IRELAND: BREAKING THE SHACKLES

Nell McCafferty

I was unemployed, in exile and in misery when 1968 opened. When 1968 closed, I was unemployed, back in my native land, and standing on a barricade, ecstatically engaged in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland.

A Google search of that year, which saw changes around the globe, does not mention Ireland. This is astonishing. The “Celtic Tiger” Ireland did not arise overnight, becoming one of the most prosperous, best educated, and feminized countries in the whole world. It has taken nearly forty years, and the first step on that long march was taken on October 5, 1968, in Derry City, when people stepped out to rebel in the working-class ghetto of the Bogside, where I was born.

Members of two tribes

I was reared for exile, because the North of Ireland was under British rule and I was not welcome in my own place. The British had quit the South of the island—the Republic—in 1922, but maintained their strategic interest by leaving a surrogate provincial parliament in the North: Stormont, which had a built-in permanent Unionist Party majority, designed to guarantee one-party rule. Unionists traditionally subscribed to union with Britain, to the Queen of England, and to the Protestant Church. The minority nationalists traditionally subscribed to the end of British occupation, to a united Ireland, and to the pope.

I was in the minority, though I cared not a whit for nationalism and had long since abandoned the Catholic Church. Still, I looked suspicious—I looked like a Catholic. Do not ask how—we members of the two tribes could spot each other’s identity a mile off. Anyway, I was on the dole and that proved it. (A university graduate on the dole? Yes, Your Honor, but that’s because the Protestants thought I was a Catholic and would not give me a teaching job, and the Catholics thought I was an atheist and would not give me a teaching job.)

Because I did not care, I got out of the place in 1965. That was just as the rulers intended—exile—but I had not thought about that. I went on the road, as Kerouac suggested, lived in France, traveled
through Europe and the Middle East, smoked dope in Turkey, and worked on a kibbutz in Israel. I was there for the 1967 expansionist war, which changed my perspective somewhat, and I ended up in London as 1968 opened.

“Destined for menial work”

It was a hard landing. I was politely turned down for professional jobs on the grounds that I was too old—a 25-year-old graduate already past her sell-by date. What the British meant was that I was Irish and therefore destined for menial work. There used to be notices in lodging houses that read “No Irish or blacks need apply.” Sure enough, I ended up in the basement of a Wimpy Bar, ladling red tomato sauce from a barrel into bottles. My coworker, a black woman, ignored me, and her attitude was confirmed when this white woman was promoted upstairs to a job waiting tables. Had anyone known I was also gay, I suppose I would have been expelled back to the North, had there been such a legal mechanism available. Decades later, the British devised one, refusing entry to British-passport-holding nationalists from the North on the suspicion that they were terrorists.

Though the Jack Kerouac ideal was kicked out of me in those ten months of trying to earn a living in London, I was jealously, keenly aware of events and people elsewhere: “Danny the Red” in Paris, men circling the moon, Billy Jean King winning Wimbledon (you can spot one a mile off), the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Black Power salute in the Olympics in Mexico, the Prague Spring that brought on the Russian invasion.

Civil rights marchers baton-charged

I cannot remember the American feminist invasion of the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City in 1968. Inasmuch as I identified with women’s affairs, I could not understand why the beautiful Jackie Kennedy married Aristoteles Onassis. I did understand perfectly the student protests in the Republic of Ireland against the papal encyclical “Humanae Vitae,” which reaffirmed traditional Catholic positions on birth control and abortion: it gave male student virgins an excuse to play cheeky chappy and shout the dirty word “contraception” in public. In a fleeting moment of desperation, I considered marriage—a man, and children, because, hey, it would mean money and a home. Swinging ’60s, my sad and sorry female arse.
I left my efficiency in Kensington, London, and caught the boat home to Derry a broken, lonely woman. I arrived on October 6, 1968, and immediately joined in the riot that had begun the day before after the Royal Ulster Constabulary baton-charged civil rights marchers. The marchers had been trying to enter the walled city, which had withstood a siege by Catholic King James in 1698, and had maintained maiden Protestant purity ever since: the riot police spotted the Catholic identity underneath the civil rights person. The experience of rioting was wonderful. I never felt better in my life. Take that, bastards—a stone—for keeping me unemployed; take that, bastards—a petrol bomb—for refusing proper housing to my Catholic relatives who were wasting away in slums.

"You are now entering Free Derry"

Within weeks, I again felt lonely and excluded. An all-male assembly had elected an all-male Citizens’ Association, which even included Protestant males. (The mantra of “One man, one vote” obviously included women, we were superciliously told.) The plan was to undermine Unionism by demanding full British rights, and if that undermined the union with Britain—actually, no, we hadn’t thought of that. We just wanted a fair share of jobs and houses and votes. Our heady, unfocused aspirations were painted on a gable wall in the Bogside that famously declared “You are now entering Free Derry.” (The slogan was borrowed from Berkeley, where protesting students had proclaimed, “You are now entering Free Berkeley.”)

The conundrum and its solution—a power-sharing nationalist and unionist coalition at Stormont—took a while to solve, caused more than three thousand deaths, and involved fighting the British Army. The solution was achieved in the context of the European Union, membership of which allowed all sides to leapfrog metaphorically onto the continental mainland, where “Danny the Red,” now a German member of the European Parliament, welcomed us home. It has to be noted that, although the power-sharing European Community model of integration after World War II provided the basis for our solution, the EC stood aside while the battle was fought within the sovereign United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and it was America that came to our aid in the form of Bill Clinton.

The ’60s ended with me working in exile once more as a journalist in Dublin, in what still is officially a separate and foreign country: the Republic of Ireland. Luckily, I was hired to report on the North,
so I kept going back to Derry, which is one hundred and fifty miles up the road. I was still lonely. The whiff of Northern sulfur rendered me suspect in the South, as did the Northern accent—you can hear us a mile off, never mind spot us.

**The Irish Women’s Liberation Movement**

In September 1970, I truly came home. The Irish Women’s Liberation Movement was formed in Dublin. There were twelve of us, mainly journalists. Our main demand was simple: we wanted to legalize contraception. The pursuit of this demand aimed to rend asunder the Gordian knot of Catholic Church and state that was the Republic, where contraception was deemed both illegal and immoral; where female teachers and bank staff and civil servants were obliged to resign themselves to marriage; where single mothers were denied welfare and their babies were given up for adoption; where homosexuality was criminalized.

We decided not to mention the war then engulfing the North, lest the issue split the sisterhood in the South. Also, we thought that the best thing we feminists could do for the island of Ireland was to change the Catholic nature of the South so as to make Protestants on the island feel more at home. The situation suited me just fine. In the South, I could be a feminist; in the North, I could be a fighter. Few noticed my dual (split?) personality because the North knew and cared little about the South, and vice versa. People in the North read British newspapers and watched British television, because, among other things, their livelihoods depended on Britain. People in the South read Irish papers and watched Irish television because, among other things, their livelihoods depended on the Republic.

**Publicity coup with aspirin**

Then, one Saturday in April 1971, which had been designated “World Media Day,” we pulled off a publicity coup that changed the entire social landscape. The event has entered history books as “The Contraceptive Train.” Forty-nine women boarded a train in Dublin, where contraception was illegal, and crossed the border into Belfast, where contraception was legally available though restricted, its use frowned on by the patriarchy of both the Protestant and Catholic Church, and the patriarchy of all Northern political parties.

We went into a pharmacy, accompanied by television crews from America, Japan, and Ireland, and bought such of the mysterious
contraband as we could without a prescription—contraceptive jelly and condoms. We had intended to buy the pill, but we hadn’t realized that a doctor’s prescription was needed. So we bought hundreds of aspirin on the reasonable assumption that Irish customs officers wouldn’t know the difference (which they didn’t).

That evening, back in Dublin, we declared our purchases to customs, refused to hand them over, swallowed some of the pills, declared the law obsolete, surged through the barrier and down to the local police station where we repeated the exercise, all in front of the world’s media. We were never charged or arrested. The patriarchy turned a resolutely blind eye and hoped the whole thing would die by Monday.

**Restricted right to abortion**

Most people in the South hadn’t seen a contraceptive. Most people in the North hadn’t either. They recognized a good thing when they saw it, though. After our protest, the taboo against discussing contraceptive practice was smashed, and the legalization of contraception gradually followed. This led ultimately to the collapse of the authority of the churches North and South, Protestant and Catholic, and the rest is history. It took another twenty years to get full contraceptive rights in the Republic, the right to divorce came in 1995, and the right to abortion is so restricted that it is virtually unobtainable (even in the nominally British North).

Under European legislation, though, women on the island are free to travel elsewhere, without fear of prosecution, for abortion, and the now friendly relationship with Britain makes that wretched journey easier than it was. Some hold, mistakenly, that availability of divorce and abortion is the benchmark of feminist success. It is not. Recourse to either, though necessary, is a sign of failure. Who terminates pregnancy, puts a partner out of the house, and shouts “Success!”?

Success is the recognition in law of same-sex partnership; freedom to work for money, regardless of gender; welfare for single parents; the ending of conflict in the North; the joy that greeted the election
of President Mary Robinson. Much has been done; there is more to do—all over the world. The Irish Women's Liberation Movement launched in Dublin in 1970 broke the shackles that bound women and men in sullen bondage beneath the amazing surface freedom of 1968.

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