Posters, Handkerchiefs and Murals: Visual Gender Separation During the Troubles

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Abstract

The Troubles in Northern Ireland provide a complex and intriguing topic for many scholars in various academic disciplines. Their violence, publicity and tragedy are common themes that elicit a plethora of emotional responses throughout the world. However, the very intimate nature of this conflict creates a much more complex system of friends, foes and experiences for those involved. While the very heart of the Irish nationalist movement is founded on liberal and progressive concepts such as socialism and equality, the media associated with it sometimes promote tradition and conservatism, especially regarding gender. This critical study examines a sociopolitical struggle through very specific sources not only as evidence of broader implications for gender in Irish society, but also as individual pieces of visual media that can be analyzed on a case by case basis to demonstrate that, despite the supposed progressive nature of the Irish nationalist movement of the 20th and early 21st centuries, traditional conservative gender ideology pervades the media involved, which are artefacts of the Irish Republican movement during the Troubles..

> I think being a woman is like being Irish... Everyone says you're important and nice, but you take second place all the time.
> — Iris Murdoch

Introduction

A conflict as volatile, encompassing and complete as the Troubles recognizes few boundaries with regard to those impacted by its repercussions. Conflicts such as the World Wars, genocides like the Holocaust, and legal institutions of extortion and

discrimination such as slavery and apartheid failed to recognize precise demographic and even ethnographic distinctions of participants, thereby self-determining broad definitions and classifications for victims based on sweeping assessments of nationality, religion and race. No member of the enemy or victimized group could hope for salvation based on any sub-classification such as cultural identity, social status, age or gender. We should assume this principle would be true in Northern Ireland as well. While the military nature of the Troubles might seem on the surface and in historical hindsight to be primarily a clash between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British Army with the primary targets for both groups being the enemy's populace, the inhabitants of Northern Ireland themselves were most often the primary instigators, agitators and purveyors of violence toward each other (Purdie, 1990). It would seem logical that the figurative divide between the enemies was pro or anti-Catholic, pro or anti-Union or a combination thereof. These obvious and broad distinctions again left little room for more precise demographic interpretation. However, mortality data from the Troubles reveals a skewed statistical result that is emblematic of some of the visual media ingrained within its collective memory: like the casualty rate, these visual media show a significant gender skew.

Methodology

This article examines specific visual propaganda from the Republican side of the conflict through gender-based and semiotic critiques (two for each medium) to demonstrate that the propagandistic qualities of these artefacts were sometimes by their very nature opposed to feminist ideas of gender equity, and this result is reflective of the comparatively low number of female casualties during the Troubles. It does not suggest women were entirely void in propaganda, nor that there was a complete lack of gender equality in these media.

Visual media such as posters, handkerchiefs (prison art) and murals were common artefacts produced by both sides in the conflict that display two dominant and recurring themes: their content commonly either excludes women entirely, or it reinforces traditional gender biases and perceptions. The intrinsic messages conveyed by the propagandistic artefacts studied here served to isolate women from deadly violence using symbolism and neglect while promoting traditionalist views

about the roles women play in a conflict. While these reaffirmations of female subservience portrayed women as incapable of fighting or as a noble, romantic symbol around which men could rally, they were congruous with female survival rates during the Troubles.

The six images in this analysis are not representative of *all* propaganda from the Troubles. They are representative, rather, of the relatively few propagandistic artefacts that predominantly deal with female subjects and imagery. Each example is from the photograph collection of Peter Moloney, which is available in the CAIN database. A Boolean search for 'women' in this database will yield strikingly few results, especially when examining files with attached images. The statistics used are generated from databases that are also accessible on CAIN, which is one of the foremost and complete resources for studying the Troubles that is available on the Internet. The media chosen for this purposive sample were selected because they were some of the few available artefacts that contained female subjects, and they all displayed similar qualities with regard to gender and feminism.

Media synopsis and modern Irish feminism

Feminism as a collective yet separate social movement in Ireland was markedly behind the times (Hackett, 1995). In essence, feminism took a permanent backseat to politics since the creation of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State in 1922 (Racioppi, 2006). Equality of pay and responsibility are just as slow to move forward as the peace process itself (O'Sullivan, 2012).

It is not illogical that gender equality took a backseat to political, social and religious equality movements during the early Troubles. However, because they emulated the social and civil rights movements of England and the United States (Purdie, 1990), it is striking that feminism in divided Northern Ireland made relatively slow progress. For this particular study, the focus will be specifically on visual media as propaganda and the gender implications involved in conjunction with these conditions.

The Troubles and their aftermath are fraught with visual propaganda. From provocative militaristic media to positivistic post-Troubles public service announcements, the Troubles spurred a plethora of propaganda that was

progressively traditional; progressive in that there was a noticeable shift from sociocultural intolerance toward tolerance, and traditional because gender distinctions, norms and expectations were often upheld and retained. Much of this propaganda can be understood through Harold Lasswell's (1971) early studies on propaganda that deconstruct propaganda into several objectives, three of which directly apply here: 'demonisation', whereby opposition leaders are vilified; 'preserving friendship', which involves consolidation of those who share similar objectives and views; and 'demoralizing the enemy', a function that utilizes messages to disrupt the unity of the opposition's objective and their resolve to continue in the conflict. Visual propaganda, most notably from Irish Republicans, nearly always had elements of one or more of these objectives. What is most apparent for our purposes, though, is these media often depicted men in masculine situations.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement was born out of multiple causes. The most prevalent were housing inequality, voting rights and basic civil rights, with the most revolutionary element being mostly students. Many of its participants were women, including prominent public figures such as Bernadette Devlin. These women were similar to Republican women during the Irish struggle for independence (1916-1921), in which women often shared power and responsibilities with men in order to resist British rule (Valiulis, 2011). The relative 'peace' that followed the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) largely reversed gender roles back to their pre-war status quo, but historical precedent suggested that women might again have a prominent role as armed conflict began anew during the Troubles.

Posters

Posters are one of the most numerous and common media available for examination of propaganda on this subject, covering a vast array of subtopics within the conflict. They are easily mass-produced and some collections number over 17,000 (Lassonde & Léger, 2009). Obviously this study cannot examine every single poster involving this subject, but a pattern emerges from examining several collections on CAIN ('CAIN Web Service - Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland"). Women most often are not involved in direct confrontation in these images and the common interpretation of

Figure 1. Mna na hEireann (Moloney, 2002).
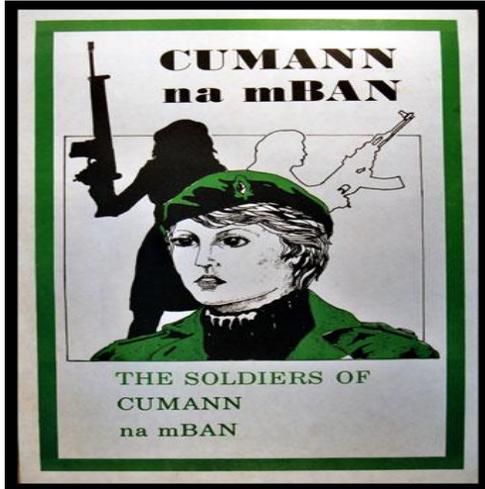
women's roles in this conflict is either a separated, idealistic figurehead or a masculinised warrior.

A poster titled *Mna na hEireann-Women of Ireland* (Figure 1) presents a complex picture of masculinity and femininity while emphasizing the omnipresent green of Ireland. Cumann na mBan is a paramilitary group in Ireland whose roots can be traced back to the Irish War of Independence, and whose nationalistic yet distinctly feminine quality would seem to reduce gender separation in Irish nationalist activity. However, their very origin was born out of gender separation (McCallum, 2005). This poster purposefully uses black and white to with the Irish green at the forefront of the image being the dominant focus. While these female figures are portrayed in the typically male-dominated practice of war and this would seem to subvert gender inequality, the foremost woman in green is portrayed as masculine.

The rear figures also only superficially represent feminism. The white figure, if separated from the rest of the image, cannot be seen as undeniably female. The black figure only reveals its gender by the outline of a skirt. Both figures are dominated by strikingly large weapons that they hold erect – assault rifles commonly associated with male soldiers. This also subverts the feminine quality of the image by emphasizing masculinity over femininity and stigmatizes these female soldiers from their fellow women (Horan, 2011). Even in this case where women are assumed to be the equal of men, they are actually portrayed with male characteristics. Moreover, as we shall see later, while this poster suggests direct military involvement in the conflict by women, statistical evidence will be examined that puts this in perspective.

The next poster, *Remember Loose Talk Costs Lives* (Figure 2) embodies traditional and archaic assumptions about women. Again, green is the proverbial eye-catcher with the rest of the image being black and white. The hushing woman personifies the belief

that women struggle to keep important matters secret, a risk that could prove detrimental to the cause of Republicanism. The coffins obviously symbolize death. This harkens back to Arthurian traditions where women were often the catalyst for life and death situations for men. This poster is an example of the

Figure 2. "Remember loose talk costs lives" (Moloney, 1972).

perceived weakness and potential destructive capacity of women. It is easy to read the basic message in this poster to women as: 'We men will take care of everything. You must be silent in order to help us.'

Handkerchiefs

When most people think of media, handkerchiefs are probably not the first example that comes to mind. For Republican prisoners, however, these served as a channel to perpetuate and express their own propaganda: they could create idealistic messages using the few materials they had available.

The first sample, *Seven Portraits of The Signatories of The Proclamation of The Irish Republic Plus Central Female Figure With Irish Tricolour Flag* (Figure 3) offers a patriotic representation of Ireland's revolutionary 20th century history. While this handkerchief appears quite simplistic, its semiotic message is deep and far-reaching. The male figures are leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. They include: James Connolly, Thomas Clarke, Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Plunkett, Eamonn Ceannt and Sean MacDiarmada. Each was executed for his role in the Rising. These men

Figure 3. Seven portraits of the signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic plus central female figure with Irish tricolour flag; inscription; signed. (Doherty, 1975).

became personified symbols of a united, republican Ireland and are portrayed in a circular barrier around the feminine "Ireland" carrying an Irish banner. The implied message of this image is the virtuous Irish maiden is surrounded and protected by men who gave up their own lives to protect her, which reinforces the patriarchal role of men as protectors of women (O'Keefe, 2003).

Óglaigh na hÉireann (Figure 4) translates several ways, but the basic premise of the title is 'warriors of Ireland', and often the name taken by the IRA in the Irish language. Clearly in this prison-made handkerchief this depicted warrior is a woman, clad in dark, secretive garb for the purpose of fighting for Republican forces. The quote is as follows:

> I believe and stand by the God-given right of the Irish nation to sovereign independence, and the right of any Irish man or woman to assert this right in armed revolution… Bobby Sands

This portrayal has similar qualities to *Mna na hEireann* above in that a woman has taken on the role and dress of a male combatant. This does reduce gender distinction in this regard, but again it does so at the expense of visual femininity. Armed conflict tends to strengthen male hegemony over women (Racioppi, 2006)

Figure 4. Óglaigh na hÉireann (Moloney).
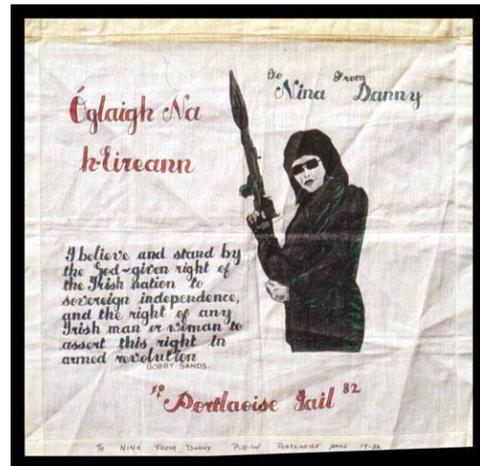
and, if it does not, the result is a loss of the distinctions between male and female,

though not necessarily as a consequence of equality. What relative social gains women made through direct participation in the Troubles sometimes came at the expense of their feminine social identity being visually distinct from masculine imagery in these forms of propaganda.

Murals

Murals are perhaps the most permanent and pervasive example of the three media examined in this study. Their prominence and fixture on large signs and buildings ensure that they linger for years, influencing the immediate and collective memory of individuals and the communities they live in. Their propaganda and gender representations promote and reiterate longstanding political and social agendas that commonly disconnect women from conflict and predominantly masculine affairs.

Figure 5. Women in struggle (Moloney, 2002.)

The first mural examined is *Women in Struggle* (Figure 5) This mural pays homage to individual women dealing with the Troubles and the Irish revolutionary movement. The centered woman is Constance Markievicz, standing in front of the General Post Office (GPO), which served as Republican headquarters during the 1916 Easter Rising, providing a clear example of Republicanism for the four other women to emulate. Even this predominantly female mural is not without gender bias and underlying themes that discourage feminist social progress. Each woman is depicted alone and, while some are actively engaged in forms of resistance, none are directly involved in actual combat. This visually reinforces gender separation throughout the Troubles. Women undoubtedly were a

part of the struggle. In this visual representation, however, they are not depicted in a male-oriented activity such as combat.

The second mural, *Plastic bullet victims* (Figure 6), starkly visualizes females in the role of the helpless victim. Its intent is to muster an outcry of support against the British, who are portrayed as ready and willing to kill innocent women. Children, including female children, were also victims of violence in the Troubles. The little girl in red symbolizes blood and death, concepts that no rational person ever wants to associate with children regardless of their gender. The serene woman and children

Figure 6. Plastic bullet victims (Moloney, 2002).

perpetuate the frequent correlation of innocents killed in war as a rallying cry. They were not actively looking to be a part of the conflict in this depiction, but their innocence and sometimes their lives were taken because of it.

Women and casualties

The media critiqued above tend to stereotype and depict women as directly involved in the death and destruction of the Troubles either as idealistic symbols of innocence and virtue or as masculine guerillas. There is rarely a visual connection between traditional conceptions of femininity (e.g. long hair or female clothing) and participation in combat. While two depict women involved in military roles, they do so at the expense of gender identity by presenting clearly masculine qualities such as short hair, masculine clothing and weaponry. The other four artefacts create figurative and proverbial barriers that are, or at the very least *should* be, *between* women and the conflict, whether by artistic rendition or by promoting traditional ascriptions of womanly roles in conflict. It is not uncommon to see women used as a propagandistic element in the media of any modern military struggle.

Women's experiences in the Troubles were invariably complex and multifaceted. While women indeed played multiple important roles in the Troubles, they also found their casualty rates far below the men involved. The following data tables reflect years of research on deaths resulting from the Troubles (Sutton, 2002). They present casualty date by gender, religion and gender, and social status and gender.

Table 1
The Troubles: *Fatality by Gender*

Gender	Count
Female	322
Male	3209
Total	3531

Table 2
The Troubles: *Fatality by Religion and Gender*

Religion	Male	Female	Totals
Catholic	1371	151	1522
Protestant	1177	111	1288
Not from Northern Ireland	661	60	721
Total	3209	322	3531

Table 3
The Troubles: *Fatality by Social Status and Gender*

Social Status	Male	Female	Totals
Civilian	1552	289	1841
British Security	1095	19	1114
Republican Paramilitary	382	14	396
Loyalist Paramilitary	169		169
Irish Security	11		11
Total	3209	322	3531

These figures show nearly an 11:1 ratio of male to female casualties. The most startling and telling figure is that only 33 military/paramilitary women were killed while 289 female civilians died, thus suggesting female non-combatants were more likely to be a casualty than those directly involved in military activity. A similar

database compiled by Michael McKeown (2009) puts the female death toll at 372, a difference of only 50. This data supports the argument that a disproportionate number of men were killed compared to women. It also suggests women by and large tended to remain out of organized military activity as portrayed in several of the critiqued media: otherwise female military/paramilitary casualties would be much higher. While women were often kept away from potentially fatal situations and scenarios as evidenced by the general lack of female propaganda and fatalities, they also were, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuating traditionalism with regard to gender roles by their abstinence from violence and minimal participation in military activity compared to males.

Conclusion

Symbolism with gender implications permeated Republican propaganda that came out of the Troubles during a time when we might expect exactly the opposite of female subservience and perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Violence involving women has been a constant theme throughout Irish history from Celtic queens fighting in chariots to women in the twentieth century banging trash can lids to warn men of imminent danger (Sullivan, 1999). Perhaps the biggest irony in the posters, handkerchiefs and murals studied here was that, while they symbolized political progress and freedom, they served to visually support feminine incapability, complacency and separation.

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