

Troubles Women: Exploring Representations of Female Republican Activists in Troubles Fiction

by

Tracey Icton

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<http://www.trywriting.co.uk/>

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Introduction

'Troubles Women', my practice-led creative writing doctoral research project, investigates, through the combined methodologies of creative writing practice and critical analysis, the portrayals of female combatants in Troubles fiction. The final thesis will comprise an original work of Troubles fiction, the novel *Herself Alone in Orange Rain*, and a scholarly commentary offering a critical analysis of the representational modes employed in Troubles fiction to depict female characters who are Republican activists. The commentary also includes a reflection on the process of writing my novel, detailing how research and creative practice informed the novel's construction. The research project is scheduled for completion in October 2016 and the novel will be published by Cinnamon Press in 2017.

The aim of the project is to create an original work of Troubles fiction that conveys, as effectively as is possible in a work of fiction, the lived experience of being a female volunteer for the Provisional IRA during the 1980s. To do this the novel has been extensively researched, drawing on secondary sources that record accounts of or by women volunteers which granted some insight into their lived experiences of the conflict (see appendix A for content sources). In addition to this a survey of existent works of Troubles fiction has been undertaken to identify how such texts have represented women combatants. In comparing factual accounts to fictional representations during my research it became apparent that fictional representations of 'Troubles' women bear little resemblance to the reported reality. Rather, Troubles fiction generally seems content to confine portrayals of women combatants to narrow tropes often based on gender stereotypes, commonly held views on women and war, misconceptions/ misunderstandings of their experiences and the aberration of fighting women.

Representations of Women in Troubles Fiction

Margaret Ward, Irish historian, has noted "Popular culture has no difficulty in continuing to regard women as angels of the home, their political involvement confined to [...] providing shelter for the fugitive."¹ Her assertion that the woman as combatant is absent from representations of the conflict in popular culture is supported by assessments of Troubles literature ranging from the popular thriller to the more literary novel or short story². Patrick

¹ Ward, 1991 p.7

² The nature of my practice-led research is such that only works of prose fiction have been included in this survey. While recognising that there are, potentially, examples of texts in other forms (poetry, plays etc.) that employ female protagonists as paramilitaries it was deemed appropriate to confine critical appraisal to those texts most similar in form to the creative component of my project.

Magee states that the prevailing stereotype of women combatants in Troubles fiction he surveyed was of “the passive female whose role is ancillary to the male volunteer.”³ Christine St Peter, in her 2000 book, also comments on the lack of female military activists in Troubles fiction, recognising just two examples of female characters⁴ who take part in military action whom, St Peter argues “are unique in their portrayal of actual nationalist violence by women in fiction.”⁵ Writing of the short story, Michael L. Storey notes a similar lack of women protagonists as combatants with female characters being represented “mostly as secondary characters who support male rebels and rarely as central characters, heroic in their own right.”⁶ Although a greater number of female paramilitaries may now be found in Troubles fiction they remain in the minority. From Magee’s estimated “700 works of prose fiction (novels and short stories) that deal either substantially or in part with the contemporary conflict”⁷ I identified twenty-five texts that employed a female character as a Republican activist. It should not be assumed that this list is complete but every effort has been made to establish and include novels/short stories that depict women as combatants. From this selection of texts these prevailing trends in representation emerge; the mother, the whore, the femme fatale, the traitor, the madwoman, the devil woman, the macho woman. Although it is not possible here to explore every text in detail following are some significant examples of these tropes in action.

Bill Rolston in his article ‘Mothers, Whores and Villains’ notes “It is an unwritten rule of these novels that women’s most important role is that of mother [...] even women who are not mothers have that potential.”⁸ One such example is seen in Tom Bradby’s *Shadow Dancer*. His main protagonist, Colette McVeigh, is tagged in the book’s blurb as “Mother. Widow. Terrorist”⁹ the syntactical order of the triple adjective description suggesting ‘terrorist’ is the least important of Bradby’s character’s roles. Con Fitzgibbon in Cathy Spellman’s *An Excess of Love* is also a mother first and combatant second although it is a state she rebels against. When reminded by her husband “you’ve a son to take care of” Con replies “I can have children and still do something [...] I’m too active to remain nothing more than a Dublin housewife.”¹⁰ Bronagh McCabe in Anna Burns’ *No Bones* is another fictional female paramilitary depicted mixing motherhood and terrorism. In one scene she is shown making both a bomb and the children’s dinner:

³ Magee, 2001 p.170

⁴ Finn in Ann Devlin’s ‘Naming the Names’ and Sal from Briege Duffaud’s *A Wreath Upon the Dead*

⁵ St. Peter, 2000 p.109

⁶ Storey, 2004 p.179

⁷ Magee, 2001 p.3

⁸ Rolston, 1989 p.44

⁹ Bradby, 2012, rear cover

¹⁰ Spellman, 1986 pp.160-1

The white slab was on the table beside the thinnest of the screwdrivers, the little boxes, the lighter fuel, the fusewire and insulating tape. Bronagh pushed everything out of Baby Wolfe's little handreach, and opened a big chequered dishcloth.¹¹

Significantly, Burns' portrayal suggests equal importance to both roles but it is worth commenting that the representation of women's motherhood in Troubles fiction is not matched by an equal portrayal of men's fatherhood when the characters are paramilitaries.

In opposition to maternal representations are examples of the whore. Jayne Steel in her book *Demons, Hamlets and Femmes Fatales* uses the term 'vampira', to denote the portrayal of IRA women as those "deadly and seductive *femme fatales*"¹² (italics original). In *1916* by Morgan Llywelyn this is developed literally through the character of Sile Duffy who is a prostitute. Significantly it is Sile, not Mary, the wholesome shop girl, who takes up arms during the Easter Rising. Other whore portrayals are less literal but not always less obvious, frequently depicting female characters in reference to sexual proclivities presented in ways ranging from the passionate to the perverse as seen in *A Star Called Henry* by Roddy Doyle. Doyle's female activist, Miss O'Shea, takes a dominatrix role during intercourse with Henry, often beating him during sex as in the scene where they have intercourse in the GPO basement during the Easter Rising:

I'd been pushed on top of a high bed made of blocks of stamps [...] I was stuck there with my britches nuzzling my ankles as Miss O'Shea grabbed my knees and climbed on top of me [...] Her hands were on my neck; she prodded and glided, looking for ways to kill me [...] she rode me slowly, with a rhythm that was cruel and wonderful.¹³

Taking this further is Burns' Bronagh McCabe, shown raping her friend Amelia prior to a bombing operation because "All she had to do before killing people, was get some [...] dominating and very fast sex."¹⁴ These examples link women's military and sexual behaviours for, as Rolston has contended, as paramilitary protagonists "women embrace violence with a passion exceeding that of men" they "represent raw, unadulterated emotion" and "the metaphor is undoubtedly sexual"¹⁵. Rarely in Troubles fiction do women activists garner a portrayal that makes no disapproving reference to their sexual behaviour and often this behaviour is portrayed as being key to them choosing military activism.

This is more fully developed in texts representing women paramilitaries operating as 'honeytraps' to lure male enemies, through sexual temptation, into a trap. Liam Murray Bell, in his PhD thesis, found "Recurring examples of the 'honeytrap' in [...] literary texts from the

¹¹ Burns, 2002 p.223

¹² Steel, 2007 p.16

¹³ Doyle, 2005 pp.119-20

¹⁴ Burns, 2002 p.222

¹⁵ Rolston, 1989 p.50

Troubles period”¹⁶. An early example of the honeytrap is Finnula in Anne Devlin’s ‘Naming the Names’ who acknowledges “I only know for certain what my part was, that [...] on such a day, I took him there.”¹⁷ Finnula develops a relationship with a judge’s son and lures him to his death but does not kill him herself. Recently a more violent approach to this representational trope appears in Bell’s own novel, *So It Is*, in which Cassie, labelled a Republican paramilitary but operating independently of any organisation, lures men and proceeds to have sex with them, using a broken glass bottleneck inserted into her vaginal to, in her words, “inflict real damage”¹⁸. Cassie comments herself on the lack of agency a honeytrap has, stating “Is there a need for the thing inside [...] if I’m only a honeytrap? Is there a need for the slit and wrench when I’m only acting as bait?”¹⁹. Here the repetition of ‘only’ confirms Rolston’s suggestion that characters like Cassie are portrayed as “second-class ‘terrorists’”²⁰.

The female paramilitary as duplicitous and conniving traitor is perhaps the most frequently used representation in Troubles fiction, particularly in Troubles thrillers.²¹ Key examples include: Clarissa Strong from Douglas Hurd’s *Vote to Kill* who works at 10 Downing Street while plotting to kill the prime minister on behalf of the Republican cause; Norah Murphy in Jack Higgins’ *The Savage Day*, who acts as the hero’s helpful go-between only to be revealed as secretly working against him and for a ruthless Republican faction; Siobhan McCaillim in Patrick Coogan’s *The General*, who plots against her Republican lover and commander in order to seize control of the IRA and; Philipa Walker (aka ‘Sleeper’) from Gordon Steven’s *Provo* who leads the double life of systems analyst and IRA assassin. More restrained examples of women activists in this trope depict shifting allegiance for example Deidre Shaughnessy in Peter Leslie’s *The Extremists* who, though working for the IRA’s northern command admits her “allegiance is to the South” because “if these idiots [northern IRA] let the Protestant extremists goad them far enough, they’ll do something stupid, sure, and they’ll get us our bad name back”²². Annie McBride, *The Armalite Maiden* of Jonathan Kebbe’s creation, is a further example. She abandons her sniper duties for the IRA to aid a British army deserter. Reflecting on her actions she is “struck by the absurdity of her position, an IRA deserter unarmed and disposed of purpose.”²³ suggesting no good can come from her changing sides. By portraying women paramilitaries as treacherous Troubles novels

¹⁶ Bell, 2012 p.6

¹⁷ Devlin, 1987 p.119

¹⁸ Bell, 2012 p.80

¹⁹ Bell, 2012 p.217

²⁰ Rolston, 1989 p.50

²¹ This is not to say that male paramilitaries are not portrayed in this manner. The general trend of depicting Republicans as ‘the baddies’ has been widely acknowledged. (see Magee, 2001 for more on this)

²² Leslie, 1970 p. 68

²³ Kebbe, 1991 p.262

promulgate the idea that women combatants are evil for, as writer Helen Birch has argued, “evil as it pertains to femininity, [implies] deviousness, manipulation, duplicity.”²⁴

Accompanying these gender-based stereotypical representations of female activists as mothers, whores or traitors are portrayals of them as madwomen or devil women. Successful fictional women paramilitaries are either (sometimes both) madwomen, suffering from a psychosis, or devil women, purely evil. Kate Fanning in Peter Leslie's *The Price* is called “the witch”²⁵ and described as being “nearer to the edge”²⁶ when she holds the gun, a phrase which suggests insanity and is in contrast to the description of her male comrade who “was always calm when he had a gun”²⁷. While waiting to hear the result of a mission M.S. Power's unnamed female combatant in *A Darkness in the Eye* is described as being in a state of “semi-controlled frenzy” during which she keeps “flicking her pink tongue in and out of her mouth like an adder.”²⁸ The snake imagery suggests a biblical evil while ‘frenzy’ implies madness. When Siobhan McCaillim seizes control of the IRA in *The General*, demanding she be “addressed as Madam President” one of her comrades astutely says “‘You’re out of your fucking mind!’”²⁹ Her response is to have him executed. The excuse given for Clarissa Strong's attempted assassination in *Vote to Kill* is that she “caught a fire [...] The Irish fever [...] It destroys all gentleness, truth, sensible calculation.”³⁰ Her actions are explained by way of psychosis as are Sarah's in Briege Duffaud's *A Wreath Upon the Dead*, where, while planning to kill her father in a paramilitary-style attack, Sarah admits “‘OK, so I'm crazy.’”³¹ Just prior to the killing Sarah is also portrayed as evil with “A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun.”³² thus she is both mad and devil woman.

Some female characters are not permitted the defence of insanity. They are purely evil women like Higgins' Norah Murphy who, after killing a comrade showed “no evidence of even the slightest remorse”³³. As she escapes the hero tellingly calls out “‘And behold how the evil ones shall reap fire from heaven [...] You'll get yours, Norah,’”³⁴. A more subtle approach but still representing the woman paramilitary as callous killer is Burns' Bronagh who “was not the sort of person even for noticing people, which was the exact reason she was so good always at killing them.”³⁵ In a similar vein is the Maureen of Sean Patrick's *Maureen's Ireland* who, when planning a mission, asks, “‘What about mowing down hundreds of them, bunching them up and smashing them? [...] Killing them without mercy or last rites.

²⁴ Birch, 1993 p.49

²⁵ Leslie, 1970 p.154

²⁶ Leslie, 1970 p.155

²⁷ Leslie, 1970 p.155

²⁸ Power, 1991 p.131

²⁹ Coogan, 1994 p.390

³⁰ Hurd, 1999 p.215

³¹ Duffaud, 1994 p.444

³² Duffaud, 1994 p.449

³³ Higgins, 2008 p.338

³⁴ Higgins, 2008 p.340

³⁵ Burns, 2002 p.222

Punishing them!”³⁶ The viciousness of this conveys a sense of ruthless fanaticism rather than rationed arguments for military violence. Ronan Bennett points out that female (and male) Republican activists are frequently “depicted as of low intelligence, [...] driven by bloodlust. If they have politics, they are the politics of the fanatic.”³⁷ Fictionally, madness and badness abound. Naturally, female volunteers would be unlikely to represent themselves as insane or evil and it would be impossible to ascertain that no IRA women were either of these things but it is worth pointing out that in none of my factual sources do interviewees suggest either madness or wickedness being evident in the women they interviewed.

While accepting the conventional “mother, monster and whore imagery” used to depict female paramilitaries Fiona McCann in her essay ‘The Good Terrorist(s)?’ argues that behind it is “the suggestion that in order to commit acts of violence, women must adopt aggressive (and stereotypically masculine) characteristics.”³⁸ They are bestowed with, as Laura Pelaschiar notes in her study *Writing the North*:

violent male characteristics, as if their activism in political terrorism had necessarily forced them to define themselves in masculine or male terms and to give up their own female identities for more macho ones.³⁹

Several representations of women combatants as macho women, depicted as pseudo males with masculine traits, looks and behaviours, seem to confirm Pelaschiar’s view. Perhaps the most striking employment of this trope is in Marion Urch’s *Violent Shadows* when the central protagonist, Tara, actively seeks her own transformation, coaxing her body into a male form, acknowledging she does so because “It was femininity, a softening of the body and the mind, that she was terrified of”⁴⁰. Later she rejoices in the changes:

Tara’s breasts became smaller, her stomach lost its curve, there was no more softness to her. When her period didn’t arrive she was pleased. She thought about what a man is [...] trained herself to invulnerability, dreamt of flight, angels and immortality.⁴¹

The erasure of her femaleness, signalled by the absence of her period, is here connected to her potential success as a combatant, implying that such success is attainable only to men. Other examples of the macho woman involve tomboy imagery like Bronagh from *No Bones*,

³⁶ Patrick, 1986 p.138

³⁷ Bennett, 1994 p.6

³⁸ McCann, 2012 p.76

³⁹ Pelaschiar, 1998 p.83

⁴⁰ Urch, 1996 p.37

⁴¹ Urch, 1996 p.88

“one big beef of a girl, bigger than most big beefs of girls”⁴² who insists on “going out to join the boys in the muck”⁴³ on the youth training scheme. Constance Fitzgibbons in *An Excess of Love* enthral her father with “her robust, hearty spirit, her horsemanship, her love of hunting and all outdoor sports”⁴⁴ and claims she “would have made an excellent son.”⁴⁵ Colette McVeigh’s (*Shadow Dancer*) mother tells her “ ‘You did it [joined the IRA] to prove yourself to Paddy and Gerry. You were a tomboy and you did it to prove yourself to them.’ ”⁴⁶ *Provo*’s Philip Walker is depicted winning at childhood hide-and-seek by climbing a tree, an action which, though not inherently masculine, when juxtaposed with the reference to “the boys who were looking for her”⁴⁷ suggests her tomboyishness. If not depicted as a tomboy, female paramilitaries are given masculine clothing or appearances. Sarah in *A Wreath Upon the Dead* is described, in typically masculine terms, as being “a big thick lump of a girl, nearly a six-footer [...] Not attractive. Slouching, in baggy jeans and leather jerkin, purple hair spiked and jagged.”⁴⁸ Minor female characters in Llywelyn’s *1916* are described in terms that, stereotypically, are suggestive of masculinity e.g. “Kathleen Lynn, a big, powerful woman with short-cropped hair”⁴⁹. In *An Excess of Love* Con Fitzgibbon is depicted dressed in “a young boy’s uniform [that] fitted her well except around the bosom. But that tightness was obscured by a bandolier of bullets”⁵⁰. Significantly her female form is disguised by the stereotypically masculine accessory of ammunition. Similarly Miss O’Shea (*A Star Called Henry*) is depicted in full military gear, described in a way that almost caricatures gun-slinging wild west cowboys:

She had two leather bandoliers in an X across her chest, and a revolver sat on each hip. Her hair was tucked into a cap [...] she’d our Thompson sub-machine-gun on her back and trouser tucked into her boots. I recognised them [...] they’d once belonged to Annie’s dead, dead husband.⁵¹

Later in the text her hair, a feminising feature that Henry frequently comments on, is cut off as a reprisal for her increasingly outrageous acts of revolutionary violence. These examples of the masculinisation of women protagonists in Troubles fiction encourage answering ‘yes’ to Nicola Ward Jouve’s question of whether or not “through the act of killing, women become men [...] that women as women cannot emancipate themselves, cannot kill?”⁵² At least in

⁴² Burns, 2002 p.74

⁴³ Burns, 2002 p.107

⁴⁴ Spellman, 1986 p.11

⁴⁵ Spellman, 1986 p.66

⁴⁶ Bradby, 2012 p.343

⁴⁷ Stevens, 1994 p.98

⁴⁸ Duffaud, 1994 p.451

⁴⁹ Llywelyn, 1999 p.424

⁵⁰ Spellman, 1986 p.405

⁵¹ Doyle, 2005 p.273

⁵² Birch, 1993 p.14

Troubles fiction this seems true. Michael L. Storey has certainly claimed that female paramilitary protagonists are restricted to being either woman or terrorist, stating that most representations are “not a well balanced integration of woman and terrorist”⁵³ while Rolston concludes that these female characters are “sad specimens of woman-kind”⁵⁴.

This series of oft-repeated representational tropes (mother, whore, madwoman etc.) that characterise female paramilitary protagonists through narrow, gendered stereotypes serves to perpetuate myths and misconceptions about the role of women in the Irish conflict. As Jayne Steel notes, “there is no access to real Irish men and women in representations of the PIRA.”⁵⁵ While agreeing with Steel’s view that “*all* representations are to a greater or lesser extent ‘fictive’.” (italics original)⁵⁶ it is my belief that, having identified the prevailing representational trends pertaining to women combatant characters alongside accessing factual accounts it should be possible to develop a fictional female protagonist who is ‘both woman and terrorist’, avoiding stooping to the “depths of prurience.”⁵⁷ that Magee noted representations of female Republicans have, at times, reached in Troubles fiction.

A Creative Representation of the Lived Reality of being a Woman in the IRA

The creative component of my doctoral research, the novel *Herself Alone in Orange Rain*, tells the story of Caoilainn Devoy, who, aged nineteen, joins the Provisional IRA as an active service volunteer. In focalising the narrative through the female perspective the novel gives prominence to the female protagonist and permits the possibility of an imaginative yet credible portrayal of what being a woman involved in the armed struggle was like, an original approach in fiction written about this period of the conflict. The novel primarily covers the years 1980-89, arguably the height of the Provisional IRA’s campaign against British occupation of the six northern counties of Ireland. It sees Caoilainn participate in some of the most high profile IRA attacks of that decade and explores her role within the conflict and her response to it.

As outlined above the role of women in the Irish conflict remains only narrowly explored in fiction and I have not found any novels that attempt a detailed exploration/imagination of the lived experiences of a woman actively fighting for the Provisional IRA during the decade of the hunger strikes and the killing of Mairéad Farrell on Gibraltar. Most works of Troubles fiction seem content to either exclude or marginalise women or, present them as generic stereotypes. Extensive reading of Troubles fiction consistently demonstrated what Eve Patten describes as the “superficially drawn terrorist presence”⁵⁸ and it was this superficiality that I hope to have challenged in my creative practice.

⁵³ Storey, 2004 p.206

⁵⁴ Rolston, 1989 p.50

⁵⁵ Steel, 2007 p.22

⁵⁶ Steel, 2007 p.21

⁵⁷ Magee, 2001 p.116

⁵⁸ Bell, 1995 p.132

To write a credible fictional narrative about a woman in the IRA that narrative needs to have its foundation not in unsubstantiated myth and supposition but in fact so research became part of the writing process. In order to write a novel about a woman in the IRA, with characters that presented as realistic people not caricatures, it was important to understand, as far as possible, what that experience might conceivably have been like. By accessing appropriate secondary sources by/about women who were in the IRA (see appendix A) I established what IRA women reported of their experiences, information which informed the creative component of my project.

But content research provides only half the story. The other half comes from the act of writing, deciding both what to write and how to write. Ultimately the process of writing is what allows the novel to take the form demanded by the material to best meet the aims of the project. Simply stated these aims were to write a compelling fictional account of the experience of being a woman in the IRA, avoiding the typecasting of female characters, developing the main protagonist in light of factual accounts I discovered and delving into the psychology of a female IRA combatant, something not previously done in Troubles fiction. I feel that the decisions made about form, mode and characterisation have resulted in a novel that hopefully does what I intended.

The first, and arguably the most crucial, decision made regarding writing methods to be employed in the novel was that of adopting the first person narrative perspective, focalising the telling of the novel through the central female protagonist. This arose from the realisation that most works of Troubles fiction deny agency to female protagonists by telling their stories through a third person perspective or through the first person narration of a character other than that of the female paramilitary. In order to explore as fully as possible the psychological development of my central protagonist I felt she needed to be able to tell her own story, revealing her experiences of the conflict and herself as woman/terrorist to readers by allowing them access to her internal monologue. Using the first person perspective permits readers, but not always other characters, to access Caoilainn's thoughts, seeing what motivates her, how she feels about participating in the armed struggle and, ultimately, humanising her as a realistically drawn character with complicated, conflicting responses to the conflict.

In order to challenge the representations of women combatants as female aberrations who participate in military action because they are either mad or evil a significant proportion of the novel explores Caoilainn's reasons for joining the armed struggle. Using as a basis for my character's motivations, the motivations cited by real IRA volunteers, several factors combine to lead Caoilainn to become a volunteer. She witnesses, as several volunteers including Mairead Farrell⁵⁹ reported having witnessed, acts of injustice, oppression and violence perpetrated against the Catholic community. Caoilainn is partially driven to join, as many volunteers were, by pivotal moments in the conflict, specifically in Caoilainn's case the

⁵⁹ Farrell said "Living in Belfast was a political education in itself [...] I saw Internment, I saw the British soldiers; and that in itself was a political education [...] From that you began to say 'I have to do something here, this isn't right'." McAuley, 1989 p.27

1981 hunger strikes. She is present at the funeral of Bobby Sands and also experiences the violence of the Dublin riots that occurred on 18th July, 1981 in response to the hunger strikes. She develops an understanding of the history and politics of the conflict, as real volunteers did, from family members who had experienced early periods of conflict. Her reasons for joining are complex, combining both the political and personal and she is seen in the novel to think carefully about the decision to join, not making it rashly for reasons of revenge as many protagonists in Troubles fiction do. She does not join because she is coerced by a male family member or lover, a misconception frequently found in representations of women paramilitaries in both fiction and the media.

The challenging of other stereotypical representations of female combatants was done through a elements of Caoilainn's characterisation and the characterisation of other female protagonists in the novel. The trope of the macho woman was challenged in two ways; through Caoilainn's backstory and through the character of Briege, a fellow IRA volunteer. Caoilainn's childhood as explored in the novel is unconventional. Her parents are socialist protesters who eschew socially acceptable ideas about gender essentialism and Caoilainn grows up in a way she describes as "unisex, monosex, polysex", with little thought for notions of masculinity and femininity. Later on when she prefers jeans to dresses and acknowledges most of her friends are lads the intention is to show that, rather than being a tomboy or macho woman she is just the person she feels most comfortable being. By focusing on Caoilainn as an individual, rather than resorting to a gendered portrayal that identifies her as masculine or feminine I hope to have avoided what Fiona McCann described as the problematic "return to essentialist, rigid categories of behaviour as inherently feminine or masculine, clearly positing violence as masculine."⁶⁰ that is frequently found in Troubles fiction. This is further developed by Briege's character whose portrayal is, to some extent, inspired by a description of Mairead Farrell. Farrell's brother, Niall, speaking of Farrell after her release from jail, said she "was into high heels, fancy clothes, disco dancing, earrings, perfume, hair perms and really loved life."⁶¹ Briege, like Farrell, does not adopt traditionally male clothing because there is no need for her to do so in order to be an IRA volunteer. Both Briege and Caoilainn are permitted, as characters, to be who they want, women styled in ways that they feel comfortable and doing what they both feel is important: participating in the armed struggle.

The characters of Caoilainn and Briege also address the representational trope of women combatants as mothers. Neither of them are positioned as mothers first and activists second. In Caoilainn's case she physically rejects motherhood, having an abortion because "This life is my choice but [...] I won't chose it for someone else. It wouldn't be fair." To Caoilainn, at this point in the novel, her role is as activist. Later in the text, as the circumstances of the conflict change for her and she becomes less active as a volunteer, she does have a child. For her it is an either/or decision, as it no doubt was for some women

⁶⁰ McCann, 2012 p.76

⁶¹ Death of a Terrorist, 1989 36.04

volunteers. However, others were both activists and mothers and Briege's character explores this. She marries and has a daughter who is cared for by her husband when she returns to active service. Briege is thus both combatant and mother but those aspects of her life are portrayed as being distinct from each other to avoid the representation that suggests women's status as mother undermines their capabilities as activist.

Caoilainn is not a whore; her life is not without romance or sex but *Herself Alone* is not a romance novel or a work of erotica. It is a piece of Troubles fiction and the primary concern throughout is to reflect the experience of being a woman in the IRA so it is this which remains central to Caoilainn's character development. She is portrayed as a committed volunteer but not a crazy fanatic. She is subjected to the emotional complexities that being a member of an armed revolutionary organisation would likely entail, accepting the need to fight but regretting the existence of a situation that makes fighting necessary. She is not a stereotype but neither is she a real person. She is a protagonist in a fictional work inspired by the accounts of real women who were active for the IRA. Caoilainn is not built on any individual, living or dead, and should not be read as such. She is a composite figure. Various aspects of her characterisation are taken from different factual sources, others are drawn from imagination or are the result of considered writing strategies employed to portray her in particular ways. By crafting Caoilainn as a complex character based on real IRA women I was able to attempt to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of female combatants in Troubles fiction by developing a character who was capable of appearing far more realistic than many of her counterparts as generally found in Trouble fiction.

Appendix A – Sources used for content research

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