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Transnational memories and gender: Northern Ireland's 1968

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Introduction

This chapter challenges the absence of the 'troubled province' from the dominant transnational narrative of this seminal period of revolt, and examines the question of gender in Northern Ireland's 1968 as one factor in that absence. Following a brief overview of how the case of Northern Ireland has been marginalised in the increasingly consensual interpretation of 1968 as a global wave of protest, the place of the gender issue in the Northern Irish context will be assessed. Drawing on the testimonies of a selection of interviews with female protagonists from the time, I argue that the perceived absence of the gender question is not something that need set Northern Ireland apart. I will problematise the predominant interpretation that 1968 stimulated (in a positive sense) the subsequent surge in feminist activism, and explore the concept of this period as in fact a 'negative catalyst' in this domain. Citing evidence of the prominent role of women during Northern Ireland's 1968 and in particular the leading role of one young female activist, I will argue that the question of gender, far from further consolidating the argument for Northern Ireland's absence from the transnational narrative of ''68', actually provides another example of how that anomalous absence merits a reassessment and is ripe for a serious challenge.

***Sous les pavés*…the Troubles – Northern Ireland and the global 1968**

'1968' has come to mean much more than a calendar year. Those four digits are today understood as something much broader, complex and interesting. They represent a period that goes beyond the obvious twelve months to incorporate a longer time-span, stretching from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s when, across the globe, country after country was rocked by a wave of protest.[1] In the areas affected, a number of striking commonalities have enabled the emergence of a transnational narrative around understandings and interpretations of this seminal 'year'. The idea that something was happening on a global scale was recognised by activists at the time, and is one reason why so many people got involved and conducted their protests in the manner they did (Katsiaficas 1987; Caute 1988; Fraser 1988; Jameson 1984). Recognition of the international aspect of 1968 has been growing steadily over the years as the period has become the focus of increasingly intensive interest, particularly around the decennial commemorations. That process arguably came to a head in 2008, when a surge in interest around the notion of '68 as a transnational revolt consolidated the idea that any understanding of what happened in individual countries was predicated on taking stock of the unquestionably exceptional international context (Crane and Muellner 2008; Førland 2008; de Groot 2008). Since 2008, the international focus has persisted, with more studies emerging to strengthen the transnational narrative (Frei 2008; Gassert and Klimke 2009; Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013; von der Goltz 2011; Tismaneanu 2011.) More recently, attention has turned to what could be described as marginal or peripheral areas, further expanding the geographical spread of what is now broadly accepted to be a transnational revolt (Dramé and Lamarre 2009; Farik 2008; Førland 2008; Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013; Klimke and Scharloth 2008; Zancarini-Fournel 2016, 778-865). In the 50th anniversary year it is clear that the emphasis on understanding 1968 through the international lens shows no signs of abating.

Even while the last half-century has seen a forging of the transnational narrative of 1968, it has been very rare to see any mention of Northern Ireland. Even the academic literature on the period has almost completely marginalised what happened there (Cornils and Waters 2010; Dreyfus-Armand 2008; Fink, Gassert and Junker 1998; Caute 1988). One could almost be forgiven for believing that nothing of any importance occurred; but anyone with a minimal understanding of Northern Ireland's recent history knows how significant 1968 was. Not only did Northern Ireland experience a significant period of revolt, but a strong case can (and has) been made for what happened in the 'troubled province' to be included in the ever-expanding roster of areas to have experienced a '1968' (Reynolds 2015). There were of course specificities that one can identify in 1960s Northern Ireland that led to a degree of difference in what drove the movement there, how it conducted itself, who was involved and what its objectives were (Reynolds 2017: 636-38). However, to present Northern Ireland as a case apart and thus to explain its absence from the transnational memory of this period is not only insufficient, it also misses the point of how the transnational narrative of 1968 should be understood. '1968' was a time when, in many places in the world, a gateway was opened for those wishing for change. Change was not the same in each country: rather, those protesting were plugged in to an international zeitgeist that armed them with the confidence, the tools, and the forms of action that enabled them to take on and challenge the status quos of their specific national contexts (Prince 2006: 867). The idea that Northern Ireland was somehow immune to that makes no sense.

So, if Northern Ireland did experience its own '1968', how can its enduring absence from the transnational narrative be understood? The response lies not in seeing what happened as a case apart, but instead focusing on what could be described as its divergent aftermath. Generally speaking, 1968 is considered as a positive, progressive moment when those nations affected shook off the conservative and archaic mores that had hitherto defined

them and took important steps towards a more modern and liberal outlook (Reynolds 2015). In France (for example), a progressively celebratory mood has come to define commemorations of the period (Reynolds 2011; Rioux 2008). Such a positive spin has simply not been possible in the Northern Irish context. The post-68 period there saw the onset of the nightmare that was the Troubles, which took Northern Ireland on a completely different and very negative trajectory.[2] As a result, for a number of reasons, including personal security and the question of regret, the story of Northern Ireland's 1968 was buried beneath the horror of the Troubles (Reynolds 2017: 638-40). That is why, both from within and from without, there has been no place for the Northern Irish story in the transnational narrative (Reynolds forthcoming). As will be argued later, as Northern Ireland adjusts to an era of peace, an opportunity now exists to right the wrong that is this absence. Before that, however, I will focus on the question of gender, in order to demonstrate that not only did Northern Ireland have a '1968', but there is a case to be made that, from a gender perspective, it was arguably leading the way.

The gender question and 1968 – stereotypical representations

That 1968 has become the focus of so much public, media and academic attention can be attributed to many different factors. There is of course the argument that what happened was really quite exceptional. The nature and magnitude of the events around 1968, whether in the USA, France, Czechoslovakia or China (to name but a few), was striking. The forms of action, the demands being made, the people involved all stir interest, even 50 years later. Making sense of how and why so many nations were affected during a relatively short period of time have become one of the stand-out concerns of '1968 studies'. That such a spread was able to happen, even before the advent of a 'world-wide web', stirs up memories of similar

type revolts in history (1789, 1848, for example) and begs the question as to how such a spread was able to happen (Graeber 2014).

Because of its widespread consequences, 1968 it is commonly referred to as a watershed year. In almost every domain, it is commonplace to see reference to 'a before' and 'an after' 1968 (Fink, Gassert, Junker 1998). Political transformations (at varying speeds) ensued. 1968 has also come to represent a turning-point in the development of fashion, music and the arts. Social mores are equally held up as having received a jolt, with the experiences of the 1968 events triggering or speeding up a transformation in the rules and regulations that underpin society. Economically, there are suggestions that 1968 paradoxically facilitated the development of some nations' ability to adapt to the rigours of a modern-day capitalist system. It is possible to cite almost any institution or element of contemporary society and interpret 1968 as a pivotal moment. This would include areas such as the Church, justice systems, ecological movements, sport, media, trade unionism, regional identities, prison, antinuclearism, education, and so on.

It would also include the question of gender. It is almost impossible to read any recent study that deals with this period and its consequences that does not refer to the role of women during the events and the subsequent impact on the rise of feminism (c.f. for example Horn 2007: 217-19; Sherman, van Dijk, Alinder, Aneesh 2013: 239-69; Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013: 239-57). The dominant narrative posits 1968 as a pivotal turning-point for what would become one of the most significant social movements in recent history. The conclusion one would be forgiven for drawing is that the feminist movement, too, came into being via the gateway opened by the experiences of 1968. When one considers the post-1968 trajectory of the feminist movement, it is understandable how such a conclusion is so commonly drawn.

In the aftermath of 1968, the question of gender and feminism became one of the most significant and important areas of debate, right across the globe (Klimke and Scharloth

2008: 281-93). The chronology of the formation of significant feminist movements suggests that something gave way as a result of the 1968 events (Freedman 2003). Developments in key areas around gender also emerged in the post-1968 era: one could cite the continued granting of the vote to women during this period (in Yemen, Andorra, Switzerland and Portugal, for example), a focus on greater gender equality in politics, changing attitudes to sexuality, important reforms to laws on contraception and abortion, or changes to family law in order to bring about greater parity (Walters 2005: 83-115). All of these changes appeared to come in the wake of the 1968 events and the new terrain they had cultivated.

Before problematising the rather facile notion that 1968 somehow gave birth to the rise of feminism and subsequent, associated developments, it is worth pausing to reflect on how activists in Northern Ireland's 1968 perceive the issue in terms of their own experiences of the time. The following section therefore draws on testimonies from former female protagonists and on their reflections on the importance of gender.

The gender question in Northern Ireland's 1968

Following the publication of *Sous les pavés…the Troubles* in 2015, the author of this chapter entered into a collaboration with the Ulster Museum in Belfast (Reynolds 2015). A series of videoed interviews was commissioned with protagonists from Northern Ireland's 1968, including voices hitherto marginalised in how the story has been told.

As well as the standard questions put to everyone as part of the structured interviews, a number of issues around the topic of gender were put to the interviewees. In both the general and specific questions on the place of women, it became clear that there were interesting and revealing reflections that deserved to be included in the story of Northern Ireland's 1968. The questions around gender sought to examine the extent to which this was actually a prevalent issue at the time. What became abundantly clear was that the protagonists

were more or less agreed on the general absence of this as a central issue. As the former People's Democracy (PD) 'footsoldier' Carol Tweedale explained:

> There was no concept that women's rights had any relevance to the People's Democracy or the civil rights movement, as far as I was aware of, right. I don't think we, as young women, were very aware of gender and equalities, your gender issues. […] women's issues were not, as far as my recollection is, were not on the agenda. There were a lot of girls about the place […] But you know, the big talkers were the chaps […] but I don't remember anything about gender issues coming up in the general civil rights […]. Not in Northern Ireland (Tweedale 2017).

The former prominent PD activist Anne Devlin remembered that, at the time, questions around feminism were not on her radar:

> It took me a very long time and it took me a lot of reading to really figure out. And still I wouldn't have been a feminist. I really didn't think there was any need for it, and I didn't understand […] And so, it wouldn't have been obvious to me, at first. So, it's hard. It's a difficult question. Because I'm very feminist now (Devlin 2017).

Judith Jennings, who also played an important role in the PD movement, explained that while feminism may have been an issue in general, the situation in Northern Ireland was somewhat different:

> Yes. It [feminism] was present, but it was more present in London. We were involved with groups in London, Grosvenor Square, for example, 'Troops Out' movement, but a lot of those women were Lesbians and would have been in communes. And so that was…and also a lot of literature, a lot of books at that time. Mainly American and of course…so much feminism there, but it was not so much in Ireland (Jennings 2017).

When asked to explain how it was that the gender issue was so absent, interviewees tended to present the context of Northern Ireland as specific, in keeping with the notion that the province was a case apart. Jennings spoke of a conservative context where religion made progressive ideas, such as feminism, unwelcome topics of debate:

> Well, I think we were too conservative in that respect with regards…well, my friends were anyway, but we read the books [...]. Everybody read them, but we weren't so militant about it as they were…English people were. […] Well, religious attitudes, obviously. Yes. There were certain things you didn't do. If you did do them you were shunned and put away and babies were hidden and, you know, put into convents and people were treated badly if they overstepped the line. (Jennings 2017)

Devlin recalled how any sign of her interest on politics was made difficult by the perception that politics was the reserve of men, and men only:

> [O]ne, it was regarded as I was boring. And two, I was also, it isn't what girls were supposed to do. There was a very strong sense that this was a gender thing. Men, and even lads, could be like that. But women didn't, weren't like that. I was really aware of that, and it was kind of embarrassing. (Devlin 2017)

Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), who would become one of the most prominent figures of Northern Ireland's 1968, offered an interesting interpretation as to why the question of gender did not feature for her at the time. Drawing on economic and personal issues she explained:

> So my first understanding of that was around economics, was around poverty, was around class in a very broad sort of way. And then understanding that that differential in class was also mediated through how I was perceived by the state because I was perceived to be within the nationalist community. So being Catholic, nationalist and poor was nearly enough for me to handle without having to process intellectually,

> gender. That's intellectually where I was. But it was also something quite interesting for me personally. Up until I went to university, my world was populated by women. My father died when I was young. I only had one brother and he was the youngest. There were five girls in my house and my mother. My granny was a widow […] and her family were predominantly girls. And I went to an all-girls school taught by nuns and women teachers from, I was five years until I was 18. So, in a way, my world was protected from the interference of male supremacy. And so, I wasn't aware, in many ways I wasn't aware that girls didn't speak out in the class because there were no boys in it. I didn't notice that no other women, young women put their hands up when to be on the faceless committee. So again, that's just one of those things that happened, or at least that's my explanation of it. I had the good fortune not to know my place in so many ways in life that, depending how you look on it, it was good fortune or poor fortune. But my own place in life was that I had, apart from poverty, I missed, you know, I was absent from the classes that taught the people what their place in life was. And so, I missed out on a clear understanding of where women fitted in society until I was in the student movement (McAliskey 2017).

On the surface, then, it would appear that the gender question was not only absent in Northern Ireland, but also the specific context made any discussion of the issue nearly impossible. Such an interpretation could be used to add credibility to the notion that Northern Ireland logically does not fit the consensual, transnational narrative of this period. However, such a conclusion can only be drawn if one accepts the stereotypical connection between the issue of gender and the 1968 events. As the next section argues, the idea that the rise of feminism is indebted to the 1968 movement merits a degree of problematisation.

1968 – *interdit aux femmes?*

The tendency of the dominant narrative to posit 1968 as a pivotal moment that paved the way for a new era for women could lead to the assumption that women were very much a part of the 1968 revolt, which demonstrated what was possible and inspired them to make the progress that was subsequently achieved.

The reality is more complex. The dominant images of the 1968 period document a stark absence of women (Evans 2009: 332). The stand-out leaders of the protest movement were men; women were not given roles of any great prominence. The 'revolution' generally stopped short of questioning the role divisions that prevailed in society at the time, and women took on remedial tasks (answering phones, making food, printing posters and staffing crèches), leaving the men to take care of what were seen as the more important and substantive aspects of the revolt (Evans 2009: 338; Allwood and Wadia 2000: 157). In fact, as will be discussed in the next section, the perpetuation of the subordinate roles reserved for women during the 1968 events served as a 'negative catalyst' for action in 68's afterlife. It is here that we can start to identify a strong crossover between what happened in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Bernadette McAliskey explained how, despite her undoubted primary role, she was treated differently and marginalised at times because she was a woman:

> I think the gender issue was actually in terms of the representation of me. […] But when I look back, […] I can reflect on the impact of gender. The hostility of the media to me in terms of where the media was and where I was should have come significantly earlier than it did but didn't because I was a young woman. So, they were still talking about my long hair and my white boots and what I was wearing in parliament. They were still prioritising this as information that people might want to know, rather than what I said […] people I don't think heard what I said and I think sometimes people within the Civil Rights Movement didn't hear what I said. They

> heard the music but the lyrics didn't count because they were coming out of my mouth. […] And there had been a meeting with Farrell and… which was a gender thing that again, never thought of at the time. You think of it retrospectively. The meeting with the leaders of the march was a meeting with Farrell and Kevin Boyle but did not include me. Why would you take the woman when you could speak for yourself and did not include any other female member of the faceless committee? (McAliskey 2017)

Devlin commented thus on the subordination of women to less important tasks:

> Oh, but it might have been variations on…but I did make banners. For example, I'm not sure that there was…it's very interesting that there wasn't a…It was very much a male thing, the PD. Although there were lots of women in it, I don't think that they would have pushed themselves into positions where they were writing speeches for Bernadette, and I think that's a crucial thing (Devlin 2017).

Just as was the case elsewhere, then, women were involved in Northern Ireland's 1968 but more often than not their participation was limited to subordinate tasks. Even when figures such as McAliskey rose to prominence, it was, as explained by Devlin, always in the shadow of a certain male dominance:

> There were hundreds and hundreds of women in the PD, hundreds of them. I see quite a lot of them now. And we're all rather baffled by the fact that there only seemed to be one iconic image of the PD female, and it was Bernadette. Because there were hundreds of women. And I find it very interesting that structurally, when you look at films by Bernadette, and I've looked at rather a number of them, she's surrounded by men. And I think what's interesting about that is that once she became quite prominent, she was more or less taken off to this place where it was men. I mean, even in crowds, there was men. The cameras don't seem to show her with other

> women. And I think that's an interesting thing that women, even when you're like Bernadette, and even when there were hundreds of women around Bernadette, there's a sense in which that's quite an unusual thing to do. (Devlin 2017)

McAliskey herself shared a revealing reflection on how, in the collective memory of this period, the widespread participation of women has been distilled into the single figure of herself. Instead of the magnitude of female participation and involvement, we get the focus on a solitary, unquestionably exceptional, young woman:

> There were a lot of young women involved in the People's Democracy and one of the interesting things that happens around storytelling is that I have become several of them or more correctly, several of them have been morphed into my history. And other people will tell me about when I took on Vice Chancellor on student committees or something. It wasn't me. I have no idea who it was, but it definitely wasn't me. I never participated in the anti-war protests in Belfast, so the young woman who lay down in front of the Lord Mayor's coach or whatever, wasn't me. But yet if you look back through the narrative, that was me, I did all those, I did all those things. And people remember me being there. People say to me, 'I remember you.' And I get tired of saying, 'No, you can't remember me because I wasn't there.' But they remember a young woman. And I've just become that, in many ways, that totem young woman. And sometimes what interests me is, I would like to go back and find out. Because these were young women activists and they were active. And as they have been… as they have been sort of moved into my history, so their own history has not just become invisible, it has now been entirely removed, they didn't exist (McAlsikey 2017).

Northern Ireland was perhaps not so different after all. Similarities are also discernible when we extend the analysis to make sense of why it was that the post-68 era saw such a surge in the gender question.

Post-68 feminism – the 'negative catalyst'

There can be no questioning that there was a post-1968 surge that saw the issue of women's place gain great currency and led to an unquestionable shift. However, the simple deduction that the women's movement emerged from, or was somehow part of, the 1968 movement encounters some difficulties in the light of the reality that very few women were leading participants. How and why the feminist movement emerged from a set of events that effectively perpetuated the gender hierarchy against which it would define itself certainly requires some explanation.

Women certainly participated in events and, in many instances, threw themselves fully into and behind the revolts that were taking place (Evans 2009: 338-42). However, having been inspired by the possibilities that these events seemed to have opened, the perpetuation of their subordination to secondary roles was the source of much disappointment. One can imagine the sense of injustice felt amongst female activists when the revolt that appeared to offer the possibility of forcing through modern, liberal reforms in reality perpetuated their position as the 'second sex'. That frustration, it has been convincingly argued, in fact provided the impulse for the feminist movement (Horn 2007: 218). Second-wave feminism did not emerge *thanks* to the 1968 events, but *in opposition* to what women had experienced during them. Frustrated by the inability of the revolts to provide the grounds for the changes they were advocating, women were inspired to put in place a new approach – and in that sense the period was indeed an important turning point for their movement.

Female Northern Irish activists such as Tweedale have identified how the feminist 'awakening' did not happen during the events themselves, but actually in their aftermath.

> I remember being at a party in 1971, '72, and we had a lecturer called Behringer**,** and he was American, and his wife Kate basically asked us why we weren't more concerned with women's rights. And that was, to me, nearly a surprise and a shock. […] It disappoints me that we never saw the inequalities that women suffered from at that time, that we weren't really aware of them. I heard on the radio a very good story being told by one of the wives/girlfriends of the civil rights […] she said they were on this big march, right, and they came back […] and he puts his legs up on the settee and he said, 'Okay, what are you making us for our dinner tonight?' And she went into the kitchen to make it. Then, she came back out and she said, 'I have been marching for civil rights all day, for equality and why is there not equality for women?' And that was, I think, summed up basically what we were doing, and you never thought of the women's cause in it. And she did, I didn't. […] I really don't remember anything about feminism until, let's call it 1970, right, thereabouts. Not in that first year, I don't recall anything. And when I did first hear about it, I became very keen on women's right issues very, very quickly. When it actually penetrated the brain, I was very receptive to it, but it took a while for it to get through. Well, no, it took somebody to point it out to me and then… (Tweedale 2017).

Devlin's view that the 'the feminist politics don't kick in until later' (2017) was echoed by McAliskey, who outlined how her understanding of feminism came not during the events but in their aftermath and connected, in a way interestingly similar to Tweedale's, to international developments:

> I didn't notice until a certain period of time. And I think the number of reasons for that as I say, I came very pragmatically to a worldview of where […] my

> understanding of, intellectually, of gender and feminism came to me through being in America and seeing and working with black women. I could understand, I understood gender inequality through the prism of black America which is also quite interesting (McAliskey 2017).

These women's experiences reflect those of their counterparts elsewhere in the world in terms of their relegation to secondary roles during the events; and the post-68 'awakening' after the frustrations felt during the period of revolt very much places Northern Ireland within the parameters of the transnational narrative. The next section goes one step further by arguing that not only was the Northern Irish experience in keeping with what was experienced elsewhere, but there are some grounds to argue that, from a gender perspective, Northern Ireland was actually leading the way.

Women in Northern Ireland's 1968 – trailblazing?

Despite the evidence that women activists in Northern Ireland – as elsewhere – were generally relegated to what could be described as secondary roles, there are also grounds to suggest that, from a gender perspective, Northern Ireland was setting an example that consolidates the case for its inclusion in the transnational narrative of the period. For example, Padrigan Drinan, who in 1968 would go on to be an active member of the PD, outlined the extent of her activity in the run-up to that year, providing a strong counter-argument to the notion that young women were absent from political engagement:

> And whilst at school I joined the Republican Labour Party and being the only woman in it. I was the secretary at the age of fourteen for the whole party. In 1966, I was involved in going up to Stormont. There was a thing called the 'Council of Labour' which was six representatives of the Irish Labour Party/Northern Ireland Labour Party and the Republican Labour Party. All Parties met up in Stormont and in the Dáil and

> at the age of fifteen/sixteen I was involved in these. At these meetings, I met up with young people in the N.I Labour Party and we formed the Young Socialists. There was Eamon McCann and Mike Farrell and people like that and we were the Young Socialists and we met in Belfast. We heard about the Civil Rights movement in the United States and there was a Young Socialist movement in the United States so we began to be in contact with them to see what their issues were. We got involved in anti-apartheid campaign and South Africa at the Ideal Home Exhibition and campaigns for hairdressers and nurses (Drinan 2008).

Jennings described how, once the PD started, women were actively engaged:

> Well, women were involved from the very beginning […]. There was a sort of middle class, convent educated girls who could speak, but weren't as fiery […]. There would have been about six or seven in that category who had a bit of debating experience from Queens from school, you know and would have spoken up (Jennings 2017).

Tweedale explained how young women were not only involved, but that their involvement went beyond the subordinate, remedial duties that were so often reserved for females:

> There were some girls, women, who were involved in the elite group at the top of the movement, right? […] Yeah. I think the one I'm thinking of was kind of the secretary or something, right. I think that's… She wasn't the tea maker. I think she was the secretary (Tweedale 2017).

Also noteworthy is the active participation of female protagonists in some of the most shocking and violent episodes of Northern Ireland's 1968. Edwina Stewart, a key figure in the Civil Rights movement and member of the Communist Party, outlined her experience of the pivotal 5 October 1968 demonstration in Derry that served as the trigger for Northern Ireland's 1968:

> I was walking along. Well we walked along and then we were not allowed to walk were we wanted to go, so we went to the next street which was Duke Street and walked up Duke Street and it was then barricaded off quickly and we stopped and somebody leant Betty Sinclair a chair and she started the meeting and you couldn't really hear her because there was no loudspeakers stuff or anything and when she stopped the meeting and said the will all go home now the Head Constable got up and said you've contravened whatever it was, I couldn't even hear him. 'Disperse, disperse', and Jimmy said he was looking, I was gabbling to people because we were all excited having done this you know, I was talking to people on the footpath and I don't know where he was, he was further in, and he said that he saw the police getting white in the face while this one was shouting 'disperse, disperse'. So, he moved into the side too and he didn't get hit either or arrested so it was shocking just seeing it. I mean I shouldn't have been so naïve but I couldn't understand why that peaceful march was going to be attacked so viciously, god I'm sure there is people regret now that they didn't, like the demands were very moderate. So anyway, when I saw the people leaving I got fuming, when I get raging, I feel as if I'm swelling up and I was running up and down looking for press photographers to come and see these people in the houses all bleeding. I went to one, and he said, 'wee girl away on home I'm the chief police photographer'. (Stewart 2009)

The two testimonies below, first from former PD activist Brìd Ruddy and then Jennings, outline their vivid memories of the shocking attack on the PD march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969. Not only were young women present, they were as caught up in the violence as anyone else:

> And then at Burntollet Bridge which again there was a bit of pre-warning of, Major Bunting and Paisley were there with hundreds of men with cudgels. We were warned

all along the way by police as usual. ‘This is an illegal march. You need to turn back’, and we would stop and make speeches and move on totally disregarding that. We neared Burntollet Bridge. We’re stopped and told that this was definitely an illegal march. We were likely to meet trouble up ahead. They didn’t say what kind of trouble. So, we knew there would be trouble but we were like in a ravine and when we were in the ravine walking through and looked up, it was like seeing in the cowboy pictures the ranks that looked paramilitary right along both edges at the top with stones, cudgels, and they just rained down on us. So, people were falling like nine-pins, blood, all of that. People tried to get away, going through streams. They were cudgelled in the streams. The police managed to keep us all together, get us through, battered, bruised, and all the rest of it. (Ruddy 2016)

Well, again, I was there. And…we were absolutely shocked and horrified…I mean, certainly I was. I couldn't believe it when this man who looked like my father, you know, in a good tweed coat came up to the march at Burntollet where we were having spent the night in Derry. And I thought he was just going to ask for information, but instead, he took my little furry hood down from the coat I was wearing which was a rabbit coat and he produced a chair leg with nails sticking out of it. And he hit me just there very, very hard. So, I fell down and my friend Katy O'Cain got me up on my feet, but he kept going. He pulled down the hood again and hit me again. […] So, I think I was maybe the first one hit and blood all pouring down, it was horrible. And they brought me to the tender to try and get me in away from the melee and I do remember being…the thing that shocked me most was the policeman just said…took a look at me with the blood coming down and just said ‘fuck off’. And I mean, I didn't… don’t use that language. I just will never forget that. (Jennings 2017)

As well as their involvement in some of the more difficult aspects of the revolt, it becomes clear that the women also had some influence on the conduct and direction of the movement, and that this influence had a bearing on how women were subsequently perceived. As Jennings explained:

> Well I suppose it was slightly a moderate approach from the women […]. And new avenues were introduced […] it increased respect for women, I think. That they could do more than just look pretty or not pretty. Or worry only about clothes and make-up. And, you know, there were more things that were important and you could prove that. And then there was respect there because of that. […] I think it's a more liberal way of thinking that brought women's rights, yes. So that was in parallel to the rights of everyone, you know, included women of course. Who were very much the second sex if you like. (Jennings 2017)

One final element that merits attention in this section is the role of Bernadette McAliskey as arguably the most prominent figure of Northern Ireland's 1968. Internationally, as outlined above, there were few, if any, women who figured as key actors in the 1968 events. The contrary was the case in Northern Ireland's 1968. McAliskey would become the face of the movement. Her involvement as a prominent figure started at the creation of the PD on 9 October 1968, and from that moment on she became one of the most important actors in that period of revolt. McAlsikey herself described how she, to everyone's surprise (including her own), was prepared to step up and help the first PD demonstration take place:

> I didn't see it coming, I just was, and it was part of that, and that's the only way I can explain it that it was part of that way that I had of thinking was right, so I started to do this, for God sake get out of my road and if we are going to do it, if you are going to do it would you do it, so why are we sitting here taking six hours talking about, like people used to do it all the time, you know the first thing they agreed was that we

were going to march again and there was no doubt about that, we were all going to march and we are all going to do this and we are all going to do that, but whose going to sign the dotted line for the police and we had a long discussion about that and […] so I signed for it. That was my first mistake, if it was a mistake, that was my decisive action […]. Everybody is looking who was that, and people didn't know me. They would say who was that and it wasn't Kieran McKeown and it wasn't Fred Taggart and it wasn't Michael Farrell and it wasn't your other woman and threw eggs and the police it wasn't them, it was the wee dippy person with the country voice, who is she, the one with the space in her teeth, people didn't know who I was. But if she was stupid enough to sign on the march, she'll do. (McAliskey 2017)

Jennings also recalled this pivotal moment and described how this set McAliskey on course to become one of the most important figures in the subsequent period of revolt:

> Well, I do remember somebody had to sign for a march to take place. Somebody had to volunteer that they would take responsibility and nobody was rushing. And then Bernadette stood up and said I'm an orphan, nobody will worry, you know, I can sign this. And from that moment she was very prominent in all our debates and discussions and meetings. And it was…I think people were surprised that a young girl could speak so eloquently. […] That was very new, yes. (Jennings 2017)

McAliskey would go on to secure such a significant place that she eventually was sensationally elected at the very young age of 21 to the Westminster Parliament, where she continued to break conventions and conduct herself in her own inimitable style (Devlin 1969). Reflecting on her experiences, McAliskey plays down the significance of her role:

> There are similar experiences and I think if you look, and because I was young and female, I look at in different ways at who were other young women around at that time, women in the Palestinian Movement, women in the Quebec Movement, so the

> women were there. […] It's in that volatility that the unexpected can happen. But I don't see, because people will always say that to me in terms of young people and, how would you advise young people about making a career in politics? And I say, I didn't have… I didn't have a career in politics. My political life happened because I wasn't looking and the circumstances created it. (McAliskey 2017)

Despite such modesty, it is hard to over-estimate the groundbreaking significance of her impact, and in particular how she was prepared to challenge the gender barriers that elsewhere were so frustrating for female activists at this time. As Devlin explained, 'if you looked across at the European scene […] I can't think of very many females who rose to the same prominence' (Devlin 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that, not least from a gender perspective, there is ample evidence to counter the suggestion that Northern Ireland has no place in the story of '68. A broader set of factors could be cited to make a case for the inclusion of Northern Irish events in the transnational narrative of the period. In terms of the contexts, the actors, the forms of action, the objectives or the sources of inspiration, there is sufficient grounds to challenge the anomaly that is the absence of Northern Ireland from the story of what is increasingly perceived as a global wave of revolt (Reynolds 2015: 83-115). Northern Ireland had its own '1968', even if the divergent post-1968 afterlife that was the onset of the Troubles has meant that the memory of those events has been buried.

However, Northern Ireland has since 1998 been living in an era of (albeit fragile) peace, and much has changed. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 20 years ago, the peace process and the conclusion of the Troubles has opened up many new opportunities, and whilst there is still much work to done before the situation can be described as normal, there

can be no questioning the fact that Northern Ireland has come a long way from the dark days of the 1968-1998 period. A central and extremely challenging plank of the ongoing peace process is ensuring that the past is sensitively handled. The shifting context that is the post-Troubles era has opened a window of opportunity, permitting a challenge to some of the limitations on how the past is understood. Northern Ireland's 1968 is a pertinent example of the possibilities on offer to reassess and even recalibrate memories of such seminal moments. This was strikingly evident in the first peacetime decennial commemoration of the 1968 events that took place in 2008 (Reynolds 2017: 642-43). A plethora of events organised to mark the 40th anniversary for the first time saw Northern Ireland's 1968 experience the full glare of commemorative treatment (Reynolds 2015: 194-201). Early signs of a will to examine this period anew were in evidence and, in particular, a marked desire to break out of the insularism that supported the marginalisation of Northern Irish events in the transnational narrative (Reynolds forthcoming). That trend is likely to continue in the forthcoming 50th anniversary period, and the connections between Northern Ireland's 1968 and what was happening elsewhere given greater prominence. A more nuanced understanding of the gender question, I have argued in this chapter, is one element in allowing Northern Irish events to take their rightful place in the global collective memory of this period.

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[1] In work on the 1968 events in France, the term *les années 68* is used to capture this broader temporal frame (c.f. Dreyfus-Armand and Franck 2008; Zancarini-Fournel and Artières 2008). More generally, the term 'the long 68' has become increasingly popular (c.f. Vinen 2008; Sherman, van Dijk, Alinder, Aneesh 2013)

[2] Too many studies of the troubled history of Northern Ireland exist to be all cited. Some particularly useful starting points would include Hennessey, 1997; McKittrick and McVea, 2001; Patterson, 2007; Wichert, 1991.