

not simply, relations of a man

Colin Graham

When Martin McGuinness warned the sisters and partner of Robert McCartney that they 'would need to be very careful' about the direction of their campaign for justice, he may have believed that he wasn't sounding threatening. It was, he wanted to convey, merely a word to the naïve from the politically wise. McGuinness's concern was that the McCartneys 'don't step over the party political line and allow themselves to be used or manipulated'. With now typical and forceful dignity the McCartneys and Bridgeen Hagans replied that they were not stupid, and that they felt condescended to. They have gently made it clear that several of them have a university education, history and politics being favoured subjects, and thus they feel that they know how politics works in Northern Ireland. Despite this, McGuinness's language, much as he'd deny it, was that of the authoritative, party-political, public man who speaks down to the individual woman, or 'women', here defined primarily as relatives of a man. Whatever strides have been made in Sinn Féin's gender policies (and there were many in the 1980s and '90s), being a republican still demands a loyalty that cannot see how the hypocrisy of partisanship-for-its-own-sake often defines republicanism's, or Sinn Féin's, limits. When men talk to women in the way McGuinness talked to the McCartneys, and when the men are in the public domain, the women emerging from privacy into public grief, the old gender imbalances are reasserted. The stench of political machismo lingers long.

Like many an individual story in Northern Irish politics, the killing of Robert McCartney is a particular horror which is in danger of being lost in the stasis of the Peace Process. The 2005 Parliamentary elections gave McGuinness's words an extra urgency, especially when it seemed that one of the McCartney sisters might stand as an independent candidate, with the potential for embarrassing Sinn Féin. But it is the familiar narrative of women coming into the political arena in the North, only to be silenced and forgotten, which seems a more likely scenario for the McCartneys, as their brother's murder fades from memory and the moment of change which their campaign seemed to signal slips into the past, to be replaced, no doubt, by another 'challenge' to the status quo of the Peace Process.

Gender, and the place of women in the state in more general terms, has always proved an irritation to the onward march of nationalist and

unionist ideologies in Ireland, north and south. While nationalist Ireland has its familiar female icons, standing as metaphors for a fantastically unified nation (Mother Ireland; Kathleen Ní Houlihan; the Sean Bhan Bhocht), Northern Ireland came into existence with a unionist equivalent. A well-known poster from 1914 depicts a unionist colleen, shawl and all, in front of a Union Flag, holding a rifle and lamenting her desertion by Britain. The implicit call to her better and stronger male half is the same as republicanism's equally well-known image of the 'Birth of the Irish Republic' in which 'Ireland' is an angel (with a distinctly French lineage) who floats above and guards the rebels of the Rising. Gun in hand or not, Hibernia and her unionist sister have always found themselves eventually kept in the shadows of their menfolk. After a flurry of public activity, it's clear that the banal work of everyday politics has little place for women, and less place for the idea that women might have something different to say.

If the imagery of Northern Irish wilting femininity has a long history, so too do the complaints women have made about the deaf ear turned to gender when the national question is being gravely pronounced. In 1909, the feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington recognised that 'we all, unionists and nationalists alike, live overmuch on our past in Ireland ... This tendency is nowhere more aptly illustrated than with regard to the position of Irish women in the Ireland of to-day. Nowhere in the pitiful tangle of present-day life does the actual more sadly belie the far-off past.' Sheehy Skeffington largely stood outside the national debate and, before the Rising at any rate, tried to keep gender and national issues separate. Meanwhile, even the redoubtable ladies of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, with a clear political agenda in mind, were capable of straight-talking. In June 1918 a memo from the Council complained to the party hierarchy that 'we have not been treated like comrades'; these, again, were women feeling silenced and betrayed by the political scene in the North, this time at the end of the First World War.

The McCartney sisters are not avowed feminists, like the suffragist Sheehy Skeffington, nor are they politicians, however muted, like the Ulster Women's Unionist Council of 1918, or indeed Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), who was so lampooned in the British and unionist press in the early 1970s for her perceived lack of femininity. The McCartneys and Ms Hagans are simply strong women, seeking to break a mould, but only because they have to. There is, in their campaigning, a resonance of an earlier phenomenon of the Troubles – the Peace People. Formed in 1976, after the deaths of several young children who were knocked down by a car in an IRA-British Army chase, the Peace People were organised by Mairead Corrigan, Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown. Williams and Corrigan were awarded the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize. The Peace People still exist – indeed like many long-standing political and non-political organisations in Northern Ireland, they see the Good Friday Agreement as an outcome and vindication of their position, difficult as it is to reconcile the mixture of paramilitary exhaustion and political cynicism in post-Agreement Northern Ireland with the Gandhianism of the Peace People. The Peace People cite the pacifism of Francis Sheehy Skeffington as an inspiration, rather than the feminism of Hanna. Yet their philosophy has always been somewhat awkwardly caught between their

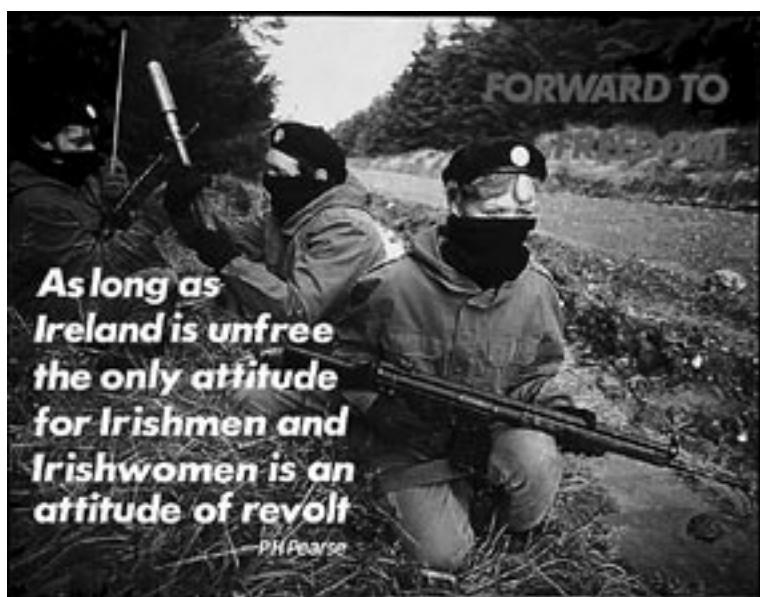
anti-violence stance and their female leadership. When awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Williams and Corrigan were sure to point to Ciaran McKeown's involvement in the Peace People. And Williams's Nobel acceptance speech effectively disavowed gender politics: 'War has traditionally been a man's work ... The voice of women has a special role and a special soul force in the struggle for a non-violent world. We do not wish to replace religious sectarianism or ideological division with sexism or any kind of militant feminism.' Women just are more peaceful, was as forceful as the gender message got for the Peace People. Their political stance was equally, benignly unengaged. The hoary political forces of Northern Ireland eventually consumed them.

For the Peace People and the McCartneys, women calling for peace and justice respectively are in a position potentially nullified from the outset by the perceived liberalism or irrelevance which clings to a 'women's movement'. It is not long, in Northern Ireland, before anything 'new', especially when it involves women, is seen to have a pitiful naivety about it. If it doesn't disappear quickly from view then suspicion, and eventually conspiracy theories, follow. The effect is to say again and again that women cannot lead political agendas. More profoundly, these stifling forces mean that no grassroots movements are conceivable, other than those variously represented by the established political parties. In the case of the McCartneys, though, there is a stronger and perhaps more resilient driving force. The Peace People failed as a mass movement because they had a notional 'sectarianism' to them. They talked about Northern Ireland's divisions and Troubles only in terms of tragedy, a discourse which falls apart once touched by real politics. Obviously the causes of the Troubles run deeper than the widespread, vague and compromisable desire that no one should die. But the McCartneys are not peace campaigners. Their strength comes from the fact that they confront their own community. The dynamic of their protest is not that of the creation of a 'third space', nor an appeal to some utopian impulse. What really rattles the cages in Northern Ireland are small shifts in the consensus, not well-meaning hand-wringing about the illogicality of sectarianism (illogical and abhorrent as it is). The recent elections, for example, were, like most preceding them, two separate elections in one: nationalists and unionists voting with almost no crossover. It is the structures within and not across these ideologies which matter. And therefore the emergence of a dissenting and impressive set of women's voices from within republicanism, and *de facto* pitted against the new republicanism, upsets the balance. The McCartneys can only fallaciously be seen as crying liberals or the stooges of the forces of oppression. Some will believe this, some have hinted at it over the past months. But it doesn't stick.

In this the McCartneys can take their strength from the individuality of their case, and they have done so by taking their story far and wide. They cause tremors in republicanism because they have the aura of loss and grief, and the authenticity of locality, both of which republicanism itself, especially in Belfast, has relied on. Without this, and their own determination, they would not have made the impact they have.

Women as women are still sidelined in the matrix of class and sectarianism which

IRA poster,
date unknown





McCartneys and Bridgeen Hagans

underwrites the politics of Northern Ireland. Evidence of this is the fate of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), formed in 1996. The NIWC were involved in the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement and subsequently had two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Their cross-community, non-sectarian policies perhaps challenged the moribund Alliance Party more than any other, though again there were glimmers of a different order in their founding, reflected best in the words of their opponents. David Ervine, for example, leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), also contesting the 1996 elections to the Northern Ireland Forum, said of the NIWC: 'I do have some dubious thoughts about how they as a cross-community group can look at this election and understand why this election is called and then field candidates to actually deal with the problems that undoubtedly beset us.' Ervine himself was leading an emerging party, the energies of which were hardly 'cross-community' but which in a different way might have signalled a new set of formations in the party political system. It was not to be though, either for the PUP or the NIWC. The PUP has only one MLA; the NIWC

now have none. Indeed the NIWC has only one elected representative, a local councillor in North Down representing the cosy middle-classness of Ballyholme. The NIWC's focus on women's issues was targeted at a middle-ground – they had more to say on health and children's issues than all the other parties combined. But their collapse was an inevitability of the effective sectarianism of the very Agreement which they helped broker. Despite their disdain for the 'win-lose syndrome' of Northern politics it was that dynamic which was solidified and institutionalised on Good Friday 1998. The result of the Agreement has been the continued rise of Sinn Féin within nationalism and the near-obliteration of the Ulster Unionist Party by the DUP. The liberal middle-ground is saturated by business, financiers and developers, who plough ahead with their transformation of the 'communities' of the North, while socially the province remains as divided as ever, and women's voices have been placed back under the dominion of the ancient ideologies.

Women in Northern Irish politics have a Hobson's choice. Either they can join the political machine and see gender issues, from abortion, to maternity services, to childcare, take second

place to the interminable negotiations of identity politics. Or they can join or form another community women's group – a phenomenon with a healthy, but semi-underground energy, stretching back continually through the period of the Troubles. Maybe the McCartney sisters will shift those tectonic plates which are the cause of the rumbling inadequacies of politics in Northern Ireland. If they do, it will be because of their own bravery, and because it seems that solidarity for women is best achieved within their 'community', and by questioning its ethics and masculinity from the inside.