Women Writers of The Troubles

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Abstract
During the thirty years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, writing by women was difficult to find, especially concerning the conflict and its violence. The publication of the first three heavy volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* towards the end of that period demonstrated the blindness of its male editors to female writing, leading to another two volumes focusing on women and also presenting more than expected on the conflict itself. Through looking at a selection of prose, poretry and drama written by women, this article wishes to illuminate a number of relevant issues such as: How have female writers reacted to the hate and violence, the social and political insecurity in their writing of poetry, plays and fiction? Is Robert Graecen's question 'Does violence stimulate creativity?'—in a letter to the *Irish Times* (18 Jun. 1974)—relevant also for women? In this very partial exploration, I have chosen to discuss a novel by Jennifer Johnston (*Shadows on Our Skin,* 1977) and one by Deirdre Madden (*One by One in the Darkness*, 1996), a well-known short story by Mary Beckett ('A Belfast Woman,' 1980), together with plays by Anne Devlin (O*urselves Alone*, 1986) and Christina Reid (*Tea in a China Cup*, 1987), as well as poetry, by, among others, Meta Mayne Reid, Eleanor Murray, Fleur Adcock and Sinéad Morrissey.

Keywords: women writers; violence; conflict; The Troubles; Jennifer Johnston; Deirdre Madden; Mary Beckett; Anne Devlin; Christina Reid; Meta Mayne Reid; Eleanor Murray; Fleur Adcock; Sinéad Morrissey

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
— W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'

The spark of the Easter Rising lit recurring flames in Northern Ireland, highlighting injustice and oppression. This was nothing new but whereas the South, over the rest of the twentieth century, has generally kept its peace, there have been waves upon waves of violence over the last thirty years of it in the North. Like all war-like situations this has involved women as well as men, even if much less is heard about the female experience, since conflict narratives have usually been read in deeply

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gendered ways as masculine, while the expressions of women's thoughts and reactions have not received the same attention. This has recently been discussed in *Women Writing War*, a collection of essays covering the period 1880 to 1922 in Ireland but, as the subtitle already indicates, it does not cover the thirty years of unrest in the North, generally called the Troubles (O'Toole et al. 2016).[1] In addition it deals more with history and the forgotten parts of it to do with women than with the literary expressions of it. Another work from another country and another time is *War's Unwomanly Face*, the first book by Nobel Laureate, Svetlana Alexievich (1988), consisting of testimonies by women of their heart-rending experiences of World War II, aiming to record aspects of warfare that had never been related before, in other words, the experience of women actually fighting as soldiers.

In Northern Ireland the Troubles grew out of the political conflict between Nationalists and Unionists with their subdivisions, but also the centuries-old sectarian segregation of Catholics and Protestants. What does it mean to be duty-bound to one side and to be nourished on prejudice about the other? This is something that can be seen in many societies, not least the formerly colonized ones, and it is mostly tied to a power hierarchy. When, in addition, there is a power unbalance between economic classes and between men and women in families, the result tends to be quite problematic. In the cultural sphere the public attention becomes one-sided, leaving the testimonies of the other side muted or neglected.[2] This is what I would claim has happened to women in Ireland, not least to the literary expression of their experience of the political conflict. With the growing awareness of this state of affairs the great expectations for the publication of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* were turned into disappointment at the astonishingly thin representation of women writers and, as a result, they had in time to be followed by another two demonstrating the massive contribution by women over the centuries.[3]

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[1] See especially the 'Introduction.' See also Claire Buck 2011 and Clutterbuck 2011.

[2] See Haberstroh 1996: 2: 'women poets were almost invisible' in her description of her difficulties in finding poetry by women.

[3] For this purpose, it is mainly volume V that has been consulted for contemporary writing (p. 1123), playwrights (1234-89) and poetry (1290-1408).

Against this background of the many earlier unheard stories of women in armed conflicts, the question is how they have reacted to the hate and revolutionary violence, the social and political division and insecurity of the Troubles in writing in the lyric, dramatic or narrative form? Is Robert Graecen's question: 'Does violence stimulate creativity?' (1974) relevant also for women? Other questions to consider concern the presentation of women in literary works, their experiences and roles in their relations to family and society, their hopes and expectations and, not least, their identity. Finally, what does it mean in a conflict to write about it, read about it or see it acted out on a stage? What happens to convictions, the lack of them or to the 'passionate intensity'? Is there any truth in Jacques Rancière's view that 'literature does politics simply by being literature'?[4]

In this, only very selective, exploration I will briefly consider a novel by Jennifer Johnston (*Shadows on Our Skin,* 1977) and one by Deirdre Madden (*One by One in the Darkness*, 1996) along with a well-known short story by Mary Beckett ('A Belfast Woman,' 1980). When it comes to poetry I have mainly examined the three anthologies dealing specifically with the conflict in Northern Ireland that were published during the Troubles. The basic assumption, most clearly emphasized in one of them, is to see the waves of terror as a continuing revolutionary situation, perhaps an ongoing counterpart to what started as the Easter Rising in the South. Since the dramatic form is best suited to show most clearly what is at stake in these conflicts, I have chosen to discuss more in detail plays by Anne Devlin (*Ourselves Alone,* staged 1985, published 1986) and Christina Reid (*Tea in a China Cup*, staged 1983, published 1987).

Jennifer Johnston

To begin in the seventies, Jennifer Johnston's work, consisting of nearly twenty novels and a number of plays, often reflects the war and violence of the whole of the last century, from World War I through all the Irish conflicts. One example is *Shadows on Our Skin*, a story seen through the eyes of a schoolboy, Joe Logan, and through his relations, mainly with

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In the last category three of the poets dealt with below in my paper were not included in the *Field Day Anthology*.

[4] Quoted in McCann 2014: 8.

his parents, his elder brother and a young schoolteacher from the South who appreciates Joe's thoughts and ideas. His mother is a hardworking, embittered woman, doing next to everything about the house, slaving for the grown men—occasionally with some help from Joe—and in addition going outside to do menial work in a café as the only wage-earner in the family. We are reminded here of James Connolly's observation: 'In Ireland that female worker has hitherto exhibited, in her martyrdom, an almost damnable patience' (1915: no pag.). Joe has a demanding, weak and sickly father, who regards himself as a hero and spends most of his time at the pub or in bed.[5] Brendan, his brother, comes back from England, risks the safety of the whole family by smuggling arms, even hiding a gun in his bed. Before leaving again in a fit of jealousy he has his 'nice friends' brutally beating Kathleen, Joe's teacher friend, when it appears that she is engaged to a British soldier. It is the early 70s and right through the story you hear shots accompanied by ambulance and fire engine sirens in the background, but sometimes they come much too near, marking the lack of safety, the cause for fear. The conflict in this society is also reflected in the quarrelling inside the home, the friction in near relationships embittered by the fear, despair and trauma caused by the violence outside. Thus, the women suffer from the troubled political situation as well as from the effects of a patriarchal society.

The victims here are—apart from the two anonymous soldiers shot dead—everybody, due to the shock reactions and the general punishment seen clearly as all of them are ordered out into the street in the middle of the cold night, while their houses, being searched by the military, are turned upside down. In particular, however, Joe's mother is a victim of her marriage and poverty, his father the victim of his own heroic ideas, weakness, sickness and alcoholism, his brother Brendan caught between the two camps, Kathleen, doubly a victim of sexual and partisan jealousy and, of course, Joe himself in the midst of it all, occasionally forgetting about the violence around him and enjoying his talks with Kathleen, the only one to take him seriously.

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[5] A not unusual picture, cf. for instance Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924).

Mary Beckett

Like Joe's mother in Johnston's novel the main character of Mary Beckett's 'A Belfast Woman' shows her resilience as she struggles through the consequences of sectarian conflicts. The short story, in its just fourteen pages, reveals to us the same violence in different periods of this woman's life. It opens with her thinking to herself that 'it would be nice if the Troubles were over so that a body could just enjoy the feel of a good day' (Beckett 1980: 84). That is, however, precisely the moment when the threatening letter arrives: 'Get out or we'll burn you out.' It reminds her of a childhood memory, 'wakening up with my mother screaming downstairs when we were burnt out in 1921.' Their house was completely destroyed: 'My mother used to say she didn't save as much as needle and thread' (85). In 1935 it was the same story with her grandmother's house, to which they had moved and where they were all still living. Then in 1972 it happened to her son's house and now again to her living alone as a widow a couple of years later, probably just before the story was published in 1980. In this short story Mary Beckett manages to give a very full picture of a woman's life with all its ups and downs, not least in her ambitions for her children and in the continuing Northern Irish conflict. It has been described as 'the most powerful and moving miniature epic to come out of that tragic territory in the last decade—a definitive Belfast Mother Courage.'[6]

In fighting for survival, this Belfast woman resembles Joe Logan's mother, while their husbands are utterly different and Beckett's main character, although on two occasions flying into a fury, manages to keep her balance in life along with her sense of humour. Her experience of living in different parts of Belfast is sharply observed. In the Catholic streets the neighbours come into your house 'for a chat or a loan of tea or milk or sugar' (Beckett 1980: 86) and the men who are unemployed gather in street corners, while Protestant men are privileged to be at work and their women keep to themselves. None of the central characters is involved in political issues except, possibly, for the protagonist on one occasion when she tries to hold a soldier back from shooting at her son. A closer analysis would reveal and exemplify more of the domestic difficulties caused by the conflict, something that might not be found in a male description.

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[6] From the editor's presentation of the author, p. 112.

Deirdre Madden

Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* is told in turn through the three sisters and their mother, thinking about family life, education and professional training against a background of growing unrest and violence. As young children, the daughters of the family were not allowed to take part in the first peaceful demonstration at the beginning of the Troubles. Subsequently things take an increasingly threatening turn, allowing the reader to follow the development of the conflict through their experiences. Helen, the eldest, ends up as a lawyer in Belfast where, as part of her strategy of protest, she defends a ruthless murderer. Kate's line of action is to leave Ireland to create a career for herself as a journalist in London. Sally, the youngest one dutifully stays at home in the countryside with her mother and, like her, becomes a teacher. In focus is their father, always referred to as kind and protective. The climax comes on the last page when Helen, like a nightmare, visualises his murder—mistaken for his activist brother. Their father is, thus, formally the victim, but all four women are in a sense, far worse off living on with this incurable trauma. We find instinctive criticism of Protestant activities like the July marches, but no partisan action on the part of the four women, just a wish for peace. Helen's choice of profession and workplace, however, could be seen as an ongoing demonstration against the political situation just as Kate's tactics of leaving, while Sally feels it her designed role to stay with her mother, thus representing a traditionally female fate of submitting to circumstances. The close family relations and emotional reactions described against the background of Ulster's cultural geography and recent history are distinctive features of this remarkable novel.

Poetry

The process of looking for poems about the Irish conflicts written by women is very revealing in terms of the kind of exclusions discussed earlier. While Padraic Fiacc's *The Wearing of the Black* (1974) includes thirteen poems by five women out of over seventy contributors, Frank Ormsby's *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1979) has no room for women at all whereas his later collection *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992), like Fiacc's, gathers poems by five women out of nearly seventy poets, adding up to no more than six out of

nearly 260 poems.[7] Here two of them are from the Republic (Eavan Boland and Rita Ann Higgins), one a New Zealander living in England although with a Northern Irish ancestry (Fleur Adcock), another, Carol Rumens, declaring that she is 'speaking as a woman and speaking as English' but living partly in Belfast, and, finally, Janice Fitzpatrick, born, bred and educated in the US but now settled in Donegal. There are probably several reasons for this poor representation of women poets from the North, one being the male prerogative when it comes to war and violence and another perhaps the scarcity of women poets dealing with the topic. Medbh McGuckian's reaction to not being included was to refer to Picasso remarking on one occasion: 'I have not painted the war […] but I have no doubt that the war is in […] these paintings I have done' (epigraph 1994: 9). It is worth observing that Ormsby's preface does not problematize or even mention the non-representation (or absence) of women or the gender issues of a thirty-year-long state of violence, hitting women as much as men. The problem is discussed by Ruth Hooley in the introduction to *The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers* (1985: 1), but as a women-only publication expressing 'the many different voices of women in and from Northern Ireland' (1), it is left 'to the readers to judge whether women write differently from men' (2). What the editor, i.e., Hooley, has found is that the predominant themes in the works by women relate to family and personal life from childhood to old age but she also claims that 'woven through these is another common theme, "The Troubles"' (2). This is true about the prose pieces, but looking through the poems in Hooley's collection, I have, however, not found any traces of political conflict, whereas individual gender conflicts and patriarchal oppression are common topics. This state of affairs led to my decision to leave aside the other anthologies to focus on the women poets in Padraic Fiacc's *The Wearing of the Black*, particularly Meta Mayne Reid who is represented by six poems, while Eleanor Murray, Eavan Boland and Fleur Adcock have two each and Joan Newman one poem. The first two, Reid and Murray are not found in any of the other anthologies nor in *Field Day* V.

[7] Alex Pryce (2014: 61) has made similar calculations but with slightly diferent figures, probably due to his use of a later edition of Ormsby's first anthology.

Meta Mayne Reid

Fiacc's anthology actually opens with 'The Whin Bush' by Meta Mayne Reid. It is in the first of the four movements of the book, the prologue to the period of violence that is to follow. Rejecting other symbols of her country, which come in various feminine shapes,[8] she chooses the whin bush, indestructible and 'advancing insidiously / to claim the whole field.' The colouring is clear 'with a flare of orange, / a thrust of green / which stabs the thieving hand.' Is it aggression or resistance in those vehement words, 'flare,' 'thrust' and 'stab' or in what follows, 'how *sharp* that scent, / how *fierce* the life which *bursts* / out of the gnarled root'? (emphasis added). In any case there is strength as in the word 'indestructible' and at the end we see the colours joined again: 'O whin bush wild in the green field' (Fiacc 1974: 1).

In 'Ghosts,' from the third movement centred in Belfast, Mayne Reid's persona is haunted, not only by children violently killed, found among splintered glass with their bones rattling in shuttered windows and their flesh crying 'from the pulp / of the bookstall bombed last week.' Much worse than this physical damage is what cruelty and destruction are doing to 'the living children / who advance, stones at the ready, uttering this week's obscenities / from lips still wet with mothers' milk.' So while the poem's first line runs: 'I am haunted by ghosts' the last line, by near-rhyming, turns 'ghosts' into 'lost,' referring to children exposed to violence. They are, Mayne Reid suggests, the most powerless and most deeply hurt victims (Fiacc 1974: 95). Another poem by Meta Mayne Reid from the same section, 'Three Year Old: Belfast 1972,' highlights the same theme, this time engaging the reader's attention in one specific case, a small child physically unhurt by the explosion that killed her mother: 'Now she expects / the whole world to explode again: / She hides her eyes and stares / into her bomb / -blasted imagination' (Fiacc 1974: 103).

Eleanor Murray

Both poems by Eleanor Murray are placed in the second movement focusing on Derry. One, 'Bitter Harvest' (Fiacc 1974: 41) looks at the sinister spectacle in a theatrical light, where 'children, fading from the

[8] Cf. the discussion and Edna Longley's rejection of Cathleen Ni Houlihan as a national symbol in *From Cathleen to Anoexia* (1990).

streets […] ring up the curtain on the macabre play / enacted nightly on a shattered stage.' The ghostly unreality melts with 'beechwood gold […] in sectarian fire.' In this blazing conflagration with its acrid smell, the only living beings are the children described tenderly 'like sunset marigolds' disappearing from the menacing scene. The other poem, 'Fear' (Fiacc 1974: 64) is more down to earth with its sarcastic smile at the expression used by others that 'the heart stood still'—until the persona is struck by her own experience of danger right outside 'the sleeping house,' as she herself is struck by fear.

As appears above, the third movement to do with Belfast and the terror and horror in that city is the most violent one. Here, Joan Newman's 'Rat's Lot' (Fiacc 1974: 108), placed among poems of meaningless murder and destruction, describes in detail the torture to death of a rat, an image of what is happening to people in the heat of the Troubles. Both poems by Eavan Boland, 'A Soldier's Son' (98) and 'Child of Our Time' (102) deal with the complexities of war and peace, innocence and guilt, fathers and sons. A dirty civil war will only lead to 'future wars and further fratricide.' The roles are uncertain: Who is guilty, who is the victim? 'you are his killed, his maimed. / He is your war; you are his pacifist.' The older generation which should have protected and instructed the young ones, must now learn from their murdered 'child / of our time' that it is 'our times' that 'have robbed [his] cradle'; he will now 'sleep in a world [his] final sleep has woken.' This is a private sorrow but with its perspectives it reaches across the whole society and across borders. These two poems demand some re-reading to sound their depth, but they are also some of the most accomplished and profound ones in the collection.

Fleur Adcock

The two poems by Fleur Adcock that are included in Fiacc's collection are what she herself calls 'anthology pieces' (1987: 1) and are both to be found in the fourth and last movement of this anthology, named 'epilogues.' In 'Please Identify Yourself' (Fiacc 1974: 148), the persona cowardly answers 'I'm from New Zealand,' although she has just admitted to the reader that she is British, 'more or less' and 'Anglican, of a kind,' but is never asked about her religion, 'the second question, unspoken / Unanswered' in spite of its crucial importance. She then marks her distance from Dr Paisley, protesting that listening to him she is

'burn[ing] with Catholicism' and gets on to the graves of her 'tough Presbyterian ancestors.' Regardless of identities, 'among so many unlabelled bones, I say: / I embrace you also, my dears.' The poem plays with the importance in Northern Ireland of the question left unanswered in Moneymore of her national and religious identity. In this plantation Mid-Ulster village she could remain anonymous, something that became impossible in Belfast, 'where sides have to be taken.' Almost a third of the poem is devoted to Paisley's sermon 'laved in blood, / marshalled in ranks' and to her reactions against it: 'I scrawl incredulous notes under my hymnbook.' From there she then crosses the city to get to the Catholic Falls Road where she meets 'a bright gust of tinselly children / in beads and lipstick and their mothers' dresses / for Hallowe'en,' setting off the martial homily and evangelistic hymns.

Adcock's other poem, 'The Bullaun' (Fiacc 1974: 150) is more of a tourist's view of the cup hollowed out of a rock, used as a cure for madness. The poem is Irish enough in its naming of people and localities, firmly set in Antrim and close to Lough Neagh. Here the poet meets two little boys, pleading with her to take a photo of them to send them at their address, Tobergill Gardens in the town of Antrim. Again, we read about a passing moment, a brief meeting with children, here against a historic, timeless background. It should be observed that the magic powers of the bullaun are not wanted for the persona's own sake but for 'sick Belfast, / For the gunmen and the slogan-writers' and for ordinary Irish people the poet has met. Both poems look at the conflict from the outside with a critical eye but with deep understanding and compassion, notably for children and for the poet's dead ancestors.

Sinéad Morrissey

To complete the picture of Northern Irish women's poetry to do with the Troubles I pick one of the outstanding poets of a younger generation, Sinéad Morrissey. Her first of now six collections, *There Was Fire in Vancouver,* which appeared in 1996, a couple of years after the latest of the anthologies discussed above. There are glimpses here of a 'shattered woman' whose son 'had his knees blown somewhere else' ('Chiara,' 1996: 12). In the high-rise 'Europa Hotel' 'you wake up one morning with your windows / Round your ankles and your forehead billowing smoke,' followed by the ironic comment: 'Your view impaired for another fortnight / Of the green hills they shatter you for' (1996: 16).

'Belfast Storm' indicates the ordinariness of having young men's knees hit by guns, only resulting in 'wheelchairs, rather than coffins' (1996: 17). As a young person returning from abroad she has to remember the importance of ordering a taxi from the right rank, of not asking the wrong questions, of not giving her name in the wrong context and, particularly, the message comes back to her of her high school uniform: 'I always walked with my heart constricting, / Half-expecting bottles, in sudden shards / Of West Belfast sunshine, / To dance about my head.' ('Thoughts in a Black Taxi' (1996: 19-20). In Morrissey's case there are just mainly childhood memories—not least of her communist upbringing—before she left Belfast for Trinity College, Dublin and then moved around abroad during the last few years of the conflict. Teaching in Germany she, however, describes life in the Northern Irish conflict by parading 'as a gunman / On the Falls Road,' getting completely carried away by her own play-acting until she hears 'A fiddler in a death-camp' and realizes something far worse than her own experience of the Troubles ('English Lesson,' 1996: 8). What is distinctive is her sense of proportions, her empathy and her humour.

Drama

Christina Reid

From poetry to drama we turn to Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*. It is a comic play about a serious subject, playing around with songs and theatrical conventions by not following a chronological order but moving smoothly between some thirty scenes in the space of two acts by making the light focus on different parts of the stage, leaving previous scenes in darkness. The main character, Beth, now and then also functions as narrator addressing the audience directly. In this play the men are all for King and Country. The Grandfather who fought in WWI himself, is very proud of his son Samuel going out to France to fight in WWII, which kills him, something that seems to hit his mother and sister much harder than his father, who immediately thinks of the money to come as compensation. The farewell scene in the past seems to be replayed in the present when the grandson Sammy is taking leave to go, in this case on peace service in Germany. With memories, then, going back to the first world war, there are scenes from 1939 and 1972 when the Troubles are raging with shootings, rioting and houses being burnt down, something that will prevent Sammy from coming home on leave—as a soldier, i.e. a

traitor in the eyes of the Nationalists, the risks are high that he would get an IRA bullet in his back. The three men show up very briefly, the two young men, both by the name of Samuel and played by the same actor, are only seen as they are taking leave of the family to go abroad as soldiers. Husbands are generally absent, drinking, gambling or on business.

The women are thus in focus in a way hardly found in plays written by men. Beth is the main character, and her Grandmother, Great Aunt Maisie and her mother Sarah—somewhat like the three witches, particularly when they are called to lay out a dead neighbour for the traditional wake—are anxious to keep up appearances, looking after conventions, holding on to their prejudice about differences between Catholics and Protestants and their view that men mean trouble. The two older women are disempowered as regards their social position in working-class poverty, but conscious of their power in the family due to their age and experience at the same time as they demonstrate the power of matriarchs in a patriarchal society. The most vital and subversive humour appears when they are on the stage. The third of them, Sarah, is seen in the functions of mother and wife but as particularly enjoying her role as supporter of the Protestant cause. The marches of the twelfth of July are important to her. The sounds of the flute bands practising 'gets the oul Protestant blood going' (1987: 5) as shown when she is dying, like when she took her baby Beth, only four months old, out to enjoy the Orange march and to be complemented by a clerical gentleman: 'Women like you are the backbone of Ulster' (1987: 6). Sarah is keen on keeping old traditions alive, the old family stories remembered, but also holding on to her sectarian views of the other community and the pretensions to be a better sort. That is why it is important not to let others know when the family is short of money: 'Don't you ever go sayin' that to strangers' (1987: 14) her eleven-year-old daughter is told. In spite of her way of accepting her duty and a situation of dependence on men, whether husband, son or patriarchal society, Sarah is occasionally protesting against it, like at the fortune teller's when she is repeatedly explaining away what the other women are told and take for the truth. When it comes to her useless husband she tends to excuse him for his 'weakness for the drink and the betting […] he couldn't help it, he was only a man, God help him' (1987: 21) and goes on declaring: 'Men need looking after like children, sure they never grow up' (1987: 21). Even so she tries

to keep silent about her husband not having left any money for her at the time when she is about to give birth to Beth and cannot take a taxi to the hospital: ‘he hasn’t been home […] since he lifted his wages’ (1987: 13). Beth later accuses her for blaming herself for his weakness. When Sarah lives on her own, however, she demonstrates strong resistance, not least in the scene, accompanied by gunfire and explosions, when Beth tries to persuade her to leave her home to come and stay with her in a quieter part of the city. The clashes outside between loyalists, the IRA and the British army, and reflected indoors by the strong wills of the two women, together form the climax of the play. It is only when Sarah later is diagnosed with terminal cancer that she finally moves in with her daughter whose marriage to a well-established businessman is the only hopeful thing in her life. That is why Beth cannot tell her when she realizes that her marriage is a mistake, at the same time as we can see that looking after her mother gives Beth herself a sense of safety and meaning.

Of particular interest to the discussion of female experiences of the conflicts in Ireland is the friendship between Beth and Theresa from the opposite side, the Catholic Quarter. In a number of scenes, they are seen in different and yet parallel conditions tackling the choice of school, the issue of school uniform, the ‘serious talk’ from their mothers and applying for jobs. All the while they wonder about the prejudices, so similar on both sides but concerning the other community. After school Theresa manages to get away to London and a boring but safe job, very soon becoming a single mother, while Beth stays at home with her mother and then gets married to a seemingly wealthy man who—it becomes clear—does not care for her. In spite of the sort of matriarchy presented, the women are dependent on their men. Beth’s mother declares: ‘it’s not natural for a woman to stay single’ (28) and in another context Beth realizes: ‘I’ve been my mother’s daughter and now I’m going to be Stephan’s wife […] I’ve never been just me’ (27). She discovers that she has never made a decision about herself. Against this background of female traditions and male talk of brave soldiers, the family see their young men off to military service abroad, leaving the women alone while violence erupts outside, houses are set on fire down

the street and people are intimidated out.[9] The partitions here are made palpable between Catholics and Protestants as well as between the opportunities for men and the more restricted conditions for women.

Anne Devlin

While being shorter works, both Mary Beckett's 'Belfast Woman,' and Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, with memories from the First World War right through to the Troubles going on in the 70s and 80s, have a longer time span than the two novels discussed above. By contrast Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1986) is much more concentrated in time to a brief period in the mid-eighties.[10] It concerns three women, Josie and Frieda, who are sisters, but also including in their family Donna, their childhood friend, since she has a relationship with their imprisoned brother Liam.[11] The play is about their dependence on men, their passionate relations with men and their struggle for independence against the power of men, whether husbands, lovers or fathers—or men acting for party or cause. Their father Malachy treats his daughters as kids bringing them sweets and demanding to be unquestioningly obeyed and served. This is something that is generally expected as can be seen when one of the rebels accuses him: 'Have you no control over your daughters' (1986: 39). If, however, women here are expected to keep house, to serve the men and make coffee for them, it was even worse for Auntie Cora, blind, deaf and dumb and without hands. At the age of eighteen she was storing ammunition for her IRA brother Malachy and since it was in poor condition it exploded. Frieda shrewdly observes that 'They stick her out at the front of the parades […] to show the women of Ireland what their patriotic duty should be' (1986: 29). So, according to Frieda, 'it doesn't matter a damn' whether there is a tricolour, the Irish

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[9] Referring to Christina Reid and Anne Devlin among others, Eva Urban points out what 'academic commentary so far has largely failed to pick up' in Northern Irish drama, i.e. 'the immense power and influence of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland both on a political and social level' (Urban 2011: 30-31).

[10] The title is the translation of the political 'Sinn Fein,' but here also translating it into a feminist slogan. There are discussions about this e.g. in Cerquoni (2007: 164), Solomon (1997: 92), (Roche 2009: 174f.) and Leeney (2018: 327).

[11] Leeney (2018: 327) also points out the resonance with the triple goddess trope of Celtic mythology.

flag, over the City Hall or 'whether the British are here or not' (30). It is all the same to the women, serving and depending on men.

The play opens with Frieda singing, rehearsing for a performance, but protesting against having to sing men's songs: 'I'm fed up with songs where the women are doormats' (1986: 13). She wants to perform her own song, 'The Volunteer' (1986: 36), a song that is still very militaristic. She also finds herself in sharp conflict with her dominant lover but, most of all, she is in rebellion against her father. At one point she even has to defend herself physically, when her father has accused her of siding with the people who condemned Bobby Sands, the political martyr. Frieda's answer, 'They didn't condemn him. They said he beat his wife!' (1986: 39) shows not only the different political views in this society, but how these are mixed up with gender issues as the male hero is pointed out, diminished by his marital shortcomings.

Frieda's sister Josie is dedicated to the Republican cause, which means that she takes messages between the commanders, moves people or 'the stuff,' i.e. arms, explosives and the like, from one place to another, operating mostly at night. She declares: 'I'm not brave. I just began doing this before I had to think of the consequences. I think I'm more scared than I was ten years ago. But I'm getting better at smiling at soldiers' (1986: 31). Even so she dreams in her longing for the object of her passion: 'Sometimes I'm a man—his warrior lover, fighting side by side to the death' (1986: 17). We see, however, that she is also trusted with the crucial cross-examination of Joe, a new recruit, something that she carries through with admirable authority and in a very professional manner. This new 'active and trained volunteer' (1986: 50) then becomes her lover. In the end, Josie finds herself pregnant, Joe is revealed as a traitor and Josie is prepared to do anything, even to accept her father's protection, to defend the baby she is expecting. It is interesting to see that Christopher Murray describes Josie as 'a pathetic failure' (1997: 194), which is true from a male republican perspective, since she will be hampered in her terrorist activities by her pregnancy and reduced to what might be considered as feeble femininity back in her father's house and under his protection. In a more human, existential light, however, she can be regarded as maturing, caring more for life than for political aims: 'it's my baby—it doesn't matter about anything else' and as more realistic in her decision than before. Accepting the new conditions of life, she might also be liberated from the stress and constrictions she has lived under for

many years. Frieda, on the other hand, is seen by Murray as enacting 'a drama of individual liberation' (1997: 194) at the cost of everything that is familiar as she is opting for a life on her own in England. This raises the question of what it means to be free, just as the catchword 'ourselves alone' gets new meanings in the play, a play that can be described as feminist in its essential questioning of a male-dominated society and its values. Thus Frieda, fleeing from violence, declares that it is not her lover but Ireland she is leaving. The men are less important than personal freedom, other relationships and living conditions without violence. Significantly, as Eva Urban points out, there are certain autobiographical features in Frieda's line of action, most noticeably the fact that Devlin herself left Northern Ireland for England and for similar reasons of getting away from the restrictions on her personal freedom (Urban 2011: 246).[12] At the same time we may notice the depth of feeling in Josie's words and actions in the crucial situation when she fights for her unborn baby, to reflect on the fact that Devlin, when writing this, was in the same quandary. This leads on to view the different roads chosen by the three women in the play as profession, motherhood or a more passive acceptance of companionship, which is Donna's alternative, together pointing to the limitations for women in finding a way of combining the three roles. None of the sisters is to be further involved in partisan action; that is left to the men, the demanding, sometimes violent father and the brother just let out of jail, who tried to force Josie to kill her child. They actually look rather foolish, compared to the women.

Looking at the men, we may notice that in both these plays portraits assume a symbolic importance; in *Tea in a China Cup*, the three generations of soldiers for King and Country are displayed and commented on, while in *Ourselves Alone* we find portraits of the ten dead hunger strikers. As a clear indication of seeing the Troubles in the light of the Easter Rising, 'the traditional prominence of Pearse and Connolly has here given way to the faces in black and white of ten men' followed by a list of their names (Devlin 1986: 13), the best-known of them Bobby Sands mentioned before as not only a martyr but also a brutal husband. Whether glorified as soldiers or rebellious heroes this gives rise to considerations of what has been termed the aesthetics and

[12] In her analysis of *Ourselves Alone,* Urban focuses exclusively on Frieda, thus distorting the totality and complexity of the play (2011: 245-47). It is, as Devlin herself declares, a play for three voices (1986: 10).

erotics of masculinity in contrast to the feminine values enhanced at the end of Devlin's play.

Conclusion

What do the literary works considered here have in common, to what extent are the attitudes they display specific to women writers and how do they reflect the socio-political situation during the Troubles? With the exception of Johnston's novel, the point of view adopted is that of women and with women as authentic and complex individuals, not as Cathleen symbols embodying 'the nation, the land, the desires or responsibilities of male characters' (Cerquoni 2007: 170; cf. Longley 1990). Referring to the relative invisibility of women in war, discussed in the introduction and the fact that on the few occasions when they do appear in historical research, it is often as activists, we find in this material only one or possibly two women activists, both in *Ourselves Alone,* Josie in the first place and, perhaps, Frieda. Hence there is hardly any heroics—apart from those possibly attempted by Frieda in her song—or aggression on the part of women in this material, but it is rather the suffering, not least by children—this is where Joe from *Shadows on Our Skin* comes in—and compassion that are emphasized. Most of the poems dealt with here are focused on the victims, notably children and the pity of it all, while in Fleur Adcock's case it is an outsider's view of a split society rather than the fear, threats and the physical damage that is emphasized. The gender difference appears also in the fact that violence is perpetrated not only by the political enemy but also by men in personal relationships, fathers or lovers, in a family structure leaving all the household work and responsibility to women and a social structure giving physical power and the power of arms to the men. Mary Beckett's Belfast woman and Deirdre Madden's three sisters and their mother, all cruelly hit by the civil war, still live in harmony with their husbands or father; yet, their lives are in different degrees conditioned by inherited social categories. The same goes for Joe Logan's mother in Jennifer Johnston's novel, living and working in slave-like circumstances, further aggravated by the political conflict. Patriarchal dominance is obvious in the families in Christina Reid's and Anne Devlin's plays, where women's experiences are contrasted by rigid nationalist or socialist ideologies imposed by men, but in the latter's *Ourselves Alone* a feminist agenda is clearly outlined in opposition to the political issues. Finally,

the question of whether violence can be seen as something stimulating creativity when women are concerned is difficult to answer but it would certainly seem so when considering some of the Belfast poems mentioned above and Frieda's summer memory at the end of *Ourselves Alone* as well as the mesmerising final dream sequence in Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness*.

We have, thus, seen the rebellious spirit from the 1916 Easter Rising to make Ireland wholly Irish, living on in various forms in Northern Ireland, where there have been waves of conflict culminating in the thirty years of the Troubles with British soldiers on the one hand and the opposing, powerful paramilitary organisations on the other. Confronting this state of affairs, it is worth considering one of the models recommended by Edna Longley to heal what she calls Ulster's anorexic condition in Northern writing, since literature, she claims, is 'the primary place where language changes and anorexic categories are exposed' (1990: 23). The literary works considered here are doing precisely this. They are critical of both sides, often distancing themselves also from their author's own camp, which is most clearly seen in Devlin's play and Adcock's poems. They illustrate Rancière's idea quoted above that 'literature does politics simply by being literature.' The rejection of a reality of violence, harassment and untimely death is not unique to women, but in these poems, stories and plays the writers reveal a readiness to sacrifice grand ideas in favour of a hoped-for society based on peace and individual freedom.[13]

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[13] See the title and main theme of Eva Urban's *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama*.

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