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Female Republican Prisoners during the "Troubles" 1968–1998 in Northern Ireland: The Women's War

Renée Tosser*

In memory of Annmarie McWilliams,
(1957-2022)
Her soul radiated brightness

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to examine the imprisonment of female republicans[1] in Armagh prison during the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. It sheds light on their living conditions and strip searches which were carried out on a regular basis. It also considers the issues raised by the republican women's family obligations and highlights how incarceration impacted their lives after imprisonment. It analyses the consequences of incarceration in their lives. This study is particularly illustrated by the testimony of a priest, Raymond Murray, chaplain at Armagh prison, who was present daily with the women and who recounted the events he witnessed. It is also based on out-of-print documents and journals, as well as interviews with former activists. The imprisonment of republican prisoners highlights the political situation in Northern Ireland at the time of the "Troubles" and on the role that women played, both in prison and in their neighbourhoods in everyday life.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; resistance; female imprisonment; strip searches; human rights; oppression

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*The University of La Réunion, France, renee.tosser@univ-reunion.fr.

Figure 1 "Women in Struggle", Republican Museum, Conway Mill, Belfast. Work of art by Raymond Watson: "Irish women have always been at the forefront of the struggle for Irish freedom. This monument is dedicated to all those women" http://www.irishartworld.com/. Raymond Watson was a political prisoners in the H. Blocks. **(**Photograph : Renée Tosser July 2010, by kind permission of the artist and the museum.)

> "It is an uncomfortable fact, and unfair, that the four-year- protest for political status by republican women in Armagh gaol has long been overshadowed by the literature and focus on the same protest in the H-Blocks, largely because there ten men died on hunger strike in 1981."
> Gerry Adams, Sile Darragh's book launch "John Lennon's dead", Belfast, 05-08-2011.

Introduction

Thirty years after the 1981 hunger strikes in Long Kesh, Northern Ireland men's prison, Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Féin, paid tribute to Sile Darragh, a female republican who wrote a book about her time in prison. To account for what women went through during the 'Troubles' serves two aims: do justice to the part played by women during a period of conflict, and shed light on a tense and violent part of history. But to deal with the events which unfolded in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998 brings us to tackle controversial and thorny subjects. The legitimacy of the republican movement's actions is frequently questioned. For the IRA's detractors, the paramilitary group was just a terrorist group that waged an unjustifiable war in its country. As Ian McBride develops in an article devoted to the 1998 peace process and the difficulty to deal with the past in that province of the United Kingdom, no consensus was ever reached on the causes of the conflict so that there is no official interpretation of them. In much the same way, the period of what is called "The Troubles" is "variously interpreted as an ethnic conflict, an anti-colonial war, or a struggle between democracy and terrorism" (McBride 2017: 1). As the researcher demonstrates, opposing interpretations of the conflict account for the "communal divisions" which pervade in the country, fuelling a climate of mistrust. Among the reasons which justify such a divisive debate is the question of the "legitimacy of the IRA's campaign" (Mc Bride 2017: 4) and the violence used by the republican movement. The Provisional IRA which came into being in 1969, claims it was born in order to protect its community against sectarian attacks by extremist members of the other community. Former republican activists will also point out that they were also fighting 800 years of British occupation, a speech very frequently heard in their ranks.

In 2014, Northern Ireland's political leaders agreed to establish an Oral History Archive on the conflict in which academics would be involved in producing "a factual historical timeline and statistical analysis of the Troubles" (Mc Bride, 2017: 12). It was thus assumed that in order to obtain truth and reconciliation, both oral history and archival research would be instrumental (Mc Bride, 2017: 22). It is worth noting how complex the undertaking is. Fiona McCann clearly articulates the complexity of the issue and points out how, as Barbara Harlow notes, prison literature is "necessarily partisan and polemical" (F. McCann 2017: 2). Besides, the way republicanism is viewed is also sensitive, which has been underlined by L. Ryan and M. Ward: "The dominant view within the academy that (in the past), research that was not critical of republicanism" was suspect 2 (F. McCann 2017: 3). Finally, let us clarify the difficulty of producing oral history. The collection of speech, whether spontaneous or solicited, is not an academic type of interview that requires a consent form, which is inevitably

difficult to obtain in a country like Northern Ireland. I have spent every summer in Belfast for over fifteen years and go to the meetings, debates and workshops that are organised as part of the "Festival of the People" (Feile an Phobail[3]) every year in early August. This has given me the opportunity to engage with many of the former actors in the conflict, very rarely managing to have their consent for a formal, recorded interview. American academic Karen McElrath (Mc Elrath 2000) gives a good account of this difficulty, to which is added the absence of amnesty for former prisoners, making them wary. Ultimately, the content of the exchanges is also obviously sensitive. It is not easy to talk to a foreigner about intimate body searches that many people want to forget, in particular women,[4] especially as they are often felt to have been institutionalised sexual violence.[5]

The purpose of this paper is precisely to give a voice to a few unheard women who agreed to be recorded and very well expressed feelings that are often brought up in former prisoners' associations and discussions; and also a former priest, Monsignor Raymond Murray, who visited the female prisoners of Armagh every day for years during the hunger strike and the "dirty protest" in the 1980s. I spoke with the latter on several occasions and he agreed to meet me and answer my questions whenever I asked him to. He repeatedly lamented the absence of academics during these years of conflict. It was undoubtedly essential to hear this leading witness who wrote extensively about the events he witnessed, published the testimony of victims and sought to influence the debates and decisions of the prison authorities in particular.

This paper will first present the background to a conflict rooted in the past before focusing on republican activism and imprisonment. It will then consider the specificity of feminine strip searches in Armagh prison and the resistance action female prisoners carried out during their detention, which will lead to an awareness of the part played by women in the Catholic community of Northern Ireland. The impact of detention will be considered.

The Historical Background: The context of an old conflict

The 12th century Anglo-Norman invasion was the starting point of the English conquest of Ireland which was completed by Queen Elizabeth I in the 16th century. That conquest was followed by the colonisation of Ulster and massive confiscations of land the two following centuries. What came to be known as the "Irish Question"[6] refers very broadly to the problems arising from the conflicting relations between Ireland and Great Britain,and not to what was modestly called the "Troubles", a real war that officially lasted from 1968 to 1998. We can consider that the end of the 15th century marked a turning point and the beginning of a new era of English political domination: Following the appointment of Sir Edward Poynings as Lord

Deputy, all laws passed by Parliament would henceforth bear the seal of the King of England This domination intensified from the Tudor reign onwards, which meant colonisation in the modern sense of the word, with the political, economic, social and cultural takeover of Ireland [7], and the conflict becoming confessional in character. The North of the island, Ulster, proved to be the most combative in its struggle against the English occupiers. Pockets of resistance were concentrated there (Brennan 1991: 11). This resistance was defeated in 1603 and the North of the country was soon settled by a Protestant population. Such a strategy of conquest saw the Irish population dispossessed of almost all their land. In response to the Catholic uprisings in 1641, Oliver Cromwell implemented a fierce repressive policy, followed by a massive settlement of Protestants from England and Scotland in the North East of the island in particular. By the end of the century, the native Irish had only 5% of the country's land. The Northern Ireland question is therefore rooted in the history of the country, due to this mass arrival of Calvinists in the early 17th century.

The impact of the cultural shock that this influx of foreigners represented should be emphasised: a rural, decentralised world was suddenly occupied by a population of industrial and urban workers, professing a different faith. As a result of the Penal Laws of 1690, the Irish were deprived of the right to own even a horse. This legislation was designed to impoverish them, prevent them from speaking their language, practising their religion, exercising any power in the legal or military sphere. The aim was to neutralise Catholics in the public sphere while ensuring power and wealth for what was called the Protestant Ascendancy (Brennan 1991: 11). The combination of these reasons, and any refusal to assimilate being evident from the outset, had the effect of deeply entrenching resentment against the English, particularly in the North of the island. John Darby refers to the settlers' "beleaguered" mentality and the sense of mutual distrust that arose, which he concludes, is the source of the Northern Ireland conflict. Studying its context, John Darby underlines the fact that, within Ireland itself, Ulster has always been apart, starting with the resistance it put up against the English settlement (Darby, 1983: 14). The impact caused by the presence of the settlers is highlighted by the author, for it reflects an early resentment of the Irish towards the English particularly in that part of the country. The establishment of a Protestant population in Ulster was accompanied by the displacement of indigenous people who were confined to the boggy regions. The early plantation of Ulster, which represented a culture alien to Ulster, actually sowed the seeds of the modern Troubles in Northern Ireland as John Darby analyses, and does account for them[8].

It would be inaccurate to oversimplify the issue of the Irish Question and consider it in a binary vision that would oppose the Protestants of British stock, and the Catholics of Irish stock. Ireland had a very strong nationalist

movement, Protestant in the 18th century, then Catholic in the following century [9]. It was indeed "enlightened" English-speaking intellectuals who initiated a movement for the Irish language and culture during the 18th century, in order to keep the country's cultural heritage alive. This preservation work served to cement the nationalist cause. The 19th century saw the gradual emergence of the Catholic majority as a political power in Ireland. The first half of the century was dominated by the struggle for Catholic emancipation and the second half by the independence and land reform campaigns of the 1880s. The two movements merged into a broad independence movement for Home Rule. 19th century Ireland was thus deeply politicised. It should be noted however that during the same century, reverence for testimonies of the past became all-important and fuelled a veritable cultural nationalism.

The strength of the nationalist movement was such that it seems to have been the priority in Ireland, at that time in particular. The part played by women in this powerful movement is to be underlined as it is remarkable: trade unionists, linguists, warriors, theorists, writers, artists, Irish women were involved body and soul in the Irish cause. Despite the plurality of their opinions and commitments, many women showed their willingness to influence the country's decisions through their common involvement in the campaign for women's suffrage. It is also surprising to note that long before the partition of the island, which saw women's rights largely curtailed in the southern part of the island, particularly due to the 1937 Constitution that limited their role to the domestic sphere, many women activists did not marry and were financially independent. Rosamund Jacob (1888-1960), Helena Molony (1883-1967), Mary Galway (1864-1928), Kathleen Lynn (1874-1955) and Louie Bennett (1870-1956) for example, were fully involved, each in their own way, in the cause of Ireland. They were all extremely active. Catholic or Protestant (Mary Galway, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946) and Helena Molony came from Catholic families), they engaged in union and political struggle with passion: Mary Galway, a pioneer in the union struggle, was the first woman to serve as a full-time unionist; Kathleen Lynn, a medical doctor despite the opposition of her family who disowned her, and a general practitioner for Sinn Féin, accomplished considerable work in the medical field with her research and the creation of St Ultan's, a children's hospital; Hanna Skeffington, an ardent nationalist and member of Sinn Féin, was a particularly combative activist, as was Helena Molony, a friend and partner of Maud Gonne in Inghinidhe na hÉireann, a movement to which Rosamond Jacob, another feminist and writer, also belonged. Margaret Cousins (1878-1954) is particularly representative of another aspect of these women, because she had an internationalist vision of the human condition, a vision that characterized almost all of them: concerned with the destiny of Ireland, they

also often travelled in America, Russia and throughout Europe. Maud Gonne is a representative illustration of involvement at home and abroad.

The Gaelic League in particular attracted to its fold some quite brilliant and remarkable female personalities, such as the artist Alice Milligan who defined herself as a "radical nationalist" (Morris 2013:152). The cultural association mobilized a significant number of women across the country to keep the Irish language alive and to foster a distinctively Irish spirit. Thus, many anonymous women have worked considerably for their country, showing their willingness to resist in their own way to the British presence in their island. Emily M. Weddal was one of those little-known members of the Gaelic League whose commitment was described by Iosold NI Dheirg (NI Dheirg 1995), a historian working at the Dublin Language Institute. Emily established a branch of the League in Dooagh and then had an Irish language school built at her own expense in Achill. This school breathed life into the island and even promoted the economic development of this remote part of Ireland. Emily M. Weddal was one of many women who developed the community aspect of Ireland where men and women worked side by side (Tosser 2000).

Let us also underline how wives, daughters or sisters of well-known activists regularly took an important part in these cultural or political actions, as for example Anna Parnell, sister of Charles Steward Parnell, (leader of the Home Rule league) who accomplished considerable work with her brother and during the latter's incarceration[10].

Women also took up arms during the Great Irish Revolution of 1916, as Margaret Ward points out: "The failed insurrection of 1916, as Irish suffragist Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington recognised, was unique in being the only instance in history where men fighting for freedom voluntarily included women" (Ward 1996: 2). The historian notes how the classic representation of Countess Markiewicz, proudly brandishing her revolver, was in fact typical of this period and she notes that some women were recognized as exceptional snipers, like Eilis ni Chorra (Ward 1995) or Margaret Skinnider.

Female members of the Irish Citizen army were armed during the uprising, as were members of Cumann na mBan. The role of women activists as messengers during this pivotal moment in Irish history was simply crucial, as Margaret Ward underlines. Several women played an important role during the uprising, travelling around the country to relay important messages. James Connolly's daughter, Nora Connolly, was the first to fill this role, preceding Mayor Perolz in Cork, or Eily O'Hanrahan in Enniscorthy, as well as Nancy Wise Power & others in Dundalk, Tralee & Waterford, in order to mobilize the armed forces of the countryside. Proof of their participation in the armed struggle, the women accompanied the men to surrender their weapons during the surrender (Ward, 1995).

The fact that many women placed the national question before the cause of women is fundamentally indicative of their selflessness, and of a broad vision of the struggle they intended to wage in their country. Rosemary Cullen Owens's portrait Louie Bennett fits well with this description of the committed trade unionist who was, according to the author, above all nationalist: “Many of the women who entered the political arena post 1916 did so from a nationalist, not a feminist, perspective (Cullens Owens, 2001, 28)”. We understand well how, following the partition of the island, the northern part of the island made these struggles still relevant in the province of the United Kingdom located in the land of Ireland. As we will see, this partition exacerbated identity issues and tensions in the north that were supposedly settled in the south with the 1916 revolution.

In 1916, a group of insurgents attempted to seize power and proclaimed the Republic. The 1916 uprising was a military failure, but a symbolic success. Indeed, the severity of the punishment of the main insurgents, almost all of whom were put to death, outraged the population. The movement for Independence which had already begun in 1886, in the form of a Home Rule project, was rejected by Ulster with all its might. At the end of the First World War in 1918, the year of the victory of the Sinn Féin (meaning “We ourselves”) movement, the country became bogged down in a war of “Independence” that seemed hopeless for the British government and particularly difficult to control because of its clandestine nature.[11] The guerrilla warfare waged by the I.R.A., the newly formed Irish Republican Army, undermined the British forces, who increased the creation of special forces, the Blacks and Tans and the Auxiliaries, to break the Irish independence movement. Overwhelmed by the military and civil resistance of the republicans and a real civil war that moved the English and international public opinion, the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, proposed the partition of the island within the framework of Home Rule with two separate parliaments, one in Dublin, for twenty-six counties, the other in Belfast for six of the nine counties of Ulster: this was the Government of Ireland Act of 23 December 1920 which was followed by the Treaty of London in 1921. Nevertheless, opposition to Home Rule was so strong among Unionists that it led to the formation of an armed movement in 1912, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which proved to be a valuable support for the strengthening of Protestant supremacy.

As early as 1920, the privileges of the Protestants were thus ensured thanks to a demographic division that was supposed to guarantee them the majority. The entire province then had 900,000 Protestants, compared to 700,000 Catholics. With three of its counties removed, the Protestant majority would be more comfortable, at two-thirds.[12] With Pierre Joannon, we can consider that the partition of Ireland was a *fait accompli,* but did not create it, since it existed in people’s minds before it was drawn on a map

(Joannon 2008: 508). It endorsed the assurance that the Catholic majority would be in the minority in this province of the United Kingdom, while the Protestant majority was in the minority in the rest of the island[13] . Michael Pool argued that the relationship between demographic characteristics and the most violent forms of ethnic conflict are linked (Poole 1983: 152). It shows how the partition of the island was seen as a threat by the Unionists. This feeling of powerlessness was particularly acute at the height of the Troubles in 1972 (Poole 1983: 157). The partition of Ireland was born out of the refusal of a section of the population to embrace Irish nationalism (Brennan 1991: 13-4). The separation of the island marked the failure of assimilation between the two communities.

When the country was partitioned, Northern Ireland was ruled exclusively by the leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party for fifty years and the Orange Order played a prominent role. In the mid-1930s, all contact with the Catholic population was discouraged; a boycott of this community was even advocated: the openly sectarian UPL (Unionist Protestant League) campaigned for real apartheid (Brewer 1998). The exaltation of Orangemen maintained exclusion through festivities, the famous Orange marches, which aimed at excluding the other community. This exaltation sustained the pogroms—violent attacks on the Catholic minority that preceded the formation of the Loyalist UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) in 1966 [14] and UDA (Ulster Defence Association) in 1971 —, not to mention the actions of the police special forces (Rolston 1987). The Catholic minority has always lived in a climate of terror, especially in certain areas of Belfast. The impression of permanent insecurity was all the stronger because of the collusion between the army, the police and the loyalist formations, which explains the climate of suspicion towards the forces of order in the republican districts. In 1966, the country experienced an upsurge in sectarian attacks on Catholics. Many Protestants feared losing their remaining advantages as traditional employment sources dried up. The situation became much worse in that period when the Irish Volunteer Force launched a series of attacks on Catholic homes, schools and shops. In the years that followed, tensions rose steadily until the summer of 1969. It then intensified further and led to a serious crisis within the I.R.A., some of whose members, who were then in the minority, deplored the inaction of their movement to provide concrete help to its population. The split in the organisation led to the birth of the Provisional IRA. The primary aim of this new formation was the protection of the civilian population, although it was not to limit its action to that. Prior to this date, the I.R.A. had moved towards a Marxist movement without being involved in organised armed struggle. It had ceased its armed struggle in the early 1960s due to the failure of its last campaign between 1956-1962, which thus signified the end of its militarily active campaign [15].

The Provisional IRA, which marked the rebirth of the republican movement, played a key role in the Troubles. In a country where the Catholic minority was in danger in its own neighbourhoods, the republican paramilitary group ensuring its protection thus took on a predominant role in this community, acting as regulators of all conflicts, even family ones, granting itself the roles of mediators, judges and executioners, governing the life of the Catholics. Women played an important role at once just after the formation of the Volunteers in 1913, and within the Provisional IRA when it was formed (see figure 3). During the 1960s, the civil rights movement, which began to campaign for a more equitable access to political power, social provision and cultural recognition, was violently repressed. The situation quickly deteriorated, especially during the summer months with Protestant marches throughout the region, including through or past Catholic areas. The period of the Orange marches from Easter to the end of the summer is often cited as having triggered the desire to join the Provisional IRA, as it generated a lot of violence and fear among the Catholic community in Northern Ireland[16]. In 1969, the British government sent in troops to enforce order and the situation became dramatic. What is called the Troubles is not a religious conflict, it is a political one. The Troubles especially cover the period from the end of the sixties until the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. According to George Boyce, the hostility of the Irish people towards England was the prime mover of Irish nationalism (Boyce 1995: 215). Combined with a powerful ethnic identity, as we have observed, this hostility fuelled the clandestine republican resistance. The tradition of hunger strikes particularly well accounts for such determination and extremism, as we shall see now.

A republican movement rooted in a culture of resistance

We have been able to underline that the cultural aspect of Irish nationalism was essential. It allows us to account for the power of the republican movement and also its characteristics. There is an original attitude in cultural nationalism, characterised by what could be called a "quest for sense'" or, at least, the justification of a cause. As John Hutchinson demonstrates, cultural nationalism is the first stage preceding actions and/or policy positions which, in a way, it fosters (Hutchinson 1987: 9). The case of 1916 insurgent Patrick Pearse is very instructive in this regard. He believed that cultural nationalism would save the country's soul and he joined the Gaelic League at a very young age in which he committed himself body and soul, later founding a school to implement his ideas and promote the love of Christian values. Then, under the influence of personalities such as Robert Emmet, Wolf Tone and John Mitchell, he produced more inflamed political writings, especially inspired by Thomas

Davis. From that moment, Patrick Pearse turned to mysticism, an inclination already detectable in his attitude towards religion, which developed as a political philosophy requiring final sacrifice for the sacred cause: Ireland's liberty. The cultural activist thus turned to political nationalism as the revolutionary's quote shows: 'Ireland a prisoner shall never be at peace', a phrase which can be seen in a mural in Ardoyne, Belfast. But the fact remains that before advocating taking up arms, the man of letters wanted to de-anglicize Ireland using only peaceful means, alongside Douglas Hyde and Eoin McNeill who founded the linguistic movement in 1893 (Tosser, 2000).

It is interesting to note that early on, the republican prisoners worked to make their past known, in order to better justify their struggle. Republican activists transformed their places of detention into places of learning. During their captivity, the prisoners taught themselves the language, literature, history, mythology and traditional songs of Ireland (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013). This knowledge truly cemented their commitment, which they felt was even more legitimate. It is therefore hardly surprising to note that republicans also coloured their struggles and means of resistance to make them typically Irish. The tradition of the hunger strike should probably be seen in the paradigm of a demand for justice which dates back to before the Christian era. George Sweeney argues that hunger striking as a method of protest can be traced to a time when oral legal codes, the Brehon Laws, were in force. The historian recalls that the notion of arbitration was the basis of those Laws (Sweeney 2004: 371) and he also indicates that within that context, "self-help was the only means to enforce a claim or right a wrong" (Sweeney 1993:2). The purpose was to seek redress through fasting against one's accused close to the offender's home in order to draw attention to the alleged wrongdoer as well, a deliberate tactic "employed by the powerless against the powerful" (Sweeney 1993: 2). It was usually successful. Let us observe how, in this non-violent and silent power struggle, the responsibility of the alleged perpetrator had to be heavy and visible. The striker put the wrongdoer face to face with his responsibilities for eternity. The establishment of Christianity did not put an end to that tradition. Fasting remained in force even if it evolved into a daytime conventionalised ritual and it was then given an extra flavour because of its Christ-like character when the country was Christianised in the fifth century[17].

The tactic of hunger striking was widely used by the republicans, showing their determination, the strength of their commitment, and their ability to stick together very strongly. The figures are impressive, as George Sweeney indicates: "In October 1923, more than 8000 political prisoners, opposed to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, went on hunger strike: Between 1913 and 1923, fifty hunger strikes were organised, involving both male and female prisoners in this form of political confrontation" (Sweeney 1993:3). The republican notion of sacrifice was particularly evident in the 1916

revolution. The insurgents, aware that their attempted uprising was doomed to failure, were also prepared to die for Ireland, as their final writings (Mac Lochlainn 2005) among others, make clear. It is therefore hardly surprising to see such an impulse of sacrificial struggle a few years later, when for many of them, the partition of the island was synonymous with treason. Determined to fight against the very principle of their detention, they also aimed at protesting against the British authorities. It is clear how the tradition of protest was particularly suited to the historical and political context of the period. The hunger strike was also a way of drawing the attention of the rest of the world. Terence McSwiney's death on 25 October 1920 after 74 days on hunger strike struck international support (Sweeney 1993: 10), and his declaration became a slogan for many activists: "It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can endure the most who will prevail."

David Matthew Doyle shows that this strength of republican commitment explains why the use of the death penalty was definitively crushed on the eve of the Second World War in order to avoid a martyr culture in Northern Ireland (Doyle 2015). We can imagine, however, that the absence of the possibility of capital punishment deprived the authorities of an invaluable means of pressure that was liable to have serious consequences for republicans. Imprisonment would likely be toughened. A few dates corroborate this view of the prison situation for republican prisoners shortly after the Troubles began: firstly 1971, when internment without trial had been introduced, the number of incarcerations therefore increased quite considerably, and cases of beatings were reported as we will see; secondly 1976, when the status of political prisoners was withdrawn for newly admitted prisoners; 1978, when the no-wash or dirty protest began and lastly 1980 and 1981, when prisoners resorted to hunger strikes. The year 1976 was a turning point as it signalled a hardening of the attitude of the British authorities in prison, and the beginning of a period of great violence that would culminate in hunger strikes a few years later, in 1981 especially. As David Beresford analyses:

> Criminalization was a denial of a belief held dear by Republican Ireland—that husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, grand-parents and great grandparents who had suffered and died for Irish independence had done so in the high cause of patriotism. And so it was that on September 16, 1976, when a squabble started between warders and a prisoner being admitted to Her Majesty's Prison Maze, the ghosts of an ancient cause were looking over the shoulder of the convicted man. (Beresford 1987: 16)

Having refused to wear the prison uniform Ciaran Nugent was put in a cell without clothes, so he used his blanket to cover himself, thus becoming the first 'blanket man'. The "blanket protest" marked the beginning of a period when some hundreds of prisoners had to face "cold, isolation and violence", as Bill Rolston and Laurence McKeown analyse (Rolston / McKeown 2017: 271). The situation deteriorated further as a result of the conditions in which the prisoners had access to the toilet. The literature of writings and interviews conducted over the last thirty years describe the same mechanism of escalation in the processes of resistance and repression. This same pattern occurred in Armagh Women's Prison, as we shall see. Begona Aretxaga who also worked on the basis of interviews she conducted herself, described how "physiological necessities such as food and excretory functions became a focus of humiliating practices" (Aretxaga 1995: 126) which resulted in the dirty protest two years later in Long Kesh in 1978 (Beresford 1987: 17). The prisoners' decisions were collective, and considered. As shocking as it may seem, the dirty protest must be seen in the context of a refusal to accept the policy of "normalisation" or "criminalisation." Since leaving the cells to go to the toilet was abusive, prisoners would no longer leave their cells and dispose of the contents of their chamber pots directly in them. This was a radical and seemingly barbaric step which may seem difficult to understand, even if the mechanism, the sequence of events, makes it possible to grasp how these extreme actions came about. The simple fact that this mode of protest existed remains a subject of controversy.

Whatever the reasons for the protest, they show how appalling the situation was for these prisoners, leading to a cycle of repression: the "history of political imprisonment and internment in the North is that of institutionalised punishment by the authorities and collective resistance by prisoners" write Linda Moore and Phil Scraton (Moore / Scraton 2010: 6). The strength of this resistance is noteworthy: "carceral violence has been used against political prisoners all over the world, including Ireland, yet there is no other case in which prisoners resisted with something like the dirt protest" writes Begona Aretxaga (Aretxaga 1995: 125). The republicans went a step further by resorting to a hunger strike to obtain better prison conditions. It is likely that Bobby Sands, who was the first republican to stop eating on 1 March 1981, knew that he would not survive, hence the decision to enter this ultimate resistance movement one by one. The aim of this protest was to make it long-lasting, therefore activists should not die at the same time. This means that this strike system where individuals, not groups, take action decided together, was based on the determination of each member of the group. It rested on their personal commitment and the very strong ties that existed between them. Bill Rolston and Laurence McKeown examined the mechanisms of this resistance and consider how "homosociality—male fraternity without homosexual desire—was fashioned

in the prison system.'" They demonstrate that "the interplay between it and political solidarity enabled the prisoners not simply to endure the individual pains of imprisonment but to mount a sustained resistance in the face of an often brutal regime" (Rolston / McKeown 2017: 265). Remarking that a sense of solidarity already existed before the detention, the two researchers show how increased solidarity was the strategic response to prison violence (Rolston / McKeown 2017: 275), a process which involved repression of their emotions and harshness towards themselves and they conclude: "Homosociality, […] an alternative form of masculine hegemony built on surviving rather than administering violence, and a shared ideology saw prison resistance not as a hiatus but as another front in the struggle" (Rolston / McKeown 2017: 282). Taking the risk of dying imprisoned in such horrendous conditions did correspond to the historical hunger strike as it existed in medieval Ireland, seeking to bring to light the injustice and dishonour that could befall their tormentors. The dirty protest made visible the conditions of life of republican prisoners in prison.

The hunger strike by three republican women in Armagh prison is much less well known than the first hunger strike by male activists in 1980. However, three female republicans (Mairead Farrell, Margaret Mairead and Mary Doyle Nugent) stopped eating on 1 December 1980 following the first strike in Long Kesh on 27 October. Mary Doyle recalls how Cardinal O Fiaich came to see them, alerted of their situation by the prison chaplain, and she writes: "Fr Murray was a brilliant chaplain, and there were times when I don't know what we would have done without him." (Morrison Danny ed., 2006: 27). Father Raymond Murray, who was ordained priest in 1962 and appointed curate in Armagh in 1967, devoted his life to his parish. The man, who is very critical of paramilitary groups, describes a country living in fear in the seventies, when even lawyers did not want to get involved (Interview, July 2015). Together with Fr Denis Faul, he wrote numerous books and booklets and travelled the world to bear witness to what he considered violations of human rights in Northern Ireland prisons particularly from 1971, when he himself noted cases of torture on republican prisoners, as we will see. The testimonies of the churchmen are invaluable as they regularly saw the conditions in which the prisoners lived. Cardinal Tomas O Fiaich, the Catholic primate of Ireland, openly criticized the inflexibility of the British government after visiting the republican prisoners of Long Kesh in 1978. He wrote that the conditions of incarceration of the prisoners were inhumane and voiced concerns about beatings and ill treatments (Aretxaga 1995: 134). As for Father Murray, he was a vigilant witness to the women prisoners of Armagh he visited every day. He also revealed facts and conditions of detention so difficult that they could have inspired doubt among the detractors of the republican movement. His daily presence and the collection of women's voices that he was able to make, offers us a

picture of the situation of women incarcerated in Armagh prison during the most critical period for republican prisoners.

Figure 2 Mural representing hunger strikes in Long Kesh and Armagh, by the Bogside artists, Derry. Photograph : Renée Tosser, July 2009.

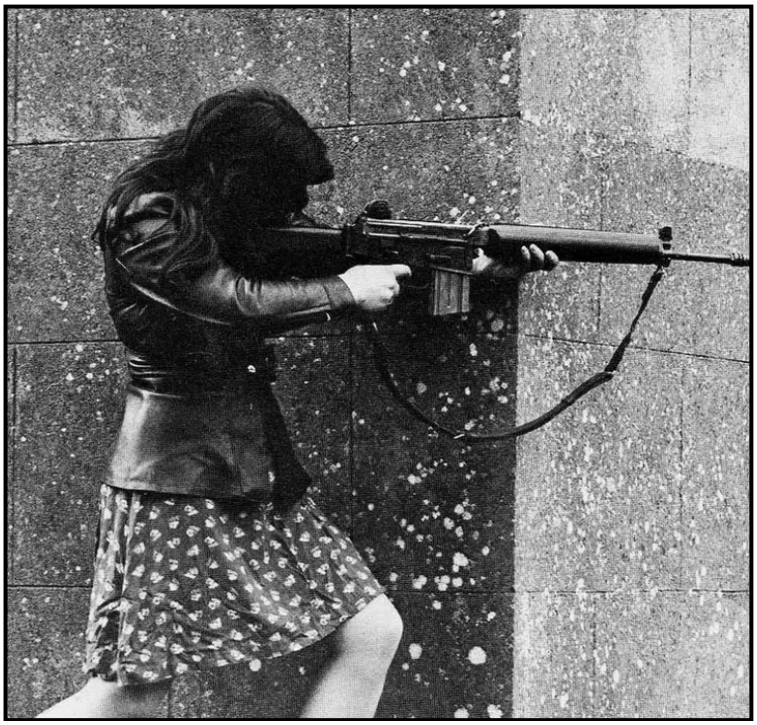
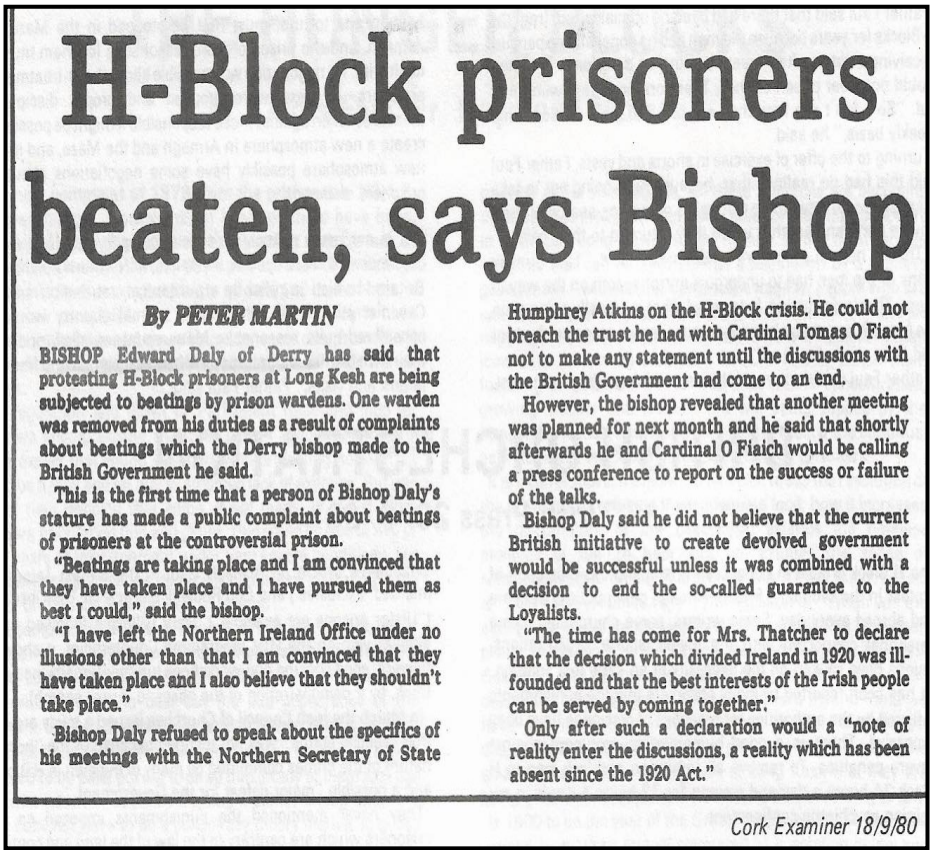


Figure 3 Female republican, Republican Museum, Belfast.
By kind permission.

Republican female imprisonment and protests in Armagh. The testimony of Fr Raymond Murray, chaplain of Armagh prison

Armagh Prison opened in 1782 and originally held both males and females but eventually became the main female jail in the North of Ireland until Maghaberry was opened in 1986. The place Father Raymond Murray described as dark and "in a poor condition" (Murray, *Hard Times* 1998: 90) emerged as the key battleground for female republicans held in captivity. The priest stresses the importance of the date of 1971, which was when he states that he was able to see for himself the marks left by torture during the interrogations. He openly denounced the brutality and ill treatment in some police stations and in the two major interrogation centres of Castlereagh, Belfast, as well as in Armagh: "December 1971 marked a watershed in my life. Political prisoners who had been ill-treated and tortured in Hollywood Palace Barracks and Girdwood Park Barracks. I saw the horrific marks on their bodies" (Raymond Murray *State Violence* 1998: 7). These events led him—and Father Denis Faul—to campaign in order to make known what he was witnessing. To Fr Raymond Murray, the prisoners were severely tortured before being sent to prison, as the Armagh parish curate testifies in a

book devoted to the prison for women: "I saw myself the many bruises and injuries on the prisoners' bodies that had been inflicted on them during interrogation procedures" (Raymond Murray, Interview 2015). Fr Raymond Murray and Fr Denis Faul were not the only clergymen to denounce this state of affairs: in an article published by the *Cork Examiner* on 18 September 1980, Bishop Daly reported similar incidents in Long Kesh prison and the article stated: "This is the first time that a person of Bishop Daly's stature has made a public complaint about beatings of prisoners at the controversial prison" (Murray / Faul 1980: 50) (Figure 4).



H-Block prisoners beaten, says Bishop

By PETER MARTIN

BISHOP Edward Daly of Derry has said that protesting H-Block prisoners at Long Kesh are being subjected to beatings by prison wardens. One warden was removed from his duties as a result of complaints about beatings which the Derry bishop made to the British Government he said.

This is the first time that a person of Bishop Daly's stature has made a public complaint about beatings of prisoners at the controversial prison.

"Beatings are taking place and I am convinced that they have taken place and I have pursued them as best I could," said the bishop.

"I have left the Northern Ireland Office under no illusions other than that I am convinced that they have taken place and I also believe that they shouldn't take place."

Bishop Daly refused to speak about the specifics of his meetings with the Northern Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins on the H-Block crisis. He could not breach the trust he had with Cardinal Tomas O Fiach not to make any statement until the discussions with the British Government had come to an end.

However, the bishop revealed that another meeting was planned for next month and he said that shortly afterwards he and Cardinal O Fiaich would be calling a press conference to report on the success or failure of the talks.

Bishop Daly said he did not believe that the current British initiative to create devolved government would be successful unless it was combined with a decision to end the so-called guarantee to the Loyalists.

"The time has come for Mrs. Thatcher to declare that the decision which divided Ireland in 1920 was ill-founded and that the best interests of the Irish people can be served by coming together."

Only after such a declaration would a "note of reality enter the discussions, a reality which has been absent since the 1920 Act."

Cork Examiner 18/9/80

Figure 4 Article published by Cork Examiner in 1980, source: Murray / Faul 1980: 50). By kind permission.

Like the men in the H-Blocks, the women in Armagh Prison convicted after 1 March 1976 were also told they would not be given special category status. It meant their status as political prisoners was no longer recognized, and they would be considered ordinary prisoners. They joined the protest of

the men's political prisoners in 1977. Unlike men, women were allowed to keep their civilian clothes but lost what were considered rights or privileges, in particular the possibility of leaving their cells. The document that Fr Raymond Murray published jointly with Father Faul, on the identity of the prisoners, and the duration of their incarceration in particular, gives us some valuable clues: the youth of these women is noteworthy as is the length of their personal commitment. These very young girls had been in protest, in other words, living in confinement in their cells for at least a year, some for three years (Figure 5).

Protesters in "A" Wing Armagh Prison, March 1980

* Age when charged in Brackets.

NAMES	AGES*	AREA	SENTENCE	HOW LONG ON PROTEST
Briege Ann McCaughley	(17) 20	Andersonstown	10 years	2 years
Mairead Nugent	(17) 20	Andersonstown	12 years	2 years 6 months
Mairead Farrell	(19) 23	Andersonstown	14 years	2 years 6 months
Rose McAllister	(39) 41	Ardoyne	2 years	1 year 10 months
Maria McClenaghan	(22) 24	Ardoyne	5 years	2 years
Patricia McGarry	(17) 20	Ardoyne	10 years	2 years
Katrina Pettigrew	(17) 22	Ballymurphy	8 years	1 year 4 months
Eileen McConville	(21) 22	Ballymurphy	2 years	18 months
Ann-Marie Quinn	(17) 20	Ballymurphy	12 years	2 years 10 months
Rosie Nolan	(21) 23	Ballymurphy	10 years	1 year
Christine Beattie	(19) 21	Bone	12 years	1 year 3 months
Janet Murphy	(24) 26	Bone	5 years	1 year 3 months
Eilis O'Connor	(19) 22	Bone	5 years	2 years 10 months
Marie Donerty	(18) 21	Derry	4 years	2 years 6 months
Sadie McGilloway	(21) 23	Derry	8 years	1 year
Pauline McLaughlin	(19) 23	Derry	D. Sec. of State	2 years
Bernie O'Boyle	(20) 24	Derry	15 years	2 years 5 months
Lynn O'Connell	(21) 23	Derry	8 years	1 year
Ann Bateson	(20) 23	S/Derry	Life	2 years 5 months
Dolores O'Neill	(22) 25	S/Derry	Life	2 years 5 months
Patricia Craig	(17) 20	Downpatrick	7 years	1 year 3 months
Mary Doyle	(21) 24	Greencastle/Bel.	8 years	1 year 3 months
Maureen Gibson	(19) 22	Kashmir, Bel.	3 years	2 years 6 months
Sinead Moore	(18) 22	Lenadoon	10 years	2 years 6 months
Ellen McGuigan	(23) 25	Lenadoon	16 years	1 year
Teresa McEvoy	(22) 24	Markets	5 years	1 year 3 months
Shirley Devlin	(17) 20	Newington	4 years	2 years 9 months
Peggy Friel	(19) 22	New Lodge	6 years	3 years 1 month
Eileen Morgan	(18) 22	Newry	14 years	3 years 3 months
Rosie Callaghan	(17) 20	Short Strand	5 years	2 years
Sile Darragh	(18) 22	Short Strand	5 years	3 years
Briege Brownlee	(18) 20	St. James.	8 years	1 year 4 months

Figure 5 Article published by Cork Examiner in 1980 (source: Murray / Faul 1980: 54). By kind permission.

The priest indicated that because of the long sentences, ranging from five years to life imprisonment, and the confined nature of imprisonment due to continual lock-up in their cell, many female prisoners contracted illnesses, several suffering from anorexia nervosa (Murray, Interview 2015). A lack of decent food and medical neglect were already pointed out by the churchman in 1978: headaches, fainting spells, failing eyesight, skin rashes and dental problems to name but a few. The course of events which led to the dirty protest in Armagh had a different origin from the one in Long Kesh. It followed a search in Armagh Prison on 7 February 1980 during a period of great tension in the Province and in the men's prison. After that date, the situation became much worse and the no-wash (also called "dirty" protest) began in Armagh.

On February 7 1980, all cells were searched in an unusual and violent way. The purpose of the search was to look for black clothing, considered subversive as similar to that worn by Cumann na mBan members, the women's branch of the IRA,[18] sometimes worn by the women during their incarceration since 1972 (Murray / Faul 1980: 53). All the accounts dealing with the event tell about a visit paid by the governor accompanied by armed prison officers wearing helmets and gloves who brutally searched cells, in front of prisoners—which was normally not the rule, to avoid confrontation. They removed and turned furniture upside down, tore up letters, grabbed women, kicked and punched them[19.] No specific incident was put forward to justify what happened on that day, which marked the beginning of a dreadful situation. At the end of February 7, all personal items had been taken including photographs, and women were all given a prolonged body search. Locked up for the rest of the day until the next morning, the women were allowed to get out the following day only. The events of that day, and those that followed, caused the movement to harden, but the circumstances that accompanied it left their mark on the churchmen who wrote in 1980:

> The beating of women by men is revolting to decent human and Christian feelings and is associated with the primitive animal feeling of uncivilised or drunken or perverted human beings. To deliberately organise a large group to beat a group of helpless women would appear to be an action of peculiar heinousness; to do this on women who are imprisoned and helpless is worse; to misrepresent the truth about it is worse still and to punish further the unfortunate women who have been beaten severely and indecently is the worst of all. (Murray / Faul 1980: 52).

A former prisoner explains how the situation then escalated dramatically:

> We took our chamber pots with us, but when we asked the screws to open (the toilets) they told us we were only out for exercise, nothing else. There's no toilet and no washbasins in the cell, so we were puzzled about this. Again, we asked the screws to open up the toilets and again they refused. And so, we wondered what the hell we were going to do. The obvious thing was to get rid of it and pour it through the windows or the spy-holes. (Fairweather / McDonough / McFadyean 1984: 220).

All the testimonies attest to the same impasse: the impossibility for the prisoners to have access to the toilet and washing facilities. They were asked to use their chamber pots in the cells instead, but were then refused the possibility of emptying them so that they had no alternative: the no-wash protest thus began. According to Mairead Farrell, who was one of three republican women to go on hunger strike at the end of that year, Father Murray was not allowed to meet the inmates on that day, however, Cardinal O'Fiaich managed to visit them. The clergymen had the possibility of seeing the prisoners very regularly during their detention. "They have been forced into a dirt strike, no slopping out" wrote Fr Denis Faul, "to a great extent the prisoners were forced into their present situation. Beatings continued for a few days. Part of the punishment was to starve them. Food was cold and they received little of it. Punishments are severe and alienation has grown" (Murray / Faul 1980: 52-3). Figure 6

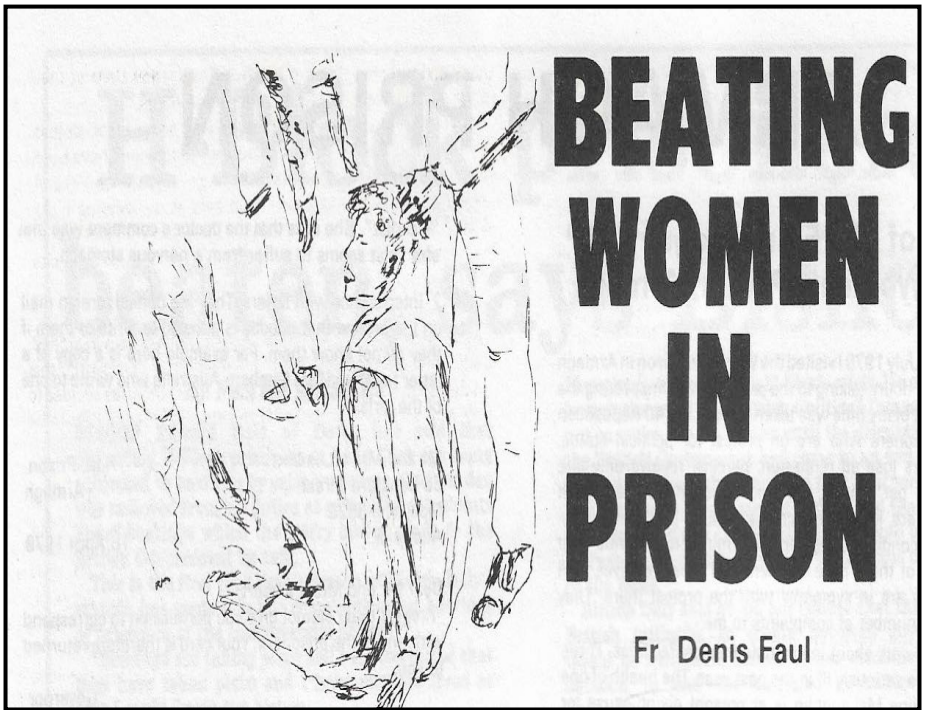


Figure 6 Article illustration, (source: Murray / Faul 1980: 52). By kind permission.

Mairead Farrell's account enables us to know that the female prisoners were not beaten before the no-wash protest:

> Before the no-wash, relationships between screws and girls were bearable, there were minor incidents but beatings did not exist. Now there has been a major change, if a girl takes too long to collect her meal or stops to speak through a door to a comrade, she will be dragged to her cell by a number of female screws. After such episodes the girls involved end up charged with assaulting screws (…) 'we are continually subjected to a tirade of abuse, screaming and bawling at us'(Murray / Faul 1980: 57).

The issue of regular insults is a recurring theme in the accounts of the prisoners, and also of the inhabitants of Catholic neighbourhoods. The sexual nature of the insults was apparently frequent. The threat of harm to the family circle also seems to have been a regular practice. Mary McGuigan's testimony collected by Father Murray illustrates these aspects well. The fifty-one-year-old woman was charged with taking part in a parade after being interrogated for several days:

> I took a lot of verbal abuse. I was questioned mostly by a young woman about the Easter Parade. The woman's talk was absolutely filthy, I never heard talk like it from anyone. She threatened to bash me against the wall and said she hoped I would live to go to the morgue to identify a member of my family in bits and pieces. Fr Faul came in for a lot of abuse. She said his day will come, too. She called me all the whores (…) She said I would end up rotting in Armagh among the piss and dirt but she said this would suit me as I was dirt anyway. Degraded me a lot. (Murray / Faul 1980: 19)

Fr Murray insists that women were generally very religious, and that these repeated insults to them or their mothers (Murray / Faul 1980: 31 and Murray Interview, 2015) were very damaging to their mental health. In such conditions of constant pressure, women's periods became highly stressful and humiliating experience, as Alexandra recounts in 2013:

> So, I was arrested and interrogated in Castlereigh. I had my period, you had to go to the toilet with a soldier. I was stained, I was wearing jeans (…) I had asked for sanitary towels, and they refused to get me them, so what I had done was I took off my jeans and pants and washed them and put them back on but actually it was the worst thing to do because when I came back and sat down, I made the situation worse: Your trousers are wet. It was awful. So, the second time I went to the toilets, when I realised what I had done, I thought, oh, God, so I tried to use loads of toilet paper. And I stopped drinking anything, and I did not eat anything because I wanted to make this stop (Alexandra, interview, 2013).

Mairead Farrell wrote that 'the sanitary towels (were) thrown into them without wrapping' which is confirmed by Rose's account of the no-wash protest: "Even when you took your periods you had nothing clean to change into. When you asked for sanitary towels they threw them into the cell. They were rationed, like everything else" (Fairweather / McDonough / McFadyean 1984: 221). In a testimony written by Mairead Farrell on the prisoners' living conditions in March 1980, six weeks after the cells search, and published by Fr Murray and Fr Faul in that year, the prisoner indicated that they "were not permitted paper bags or such like, so that they (sanitary towels) lie in the dirt until used, (and they have) nowhere to dispose of them when used," which led the women to display their menstrual blood on the walls.

Begona Aretxaga explores how, she posits, the female body was "politicized" and "colonized" in Armagh prison. Underlining the similarity of imprisonment in the H-Blocks and Armagh prison, she remarks that the handling and beatings were accompanied by exposure of the bodies of

women who would also be the objects of sexual remarks. Therefore, "the soul", she argues, "not the body" was the target of disciplinary power in Northern Ireland (Aretxaga 97: 130). Whatever the debate on the symbolical value of their protest, the Armagh women used their bodies as political weapons with tremendous determination, in the same way as the male prisoners did. By showing off their feminine suffering objectified by their menstrual blood, they made the no-wash protest look even more dirty and repulsive to warders, reversing the roles of executioner and victim. However, as symbol and weapon, the female "dirty protest" must have involved appalling anguish. The discomfort brought about by periods in such conditions made femininity degrading and bestial.

Republican activist Brendan McFarlane argues that the two protest movements had the same origin (Lyons 1996: 119) but we can see that this development in the no-wash protest movement introduced gender difference into prison life in Northern Ireland. We can agree with Linda Moore and Phil Scraton that the prison authorities' treatment of women's intimate hygiene was a way of controlling them. The researchers point out that reactions of disgust followed. The women had "transgressed codes of feminine propriety," to resume Corcoran's expression, contrary to the "blanket men" who had shown endurance (Scraton & Moore 2010: 5). In an article entitled "Menstruation as a weapon of war", Azrini Walidin studies how the women's bodies were used as "weapons of war." Does this mean that these extreme actions were the result of a strategic calculation on the part of the activists? It seems unlikely. Women wanted to show their endurance in putting up with what the authorities were doing to them. However, it is possible that by making their cells even more repulsive, the women knew that they were creating a barrier between themselves and their jailers, thus protecting them, as Mairead Farrell's remark may suggest: "The female screws who work on the wing are supplied with special overalls, boots and gloves and masks. At the beginning the masks weren't put to much use, but now it's seldom a screw is seen without them" (Murray / Faul 1980: 57). Ironically, some women prisoners used hygienic towels to help them cope with the stench of the cells (McCafferty 1981: 15). Remarking that bodies thus became "targets of repression and weapons of resistance," women actually took control of the prison as Laura Lyons demonstrates: "The prisoners appropriate the means of containment and point directly at the way in which the system that has incarcerated them is both morally and literally "full of shit" (Lyons 1996: 122). The expression is trivial, but the analysis is convincing. The behaviour of these women was in keeping with the Irish republican tradition of pushing the jailers to the limits that they themselves had set. The no-wash protest showed how appalling the living conditions of the prisoners were, especially for women, and how the latter were prepared to go beyond the boundaries of what was bearable, in order to be even more

resilient. By putting up with the unbearable, activists were also reversing notions of fault and guilt: “I look round the cell at the way I’m forced to live - I know who the real criminals are”, wrote Mairead Fairrell (Murray / Faul 1980: 58) (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Photograph of Mairead Farrell in her cell (source: Murray / Faul 1980: 56) By kind permission.

Whatever the purpose of these war actions within the prisons, the republican movement still inscribed its struggle in the resistance despite the horrific conditions of detention that Mairead Farrell relates in 1980:

> 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 windows, as the male screws have boarded them up. Little light or air penetrates the thick boarding. The electric light has to be kept on constantly in the cells, the other option is to sit in the dark. Regardless of day or night, the cells are dark. Now we can't see out the windows, our only view in the walls of excreta. (Murray / Faul 1980: 55)

Some of the details are terribly disturbing, such as the description of the hundreds of flies on the walls (McCafferty 1981: 15; D'Arcy 1981: 73), the pestilential smells and the physical reactions of disgust they may have inspired (Darragh 2011: 68). It is not surprising to read that such living conditions caused gynaecological problems of an infectious nature as reported by M. D'Arcy (D'Arcy: 80-1). In the midst of this gruelling daily life, the attitude of the prison guards seems to have been rooted in a permanent power struggle. Mairead Farrell indicates how "most of (the prisoners) empty our chambers on the wing when going to exercise, for if not, you only return to find the pot and its contents kicked around the floor of the cell" (p. 55). Similar scenarios have been described by Sile Darragh (Darragh, 2011: 78). Mairead Farrell also pointed out that: "At night they sometimes hose down the wing and the hose is pressed up to the doors spraying jets of water on us", and she added: "Every day conditions worsen, and every day the screws continue their harassment, six weeks have gone, our comrades in H Blocks, with one blanket have suffered it for years. How much longer will it continue?" (Murray / Faul 1980: 57).

Mary Doyle who took part in the hunger strike together with Mairead Farrell (and Margaret (Mairead) Nugent in that year, delivered a similar account of the prison officers' attitude: "The screws were abusive, particularly during cell searches. […] During the summer of 1980, the question was repeatedly asked: what's next? It was sort of inevitable that the only other avenue we had was to hunger strike" (Morrison 2006: 25). The prisoners in Long Kesh went on hunger strike on 27 October. The women in Armagh made their own decision to join the movement on 1 December. Mary Doyle explained that the guards always left food available for the strikers at all times:

> (Usually) The cell was never without food. Jail food is notoriously rotten and cold but all of a sudden, the plates were overflowing with steaming hot chips that smelt so appetising. A screw would say, 'those chips have been counted, so we'll know if you're eating' […] They were so petty (Morrison 2006: 26).

The hunger strike ended after nineteen days together with the hunger strike in Long Kesh and did not resume a year later in 1981 in Armagh. In

spite of the death of ten men in Long Kesh, the situation deteriorated even more a short time after that period when strip searches started in Armagh, a practise which the churchmen widely documented, allowing us to have a fairly accurate idea of the events of the time. In that war of pressure, and escalation of punishment, strip searches became common from 1982 onwards, that is to say about one year after the end of the second hunger strike in Long Kesh. To Fr Raymond Murray, the mental suffering reached a climax when the prisoners were stripped searched, the most degrading experience of all and he wrote:

> The stripping naked of the women in Armagh, now the pain plank of Mr Nicholas Scott's prison policy, was introduced on 9 November 1982, shortly after a delegation from 'Help the Prisoners' organisation, met Lord Gowrie. […] The answer was the stripping of women in Armagh and two years of intense agony and strife, tension and alienation, such as the prison never before experienced. […] the mental suffering of women, most of the Catholic and Irish, fits into the alienation context (Murray, *Hard Times*, 1998: 107-08).

Strip searches in Armagh Prison

According to the NCCL (National Council for Civil Liberties) which led an inquiry into the strip searching of women remand prisoners at Armagh Prison between 1982 and 1985, when the searches were first introduced, they were carried out as a matter of routine, which meant that every political prisoner leaving the prison for whatever reason would be strip searched. The report provides a detailed account of the procedure: "You are told to strip naked. You are always in view of prison staff who usually number about six (but sometimes as many as 15). When you are naked, your body is inspected front and rear." The report is very specific: "it is like a cattle market" and "menstruating women are ordered to remove their tampons or pads. If a prisoner refuses, their sanitary protection is forcibly removed and inspected" (NNCL, 1986: 13). The groups campaigning against strip-searching suggest that it was brutal, inhuman and very degrading.

Fr. Denis Faul's account bears witness to the same brutality, remarking that women with long hair were ordered to gather their hair in their hands and hold it on top of their heads which made the 'entire sordid affair look like a slave trade market' (Faul, 1983: 8). He equally reported allegations of assaults, injuries and offensive procedures. The churchman mentioned cases of women being searched in front of male warders—one searched nineteen times in eleven days although she was constantly locked up in a prison van (Faul, 1983: 3). The two clergymen both insisted on the fact that pregnant women were not spared at all: "A woman in an advanced state of pregnancy

was forced to strip twice inside fourteen hours. Needless to say there was no medical supervision in that case, there is no medical supervision in any of the searches" (Faul, 1983: 8). Fr Faul underlined how women deeply resented the strip searches and he observed:

> Those who have protested have been forcibly strip-searched and have suffered injuries. […] Some have been stripped naked and visually examined 120 times. […] I asked (one prison authority member) if he would like his daughter was stripped naked and had her genitals and anus examined by a stranger, he replied that he would not mind (Faul, 1983: 6).

Fr. Faul and Fr. Raymond Murray insisted on the immorality of such practices. Fr. Faul remarked that "there was not the same visual examination of the female private parts in English or Scottish prisons" (Faul, 1983: 7). He added that under the innocent title of "Reception Searches", the Northern Ireland Office brought into force a procedure which was designed to humiliate and degrade prisoners. Strip searches were by no means necessary, he wrote, besides he added, warders never found anything women would have attempted to hide. According to Mickey Cooper, "In the whole time that strip searches were enforced as a sustained policy the only items found were a phial of perfume, a £5 note, one letter and some medical tablet" (Cooper 201:85). Concerning the justification for such strip searches, the priest pointed out that they were carried out before and after court hearings, when the prisoners had never been alone, and that the same procedures were applied before and after funerals: "Imagine being stripped naked a few hours after burying your father?" (Murray, interview, 2015). The latter notes that an academic study supports this view:

> Dr Susan Kramer's study which was published in the *British Medical Journal*, indicates that 'between 11 November 1982 and 1 March 1983 a total of 722 strip searches were carried out in Armagh on an average of 40 women, most of whom were long term prisoners and never left the prison (Murray, State Violence 1998: 109).

To the priest, strip searching was "an end to dialogue", an unnecessary and widely practised procedure that was provocative, "a customary face in the face to our community" (Murray, State Violence, 1998: 108). To the former prisoners, strip searching was an attack on sexuality which was felt as a tool to humiliate the prisoners: "They are always attacking your sexuality in order to degrade you, to humiliate you and in order to beat you" (Pickering 2002: 177). The same point is made regarding searches by British forces in public spaces. Having to open one's coat and having one's

body felt by a soldier is described in quite strong terms: “These little humiliations are designed to make you feel rotten” (McCafferty1981: 74). Women prisoners’ accounts often link life in their quarters to the imprisonment that followed, even though the detention was a particularly degrading experience.

After imprisonment and outside Armagh

Female republican prisoners’ testimonies don’t reveal self-pity but extreme sadness and concern for their families or cellmates, as can be read in “In the Footsteps of Anne”, published in 2011. It is a big collection of interviews done by and about female ex-prisoners. The title was chosen by Eileen Hickey[20] who began the process of collating the stories of women ex POWs (Prisoners of War) until her death. Resiliency is the first outstanding concept which clearly pervades the accounts. The suppression of emotions women dealt with was clearly experienced by male and female republican prisoners alike. Prisoners showed toughness in the face of their warders in Armagh like in Long Kesh: “We could not show any emotion in front of the screws, we never let our guard down”, writes Sile Darragh, who accurately accounts for women’s sense of duty but also repression of feelings:

> At times, I was overcome with anger so raw that I had to clench my teeth to keep from screaming. At times I watched women so overwrought with anger and frustration that their only outlets were tears. We were like dangerous caged animals and the screws, not surprisingly, kept their distance (Darragh, 2012: 137).

The women imprisoned in Armagh Prison, equally adopted a “mask of toughness”, to use Bill Rolston's and Laurence McKeown’s phrase, leading them to suppress their emotions, to the point of masculinising their behaviour:

> You become very ‘manlike’ in your speech and the way you react to things. The way I saw I was, if I kept my softness, my femininity so to speak, I’d be seen as a sign of weakness. Therefore, I had to suppress my emotions […] Crying to me became a form of weakness so I didn’t cry when anything affected me (Fairweather / McDonough / McFaydyean1984: 225).[21]

This anaesthesia of feelings is combined with a desire to mask the difficulty of detention: Journalist N. McCafferty reports how the women did

their best to conceal their misery in front of their families in order to spare them:

> The protesting prisoners spend a total of six hours a year with their families. You should have seen the efforts made to look their best before a relative arrived. It's wonderful what you can achieve in a cell full of shit and blood. You'd do yourself up, using sweat to clean your face […] take your cleanest dirty shirt off the bed, maybe even a wee jacket you had hung on the wall and only used on that one visit a month (McCafferty, 1981: 15)

The stories of ex-prisoners do not tell much of their lives as wives or lovers or partners, nor do they expose anything about their lives as women as they were merged into one group and did not exist as individuals. More specifically, attention to other prisoners took precedence over attention to their own persons: "You always found that someone else was going through something far worse than what you were going through yourself, you always come across the idea that you are bad, but no, you are not" (Alexandra, Interview, 2013). Yet women prisoners very much suffered as mothers. Some gave birth in prison, others had young children who did not recognise their mothers when they visited them in jail as Nell MacCafferty reports: "At the age of six weeks, she (Jean Hamilton) sent the child out to her parents. She now sees her children once a month for half an hour. Neither of them recognises her mother" (McCafferty, 1981: 39). The consequences of imprisonment during pregnancy and childbirth in captivity are discussed by Sile Darragh who tackles the impact of maternal estrangement on young children. The consequence was even greater when women prisoners were involved in protests, as their time in captivity was extended:

> Three women gave birth while on the protest. Bernadette O'Boyle from Derry had a baby girl, Brenda Murphy from Ballymurphy had a girl, and Jeannie Hamill from Ardoyne had a boy. All three were allowed to keep their babies in the prison for a short time but then had to hand them over to family members and saw them for half an hour every four weeks after that. They missed some of the most important milestones of their babies' years. In all cases, as time went on, the children found it hard to relate to their mothers: they tended to view their aunts or grandmothers as their parent. If these women had not stayed on the protest, they would have been released after having served half of their sentences. (Darragh 2011: 22)

Female prisoners suffered enormously because they knew their own parents and family would be worried. Fr Murray indicated that for every person interned, thirty people were affected, of which women must have

been aware (Murray interview, 2015). Female prisoners' concern for their families also impacted their decisions, which may have caused guilt. Mary Doyle eventually renounced going on hunger strike again in 1981, one year after the first one: "Then I began to think about it more and more. You don't realise what you're putting your family through, and I decided I couldn't put my family through it again" (Morrison, 2006: 28).

The feeling of guilt certainly exemplifies the mental imprisonment women experienced during imprisonment and after it, whether they were actively involved in the republican movement or not: "My internment had a devastating effect on my family. I was in constant worry", Annmarie said. "You miss your family; you are worried about your family. My mother suffered a lot, too. She used to visit us almost every day. It was hard for her, all the travelling, she was always sick" (Annmarie, interview, 2013). Alexandra (fictitious name) voices the same concern:

> So of course, you think about that – parents coming to see you and having a car crash. I also had two little brothers so my mum had to come back on time to mind them so I was worried she would not arrive on time as it's quite a distance from Belfast to Armagh. You knew you put pressure on them (Alexandra, 2013).

The only girl in a family of ten children, Annmarie also confides how she regretted not having been able to help her mother while in prison. Worse still, she added never having been able to overcome her father's death when she was in Armagh: "It had a terrible impact on me because I had spent and lost two years in jail. I had all that resentment because of the two years I was away." Annmarie's account very well shows how imprisonment proved even worse after the event and for a long time:

> It was a very strange feeling, (when I got out of jail). I was a teenager at the time I was interned and everything was new, there were new people. It was like a different sort of street. […] There is a lot of emotional trauma that happened over the years in my life as a woman. Sometimes, something reminds me of a bad memory, a sound, a smell. Bad news. They affected me in a big big way. When you heard the jingle of the keys in the middle of the night because you knew that it would be for bad news, as the cells were never opened at night. […] After my mother's death, especially in the last 14 years, a lot of emotional baggage came back to me, and it held me back (Annmarie, interview, 2013).

The mental suffering mentioned by the priest seems to be confirmed by the testimonies, like Alexandra's: "Myself I no longer have nightmares but I used to have some. I remember one, me, walking in a cubicle and I could see dead bodies of friends hanging upon a wall" (Alexandra, 2013). Journalist

Nell McCafferty reports a testimony in the same vein: “I was depressed when I got out of jail. I spent a lot of time after that in my mother’s home or my own, feeling disjointed” (McCafferty, 1981: 50).

It is striking that there is similar guilt after imprisonment towards relatives, especially children. Alexandra whose house was constantly raided because she was a member of a republican family dwells on how frustrated she felt not having been able to protect her children enough. She was not politically involved and was imprisoned without trial for a few years, which prevented her from finding a job after jail because, she says: “I was in Armagh jail where I spent 3 years but there was no trial, there were no charges, I was just interned. I wasn’t convicted of anything”. She recalls how as an ex prisoner, she was perpetually harassed and threatened:

> We were constantly harassed by the Brits, we were constantly arrested, our house raided, you just got no peace. They just tortured you, so we decided to go south because one of the times they came, they arrested the three of us, my husband and my daughter who was only a year old. They came at 2 or 3 a.m., put us in a Saracen, I was protesting I had a baby, but we were taken to barracks. My arms were all black and blue because they took photos of her and I had put my arm to protect my daughter (Alexandra, Interview, 2013).

Alexandra’s account is of particular interest as it well illustrates the part played by nationalist (Catholic) women in everyday life. Her testimony reflects her constant concern to protect her family during a period of constant military presence, it shows the suffering caused by her inability to spare her children:

> You feel so sorry for your children who get pulled out at 3 o’clock in the morning. They just kicked in the door in, their faces black with their rifles. I remember one day they came after Christmas, on Boxing Day. My son had been offered a train and my daughter had been offered a fancy dress and they just broke them. They broke the toys on purpose. That day was a terrible experience. Also, they took all our photos, our two children when they were young, we never got them back; they took all of our children when they were wee babies. […] I still have scars about what the British have done.

Alexandra describes well some of the situations where it was difficult to properly take care of her family and how she feared the repercussions of certain stressful events for them:

> At another day, I remember, my daughter, it was her first day at secondary school, and they were laughing at her and saying to her: "Don't go to school, you don't need it" and they refused to let me out to take her to school, so I said, "do what you want, take what you want, I don't care but my daughter will go to school" and finally I managed to take her to school but when I came back, the whole place was in a mess.

Alexandra's testimony does correspond to Sharon Pickering's analysis of the political situation of Northern Ireland during the years of conflict, more precisely about the way women coped with the policing of the Troubles (Pickering 2002: 1)[22]. Sharon Pickering conducted a research based on a hundred interviews and studied how women have waged many struggles "which brought them into repeated contact with the forces of the state" (Pickering 2002: 5) and she remarks: "Women's political activity is often not for their rights as individual women, but as part of a class and a community who suffer collectively" (Pickering 2002: 9). Her reflection matches the picture painted by Eileen Fairweather, Roisin McDonough and Melanie McFadyean of life in Northern Ireland's Catholic neighbourhoods as they report on the constant and intimidating police presence. The omnipresence of women at all times, "as ever, the women outside, and the women in Armagh" (Fairweather, McDonagh / McFaydyean 1984: 101) left them permanently exposed in many ways, having to both protect their families and manage the day-to-day while playing their part to support the republican movement. For example, by leaving their doors open at all times during the Troubles, women facilitated the activists' escape, which was instrumental, and they took risks to save lives:

> 'Without that woman to open that door, […] I could have been killed' says one man called Paddy. With open doors during gun battles, the IRA could come rushing through and out the back. The British chasing them came running through, minutes later, raging with anger, and the women went on serving the tea to their children and coping with some big sergeant with a gun shoved up to her nose, and him backed up by a patrol. (McCafferty, 1981: 52)

Nell McCarfferty reports how, in a nutshell, women kept things going while protecting republicans. They used sheets and blankets and climbed on top of Saracen tanks to cover the gun slits. They picketed to support prisoners, sometimes blocking the traffic, sitting down and singing. They used their bodies as shields during confrontations and they also did their best to maintain an impression of normality in completely extraordinary circumstances. By doing so, they were brought into repeated contact with the forces of the state. A provisional (member of provisional IRA) confides:

“Women are brave. They’re the ones who are on the spot, and they don’t budge. […] Those women never realised how brave they were. They never knew how the area could not have survived, literally, without them” (McCafferty, 1981: 52). The Bogside artists dedicated a mural to the part played by women in everyday life (Figure 8). It is entitled “The Bernadette Mural”. The painting not only focuses on the female activist but also celebrates women using dustbins for warning of invading army or police. A female ex-prisoner posited that the women were “the backbone” (Alexandra, 2011) of Irish republican resistance in Northern Ireland.

Figure 8 The Bernadette Mural, The Bogside artists, Derry/LDerry). (Bernadette Devlin was elected to Westminster for Mid-Ulster on April 1969) Photograph: Renée Tosser, July 2010

Republicans' families, wives or partners were especially affected by police raids, which frequently happened in the early morning, around 3 or 4 o'clock. Any man or woman could be arrested for a "screening operation" and be kept in detention for interrogation. It was a general practice carried out mostly by the British Army to gather information on local communities. Sile Darragh indicates that "the army and RUC would attempt to blackmail, bribe or coerce the vulnerable into becoming informers, as well as interrogating people they suspected of being involved in or supportive of Republican activities" (Darragh, 2011: 11). The young people were threatened and ill-treated[24]. Such practices can account for the very early political commitment of young inhabitants in nationalist areas, which also explains why prominent members said they were just ordinary people who could not but get involved, as Sile Darragh wrote (Darragh, 2011: 17). Back home after years of living in extreme conditions in prison, women had to look after their families while coping with the aftermath of imprisonment in extreme conditions. Because of the permanent climate of insecurity, and also because of the frequency of arrests, some women have also hidden their time in prison from their children, again, for the purpose of sparing them. A visit in Armagh prison organised by an association of former Republican prisoners in 2010 enabled some daughters of former prisoners to find out their mothers' political past as Eibhlin Glenholmes recounts:

> One daughter told me that her mother, a former internee, had called her into the kitchen the week before and asked her if she would like to go on the visit to Armagh. She'd said yes and asked her mother if she had ever visited the jail before. Her mother told her no, she hadn't visited – she had been in it as a political prisoner. The young woman was aware of and proud of the years her father had spent in prison but she was totally flummoxed by the news that her mother had also been in jail. I was also confused but later in the day I heard a similar tale from a former prisoner. She explained that she was very young when she went to jail, had married her husband shortly after her release, and had started a family and then her husband went to prison. She felt that the children would worry about her being taken back to jail, so she never told them. (Glenholme: 2010)

The imprisonment was obviously repressed by former prisoners, which does not detract from the suffering it caused as Sile Darragh's following quote clearly shows: "Twenty years later, reading back the coms, I cried again. Once more, I was that young woman of 23 sitting in a cell in Armagh prison, reliving the terrible memories of a terrible period of my life" (Darragh 2011: 123).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to uncover consistent evidence of the brutality of the Northern Ireland prison system and to demonstrate that women were both morally and physically abused. Is it even possible to assess how much these women have been weakened and what their lives as women have been like after imprisonment? Periods would be a constant reminder of awful days long after imprisonment. The invasion of the bodily intimacy of these women examined internally and repeatedly must have left indelible marks.

To Raymond Murray, "the political failures have ensured the prison failures. The great symbol of all this, he added, the contempt of government for the human person, is the stripping naked of the girl prisoners" (Murray; Hard Times: 87).

The issue of feminism often emerges in academic articles, but it does not appear to have been a priority for these women. Martina Anderson, in response to a question on this point at a conference during West Belfast Festival in 2011, simply stated that "at the time, the priority was survival". Sile Darragh articulates the question as follows:

> Most members of women's movements argued that the issue of Armagh was not an issue for them, that we were part of a male-dominated organisation and therefore accepted the position of women in society as second-class. We argued that nowhere were women struggling harder for women's rights than in Armagh and how could we possibly have women's rights recognised in the absence of human and national rights? (Darragh 2011: 88-9).

The trauma of imprisonment undoubtedly remains a priority, hence the importance of the collection of testimony, which should be pursued.

NOTES

1. In a Northern Ireland context, the term republican is taken to imply that the person gives tacit or actual support to the use of physical force by paramilitary groups with republican aims: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/glossary.htm#R

2. Here Fiona McCann quotes Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward.

3. This West Belfast-based festival called "Féile an Phobail" (the Festival of the People) organises artistic, cultural and political conferences and discussions every year at the beginning of August.

4. Fiona McCann reports on this in her article: “Strip searches were often experienced as a form of sexual assault,” (F. McCann 2017: 1).

5. This view is consistent with the tenor of the exchanges I observed. Strip searches were clearly named by a former prisoner as “rapes” (Ciaran Interview, 2014).

6. The “Irish question” refers in a very general way to all the problems arising from the conflictual relations between Ireland and Great Britain: La « question d’Irlande» désigne de façon très générale « l’ensemble des problèmes issus des relations conflictuelles entre l’Irlande et la Grande-Bretagne ainsi que leurs conséquences directes ou indirectes sur le développement intérieur de l’île dont la « question d’Irlande du Nord » est emblématique », Jennifer Heurley, *De la Question d’Irlande à la Question d’Irlande du Nord*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003, p. 7.

7. Colonisation was political with the Poyning Act, economic (English and Scottish settlers took over the best land, reducing the native Irish to farmers or sharecroppers), social and cultural: Catholicism was barely tolerated, so the Anglican Church was perceived by the Irish as the religion of the coloniser.

8. “The deep resentment of the native Irish towards the planters, and the distrustful siege mentality of the planters towards the Irish, is the root of the Ulster problem’: John Darby, *Northern Ireland : The Background to the Conflict*, Belfast: p. 15.

9. Two identities had actually existed from the late 16th century: The Gaels and the Anglo-Irish. It was indeed among the “enlightened” English-speaking class of intellectuals that for example, a movement toward the promotion of the Irish language was born in the 18th century. A nationalism of place can thus be detected before the 19th century when Irish nationalism would adopt its own features and spark the 1916 revolution. The interest in the past originated in a powerful ethnic identity as well as in the coexistence of two religions—catholic and protestant—which, combined, gave rise to a national Irish identity in that century.

10. See Groves, Patricia. Petticoat Rebellion (The Anna Parnell Story), Cork: Mercier Press, 2009.

11. Sinn Féin is the political arm of the republican movement. See Brian Feeney, Sinn Féin, A Hundred Turbulent Years, Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2002.

12. C.C. Craig, brother of the first Prime Minister, explained it well in the House of Commons: “If we had a nine-county parliament, with sixty-four members, the Unionist majority would be about three or four: but in a six-county parliament, with fifty-two members, the Unionist majority would be about ten.” John Darby, *The Background to the Conflict*. p. 20.

13. It should be noted that British sovereignty was nevertheless affirmed by section 75 of the 1920 “Devolution Act”.

14. The UVF is also the name of a violent loyalist paramilitary movement formed in 1966, in principle unrelated to the former. It became famous for its assassinations of IRA members and Catholics.

15. Tim Pat Coogan, The IRA, Fontana Paperbacks, pp 460-81; Agnès Maillot, IRA, Presse Universitaires de Caen. Both authors point out that before the PIRA (Provisional IRA) was born, the movement had almost no weapons and was not very popular with the population, as the graffiti visible at the time, IRA = I Ran Away,

makes clear. The good reception given to the British troops in 1969 attests to the lack of activity of the republican movement at that time.

16. See, for example, the testimony of Sile Darragh (*John Lennon's Dead*, p.16) or the book "*Only the Rivers Run Free* (p 191). The context of the Orange marches is frequently referred to, having regularly resulted in violence during the Easter period in late summer.

17. In Ireland, "fasting and self-sacrifice in general began to have a special value in the development of Irish-Christian traditions, more particularly so if it was linked to or offered up to God in unison with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Christ", Sweeney, George, "*Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice*" p. 3.

18. See for example Dieter Reinish article: "Cumann na mBan and Women in Irish Republican Paramilitary Organisations, 1969-1986".

19. See the following accounts: Darragh, Sile. '*John's Lennon's Dead'*, Fairweather, Eileen, Roisin McDonagh and Melanie McFadyean. *Only The Rivers Run Free, Northern Ireland: The women's war*, McCafferty, Nell. *The Armagh Women,* D'Arcy Margaretta, '*Tell them Everything'* London: Pluto Press, 1981.

20. Eileen Hickey was inspired by republican Anne Devlin who was imprisoned and tortured in Kilmainham Gaol. See Finegan, John. *Anne Devlin, Patriot and Heroine*. Dublin: Elo Publications, (1968), 1992

21. The loss of femininity that is caused by what is experienced as harassment by the jailers is felt to be necessary, as the only way to survive in Armagh prison, as Maureeen explains: "You lose your femininity completely, you become very hard in your attitudes, your speech, in every way, because you have to, in order to survive in jail" (D'Arcy 1981: 53).

22. See for example the following book of interviews which describes numerous raids : Fairweather, Eileen, Roisin McDonagh and Melanie McFadyean. *Only The Rivers Run Free*, 1984.

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