⁶

Theresa O’Keefe argues in “‘Mother Ireland, Get Off Our Backs’: Republican Feminist Resistance in the North of Ireland” that the examples of Cumann na mBan members inspired later republican women to join the IRA, which opened its ranks to female involvement in the 1970s. O’Keefe contends that women joined the IRA for four main reasons: the legacy of their 1916 foremothers; in reaction to gender-based violence

²⁵ Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women, 1900-1922* (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 2010), Kindle edition, location 1517.

²⁶ Matthews, *Renegades*, Kindle edition, location 3085.

by the Northern Ireland state; to campaign against the treatment of republican prisoners; and to combat the marginalization of republican women by both the republican movement itself and the wider feminist movement.²⁷ O’Keefe acknowledges that women have not been taken seriously as republican activists, and maintains that they have “felt hampered by societal expectations regarding motherhood and femininity emblematic in the trope of Mother Ireland. Republican feminism can thus be understood as an attempt to disrupt such norms, to say ‘Mother Ireland, get off our back[s].’”²⁸

Though largely uninvolved in the general histories of the Troubles, republican women refused to be ignored during their years of active involvement. Hampered by societal expectations that they should be maternally peaceful, female IRA volunteers disrupted cultural norms and have made both contemporary witnesses and later historians uncomfortable with their violent commitments. The fiction of the Myth of Protection, in tangent with the image of Mother Ireland, remains frustratingly affixed to conceptions of Irish womanhood. This paper will show that to get Mother Ireland off their backs, republican women participated in the republican movement— sometimes politically, sometimes violently, but always passionately.

²⁷ Theresa O’Keefe, “‘Mother Ireland, Get Off Our Backs’: Republican Feminist Resistance in the North of Ireland,” in *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements*, ed. Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio, 165-184 (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 167.

²⁸ O’Keefe, “‘Mother Ireland, Get Off Our Backs,’” 168.

CHAPTER 2: Catholic, Republican, and Anti-British: The Irish Ethos

Ireland is a land riddled with conflicting mythologies and legends, marked with the influences of ancient Celtic culture, Catholicism, and centuries of victimhood. These influences have, over the years, become interwoven and inextricable from the Irish identity. They have formed an ethos that is uniquely Irish; specifically, it is uniquely Irish Catholic, and those who do not share this ethos are not trusted by the Irish Catholic majority. Since this ethos dominates the thinking of all republican supporters, male or female, it is important to understand in order to appreciate the nuances of republican feminists' ideologies.

Fervent republicans who support a united Ireland will tell you that the Northern Ireland Conflict, with all its complexities and devastating consequences, has its earliest roots in the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1171. Since then, they argue, Ireland has never truly been free. Even the more muted republicans in Northern Ireland continue to view the British as a foreign entity within their country. Many republicans trace inequality between Catholics and Protestants to the Ulster Plantation, a scheme in which land in the North of Ireland was apportioned to wealthy Anglo-Protestant planters, at the expense of previous Catholic landowners. By 1683, less than 4% of the land in Ulster remained in Catholic ownership.²⁹ As Catholic landowners disappeared, so did the Catholic elite; without land or an influential gentry to support them, Irish Catholics fell to a lower social level.

The Penal Laws of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries only worsened Catholic/Protestant relations. These laws targeted Catholics who had managed

²⁹ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 114.

to retain property and political power and were meant to ensure that no such class of Catholics could emerge. Catholics were also essentially banned from serving in Parliament in 1693 when a law was passed requiring MPs to swear oaths against the Pope and refuting transubstantiation.³⁰ Though these laws were repealed in 1762, Protestant contempt of Catholics remained, and Anglo-Protestant governors continued to enforce many of the edicts. The Penal Laws “created an undercurrent of sullen Catholic resentment and swaggering, if insecure, Protestant imperiousness which would surface at times of crisis.”³¹ The combination of the Ulster Plantation and the Penal Laws spurred strong sentiments of bitterness and hostility towards Anglo-Protestants, who Catholics regarded as little more than usurpers.

Centuries before the Troubles began, then, Irish Catholics already internalized this sullen resentment to the point of no return; their religion was inherently associated with dispossession and repression. These feelings of injustice and mistreatment continued through 1973, when Fr. Raymond Murray, chaplain at Armagh Prison, wrote that the prisoners he worked with “represent a whole background of repression and suffering among the Catholic community which, one feels, is the result of political bungling.”³² This bungling, it could be argued, began with the Penal Laws and was never fully resolved.

The history of Irish Catholicism would not be so significant if Catholics and Protestants in Ireland did not continue to feel such antipathy towards each other. However, both Christian sects continue to abide by centuries-old prejudices of one

³⁰ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 165-8.

³¹ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 165.

³² Raymond Murray, *Hard Time: Armagh Gaol, 1971-1986* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), 32.

another. From the seventeenth century, Protestants believed Catholicism induced “sloth and slavishness of mind,” and that Irish Catholics were incapable of liberty or virtue.³³ In the twentieth century, little had changed; according to republican Brigid Sheils Makowski, “Loyalists in Derry held that the people who lived in the [Catholic] Bogside were unwilling to work, bred like rabbits and were frivolous. If given a good house they would only tear out the woodwork to burn in the fireplace.”³⁴ Catholics, for their part, have not forgotten nor forgiven the fact that their land was taken from them and given to Protestant foreigners, and believe that this pattern continues to the present day—Protestants, they feel, are more likely to be given better jobs and housing, at the expense and suffering of Catholics.

Eamon Collins was an IRA volunteer in Newry, Northern Ireland from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, when he broke from the organization. In his memoir, he recalls the many influences in his life which led him to support the IRA in the first place.³⁵ As a child, his mother, a passionate and devout Catholic, taught Collins a specific Irish history—a version trapped within the Irish Catholic ethos. He remembered,

My mother’s tales were versions of Irish history: she told us of the priests who had died to preserve our Catholic faith when the Cromwellians had hunted them down, decapitated them, and placed their heads on spikes outside towns and churches. She aroused a sense of anger in me about the wrongs done to us by the British—the atrocities, the penal laws, the theft of our estates... She encouraged

³³ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 170.

³⁴ Margie Bernard, *Daughter of Derry: The Story of Brigid Sheils Makowski* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 46-7.

³⁵ In January 1999, less than two years after the publication of his memoir, which detailed both his activities in several IRA killings and his later attitudes towards the organization, Collins was murdered while walking his dogs. It is commonly assumed that he was killed by the IRA, but no one has been charged with the murder.

me to feel... that the injustice of partition, the division of Ireland, was yet another wrong inflicted on Catholics by Protestants.³⁶

Collins's childhood education was not atypical; many Catholic children of mid-to-late twentieth century Northern Ireland were instilled with the same beliefs. As they grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, these children were witnesses to—and sometimes victims of—discrimination, violence, and hatred. Between the stories they were told at home and the events they saw unfolding around them, many of these children concluded that this tense atmosphere was the creation of Protestants. As Collins recalled of his adolescence, “I felt my mother must be right: the struggle for our faith was not yet over.”³⁷

Inter-religious antagonism is typically most common amongst the working class. In Northern Irish cities such as Derry and Belfast, Catholics and Protestants lived in highly self-segregated working-class communities—Derry is separated into the Catholic Bogside and the Protestant Waterside; in Belfast, Catholics would rarely, if ever, wander into the Shankill Road area, and instead would stay closer to their own Falls Road area. It is within these neighborhoods that religious tensions turn into harsh invectives, and invectives escalate into violence. However, religion alone is not the root cause of the Troubles; Catholics and Protestants have not killed each other over issues of transubstantiation or papal infallibility. In Northern Ireland, a series of identity-making qualities have become inseparable from each other: Protestantism, Britishness, and Unionism on the one hand; and Catholicism, Irishness, and Republicanism on the other. Neither side in the Troubles can easily differentiate between these otherwise discrete entities. Therefore, to study only religion is to vastly simplify a complex struggle.

³⁶ Michael Collins and Mick McGovern, *Killing Rage* (London, United Kingdom: Granta Books, 1997), 36.

³⁷ Collins and McGovern, *Killing Rage*, 37.

Brigid Sheils Makowksi, upon emigrating to Philadelphia with her Polish American husband Leo in the 1960s, supported the Irish republican movement from afar through membership in various Irish American organizations. However, despite enthusiastic picketing and leafletting, these groups were unsuccessful in drawing substantial media attention to the events unfolding in Northern Ireland. She recalled that in the later years of the 1960s, “[r]eporters regarded developments in Birmingham (Alabama), Hanoi, Saigon and Washington as more newsworthy than a 900-year-old political struggle in Ireland which in any event they had been led to believe by British propaganda had been caused solely by religious differences between Protestants and Catholics.”³⁸ This was not the case; though religious tension is an inherent component of the Troubles, such unease was precipitated by British policies. Therefore, anti-British sentiment is the persistent undercurrent of Northern Ireland’s chronic violence.

To be truly Irish was to be Catholic; to be an Irish Catholic was to be anti-British. In the late eighteenth century, as tensions and violence escalated between Catholics and Protestants, the forces of law and order were increasingly influenced by Protestant loyalists. The Catholics, then, began to see the British state as an ally of their enemies, rather than as a protector. Alienated from the government, security forces, and landowning class, Irish Catholics came to terms with their subordination by crafting an anti-English identity that rested on their position as a chosen people in captivity. As twentieth century republicans will explain, “Ireland was the only colonized country in Europe.”³⁹ Britain, they argue, is nothing more than a colonial overlord.

After the passage of the Penal Laws, resentment over their social standing was

³⁸ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 65.

³⁹ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, xix.

constantly simmering among Irish Catholics, and periodically boiled over into armed protest and rebellion. When Catholics gained the franchise in 1829, they began several campaigns for Home Rule— for self-government of their island while still remaining part of the United Kingdom. A Home Rule Bill was finally passed in 1914, but implementation was delayed until after the World War.⁴⁰ The more radical nationalists took advantage of the opportunity the war provided them. On Easter Monday, 1916, armed members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army gathered to seize military and government sites in Dublin, proclaiming an Irish Republic.

The Irish rebels surrendered five days after the start of the Rising, and the British government's handling of the aftermath achieved more for the radical republican movement than the actual revolt did. Leaders and participants of the Rising were court-martialed, and fourteen were executed without an opportunity to defend themselves in court.⁴¹ Due to these hasty executions, members of the Irish public who had not supported the uprising itself grew sympathetic to the rebels. Arresting suspected Volunteers "raised rather than lowered the political temperature, as a largely quiescent Irish nationalist people gradually became host to a major revolutionary movement."⁴² The internment of republicans and subsequent public support for the republican movement was to occur again in the 1970s.

Support for the constitutional route of Home Rule had died along with the Easter leaders. Following the 1918 general election, the MPs of Sinn Féin— the political party of the Irish republican movement— declared that they would never sit in Westminster,

⁴⁰ Walter L. Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today: 1830 to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 166-171.

⁴¹ Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today*, 286.

⁴² English, *Armed Struggle*, 14.

but in their own parliament in Dublin. In January 1919, they did just this, calling the first session of the Dáil Éireann and declaring a state of war between Ireland and Britain.⁴³

The Irish War of Independence (or, as the British called it, the Irish Civil War) had begun. The Irish Republican Army (born out of the Irish Volunteers of 1916) fought a guerilla war against the British Black and Tans.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 allowed for an Irish Free State with dominion status within the British empire, but only for the twenty-six counties of the south; a formal partition would exclude the northern six counties from the Free State.⁴⁴ Though the Treaty was accepted in the Dáil in January 1922— by a vote of 64-57— the more radical members of Sinn Féin, led by Eamonn de Valera, considered the Treaty to be a betrayal of their goal for full independence of the entire island. Soon, Ireland descended into civil war until May 1923.⁴⁵ In 1948, Ireland officially declared itself a Republic, and shortly after, Britain’s Ireland Act “acknowledged that the Irish Republic had ceased to be part of ‘His Majesty’s Dominions.’”⁴⁶

The end of the Irish Civil War and Britain’s recognition of the twenty-six counties as its own entity resulted in a tacit acceptance of the partition of the island into North and South. Catholics in Northern Ireland felt abandoned by the Republic, which turned inwards, and alienated from the Northern Ireland government, which it considered illegitimate. The IRA took on a defensive role in the North, while the republican army was brought into the mainstream in the south. However, without any support from the country to whom they gave real allegiance, the IRA slowly became ineffectual. While

⁴³ Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today*, 287.

⁴⁴ English, *Armed Struggle*, 30.

⁴⁵ Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today*, 288.

⁴⁶ Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today*, 377.

Ireland, as an official and independent nation, began its quest for modernization and stability, “[a] peace of sorts descended on the north. But it was one of exhaustion and disillusionment on the minority’s part.”⁴⁷ Though the Irish Republic managed to wrangle free, Northern Ireland remained in the grip of Britain.

Even after he left the IRA, Eamon Collins was adamant that he did not forget “the injustices imposed upon Catholics since the inception of the Northern Ireland state. Widespread anti-Catholic discrimination provided a well-spring of suppressed anger ready to be tapped by any movement which challenged the *status quo*.”⁴⁸ This status quo, in which a foreign power continues to oppress the native people of Ireland, is a bleak reality for republicans. Bogside resident Eileen Doherty was one of many who rejected this reality. “I couldn’t blame anyone for joining the IRA,” she said. “There’ll never be peace in this country until the British let go. It’s as simple as that.”⁴⁹

Mairead Farrell wholeheartedly agreed. While the British— and loyalist Unionists living within Northern Ireland— considered IRA members to be little more than terrorists, disrupting and attacking the lawful government, Farrell and her republican comrades saw the situation differently. As the IRA does not consider Northern Ireland to be a legitimate state, neither do they consider themselves to be terrorists, or the Troubles to be anything less than a war of survival. “I’m talking about a war,” Farrell told one author. “You have to understand that this is a war.” And war, she argued, was the only option. She continued, “I know it happens [that civilians die]. But it happens on both sides. It’s the casualties of war. The British have murdered our people. When you think

⁴⁷ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 377.

⁴⁸ Collins and McGovern, *Killing Rage*, 4.

⁴⁹ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 47-8.

of how long they have been here... from the very beginning they have murdered so many people. Those are the only methods the British know.”⁵⁰

Though never completely free from anxieties, Northern Ireland was relatively peaceful in the early 1960s. Rather than turning to paramilitary actions, Catholics organized a peaceful civil rights movement to protest continuing discrimination against them. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), inspired by student movements around the world, organized peaceful marches and demonstrations.⁵¹ Ian Paisley, a radically loyalist politician and Protestant minister, instigated Unionist opposition to the Catholic civil rights movement. Creating a mass of followers who were referred to as “Paiselyites,” the evangelical preacher “was fast becoming the midwife in the rebirth of a noxious strain of militancy” which followed an ideology that “blended an extreme loyalty to the Crown with a narrow and exclusive interpretation of Ulster unionism and, above all, a rabid hatred for all things Roman Catholic.”⁵² Inspired by Paisley’s fiery denunciations of the non-republican Catholic movement, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), comprised of disaffected working class Protestants and ex-servicemen, emerged in 1966 and declared war on the IRA, which at this point was inactive almost to the point of non-existence.⁵³

In October 1968, NICRA marched in Derry to protest unequal allocation of housing and government positions to Protestants, to the disadvantage of working-class Catholics. During the peaceful march, militant Protestants attacked the protestors, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) aided the attackers, rather than the marchers. This

⁵⁰ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 123.

⁵¹ Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*, 413.

⁵² Aaron Edwards, *UVF: Behind the Mask* (Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017), 11.

⁵³ Edwards, *UVF*, 34.

began a pattern of Protestant and police collaboration against Catholic civil rights advocates; Catholics now viewed the police force as their enemy.⁵⁴ This antagonism continued through the rest of the decade. The August 1969 Battle of the Bogside, its resultant riots, and the deployment of British troops to Northern Ireland are typically seen as the events that began the official period of the Troubles.

On August 12, a loyalist group held a parade that passed by the Catholic Bogside. After a torrent of stone throwing between the marchers and Bogside residents, the RUC came in; in response, Catholics barricaded themselves within their housing development. Republican politician Dodie McGuinness remembered, ““Eventually I was in the Battle of the Bogside. Everyone was behind the barricades then: grannies, kids, everyone. We were just trying to protect our own area from the RUC and the B-Specials,”” a predominantly Protestant, quasi-military special reserve.⁵⁵

With the RUC and B-Specials unable to enter the Bogside, and unable (or unwilling) to stop the loyalists from setting off petrol bombs from the outside, the British government sent in the army to restore order. The Catholic population was relieved, believing the army would defend them; however, as Elizabeth Shannon points out, “one country’s army... cannot go into a divided community and act impartially for both sides... The British army is obviously British. Their interests are Britain’s. Who thought they could ever be impartial when it came to Unionists versus nationalists?”⁵⁶ The Catholics of the Bogside soon concluded that the British army was not necessarily sympathetic to them; it was in this climate of fear and mistrust that the IRA was reborn.

⁵⁴Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 46.

⁵⁵ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 49.

⁵⁶ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 51-52.

The Troubles had begun.

The next three decades would largely be characterized by the same pattern of events: a UVF or IRA killing, followed by a UVF or IRA retaliation. Politicians and known paramilitary members were specifically targeted, but many civilians were killed in bombing campaigns, especially in pubs. In August 1971, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Brian Faulkner introduced the policy of internment— imprisonment without trial. In the seventy-two hours that followed the introduction of internment, in what the British army called “Operation Demetrius,” 363 individuals were arrested and imprisoned; only two were Protestant. Thirty people were killed in the shootouts and bombings that accompanied Operation Demetrius.⁵⁷ In March 1976, all individuals interned for Troubles-related offenses were stripped of their status as political prisoners; this removal of Special Category Status (SCS) led to the escalation of several forms of republican prison protest, in what historian Richard English calls the “Prison Wars”: 1976 began the blanket protest, 1978 was the no-wash protest, and 1980 saw the first of the republican hunger strikes, which gained worldwide publicity.⁵⁸

Margaretta D’Arcy, a Northern Ireland feminist who purposefully got herself arrested and sent to Armagh Prison in order to publicize the conditions within the jail, summarized the self-perception of the IRA prisoners and their relationship towards the prison guards (who were predominately loyalists). She wrote, “One never becomes aggressive to the screws [guards], but always tries to maintain one’s consciousness that one is a prisoner of war and that they are servants of British imperialism.”⁵⁹ Here,

⁵⁷ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 52.

⁵⁸ English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, 187.

⁵⁹ Margaretta D’Arcy, *Tell Them Everything: A Sojourn in the prison of Her Majesty Elizabeth II at Ard Macha (Armagh)* (London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1981), 62.

D'Arcy, in speaking for her fellow inmates, constructs strict battle lines between Irish prisoners on the one side and British officials on the other. The guards are hardly considered to be Irish; they serve the Crown, and therefore they are on the wrong side of the Irish war.

It is important to note that none of these above statements explicitly refer to Protestants as the enemy of Catholics; rather, the British state is the recipient of the most virulent republican hatred. Kevin Toolis interviewed two leaders of the East Tyrone Brigade of the IRA. One explained to Toolis, ““We have our aim. Our aim is to get the British out of Ireland and we will not be deflected into a war with Protestants.”” Yes, the men admitted, their targets— whether British soldiers, RUC men, or loyalist paramilitaries— were predominately Protestant. ““But religion has got nothing to do with it,”” the other leader assured. ““If they were Catholics we would still be shooting them... We’ve shot Catholic RUC men before.””⁶⁰ The enemy is not Protestantism; the enemy is British imperialism, and anyone who aids it.

The cause of Irish republicanism is the cause of British expulsion from the island. It is not, republicans will tell you, a fight against Protestantism or any sect of religion. The IRA is not at war with the UVF per say, but with the British state and all that encompasses, and with all who sustain its existence in Ireland. This war, the IRA maintains, is centuries old; it is ancient and all-encompassing, it has affected generations of Irish Catholics on both sides of the modern border, yet it is for the North to finish. When Kevin Toolis spoke to his IRA contacts, what struck him the most was not their words. It was their “tightly wound rage. It was a rage against the British and their

⁶⁰ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 77-78.

Protestant Planters that reached back across the centuries; it was a rage that believed Protestants still held the best jobs, the best land and the best houses; it was a rage that would never end until the balance of political power in Northern Ireland fundamentally shifted from the Protestant community or the British withdrew.”⁶¹ Northern Irish Catholics resent their continued colonization, and as historically oppressed and colonized people are wont to do, they have taken up arms against the imperial power time and time again— from the seventeenth century to the late 1990s. Their war, they argue, is unfinished.

⁶¹ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 81.

CHAPTER 3: Women in Ireland until 1960s

As a famously— some might say infamously— Catholic people, the Irish have traditionally been written off as a backwards, conservative population, one that pushes women out of public life and into the home. This conception permeates writings about the Troubles. In her book about women in the Troubles, Elizabeth Shannon compares Catholicism with other religions that are commonly denounced by nonbelievers for being sexually repressive. She writes that the Catholic Church is

“male-dominated, [and its] influence on Northern Irish life has profoundly undermined the self-confidence and the self-esteem of women. Where religion is deeply woven into the national psyche, where major life decisions are controlled by a religious hierarchy, whether it is that of orthodox Judaism in Israel, or of Muslim fanaticism in Iran, there is a denial of women’s basic rights and freedoms.”⁶²

The Northern Ireland Conflict is conceived by many to be a struggle of men, a conflict that affects women mainly as wives and mothers, the weary domestics left behind while their sons and husbands are imprisoned. To evaluate the validity of this conception, therefore, one must understand the historical role and image of women in Ireland.

It is true that women in Ireland have historically been excluded from public life, educational opportunities, and political participation— but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this was hardly abnormal. The economy of Ireland, however, was such that even in the seventeenth century, working-class females were a regular feature of

⁶² Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 170.

Ireland— especially in the North, where linen mills required female laborers.⁶³ This pattern of female employment continued into the nineteenth century, when the pre-Famine Irish economy necessitated that wives and children contribute to the husband's income in order to survive.⁶⁴

In the late nineteenth century, the “lack of educational opportunities for women meant that political awareness was in short supply, whereas perception of social constraints was brought home to every woman who accidentally or intentionally stepped out of line.”⁶⁵ However, although women may have been discouraged from stepping out of line by societal backlash, some brave souls did so anyway. Feminist-turned-republican Maud Gonne founded *Inghinidhe na hEireann* (Daughters of Erin) in 1900, and the organization's newspaper *Bean na hEireann* (*Women of Ireland*), was the first woman's paper in Ireland, and stated that Daughters of Erin maintained the “dual stance” of “Freedom of our Nation and the complete removal of all disabilities of our sex.”⁶⁶ In 1914, Daughters of Erin was absorbed into Cumann na mBan, an unabashedly nationalist women's group. The members of Cumann na mBan felt strongly that women should vote— but never for a British parliament. Therefore, they stood for violence over constitutionalism, and prioritized their republicanism over their feminism.

Critics of the Daughters of Erin and Cumann na mBan argued that these organizations remained subservient to male nationalist organizations. This argument rests upon the continuing assumption that women in Ireland— and in its republican movements— have been instructed by men, and that their participation has been in purely

⁶³ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 20.

⁶⁴ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 38.

⁶⁵ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 45.

⁶⁶ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 71.

supportive roles. Brigid Sheils Makowski echoes this position as she remembered her upbringing in Derry, where she learned her role as an Irish woman. Growing up, she recalled, “[t]he role model we were expected to emulate was that of the Virgin Mary— to be selfless, devoted mothers... Irish girls were, and still are in many respects, raised to be the servants of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons— to take care of them, keep silent, and never ask questions.”⁶⁷ Others have argued, however, that the Marian model of womanhood was less servile; Mary, in many biblical stories, is more influential than she might originally appear.⁶⁸ Irish women may exert more influence than they let on; though it may be from behind a curtain of domestic and feminine duties, Irish women of the Marian model were not necessarily passive.

Many active republicans cite their mothers as being prominent figures in their political upbringings; exerting their “off-stage” influence, Irish mothers were not infrequently radicalizing forces within their homes.⁶⁹ Eamon Collins, whose mother taught him of the long, contentious history of the Protestant abuse of Catholics, prompted his turn to republicanism— albeit through religious, rather than overtly political, language.⁷⁰ Martin Finucane similarly credited his mother, Kathleen, with his and his brothers’ political upbringings. ““She was involved in all the street protests,”” he said. ““My mother was a Republican; she was the rock of our support. She was the one who organized for us to slip out of the house and then slip back in without the knowledge of our father... She was fully supportive of what her sons were doing.””⁷¹ Dolours Price, a

⁶⁷ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 25.

⁶⁸ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 40.

⁶⁹ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 29.

⁷⁰ Collins and McGovern, *Killing Rage*, 30.

⁷¹ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 142.

highly active member of the IRA, was the daughter of two devoted republicans; Albert and Chrissie Price spoke often, at length, and very passionately about their past escapades and imprisonments, of friends who had died for the cause of a united Ireland. Dolours “grew up thinking that this was the most natural thing in the world: that every child had parents who had friends who’d been hanged.”⁷²

Dolours’s mother and grandmother were both active members of Cumann na mBan, which, although from a feminist point of view has been considered “a pathetic creation,” nevertheless “evolved in such a way that it is rightly regarded as one of Ireland’s most extreme rebel organizations.”⁷³ Founded in 1914, Cumann na mBan’s constitution set out the organization’s purpose and aims: 1) to advance the cause of Irish liberty; 2) to organize Irishwomen in the pursuit of this objective; 3) to assist in arming a body of Irishmen in pursuit of the same objective; and 4) to collect funds for the cause of Irish liberty.⁷⁴ At its conception, then, Cumann na mBan abided by traditional Irish conceptions of the role of women: they were to serve a supportive, subsidiary role for the more active male republicans. This does not mean, however, that they were non-feminist. The women of Cumann na mBan “were hardly an army but they were not a sewing circle either. They had a strong nationalist ethos and as such did their utmost to organize nationalist women all across the island.”⁷⁵ Throughout 1915, a more radical faction of Cumann na mBan began to introduce some military training into the organization, such as rifle practice and gun maintenance.⁷⁶

⁷² Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 11.

⁷³ Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 81.

⁷⁴ Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork, Ireland: Collins Press, 2007), Kindle edition, location 343.

⁷⁵ McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, Kindle edition, location 718.

⁷⁶ McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, Kindle edition, location 820.

Though these particular skills did not come to be utilized by many women during the Easter Rising, members of Cumann na mBan did actively involve themselves in the insurrection for an independent Ireland. Throughout Easter week, the women were primarily engaged in three main activities, two of which were traditionally feminine, and one which was more dangerous: nursing, cooking for the male combatants, and delivering communications.⁷⁷ Women who did take up arms during the Rising did so as members of the Citizen's Army, which welcomed women, rather than as members of Cumann na mBan, although there was considerable cross-membership between the two organizations.⁷⁸ In all, seventy-nine women were arrested for their activities in the Rising.⁷⁹ Though most women fulfilled domestic and feminine roles during the Rising, their presence in the streets and in the GPO asserted their desire and right to be included in the governing of the new Ireland they were trying to establish.

During the ensuing Irish War of Independence, women continued to complete tasks and duties similar to those they undertook during the Rising— nursing, visiting prisoners, and transporting both communications and weapons. Afterwards, during the Civil War, republican women of Cumann na mBan were overwhelmingly against the Anglo-Irish Treaty; all six female members of the Dáil voted against signing the Treaty.⁸⁰ The official Cumann na mBan stance was anti-Treaty, and the organizations members enthusiastically assisted the IRA in their new battle against the Irish Free State— again, a main component of their Civil War duties was transporting information and arms. The Free State, aware of how women were utilized during Easter, were quicker to arrest

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, Kindle edition, location 1067.

⁷⁸ Sawyer, "*We are But Women*," 90.

⁷⁹ Matthews, *Renegades*, Kindle edition, location 2359.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, Kindle edition, location 2822.

women than the British had been; because of this, women were stopped, searched, and detained more often during the Civil War than during the War of Independence.⁸¹ Furthermore, during the Civil War— and after the anti-Treaty faction’s acceptance of the legitimacy of the Free State— the women of Cumann na mBan continued to cause problems for the new Irish government. They “were anticipating the policy of the Provisional IRA as practiced from the 1960s until the present day: destabilization;” furthermore, “they had shown that while they shared the anti-Treaty men’s overall abhorrence of the Irish Free State, they had commitments which the IRA lacked.”⁸² After the Civil War, republican women were far from supportive; they took the initiative to continue what they believed to be an unfinished battle.

Following the establishment of the Irish Republic and the deaths of leading republican feminist figures, Cumann na mBan and republican women in general fell into a brief period of no activity. New Irish president Eamonn de Valera became a champion of “traditional” values, and essentially abandoned the anti-Treaty women who had supported his Civil War campaign. After approximately two decades of turmoil, the Irish Republic was settling into its new status as an independent nation. In doing so, it unfortunately followed the common pattern of many nations transitioning from wartime to peacetime: it sent its women back to the hearth. There they remained, for the most part, until the beginning of the Troubles in the 1960s.

In Northern Ireland, no one is neutral. There was no way to avoid the Troubles.

⁸¹ McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, Kindle edition, location 3301.

⁸² Such commitments included the printing and distributing of various anti-Treaty propaganda and leaflets, some of which included the names and addresses of jurors who imprisoned militant republicans, who were denounced as traitors. Some imprisoned women went on hunger strike in protest of their treatment— a tactic made famous by later IRA men in the 1980s (Sawyer, “*We Are but Women*,” 100.).

Hatred, mistrust, and resentment were pervasive, and at times all-consuming. Certainly, many individuals on both sides of the struggle chose to remain uninvolved, to be non-participants; however, full neutrality was impossible. By consequence, how could women be uninvolved? To believe all women across Northern Ireland were decidedly neutral—or passive—over the last four decades of the twenty-first century is to seriously underestimate the pervasiveness of the Catholic versus Protestant, Republican versus Unionist, Irish versus British antagonism. Women, as members of their respective religions and cultures, were far from disinterested in the fate of their island. Their participation in the wider Irish struggle can be documented from the beginning on the twenty-first century. The Troubles were not, as it has been suggested, a male affair.

CHAPTER 4: Perceptions of Women

Two overarching themes dominated the discussion of female republicans during and after the Troubles: victimization and manipulation. The first position maintains that women are uninvolved in the struggle entirely; they are the passive sufferers of unfolding violence who would much prefer peace over independence. The second position abides by the notion that women who do participate in the Troubles do not do so independently; they are led into battle by men, instructed to plant bombs by men, told what to believe by men. Both conceptions of the female role strip republican women of their agency, and feminist republicans were adamant that these perceptions were inaccurate.

Elizabeth Shannon promotes the victimization theory of republican women in *I Am of Ireland*, even when women she interviewed did not espouse these views themselves. She writes, “In Northern Ireland I was confronted with a cult of nationalism (on both sides) that glorified bigotry and made economic and cultural differences impassable. I saw women as the innocent victims of this cult, not as the perpetrators.”⁸³ Ireland, she argues, is “like a secret society for men,” and women have been uninvolved in both the creation of the Troubles and the attempts to end them.⁸⁴ Shannon adheres to the image of the grieving Mother Ireland. However, instead of begging her Irish sons to save her, Shannon’s Mother Ireland is begging them to stop their fighting. “Perhaps the most poignant victim of the Troubles in Northern Ireland is the mother,” she writes. “[S]he is both queen and victim, loved and used, a symbol of sacrifice and suffering.”⁸⁵ Far from being rescued by her IRA sons, Shannon’s Mother Ireland has been abandoned

⁸³ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 5.

⁸⁴ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 4.

⁸⁵ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 107.

by them. Her sons have killed and been killed, they have been on the run, they have starved themselves to death in prison. They have left their mothers behind to grieve.

The theme of manipulation is less overt than victimization; while some critics have explicitly argued that female republicans, especially those active in the IRA, have been instructed by their male comrades, most adherents to this view are far more subtle in their assertions. They are not condemnatory of the republican movement per se; rather, they merely believe that women should let the men handle the more violent aspects of the movement. Well-meaning and critical writers alike refer to IRA women as “girls,” demoting them to a lesser position than their men comrades.

This image of republican women as “girls” is not unique to the Troubles. Louise Ryan examines the prevailing images of republican women during the War of Independence. Ryan finds that women’s involvement was marginalized in the autobiographies of men, who referred to the “girls” of Cumann na mBan, “young and active, risking their lives for the cause... While acknowledging the bravery of these women, this image reduces them to a homogenous group of nameless ‘girls.’”⁸⁶ Even more than marginalizing their role, referring to women as “girls” also relegates them to deputies; while “women” are adults, capable of taking charge, “girls” are in need of direction and leadership.

Fr. Raymond Murray was the prison chaplain at Armagh Gaol, the women’s prison, from 1971 until its closure in 1986. In 1998 he published his annual reports on the conditions of the prison in order to highlight the ill treatment of the prisoners at the hands

⁸⁶ Louise Ryan, “‘In the line of fire’: representations of women and war (1919-1923) through the writings of republican men,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*, ed. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, 45-61 (Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2004): 51.

of the British government. Fr. Murray was an advocate for the prisoners, and many remembered him fondly for his kindness and dedication to their cause. Even he, however, was guilty of minimizing these women's deeds. His protests about the treatment of the prisoners— many of whom, like their male comrades in Long Kesh Prison, were on protest for the reinstatement of political status— was less about the criminalization policy and more about the idea that women should not be subjected to such treatment. In 1980 Fr. Murray attended the International Commission of Catholic Chaplains, where he made the following remarks:

I feel that the Church has a special duty in the case of women prisoners for whom jail, even in reasonably relaxed and enlightened conditions, is a burden altogether unsuitable for them to bear even for a short period. I feel that the Church should campaign for the recognition of a policy that women who offend against the laws of society would be kept in hospital-type institutions rather than be sent to prison cells.⁸⁷

Here, it is apparent that Fr. Murray, while a sympathetic and devoted advocate for the Armagh prisoners, did not consider these republican women to be entirely equal to men. Their agency is less than the men's, their choices less freely made.

Newspaper coverage of republican women— their arrests, crimes, and imprisonments— routinely referred to them as girls. Furthermore, the arrests of women were treated as uniquely newsworthy events. When Elizabeth McKee, the first woman detained under internment, was picked up by the police, *The Irish Times* emphasized that the British government was “breaking new ground by detaining a woman subject,” and

⁸⁷ Murray, *Hard Time*, 74-75.

warned that such an arrest could very possibly provoke widespread violence.⁸⁸ When Mairead Farrell was first arrested in 1976 for bombing the Conway Hotel, the headline in *The Irish Times* read: “Girl jailed for 14 years” and continued to refer to Farrell as a “girl” throughout the article.⁸⁹ Granted, both Elizabeth McKee and Mairead Farrell were in their teenage years and therefore could be considered girls; however, when males of the same age were arrested for crimes they freely committed in the name of a political struggle, newspapers did not refer to them as “boys.” Nineteen-year-old males were “men.” Females in the same age bracket were “girls.” This vocabulary merely perpetuated the notion that republican women were less devoted than men.

Republican women resented this relegation to the position of deputies. Begoña Aretxaga interviewed several such women for her book *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland*. When Aretxaga told one unnamed woman about the topic of her book, the woman “said forcefully: ‘Women are the backbone of the struggle; they are the ones carrying the war here and they are not receiving the recognition they deserve.’”⁹⁰ Women in Armagh were adamant that they had joined the IRA and committed crimes out of their own political conviction; they took it upon themselves to join the nationalist struggle. They did not commit crimes because their boyfriends had told them to. Margaretta D’Arcy learned how passionate these women were when she inadvertently questioned their commitment to the cause:

Like a flash, they reared up. How dare I assume that they were not political? A lot

⁸⁸ Reneagh Holohan, “Teenager is first girl detained in the North,” *The Irish Times*, January 2, 1973. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

⁸⁹ “Girl jailed for 14 years for Belfast hotel bombing,” *The Irish Times*, December 10, 1976. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

⁹⁰ Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), ix.

of the activities they couldn't tell me about anyway... Suddenly I was facing two revolutionaries, gone were the wee girls now, they were young warriors, I had stumbled into an Amazon camp and put the wrong questions. They were committed at all times, they would leave work if it were required. Tears were springing into their young eyes... I felt I had uncovered a depth of feeling that I never experienced before in anyone.⁹¹

This depth of feeling and passion is further evidenced in an inscription a prisoner wrote on the wall of her cell: "I am one of many who would die for my country. I believe in fighting the fight to the end. If death is the only way, I am prepared to die."⁹² One does not come to such a conclusion lightly; a mere "girl" would hardly be willing to die for a cause she was not deeply committed to. This inscription was written by a woman, no matter her age, who was fully aware of her actions.

The complete dedication of many women is represented in the biographies of three particular women who were lifelong participants in the Irish republican cause. They were devoted republicans as well as passionate feminists. Brigid Sheils Makowski was a city counselor and supporter of militant republicanism, though she herself was not a member of the IRA. She tells the story of her involvement in *Daughter of Derry: The Story of Brigid Sheils Makowski*, co-written with Margie Bernard. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey is a republican-socialist politician, elected to sit in the British Parliament in 1969 when she was only twenty-one years old; the early years of her activism are detailed in her memoir *The Price of My Soul*. Finally, Mairead Farrell is perhaps the most well-known female republican and was a respected leader in the IRA. She was killed by

⁹¹ D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*, 95-96.

⁹² D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*, 93.

British troops in a highly controversial shooting in Gibraltar in 1988, at only thirty-one years old; because of her early death, she left behind no written memoir. However, many writers and filmmakers spoke with her before her death, and these interviews remain a valuable source for studying republican feminism.

CHAPTER 5: The Activist: Brigid Sheils Makowski

A feminist and republican supporter whose activities spanned several decades and two continents, Brigid Sheils Makowski was emblematic of many republican women in Northern Ireland. She was involved in a number of republican organizations, staged various protests, and participated in violence at the Battle of the Bogside. A wife and mother, Sheils did not believe that her domestic duties should preclude her from contributing to the republican cause. Furthermore, her husband was an American who had little knowledge of the Irish republican struggle— Sheils was not, therefore, manipulated or otherwise coerced into her republican activism. She was neither a victim nor a pawn; she was a devoted activist, a proud republican feminist.

Brigid Sheils was born in the Bogside in January 1937 to a “very Republican, very Catholic” family.⁹³ Her father Paddy had been an original member of the Irish Volunteers and was arrested following the Easter Rising; during the War of Independence, Paddy Sheils was again jailed and went on hunger strike to protest his internment.⁹⁴ Naturally, Paddy’s tales of his participation in the fight for Irish independence were related to his seven children, who grew up with a distinctively republican understanding of Irish history. In addition to her father’s lessons, Sheils remembers “having an almost instinctual understanding that because I lived in the Bogside I was different from people who lived elsewhere in Derry”— the Sheils family and their neighbors were often targeted by the RUC.⁹⁵

Due to her family’s poverty, Sheils was unable to attend university, and left

⁹³ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 14.

⁹⁴ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 9.

⁹⁵ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 19.

school at sixteen years old to find work— first at a shirt factory, where she was fired for trying to organize the women to strike for better conditions, then at a hotel in England. Back in Derry, she met an American sailor Leo Makowski, who she quickly became engaged to. At eighteen years old, Sheils sailed to Philadelphia to marry Leo, which she did in April 1955. She fulfilled her Marian duty of marrying and having children— five in all. However, despite her full-time role as a wife and mother and part-time job as a waitress, and despite being thousands of miles from Northern Ireland, Sheils refused to remain passive. In 1961, she joined Clan-na-Gael, an Irish republican organization founded in the United States in 1867 with the purpose of supplying money and weapons to the cause of Irish independence.⁹⁶ “Thus,” she remembered, “began my 27-year involvement in the campaign to achieve a united Irish republic. My political orientation at that time was pure Republican/ Nationalist, based on the naïve belief that all Ireland’s ills would be solved if Britain gave up its claim to NI. I was prepared to give unquestioning support to any organization which supported that goal.”⁹⁷ As part of Clan-na-Gael, Sheils sold the IRA’s newspaper and Irish tricolors, and also raised money for dependents of Irish political prisoners.

In 1967, the fiery and divisive Ian Paisley embarked on an American speaking tour. Sheils and several of her Clan-na-Gael colleagues went to see the reverend speak in New Jersey to hear his anti-Catholic message firsthand. “His was a speech of pure hatred directed at all I held dear and I felt both outrage and fear. Against my better judgement

⁹⁶ Brigid was initially sworn into Roisin Dubh, the women’s auxiliary of Clan-na-Gael, until she successfully led the women of Roisin Dubh to submit a resolution to abolish the auxiliary and grant women full membership into Clan-na-Gael. She similarly challenged the County Derry Society for calling itself the “Catholic Sons of Derry” because “the name implied that the daughters of Derry were insignificant” (Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 45).

⁹⁷ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 43.

and sense, I felt my anger grow and before I realized what I was doing I was on my feet pointing my finger at Paisley shouting, ‘Paisley, there are at least six people here tonight that know you are a liar’... With venom in his voice, Paisley pointed to me: ‘There’s one of those Fenian’s [sic] I’ve been talking about!’” Sheils quickly exited the church.⁹⁸

After suffering from bouts of depression that she attributed to “living in a society gone completely mad,” Sheils and her husband decided it would be best for her spend some time at home.⁹⁹ She arrived in Derry on October 3, 1968, just one day before the ill-fated Derry Civil Rights March. During her time home, Sheils participated in the October 4th and November 13th marches, attended Sinn Féin Republican Club education classes, and began what she referred to as her socialist education. She also, by the time she returned home, decided to move back to Derry for good. She moved with her children in June 1969—two months before the Battle of the Bogside.

During the Battle, Sheils (pregnant, at the time, with her fifth child) and her sister Eileen set up a first aid station in their mother’s apartment, while others gathered materials for the barricade and even more collected milk bottles and petrol to make bombs. “As far as humanly possible people prepared to defend their community,” Sheils recalled, “knowing they could not depend on the RUC to do so.”¹⁰⁰ At one point during the fighting, Sheils and her mother were the only two in the apartment; when the RUC got wind of this fact, they attempted to break in before resorting to CS gas. As the gas seeped under the door, Sheils and her mother “lay there and I felt my baby moving restlessly within my womb as if aware of the terror I felt. I vomited and retched while my

⁹⁸ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 53.

⁹⁹ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 69.

mother continued praying.”¹⁰¹

Sheils’s homecoming was not to be a permanent one. Shortly after the Battle of the Bogside, Leo Makowski insisted that Sheils and the children return to Philadelphia. Despite this, Sheils’s commitment to the Irish cause did not falter; the following summer she staged her boldest protest yet: a sit-in at the British Consulate in Philadelphia. The immediate impetus of the sit-in was the imposition of the Falls Curfew, in which the British Army raided the Catholic Lower Falls in search of weapons. In protest, Sheils took her five children with her to the Consulate on July 13th, 1970. When the receptionist asked if she had an appointment, she responded, ““No... but would you please inform Mr. Barrett [Acting Consul] that Brigid Makowski is here and I will not leave this office until the British government gets out of Northern Ireland.””¹⁰² Later, when the office was closed for the night, two policemen were recruited to stand guard while Sheils refused to leave; “I told [Barrett] that wouldn’t be necessary as we had no intention of doing any harm; contrary to the actions of his government in my country, this was a peaceful protest.”¹⁰³ She and her five children spent the night in the Consulate.

The next morning, Sheils was again told that she had until the end of the day to vacate the office. She remarked to her friend, ““I sense the British government doesn’t know how to handle this. It’s one thing to drive women and children out of their little houses in Belfast but another to throw me and my children out of their office onto the streets of Philadelphia.””¹⁰⁴ On their fifth night of the sit-in, Sheils and her children were carried out of the building by federal marshals. The protest was over, but Sheils realized

¹⁰¹ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 71.

¹⁰² Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 3.

¹⁰³ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 77.

her real fight was only just beginning. “My place in Ireland’s struggle was in Ireland,” she decided.¹⁰⁵ Rather than moving home to Derry, the Makowskis relocated— permanently— to Limerick.

In Limerick, Sheils joined Sinn Féin and was increasingly asked to give anti-internment addresses at events and rallies. She also continued to collect money for dependents of the interned; on one occasion she was fined for collecting these funds without a permit. After refusing to pay this fine, Brigid Sheils Makowski was arrested in January 1972. It was only because she was in Limerick Jail that she did not return home to participate in an anti-internment march; it was only because she was in jail that she was not present at Bloody Sunday.¹⁰⁶ Months later, Sheils was tried for her supposed crimes: non-payment of a fine, membership in the IRA, and incitement. She was the first woman in the history of Ireland to be charged with membership in the IRA; she was also found innocent by the jury of membership and incitement.¹⁰⁷

Over the next few decades, Sheils continued to support the republican movement through protesting and raising funds. She grew increasingly socialist, leaving Sinn Féin and helping to establish the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) in 1974 (Bernadette Devlin also joined this party).¹⁰⁸ In 1982, she was elected to the Shannon Town Commission on the IRSP platform.¹⁰⁹ Her primary allegiance, however, remained with the republican movement, up until her death in 2017. Sheils ended her 1989 memoir by saying, “The 800-year struggle for Irish sovereignty and independence may be only just

¹⁰⁵ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 82.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 92.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 117.

¹⁰⁹ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 159.

beginning.”¹¹⁰ Decidedly feminist and devoutly republican, Brigid Sheils Makowski, a daughter of Derry, did not shy away from activism, no matter where it took her.

¹¹⁰ Bernard, *Daughter of Derry*, 170.

CHAPTER 6: The Politician: Bernadette Devlin

Bernadette Devlin has been a visible and well-known figure in republican politics for fifty years. As a protestor, she was beaten and harassed; as a young politician, she was ridiculed for her age and gender. Nevertheless, she continued her impassioned fight for Northern Irish independence. Born in Cookstown, County Tyrone on April 23, 1947, she suspected her father was in the IRA, though she writes that his political involvement was largely hidden from the family— or at least the children. Devlin does, however, credit her father with her “dawn of political feeling.”¹¹¹ John Devlin told his five children bedtime stories of Irish history, and from a young age Devlin learned of the many ways in which Britain had wronged the Irish people. She recalls the first nursery rhyme she remembered learning:

Where is the flag of England?

Where is she to be found?

Wherever there's blood and plunder

*They're under the British ground.*¹¹²

Though John Devlin was obviously a republican, his daughter remembers no ill feeling towards her Protestant neighbors. Cookstown was mostly Catholic but had a considerable Protestant minority, many of whom were kind to the Devlin family while the young Bernadette was growing up, especially after her father died in 1956. As such, Devlin harbored little antipathy towards Protestants as a religious group.

Devlin was an ardent republican from a very young age. When she was twelve,

¹¹¹ Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 34.

¹¹² Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 35.

she made her first political protest at a talent competition, where her performative talent was the reciting of famous republican speeches and poems, all of which were fairly militant. She performed “The Rebel,” a poem by Patrick Pearse, leader of the 1916 Easter Rising. The poem ends, “I say to the master of my people, ‘Beware the risen people who will take what you would not give!’”¹¹³ Devlin won first prize at the competition, to the outrage of many Protestants and Unionists in Cookstown. In fact, on the last day of the competition, the young republican needed a police escort home.¹¹⁴

Devlin began her studies at Queens University, Belfast in 1965. She refers to the beginning of her time at university as her “militant Republican days,” and admits that she dreamt up terrorist plots— though she shared them with no one.¹¹⁵ Gradually, she came to believe that the problems in Northern Ireland would not simply be solved by getting the British out of Ireland. Deeper economic problems needed to be solved, and terrorism could not solve them. Devlin joined the civil rights movement and became increasingly involved in crafting the group’s message and planning marches, even after the death of her mother in 1966, which, with her older sister in the convent, left nineteen-year-old Devlin as caretaker of her three younger siblings.¹¹⁶

Even with this added responsibility of caring for her siblings, Devlin managed to attend important civil rights demonstrations, including the October 1968 Derry Civil Rights March. The march was meant to be peaceful and nonsectarian, but was quickly stopped by police. As different leaders of the march debated what to do— one thought they should go home, another believed they should try to march on— the police encircled

¹¹³ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 59.

¹¹⁴ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 59.

¹¹⁵ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 87.

the protesters. Devlin remembers being paralyzed with panic. She remembered in her memoir, “Arms and legs were flying everywhere, but what horrified me was the evil delight the police were showing as they beat people down, then beat them again to prevent them from getting up, then trailed them up and threw them on for somebody else to give a thrashing. It was if they had been waiting to do it for fifty years.”¹¹⁷ Devlin saw the whole event as an example of police overreaction, and the march strengthened her commitment to civil rights.

After the Derry march, Devlin and some fellow students founded the People’s Democracy, a politically and religiously unaffiliated civil rights group that was guided by what she called “a sort of liberal belief in the necessity of justice.”¹¹⁸ Furthermore, People’s Democracy was non-violent. “The more demonstrations we organized,” Devlin writes, “the more we became convinced of the usefulness of the nonviolent method: it baffled the police, it baffled the Paisleyites, and it gave us each time a further lesson in self-discipline.”¹¹⁹ Gradually, the movement— and Devlin herself— became increasingly socialist. Devlin realized that the essential problem was not uniting Northern Ireland with the rest of the island, but uniting the people of Northern Ireland itself. This, she believed, could only be achieved by socialism.¹²⁰

In early January 1969, People’s Democracy organized a student march from Belfast to Derry. The march went fairly smoothly until the group approached Burnttollet Bridge in Derry, where a group of Paisleyite loyalists had gathered to attack the marchers. Trouble had been suspected as the group neared the end of their march, so the

¹¹⁷ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 105.

¹¹⁸ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 130.

¹¹⁹ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 130.

¹²⁰ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 133.

police had been ordered to protect the marchers and guide them to the end of their route. However, as they marched, Devlin noticed other policemen standing behind hedges, speaking amicably with loyalists who were collecting stones and bottles to throw at the protesters.¹²¹ When the marchers got to the bridge, they were attacked on all sides. Devlin fell to the ground. “Through my fingers, I could see legs standing round me: about six people were busily involved in trying to beat me into the ground, and I could feel dull thuds landing on my back and head.”¹²² When she was able to get up, Devlin saw a police officer walking by several wounded marchers, doing nothing to prevent further attacks. “‘What the bloody hell d’you think you’re doing?’ I shouted at him, whereupon he gave me a vigorous shove and said, ‘Get up the road to the rest of your mates, you stupid bitch.’” Here, the policeman resorted to the standard insult of outspoken women. In her memoir, Devlin added a parenthetical: “Policemen were always calling me a stupid bitch, and I deny that I’m stupid.”¹²³ By denying stupidity but accepting the label of “bitch,” Devlin acknowledged that her activities threatened gender norms. Rather than shying away from confrontation, she claimed the label as a badge of female activism.

It was clear to Devlin, after the Belfast to Derry march, that the main problem of the civil rights movement was getting Protestants to support them. She blames Ian Paisley for this difficulty; he convinced many Protestants that any greater rights or equality given to Catholics would deeply threaten the Protestant heritage. However, Devlin believes that the true struggle in Northern Ireland is not Protestant versus Catholic, but working class versus ruling class. In this respect, Devlin and her fellow student protesters differed

¹²¹ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 156.

¹²² Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 157.

¹²³ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 158.

somewhat from the republican movement. While many republicans— as part of a largely unemployed underclass— held socialist tendencies, most did not allow this socialism to override their bitterness towards Protestants. Devlin, however, writes, “What we must at all times make clear is that we are fighting for the economic rights of an underprivileged people, not to win back the Six Counties for Ireland.... [The struggle] must be fought not in the Six Counties by Catholics, but in Ireland as a whole by the working class. Only if it's an all-Ireland working-class revolution, are there enough of us to overthrow the powers that be.”¹²⁴ The sectarian division of the lower classes only serves to benefit the British ruling class, as it maintains the status quo.

The Burntollet Bridge incident brought even greater attention to the civil rights movement in general, and People’s Democracy in particular. The group decided that to spread their ideas to a wider audience, some leaders would stand as candidates in the February 1969 by-election. They did not necessarily want to win the elections; they merely wanted to propagate their ideas. They chose seats that had been uncontested for years, held by incumbent unionists and nationalists that stuck by their old sectarian slogans. Devlin contested the seat for South Derry against the incumbent Major James Dawson Chichester-Clark (Later in the year, Chichester-Clark became the penultimate Prime Minister for Northern Ireland). The South Derry constituency was largely Protestant and Paisleyite. Even so, Devlin won just under six thousand of the fifteen thousand votes cast in the election.¹²⁵ Though Irish women had stood for election in the past, Devlin’s youth, socialism, and republicanism were noteworthy in 1960s Northern Ireland.

¹²⁴ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 180.

¹²⁵ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 171.

In April, she stood for election again, this time in Mid-Ulster. This time, she had the support of the Republicans. The Mid-Ulster seat had always been abstentionist— that is, it had traditionally been held by a Republican who then refused to recognize the legitimacy of Westminster rule over Northern Ireland, and therefore refused to take his seat. The Republicans now wanted someone to actually take their seat and represent their platform. It could not, however, be a prominent Republican, because they could not break their policy of abstentionism. It was with this mindset that they chose twenty-one-year-old Bernadette Devlin to stand for election. Upon being chosen as candidate, she remembers, “I made my little acceptance speech— we would beat the Unionists, and use Westminster properly, and work toward the day when we had no need to send people to Westminster.”¹²⁶ To the surprise of many— including Devlin herself— she won the election. Bernadette Devlin, university student from County Tyrone, was a Member of Parliament.

While her election to Westminster should have been indicative of how far the Republicans were willing to go to promote their cause, “[the] press were interested only in the gimmick publicity of the twenty-one-year-old female who makes it to be a Member of Parliament... None of them wanted to ask the basic questions that would show why the situation in Northern Ireland should produce a ‘baby of Parliament.’”¹²⁷ Even when she made her maiden speech in Parliament, she remembers that “[the] whole attitude of the House was, ‘Well, well, well! Look who’s here!’”¹²⁸ All the amusement surrounding her election, however, ended after her speech. She criticized Westminster for its handling

¹²⁶ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 193-4.

¹²⁷ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 196-7.

¹²⁸ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 206.

of Northern Ireland, and asked which side of the House was going to take the blame for what was unfolding there. When Prime Minister Harold Wilson evaded a question about why the Special Powers Act targeted Northern Ireland more than any other part of the United Kingdom, Devlin tried to challenge him, only to be told by her colleagues that she could not treat a Prime Minister like that.¹²⁹

The press further criticized her, writing that she had no respect for the “MP” that followed her name. “The trouble in those early weeks,” she writes in her memoir, “is that I wasn’t just an MP, however ineffective, but a phenomenon: I was the big international story. Which is a very time-taking and soul-destroying thing to be.”¹³⁰ Some of the attention given to Bernadette Devlin, MP, deserve note. Unionist businessman Christopher Bland said she was “Ireland’s greatest national disaster since the famine.” She received several threatening letters that called her “Fenian scum” and promised that she would be stabbed, drowned, and/or gunned down. Finally, Reverend Ian Paisley gave her the title “International Socialist Playgirl of the Year.”¹³¹ This gendered dismissal, clearly intended to both sexualize and belittle Devlin, was indicative of a larger pattern of trivializing female participation in the republican movement. Furthermore, all this publicity, unsurprisingly, deflected attention from the issues Devlin had been elected to represent. All she could do, in this situation, was try to keep Northern Ireland in public awareness.

The last action sequence of *The Price of My Soul* is the Battle of the Bogside, which Devlin participated in. She describes the Battle: “What was happening there was

¹²⁹ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 211.

¹³⁰ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 212.

¹³¹ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 216.

that ordinary, peaceful people, who had no desire to spend fifty hours throwing stones and petrol bombs, had realized the harm that had been done to them for half a century and were learning how to fight in self-defense.”¹³² Though she had preached the importance of non-violence, and had herself taken beatings without fighting back, Devlin knew that the time had come for retaliation. As everyone in the Bogside attempted to protect themselves and their homes, what was left of Devlin’s reputation was being attacked. “All the papers were carrying photographs of Bernadette Devlin, bejeaned, besweated, and besieged in the Bogside, leading people on and organizing the manufacture of petrol bombs.”¹³³ Catholics of Northern Ireland, however, were unphased by this press coverage of their MP. They “could see that what I was doing was necessary. ‘If they come in here to get Bernadette Devlin, we’ll slaughter them all,’ they said.”¹³⁴

Though her memoir ends in 1969, Devlin’s involvement in republican and civil rights movements continues to this day. In December 1969, she was arrested for incitement to riot for her participation in the Battle of the Bogside and was imprisoned for six months— she continued to carry out her work for her constituency in her cell in Armagh prison.¹³⁵ In December 1972, she again witnessed unwarranted violence towards Catholic protesters in what became known as Bloody Sunday. Devlin was speaking to the crowds when the British army opened fire.¹³⁶ Days later, when the Conservative Home Secretary Reginald Maudling stated in Parliament that the British army was acting out of self-defense, Devlin walked across the Parliament floor and slapped him across the face,

¹³² Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 235.

¹³³ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 237.

¹³⁴ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 237.

¹³⁵ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 121.

¹³⁶ Nicola Depuis, *Mná na hÉireann: Women Who Shaped Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2009), 57.

calling him a liar.¹³⁷ Devlin left office in 1974, and began focusing on building a real socialist party in Northern Ireland. Towards the end of the decade, she was a leading figure in the Smash H-Block campaign, which supported the IRA hunger strikers. Because of her involvement, she became an even bigger target for militant loyalist groups. In January 1981, she and her husband Michael McAliskey were shot in their home by loyalist paramilitaries.¹³⁸ Both recovered after being flown to Belfast for treatment at an intensive care facility.¹³⁹

Devlin's memoir ends with questions about the future. She had few answers of what would happen in the coming years. She was certain, however, that the fight was just beginning. Her memoir, clearly written for political purposes, encourages Catholics, republicans, and socialists to continue to challenge the British. She ends her memoir echoing the sentiments she espoused in her talent competition performance a decade earlier, when she was twelve years old. She writes,

The people have made their situation clear. We will fight for justice. We will try to achieve it through peaceful means. But if it becomes necessary we will simply make it impossible for any unjust government to govern us... For half a century it [the government] has misgoverned us, but it is on the way out. Now we are witnessing its dying convulsions. And with traditional Irish mercy, when we've got it down we will kick it to the ground.¹⁴⁰

Bernadette Devlin was a lifelong republican. Instilled with the Irish ethos as a child, she

¹³⁷ Depuis, *Mná na hÉireann*, 58.

¹³⁸ In 1971, Devlin gave birth to a daughter, Roisin. Being unmarried, she lost some political support as a result, but continued to serve in Parliament as a single mother. She married Michael McAliskey in April 1973.

¹³⁹ Depuis, *Mná na hÉireann*, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, 240-1.

was fully committed to the cause. Devlin was a trailblazer, a young and devoted protestor and politician. Like Brigid Sheils Makowski and Mairead Farrell, her activism did not come without sacrifice; she had to leave her siblings at home, she was beaten and berated, and she spent time in prison. Through it all, bruised yet determined, she did not stray from her republican path.

CHAPTER 7: The Solider: Mairead Farrell

Mairead Farrell was one of the most well-known female militants of the Troubles. Her entire life was devoted to the struggle for a united Ireland, a cause for which she sacrificed her youth, her freedom, and ultimately, her life. Unlike Brigid Sheils and Bernadette Devlin, Farrell did not come from an ardently republican household. She was born on March 3, 1957 in the Falls Road area of Belfast. Though she had said in interviews that her family was republican, Farrell did not have the same politically charged upbringing that Devlin and Sheils had. Her maternal grandfather had been a republican and was interned by the Black and Tans earlier in the century, but her parents were not actively involved in the republican movement.¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, growing up on Falls Road was an educational experience in itself. She told Elizabeth Shannon, ““As I was growing up, I saw the curfew imposed on the Falls Road, I saw soldiers coming into our neighborhood, into our homes. I saw the violence. I saw discrimination all around me. I lived in a ghetto, and I came to believe that something had to be done. Passive resistance wasn’t the way forward. It doesn’t work.”¹⁴² Farrell’s experiences as a young Catholic girl in Belfast left an indelible mark on her. By eighteen, she was an official member of the IRA.

Bríona Nic Dhiarmada spent eighteen months interviewing Mairead Farrell for a book project before the Gibraltar shootings. In 2013, Dhiarmada revisited her work and also interviewed some people who were close to Farrell in order to understand what why she took the path she did. When she spoke with Farrell’s childhood neighbor Geraldine

¹⁴¹ Helen Shaw, “From teenage recruit to prison leader,” *The Irish Times*, March 8, 1988. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁴² Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 122.

Holland, Nic Dhiarmada asked if Holland was surprised when Farrell joined the IRA. “No. No, not at all,” Holland answered. “I wasn’t the least bit surprised. It was very much a natural progression.”¹⁴³ Farrell’s mother told reporters that her daughter was “strongly affected” by seeing classmates’ fathers and husbands arrested during internment. At fifteen, she saw news coverage of Bloody Sunday— she later said that it was these images from Derry that set her mind on her future involvement.¹⁴⁴

By nineteen, Farrell was on active duty with the IRA. In 1976, she was arrested for planting a bomb at Conway Hotel in Belfast along with Sean McDermott (aged 21) and Kieran Doherty (aged 20).¹⁴⁵ In subsequent interviews, Farrell remained unapologetic for her actions: “No one told me to go out and plant a bomb,” she told Shannon. “I did it because of my own ideology. They didn’t pay me to do it. I didn’t have a grudge against the Conway Hotel. It was simply a target which would help us pursue our goals.”¹⁴⁶ To Nic Dhiarmada, Farrell admitted she was nervous during the operation. However, she was adamant it had to be done. She said, “You know what you have to do... Get the job done, and get it done properly.”¹⁴⁷ The trio managed to partially destroy the hotel with no casualties, but McDermott was killed by security forces, while Farrell and Doherty were arrested and imprisoned.¹⁴⁸ Farrell was convicted of causing three explosions, possession of three bombs, possession of firearms and ammunition, and membership in the IRA.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ *Mairead Farrell: An Unfinished Conversation*, directed by Martina Durac (2013; Dublin: Irish Film Institute), 15:45.

¹⁴⁴ Shaw, “From teenage recruit to prison leader,” *The Irish Times*, March 8, 1988.

¹⁴⁵ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 176-7.

¹⁴⁶ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 122.

¹⁴⁷ *Mairead Farrell: An Unfinished Conversation*, 18:21.

¹⁴⁸ Kieran Doherty later died while on hunger strike in 1981 (Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 177).

¹⁴⁹ “Girl jailed for 14 years for Belfast hotel bombing,” *The Irish Times*, December 10, 1976. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

Farrell knew she risked imprisonment when she joined the bombing mission. She did not fear arrest; she told Nic Dhiarmada, “My own capture looked so small against [Sean McDermott’s death] ... I was the lucky one.”¹⁵⁰ As she refused to recognize the court, she did not defend herself and was sentenced to fourteen years at Armagh Prison.¹⁵¹ Farrell was the first republican prisoner to be processed at Armagh and not receive political status. As more women joined her, they refused to participate in prison work.¹⁵² The women soon organized themselves, with Farrell serving as OC (Officer in Command). All communications between the IRA and the women in Armagh went through Farrell, as did communications with the prison guards. Nic Dhiarmada interviewed two women who served time in Armagh, Mary Doyle and Sinead Moore; they told her that Farrell was always a leader, and as such it was only natural that she be OC. She “dominated her fellow prisoners and warders by the force of her will and intellect,” and led the Armagh women in 1980 as they escalated from a no-work to a no-wash protest in demand for a return to political prisoner status.¹⁵³

In December 1980, after almost a year on the no-wash protest, Mairead Farrell, Mairead Nugent, and Mary Doyle began a hunger strike in solidarity with the male hunger strikers in Long Kesh Prison, who had been refusing food since late October.¹⁵⁴ Even before these men began their strike, Farrell had smuggled out a “comm” (communication) to her counterpart at Long Kesh, OC Bobby Sands. She wrote, ““We had been making a general assessment of the no wash protest here to see if there is any

¹⁵⁰ *Mairead Farrell: An Unfinished Conversation*, 19:27.

¹⁵¹ “Girl jailed for 14 years for Belfast hotel bombing,” *The Irish Times*, December 10, 1976. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁵² Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 123.

¹⁵³ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 177.

¹⁵⁴ “Three jailed women to join hunger strike,” *The Irish Times*, December 1, 1980. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

way in which we could step up the protest for status. We all believe that something else, some other form of action is needed to ram it home to the Brits. So discussion at present is heavy.”¹⁵⁵ The decision of whether to go on hunger strike was a difficult one for the women, especially because the IRA leadership tried to discourage them from taking that step. Farrell remembered,

We had a lot of discussion about it among ourselves. The republican movement didn't want us to die. They were against a hunger strike. British propaganda tried to make out that we were forced to go on the hunger strike by the IRA, but you can't force someone to go on a hunger strike. You can't force someone to die. In fact, they tried to get us not to go on the strike. But we felt like we were in hell anyway. Death would be a release.¹⁵⁶

The three women were on hunger strike for nineteen days when the Long Kesh men called it off; the Northern Ireland Office had told them that they would negotiate with the prisoners' demands for a return to political status. This promise proved to be empty, and the men resumed their strike in March 1981. The women did not participate in the second hunger strike, which ultimately resulted in ten deaths. Farrell explained that the women did not participate because they wanted full publicity to be given to the Long Kesh men, who had greater numbers.¹⁵⁷

Farrell was released from prison in 1986, after serving ten and a half years of a fourteen-year sentence. She enrolled at Queen's University, Belfast in pursuit of a degree

¹⁵⁵ Mary Corcoran, “‘We had to be stronger:’ the political imprisonment of women in Northern Ireland, 1972-1999,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*, edited by Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 121-122.

¹⁵⁶ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 126.

¹⁵⁷ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 126.

in politics and economics; she also immediately reentered active service in the IRA.¹⁵⁸ Though Sinn Féin had given up their abstentionist position, allowing republicans to sit in Westminster and advocate their position through political representation, Farrell still saw her role as a military one. Nic Dhiarmada said that following her release, Farrell spent much of her time studying, reconnecting with her family, and spending time with her boyfriend. Nic Dhiarmada is quoted in a newspaper article as saying, “I think she wanted to have [as] normal a life as was possible. But she knew it would never be normal. She was completely dedicated.”¹⁵⁹

Seamus Finucane, a focal character in Toolis’s *Rebel Hearts*, was Farrell’s boyfriend after both were released from their respective prison sentences in 1986. Recalling his time with her, he told Toolis, “Mairead was very independent, very determined, a strong woman. She wanted children, she was like any other girl, she liked socializing, dancing, music, fashion, and loved meeting people.” The couple even talked of having children together, and they discussed how the possibility of both of them going back to prison might affect kids.¹⁶⁰ Farrell may have had the same interests and desires as any other thirty-year-old woman; however, her belief in the need for a united Ireland superseded any other consideration.

This belief led Farrell to Gibraltar, where she and fellow IRA Volunteers Sean Savage and Daniel McCann were shot by the British Special Air Service (SAS) on March 6, 1988.¹⁶¹ She had turned thirty-one years old just days earlier. The SAS, a plainclothes,

¹⁵⁸ Shaw, “From teenage recruit to prison leader,” *The Irish Times*, March 8, 1988.

¹⁵⁹ Shaw, “From teenage recruit to prison leader,” *The Irish Times*, March 8, 1988.

¹⁶⁰ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 179.

¹⁶¹ Sean Flynn, Ronan Foster, and Geraldine Mitchell, “IRA trip on bomb mission shot dead in Gibraltar,” *The Irish Times*, March 7, 1988. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

counterterrorism unit of the British army, had tracked the trio to Gibraltar, where they were on active duty. They had been planning to plant a car bomb near the governor's residence.¹⁶² The official British statement about the shootings maintained that the SAS had acted out of self-defense, opening fire only after they saw Farrell, Savage, and McCann reaching for weapons. However, later investigations found that the IRA trio were, in fact, unarmed at the time of their deaths.¹⁶³ Furthermore, Farrell and Daniel McCann had been shot in the back; Sean Savage was shot sixteen times, including several shots in the head after he had already fallen to the ground.¹⁶⁴ Given these circumstances, the Gibraltar shootings generated heated and controversial debates in Britain and Ireland. IRA sympathizers quickly condemned the shootings to be cold blooded murders.¹⁶⁵

Upon her death, Mairead Farrell, well-known to all in Northern Ireland and well-respected by republicans, was quickly transformed from IRA volunteer to IRA martyr. After her death, friends spoke of Farrell's complete and utter commitment to the republican cause. She did not want to die, but accepted death as a possible consequence of her activities, and she did not shy away from the possibility. If that is what it took to achieve a united Ireland, death did not scare Mairead Farrell.

¹⁶² Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 179.

¹⁶³ Roger Bolton, "Death on the Rock," in *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader*, edited by Bill Rolston and David Miller (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996), 119.

¹⁶⁴ June Tweedie and Tony Ward, "The Gibraltar Shootings and the Politics of Inquests," *Journal of Law and Society* 16, no. 4 (1989), 464.

¹⁶⁵ Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 182.

CHAPTER 8: Armagh Prison

On February 7, 1980, republican prisoners at Armagh Gaol were surprised by an announcement that they would be served chicken and apple pie for lunch—a luxurious meal they normally only enjoyed at Christmas or when the prison authorities were trying to impress important visitors.¹⁶⁶ While the women were collecting their meals, the prison governor informed OC Mairead Farrell that there was to be a general search of the cells. When some prisoners objected, they were beaten. All the women were forced into association rooms while their cells were searched.¹⁶⁷ The authorities had been searching for military uniforms—berets and black skirts. Aretxaga writes, “In search of those small pieces of apparel, trivial in themselves yet deeply significant in the encoded world of prison regime, in full riot gear military men, kicking and punching, entered the cells of IRA prisoners.”¹⁶⁸

After the search, the women were locked in their cells the rest of the day as punishment for what the authorities deemed to be a “riot.” For a week, they were allowed out for one hour of exercise, but were denied access to the toilets.¹⁶⁹ At the end of this week, the prison governor offered to reopen the washroom in a restoration of privileges. The women believed that the governor was merely trying to break their no-work protest for political status. Angry and bitter that a basic right such as going to the bathroom was now categorized as a “privilege,” the prisoners protested their treatment by continuing to remain in their cells. The infamous “no-wash” protest—also referred to as the “dirty”

¹⁶⁶ Eileen Fairweather, Roisin McDonough, and Melanie McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free: Northern Ireland: The Women's War* (London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1984), 219.

¹⁶⁷ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 123.

¹⁶⁸ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 122.

¹⁶⁹ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 220.

protest— had begun. The no-wash protest is an important case study of republican feminist perseverance in the wake of hardship and seemingly unending criticism. The collective women of the protest, like Brigid Sheils, Bernadette Devlin, and Armagh OC Mairead Farrell, refused to be made supporting characters in a male-dominated political movement. The Armagh women aimed to establish themselves as equals within the IRA and proved their commitment through the no-wash protest.

IRA prisoners at Long Kesh had been on a no-wash protest for two years before the Armagh women began their own. For the ten months they were on the protest, the Armagh women were kept in their cells for twenty-three hours a day and denied the opportunity to visit the prison bathroom facilities. This not only meant that the women were unable to clean themselves, but they were similarly unable to empty their chamber pots. As such, the prisoners of both Long Kesh and Armagh had little choice but to resort to smearing their excrement on the walls in order to hasten the drying process and thereby lessen the smell. Mairead Farrell described the protest in a letter smuggled out to her family:

The stench of urine and excrement clings to the cells and our bodies. No longer can we empty the pots of urine and excrement out the window, as the male screws have boarded them up. Little air or light penetrates the thick boarding.... Sanitary towels are thrown into us without wrapping. We are not permitted paper bags or such like so they lie in the dirt until used. For twenty three hours a day we lie in these cells.¹⁷⁰

Another prisoner, Rose McAllister, said in an interview, “I remember the first day, I’ll

¹⁷⁰ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 125-6.

never forget it, that I had to put my waste on the wall after they boarded all the windows. I was actually physically sick because I didn't realize you had to steel yourself to do that."¹⁷¹

While the prison authorities maintained that the protest was "self-inflicted" for propaganda reasons, the women always contended that they had been forced into their protest. Rose went on to say, "I mean, who would actually choose to live in that? Who would choose to spend 23 hours a day in filth and shit?"¹⁷² To be sure, the decision to embark on the protest was a conscious decision for the thirty-two women who chose to participate, but the decision was the result of continued abuse by the prison guards. Farrell explained, "We were forced into it. We had been locked up for four years and we felt that we needed more publicity. The only way we could do get it was to escalate our protest. It was either that or a hunger strike, and we had to try a no-wash protest first. A hunger strike, after all, is the end, it's death."¹⁷³

The Armagh no-wash protest was given considerable press coverage and was debated by the public. Many critics were uncomfortable with the idea of women purposefully not bathing, of sitting amongst dirt and filth. Such a protest was far more suitable for men than women. The wider women's movement were slow to claim Armagh as a feminist issue. This is for two reasons: first, the "unwashed, undisciplined female body is almost incomprehensible in Irish society," and therefore difficult to sympathize with.¹⁷⁴ Second, many believed that the Armagh protest was little more than a mimicry of

¹⁷¹ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 221.

¹⁷² Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 221.

¹⁷³ Shanonn, *I Am of Ireland*, 124.

¹⁷⁴ Paula Burns, "Rethinking the Armagh Women's Dirty Protest," in *Theory on the Edge: Irish Studies and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 34.

Long Kesh. The male protest had far greater numbers (over four hundred compared to the women's thirty-two), a longer duration, and on the whole, more brutal conditions.¹⁷⁵ The women's protest, therefore, had been treated as little more than an appendix to the men's struggle. However, there was one aspect of the Armagh no-wash protest that set it distinctly apart from the Long Kesh protest: as journalist Nell McCafferty wrote, "There is menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh Prison."¹⁷⁶

This opening line of McCafferty's article on the no-wash protest was a stark reminder of the sexual difference between the Long Kesh and Armagh protests. Margaretta D'Arcy joined the protest during her three-month stint at Armagh. She remembered, "Once a month on a fixed day, whether we are menstruating or not just then, she [the nurse] gives out either sanitary towels or Tampax (you can't have both). The quantity is the same for each prisoner, no matter how heavy or light her period."¹⁷⁷ The prisoners felt that this rationing of such a basic need was a particularly humiliating and sexualized form of punishment. Rose said in an interview, "He [the prison governor] tried to break us physically and mentally. He thought that by doing so he could break the protest and weaken us. He thought we were women who could be pressurized into saying 'Ok, enough's enough, we can't go on anymore.'"¹⁷⁸ The women, however, persisted, bleeding and all.

Even republican supporters and the IRA leadership was uncomfortable with the

¹⁷⁵ In addition to their no-wash protest, the Long Kesh men had been on a "blanket" protest, choosing to cover themselves in only a blanket rather than wear a prisoner uniform. In Northern Ireland prisons, there were no prison uniforms for women. Therefore, the men's additional protest of nakedness was not one pursued in Armagh (Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 126).

¹⁷⁶ Nell McCafferty, "It is my belief that Armagh is a feminist issue," *The Irish Times*, August 22, 1980. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁷⁷ D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*, 60.

¹⁷⁸ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 222.

Armagh protest. Tim Pat Coogan, editor of *The Irish Press* and author of several books about the IRA, wrote a chapter about the Armagh women in his book *On the Blanket*, which otherwise focused solely on the Long Kesh men. He began his chapter by writing, “The ‘dirty’ protest is bad enough to contemplate when men are on it, but it becomes even worse when it is embarked on by women, who apart from the psychological and hygienic pressures which this type of protest generates, also have the effects of the menstrual cycle to contend with.”¹⁷⁹ He continued that the “A” wing that housed the protesting prisoners was “sickening and appalling... Tissues, slops, consisting of tea and urine, some feces, and clots of blood” induced intense nausea, worse than what he experienced at Long Kesh.¹⁸⁰ Even an experienced political journalist like Coogan struggled with the presence of menstruation in his prison visits. The male IRA leadership was similarly embarrassed by the subject; in fact, they tried to dissuade the Armagh women from continuing. Protesting prisoner Brenda told one author,

He [her brother] would say ‘Come off. It’s not right for women to do this!’ Sinn Féin would say ‘Don’t do that. It’s easier on the men.’ They didn’t want us on dirty protest because of our periods. They didn’t say that; they said that we were women, that we were different. But we knew it was because of our periods. These were men who had killed, had been imprisoned and they couldn’t say the word period!¹⁸¹

In June of 1980, seven months into the no-wash protest, four feminists (including Nell McCafferty and Bernadette Devlin) wrote to the *Irish Times* in support of the

¹⁷⁹ Tim Pat Coogan, *On the Blanket: The H-Block Story* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980), 114.

¹⁸⁰ Coogan, *On the Blanket*, 215-216.

¹⁸¹ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 127.

Armagh women. They decried prison authorities for denying women “[s]imple needs, surely the minimum a humane society can afford the political prisoner who has already forfeited personal liberty for a personal commitment.”¹⁸² They argued that the feminist movement should not ignore the Armagh women because of their political beliefs. Rather, they continued, “In spite of differences among us, women political prisoners must be given the respect they deserve. They have, as part of an oppressed minority, chosen to struggle. Those in politics are exacting a price, their personal liberty. Must they be degraded and demoralized as well?”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, Marie McMahon, Anne Speed, and Nell McCafferty, “Women in Armagh Prison,” *The Irish Times*, June 5, 1980. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁸³ McAliskey, McMahon, Speed, and McCafferty, “Women in Armagh Prison,” *The Irish Times*, June 5, 1980.

CHAPTER 9: Conclusion: Republicanism vs. Feminism (Or Republican Feminism?)

The treatment IRA women received from the wider Northern Ireland public was not entirely different from the treatment given to many working women in the 1970s, especially in such a conservative country as Ireland. The linen industry in Northern Ireland had allowed a long history of female wage-earning in earlier centuries, and because of high male unemployment during this era, many women did work outside their homes. However, being an attentive wife and mother was supposed to remain their primary duty. Republican women were criticized for participating in what should have been a man's struggle. Rose McAllister was arrested in March 1977 after the British army found incendiary devices during a raid on her home.¹⁸⁴ A mother of three and pregnant with a fourth child, Rose was granted bail and her trial was set for May of the next year. She remembered,

My trial date was fixed for 18 May. It was a black time. Christopher was only a few months old, Dominic was going on 19, Terry [her husband] was in jail, Patricia was just seven and Karen was 11. And there was no money in the house... Kelly was my judge. At the trial he gave me a real dressing-down about being a woman without any respect for human dignity or human life, and having no consideration for my family... I had to sit there and listen to that old bastard tearing strips off me whilst he was going home to his big flashy house, sitting down to his four-course meal with blinkers on and things stuffed down his ears so that he wouldn't see and wouldn't hear what was going on in this country.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 207.

¹⁸⁵ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 209.

Judge Kelly was ignorant of the struggles of those poorer than him, blissfully unaware of the trials of the underemployed Catholics and Protestants living in slums— trials that could drive a pregnant mother to dangerous action.

Terry McAllister received no such admonishment at his trial; his imprisonment was not considered a betrayal of his family like Rose's was. Rose was fully aware that she was being punished not only for her republican activities, but for her lack of respect for gender roles as well. She explained to an interviewer that being arrested is "twice as bad for a woman because they have this idea that good mothers, good wives and good girlfriends shouldn't be in jail and the reason why you're there is because you aren't good. By going to jail you're destroying their ideals about what a woman should be like."¹⁸⁶

Rose, like many other IRA women, was a feminist who upset gender norms by partaking in the republican struggle. These women refused to sit idly at home while men fought for a united Ireland. In her book, Aretxaga included several statements from unnamed interviewees attesting to this sentiment. One woman revealed, "I was a typical Irish woman, wife and mother in 1969. I never thought about politics." She became involved in the struggle, like many people, after the introduction of internment— her sixteen-year-old son was interned for eighteen months without trial or cause. She continued, "When the hunger strike ended I felt that I just couldn't go back into the house again. It just wasn't enough for me. I was too aware of the social problems in the community." Another woman similarly recalled that once she became active in the struggle, "I wasn't a housewife anymore. I became more aware of injustice, of the

¹⁸⁶ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 210.

interdependence of people for help, and of international politics.”¹⁸⁷

It is possible that these statements were crafted to win sympathy for the republican movement; the image of a devoted mother and housewife being moved to action in order to protect her family is a powerful one. However, this does not invalidate their participation. To be sure, not all republican women were lifelong radicals like Brigid Sheils, Bernadette Devlin, and Mairead Farrell. In many conflicts and movements, people are not necessarily politically aware until events directly affect them. So it was for many women in Northern Ireland: they were moved to active participation in the republican movement when their husbands, sons, and relatives were interned without trial, sometimes for months or years on end.

Many men found that upon their release from internment, their wives were unwilling to return to their previous domestic arrangement. One woman, Brigid, explained, “Men were used to the women being in the house all the time. But with internment there was no dinner-at-five and children-to-bed-at-eight. Everything was disorganized then. Men did not realize that, because they were locked up. Then when they came out they expected to find things as they left them. But women were not willing to go back into the house again.”¹⁸⁸ Fiona, another volunteer, said that most people saw women’s involvement in the republican struggle as a passing whim, not a serious commitment.¹⁸⁹ People found it difficult to believe that women could be so involved with a cause that would take them so far from the hearth.

For many women, however, the republican movement was much more than a

¹⁸⁷ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 54.

¹⁸⁸ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 75.

¹⁸⁹ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 137.

passing interest. This is why women fought for inclusion in the IRA rather than the women's auxiliary. This is also why the IRA, which had been male dominated for decades, needed to organize itself to accommodate this influx of women into its ranks. In 1975, the IRA leadership declared what proved to be a short-lived ceasefire. IRA women in Armagh, however, were not consulted in the decision-making process. The women realized that even though they had the same prison military structure, the same arrests, had risked their lives in the same way as the men, they were not considered peers. Armagh internee Theresa remembered, "We were in Armagh, internees, remanded, and sentenced prisoners. We had been fighting, and we were told to shut up. Why could we not have a say in what was going on?" The women demanded that the IRA leadership recognize them as equals and allow them to have input in the direction of the struggle.¹⁹⁰

After the IRA leadership met their demand, most women maintained— at least publicly— that the IRA was a movement of gender equality. One unnamed volunteer admitted, "I think it is true to say... that a woman has to be better than a man initially to prove herself. After that though, there's no obstacles. Whoever's most skilled is in charge, be it a woman or a man." The same volunteer— an explosives expert— assured the interviewer that women were involved in all spheres of IRA activity: carrying weapons, making and planting bombs, and planning operations. "The classic media image is of the *gunman* doing the shooting or sniping, but women do that too."¹⁹¹ She was even in charge of training male volunteers in explosives.

Mairead Farrell was a well-known feminist and republican. Kevin Toolis describes her as being "charismatic, articulate, and able to bridge the gap between the

¹⁹⁰ Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, 76.

¹⁹¹ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 242.

Provisionals' version of power politics and feminism."¹⁹² In the interviews she gave during the eighteen months between her release from prison and her death, Farrell was adamant that the IRA did not discriminate against its female volunteers. The movement treated them as equals, but "[people in] general society looked on us as 'the girls,' and had the idea of 'let the men do it.'"¹⁹³ Farrell, however, would not merely sit by and let the men do it. She rejected the "Mother Ireland" trope. She said, "It became a standard joke in there [Armagh Prison], you know? This 'mother' image... we would slag about it, and we would say— our joke was, 'Mother Ireland, get off our back!' You know? Because we just couldn't— it just didn't reflect what we believed in and it just doesn't reflect Ireland."¹⁹⁴ Farrell admitted in her interview with Elizabeth Shannon that there were few leadership roles for women in the IRA, but she said that it did not bother her in that they were all dedicated to the same cause.¹⁹⁵ Of course, this comment may have been mere lip service to the unity and cohesiveness of the IRA and republican movement— one could not publicly admit to cracks in the IRA's foundation, or allude to weaknesses of any kind—, but Farrell maintained this stance in every interview she gave.

During the no-wash protest, the Armagh women wrote a letter to *The Irish Times* in order to publicize their stance on the intertwining issues of republicanism and feminism. In this letter, they write that if Armagh "is not a feminist issue then we feel that the word 'feminist' needs to be redefined to suit those people who feel that 'feminist' applies to a certain section of women rather than encompassing women everywhere

¹⁹² Toolis, *Rebel Hearts*, 176.

¹⁹³ *Mother Ireland*, directed by Anne Crilly (1988; Derry: Derry Film and Video Collective), 42:56.

¹⁹⁴ *Mother Ireland*, 49:53.

¹⁹⁵ Shannon, *I Am of Ireland*, 128.

regardless of politically held views.”¹⁹⁶ Criticizing the broader feminist movement for not supporting them, they argue that the feminist movement is concerned about the plight of wives and mothers— but not the problems of the wives and mothers who are imprisoned, living in filth and squalor.

The protesters concluded their letter by calling for an end to “petty squabbling” within the feminist movement. They argue that too many feminists have disregarded the plight of republican women, specifically those in prison, because they do not agree with their politics. IRA women, like their Cumann na mBan predecessors, were written off by the larger feminist movement as not caring about women’s issues, or as being mere lackeys for their male superiors. Bernadette Devlin and Nell McCafferty defended the Armagh women against feminists who abandoned the protestors over their politics. They write, “They [the Armagh women] are asking of us solidarity and human compassion; they are not asking for total political agreement. This is the time when sisterhood can illustrate its potential power and strength.”¹⁹⁷

What many non-republicans did not understand was that the Armagh women, as representatives of republican women both in and out of prison, were feminists. One unnamed volunteer called the idea that they were merely supporting their male superiors as “patronizing rubbish.”¹⁹⁸ She declared that she was a feminist, and she wanted to fight to end all kinds of oppression; however, she was focusing on ending British oppression of the Irish first. She said, “A lot of women I know are not against things like abortion but

¹⁹⁶ No-Wash Protesters, “The Armagh Women,” *The Irish Times*, October 22, 1980. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁹⁷ Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, Marie McMahon, Anne Speed, and Nell McCafferty, “Women in Armagh Prison,” *The Irish Times*, June 5, 1980. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁹⁸ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 261.

simply say, ‘How they hell can we find time to get worked up about it when we’re constantly having our doors kicked in, our homes raided and wrecked and our sons or husbands dragged off to the H-Blocks?’”¹⁹⁹

Many republican women agreed with this sentiment. Doubly oppressed as Catholics *and* women, they chose to prioritize the republican struggle. Bernadette Devlin said in a 1988 interview that she believed that the best feminists are those who have come through the republican movement, because they understand all layers of oppression, not just sexual or gender oppression.²⁰⁰ These women believed that they proved their equality with men through their IRA involvement, and that once the republican movement was successful, the men would recognize the needs of the women who helped them, such as equal pay, access to contraceptives, and domestic violence laws.²⁰¹ The same volunteer who asked how Catholic women could worry about abortion when their homes were being raided assured her interviewer, “There is no way any men are going to be able to say ‘Thanks for your help— now we’ll get on the business of running the country.’ They’d be lynched.”²⁰² Republican men had, indeed, tried to do just this during the no-wash protest. They appreciated the sacrifices women had made that resulted in their imprisonment, but preferred they did not participate in the prison protests as the men did. But the Armagh women had not listened; they refused to be thanked for their service and summarily dismissed. They would not allow this to happen at the end of the struggle either. Republican women wanted to make it clear that they were here to stay.

¹⁹⁹ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 260-261.

²⁰⁰ *Mother Ireland*, 40:28.

²⁰¹ Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 260.

²⁰² Fairweather, McDonough, and McFadyean, *Only the Rivers Run Free*, 261.

What do the biographies of Brigid Sheils, Bernadette Devlin, and Mairead Farrell reveal about republicanism and feminism in Northern Ireland? How do these women, and the Armagh women of the dirty protest, represent a broader trend of female involvement in the Troubles? These women were fully committed to their cause: Sheils, Devlin, and Farrell all knew that arrest and imprisonment were possible consequences of their republican activities, yet they participated nonetheless. All three ran for political election— though Devlin was the most successful of the three in this regard, Sheils was a city councilor in Limerick, and Farrell stood for parliamentary election while she was in Armagh. They were not merely passive participants. They wanted to actively be involved in changing their country.

Brigid Sheils Makowski, Bernadette Devlin, and Mairead Farrell all willingly chose their paths. They were not pressured into joining the IRA by men, as British propaganda and non-republican feminists often claimed. None of these women ever expressed regret in their choices, or intimated that their participation was in any way involuntary. On the contrary, many women fought to be included in the movement. They were willing to sacrifice as much as republican men, if not more. Subverting traditional Irish Catholic conceptions of femininity and womanhood, these women were criticized by the public for their participation in a non-domestic, risky, and often violent movement. Many were wives and mothers; a few even gave birth in prison.²⁰³ These women who were supposed to be totally dedicated to their homes and families were condemned for

²⁰³ Margaretta D’Arcy wrote of one woman she met while at Armagh had been three months pregnant when she was arrested and refused bail. A nursery was prepared in one of the cells, and she kept her baby for six weeks before the child was sent out to be fostered by a family member. The woman saw her child once a month; at the time the book was written, the child was three years old. D’Arcy wrote, “[W]e salute her courage in remaining on the no-wash protest— for had she come off it, she would gain the remission that would enable her to be at home with her baby eight years sooner” (D’Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*, 71-2).

abandoning their duties. Moreover, the taboo topic of menstruation was brought to the forefront during the no-wash protest. The Armagh women were dirty; they were unable to hide their menstruation as they were expected to do in normal circumstances. Though their blood was a physical sign of their womanliness, it was considered unfeminine. The women were encouraged by the press, the IRA leadership, the Church, and even their parents to abandon the protest.²⁰⁴ Never before had Irish women shown such blatant and public disregard for norms of gender and femininity. By breaking the menstrual taboo, the Armagh women powerfully challenged traditional Irish conceptions of womanhood: not only would they fight for a united Ireland, they would give their blood for it. Despite these criticisms, despite the filth, despite the inherent risks involved, the women persisted.

Most republican women were feminists. They fought to be considered equals within the republican movement. They understood that they were far more vulnerable to criticisms than men because of their sex. The Armagh women deeply felt the consequences of sexual double standards when they were told to end their protest, to let the Long Kesh men carry the burden. These women were feminists. But under the circumstances of poverty, violence, and harassment of Catholics, their republicanism took precedent. They demonstrated their feminism *through* their republicanism. By claiming a place within the IRA and the larger republican movement, women asserted that they belonged at the forefront of whatever new Ireland would be created.

²⁰⁴ Murray, *Hard Time at Armagh Gaol*, 76.

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