

WOMEN IN A

WAR ZONE



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Twenty Years
of Resistance

Edited Chrissie McAuley

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Notes on the editor

CHRISSIE McAULEY grew up in nationalist West Belfast during some of the most politically turbulent periods of Ireland's history. At 13, her family were forced to flee their home in the Lower Falls area during the loyalist pogroms of 1969. The redeployment of British soldiers and their brutal suppression of nationalists directly influenced her to actively oppose the British presence. She was arrested with six others in Cork in 1975 and charged with possession of explosives. She served a four-year sentence in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin where she was the only political prisoner, opposing the prison regimes attempt to criminalise her.

On her release in 1978 she joined Sinn Féin and began reporting for *Republican News* in the North. The British government attempted to suppress the production of the paper by raiding its offices and arresting several members of staff. However, by working from safe houses *Republican News* continued to successfully produce a weekly edition. In 1979 *Republican News* merged with *An Phoblacht* in the 26 Counties and Chrissie McAuley continued to report for the publication until 1987. She was a founder member of Sinn Féin Women's Department and was involved in formulating the party's policy on women.

She is currently involved in overseeing Sinn Féin's international publicity and information publications.

Foreword

This book documents women's experiences in the last 20 years of resistance in the British occupied Six Counties in Ireland.

For the first time it is the women involved in the struggle who document their own history.

For the last 20 years women have been involved in all aspects of the struggle. They are Volunteers in the IRA, political activists in Sinn Féin, campaigners, fundraisers, political prisoners and the relatives of prisoners. They provide the IRA with safe houses, care for Volunteers on the run, and confront the British occupation forces on the streets. They are, in effect, the solid bedrock of the national liberation struggle.

In this book we get a rare glimpse of the effects of British occupation on their lives. In a rare interview with an IRA Volunteer in Belfast, she asserts that "*The only logical road towards lasting peace in Ireland is British withdrawal*".

We in Sinn Féin see the liberation of women in Ireland as being inseparable from the struggle for national liberation. The victory of the struggle to end partition and reunite the national territory is the absolute condition for any fundamental change in the social status of women.

Is mise le meas,
Mairead Keane, Sinn Féin Women's Department.

INTRODUCTION

A POPULAR SONG by Irish singer Christy Moore, 'Unfinished Revolution', poignantly describes the violence of British occupation against Irishwomen in the North of Ireland today:

*Soldiers kicked in the door, called her a whore,
While he lingered in Castlereagh.
Internment tore them apart, brought her to the heart
Of resistance in Belfast today.*

*Her struggle is long, It's hard to be strong
But she's determined deep down inside,
To be part of the Unfinished Revolution*

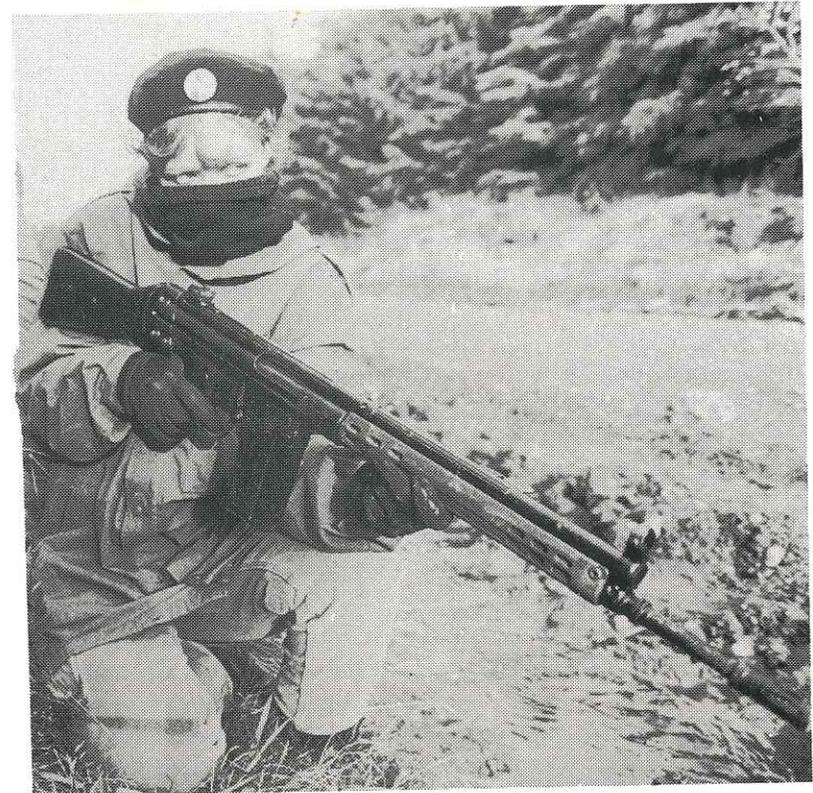
The lyrics epitomise the daily battle by Republican/nationalist women against British repression.

For the past 20 years, these women have been part of a revolution aimed at removing the sectarian institutions and structures of British and Unionist rule which has treated them and their families as second-class citizens for generations. Throughout Ireland, women are oppressed in society through the institutions of church and state. Those in the Six Counties are doubly oppressed by the physical occupation of their country and the consequent denial of self-determination and national independence.

They live in a war zone, recognised as one of the most militarised areas of Western Europe. Since partition in 1921, the North of Ireland has existed under a perpetual state of 'emergency'. Democracy has been denied and the 'rule of law' is rigorously implemented by undemocratic methods aimed at crushing political opposition.

The cities, towns, villages and streets are patrolled by a combined total of 30,000 heavily armed members of the British army, RUC and UDR. Along the border, huge British army watchtowers, similar to those between East and Western Europe, is telling testimony of a country occupied by military might.

Nationalist areas are dominated by grotesque military bases that are equipped with the latest hi-tech computer and surveillance paraphernalia which are used to co-ordinate the mass harassment of the



● An armed IRA Volunteer on patrol in the Six Counties

local population. Low-flying helicopters fitted with high-powered video cameras buzz overhead scrutinising the movements of individuals and vehicles. Equally repressive legislation supplements the British war machine in Ireland. Methods of arrest, detention and no-jury Diplock courts have been widely condemned by human rights organisations. The British forces are largely immune from prosecution, the judiciary is pro-British and corrupt.

Freedoms normally associated with democratic societies have been swept aside under a flood of legislation which denies a detainee the right to silence, denies freedom of assembly, freedom of information and freedom of political expression.

Britain has the worst record in Europe of human rights violations. It was found guilty by the European Commission on Human

Rights of torturing prisoners in the Six Counties and has regularly been condemned for human rights abuses by leading civil liberties organisations. It has derogated from the European Convention of Human Rights on eight occasions. On almost every occasion, the derogation has been in relation to human rights violations in the North.

In summary, the combined methods of British policy in Ireland have created a climate where men, women and children can be killed with little redress to the law by plastic bullets, where the elimination of political opponents and unarmed nationalists is sanctioned by government and where loyalist death squads are aided in their assassination campaigns by members of the British forces.

Never in Ireland's history have women played a more vital role in challenging British rule than they have over the past 20 years. Their courage and determination to bring this final phase of the struggle to a peaceful conclusion is a fitting legacy to those countless numbers of Irishwomen down through history who fought, sacrificed and paid the ultimate price in opposing British imperialism.

The essential difference today is that the protracted nature of the conflict is unprecedented and, consequently, has brought more women than ever into the front line. Within Sinn Féin, they are holding down key areas in every department and on the party's Ard Chomhairle (National Executive).

More women than at any other time have chosen to become Volunteers in Oglaiġ na hEireann, (the IRA) putting their lives and freedom at risk on a daily basis. Women have been the driving force behind the struggle, while simultaneously looking after families and very often trudging to the prisons year after year. They have faced lead and plastic bullets, RUC batons and British army beatings. Many have paid the ultimate price for challenging the system. Twenty years on, the non-participation of women would seriously impede the struggle itself.

This book is a small but sincere tribute to the women supporters, political and military activists, who have undertaken, and who continue to undertake, the tremendous responsibility of putting themselves in the front line against a mighty imperialist army of occupation.

The book looks at key political events spanning the past 20 years, drawing on their experiences. It is by no means intended as a definitive account but, hopefully, it will give those critics who look on women Republicans as tea-makers and secretaries more than a little food for thought.

PART ONE

1916/1989 — The same struggle

"I was in the Citizen Army then. So from then on, when the two armies joined to form one, I was in the IRA. And I was always in the IRA afterwards and I still feel myself to be part of the IRA."

— 1916 veteran Republican Nora Connolly O'Brien, speaking shortly before her death in 1981.

Over the past 20 years, critics of the IRA's use of armed struggle to remove the British presence and secure national self-determination, have labelled Republicans 'criminals' and 'terrorists'. The British and Irish establishments adopted the very same attitude in 1916, when a section of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army fought against the British forces in Dublin. Indeed, some of the people of Dublin spat on them as they were being marched through the city to the British prisons. As history has shown, one person's terrorist today is another person's statesperson tomorrow. The participants of the 1916 Rising were duly acknowledged as national heroes.

Seventy-three years later, nothing much has changed. Part of Ireland is occupied by the British forces and those who engage in armed struggle, those who are fighting the same enemy as the patriots of 1916, are castigated and denounced by the British and Irish establishments.

In this small tribute to women involved from 1969 in the national liberation struggle, it is deeply significant that 1916 veteran Nora Connolly O'Brien (and veterans like her) believed until her death that the tactics adopted by the Republican Movement today would have the unconditional approval of her father James Connolly and his comrades.

She said: "...I consider the present fight in the North of Ireland the continuation of the battle for which he died." Nora wrote this in January 1978 ('James Connolly Wrote for Today...').

She explains that of all her father's quotations, it was the speech to the court martial before he was sentenced to death which remains as pertinent to events today as it did in 1916. Connolly stated:

"Believing that the British government has no right in Ireland, never had any right in Ireland, and never can have any right in



● Máire Drumm, Vice-President of Sinn Féin who was assassinated in hospital by loyalists in October 1976

Ireland, the presence, in any one generation of Irishmen, of even a respectable minority, ready to die to affirm that truth, makes that Government forever a usurpation and a crime against human progress."

The late Máire Drumm, Vice-President of Sinn Féin, was assassinated by loyalists in October 1976. In 1973, she spoke of having a conversation with Tom Barry of Cork, who led the IRA Flying Columns against the British. She said:

"Past generations of Irish resistance fighters were never as brave as the present generation... I have spoken to the legendary Tom Barry of Cork, the famous IRA General who literally drove the hated Black and Tans out of the South in 1920-21, he is generally accepted to be one of the greatest tacticians in guerrilla fighting ever born.

"General Barry told me that what he went through was a tea-party compared to what the young IRA guerrillas of today are doing.

"He said that the boys and girls who are engaging the British at the moment are the greatest Irishmen and Irishwomen of all time and that he dearly regretted having been born too early to take part in the campaign."

On the road to civil rights

"We were only fighting for our rights. What we didn't know at that time was what we were starting. But looking back on it, after 20 years, with all the deaths that have happened since, which is enough to break anybody's heart, we can't see how we could have done anything else. It should have been done years beforehand and, if it was tomorrow, we'd do it again." — Annie Gildernew, civil rights activist.

The unionist-controlled Dungannon Rural Council made the fatal mistake on June 18th 1968 of ordering bailiffs and the RUC to forcibly evict a young Catholic mother and her three children from a council house in Caledon, County Tyrone.

The inhumanity of the event exposed the corrupt system of government in the North of Ireland, which had treated Catholics as second-class citizens, denying them votes, houses and jobs. At that time, Catholics could not vote unless they had a house; the allocation of housing was in the hands of the local councils which had been 'gerrymandered' and were unionist controlled. Giving a Catholic a house meant giving a Catholic a vote; Catholics with votes posed a serious threat to the very stability of unionist control. Catholics were systematically denied houses and either emigrated or lived in overcrowded conditions.

Mary Teresa Goodfellow and her bewildered and crying infants were evicted in front of television cameras and reporters. The event blew the lid off what was happening to nationalists in the Six Counties and had repercussions which not even the participants could have foreseen.

Twenty years on, Mary Teresa recalls:

"I'll never forget it... it was to highlight what was happening, that Catholics couldn't get a house, and therefore hadn't a vote either. I don't think we thought much about it at the time, but I felt angry at what was happening, not only for myself; it was an awful set up, but that's what was happening to everybody."

Mary Teresa's decision to participate in the squat was largely influenced by her mother Annie Gildernew, who had experienced sectarian discrimination all her life. Annie was involved with Brantry Republican Clubs at the time. Negotiations took place between the

Republican Clubs and the newly-formed civil rights movement about the allocation of the Caledon houses to mainly Protestant families. They jointly decided to strike out against the apartheid system by occupying several of the houses in Kinnard Park. It was the first direct action taken by the civil rights movement, but, more significantly, it was women who were the driving force behind the initiative.



● A march in Newry a week after Derry's Bloody Sunday 1972



● In Crossmaglen, as in every town and village in the Six Counties families daily face the oppressive presence of the occupying forces

Off our knees

"IN DERRY," wrote journalist and author Nell McCafferty in September 1989, "5,000 Catholic families were on the waiting list for houses... The central demand of the civil rights movement was crucial to the quality of life of Catholic women, not that the men saw it that way. Their demand of 'One Man, One Vote,' designed to expose political gerrymandering, was based on housing... The denial of houses to Catholic families ensured Unionist domination even in areas such as my hometown of Derry, where Protestants were in a significant minority.

"Were the one man-one vote demand granted, it was Catholic women who would reap the benefits. Then, as now, Northern women work mainly within the home as full-time mothers. The thought of graduating from a slum flat to a modern house gave Catholic mothers everything to live for, and as the struggle deepened, something worth dying for on behalf of their kids. They poured onto the streets alongside the men."

Derry woman Mary Nelis was highly conscious of political dis-

crimination and throughout the Sixties she campaigned for better housing and jobs for her community. She was a prominent civil rights and prisoners' rights campaigner and today, within Sinn Féin, she is battling alongside her community to improve the quality of life (in as much as it can be improved) while struggling to remove the British presence.

"While we were struggling all through the '60s on the social issues of housing and amenities that most civilised communities take for granted, people began to examine the whole political implications of why we didn't have these and the finger was pointing fairly and squarely at the unionist government, although people tend to forget that that unionist government only existed because it had the goodwill and economic backing from Westminster.

"It was in the late '60s too that a housing action committee came together in Derry. You had people like Brigid Bond and Fionbarr O'Doherty who began to address the real evils of slum housing in the Bogside. And that led eventually to the formation of a civil rights group in Derry.

"There was a chain reaction set up then. There was no going back, people were actually up off their knees, thinking, challenging, and you knew yourself that you were going somewhere, although none of us were very clear about where we were going. But we were going and what happened then is history: the Battle of the Bogside, the civil rights march in Duke Street being batoned off the street."

Squatting in the Guildhall

BRIGID BOND of the local Housing Action Committee in Derry rallied around some of the women who were living in atrocious, overcrowded conditions. Nellie Gorman was living in one small room with her husband and five children:

"I was on the housing list for ten years but I still couldn't get a place. I'd heard of Protestant couples going away on their honeymoon and coming back to three-bedroom houses and there we were, seven of

us in one room. So when Brigid Bond came to me about squatting in the Council Chamber I agreed to do it."

The squat lasted six weeks and was mainly carried out by women. Nellie adds:

"There was an awful lot of support from the Derry people and from different groups. It was hard going because there was no way of sleeping — if you slept for ten or 15 minutes, it was just on the bench. But at no time could the Council Chamber be left empty. We did it in relays."

NO GOING BACK

Half-hearted reforms granted by the British government to appease nationalists and stabilise the unionist government were far too little and came much too late:

"They thought that if they built community centres, fixed up the streets, provided some token jobs, that Catholics would be appeased, but we weren't. Because once people were off their knees, they knew that underpinning the social evils of discrimination and housing and work was the whole thrust of people's desire to be free, to be able to govern themselves. You could see the kind of thinking changing in the people as the civil rights demonstrations kept on and on, especially after Internment and then Bloody Sunday. People were thinking that the thrust of the campaign had changed. We weren't going to be appeased by token gestures, we wanted something more than that. We wanted our country back... it was as simple as that." — Mary Nelis.

CIVIL RIGHTS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, NATIONAL RIGHTS

"Although they were saying things like 'one man, one vote,' women knew that although they were campaigning on sexist slogans, and were forced to use sexist slogans, that for them there was something else — maybe the question of the whole oppression of women being addressed. I can see now in retrospect that that's where women actually came into their own in Derry, because they have never gone back. A lot of women whose roles were cut out for them — be a good wife, be a good mother — because of the influence of the Catholic Church, decided 'No, that's not what my life's about. I'm a woman first. I'm a human being. There's other things about, not just sitting at home looking after children and being denied any option.' So the role of

women has changed tremendously, because women became involved in every campaign that was going, from the civil rights movement right through to the bin lids. And women paid a high price for it. In Creggan, Kitty Thompson was shot dead by the British army for rattling her bin lid. Women were the people who were on the streets on a daily basis facing British soldiers trying to arrest their children." — Mary Nelis.



● The harassment of women by British soldiers is an everyday occurrence in the North

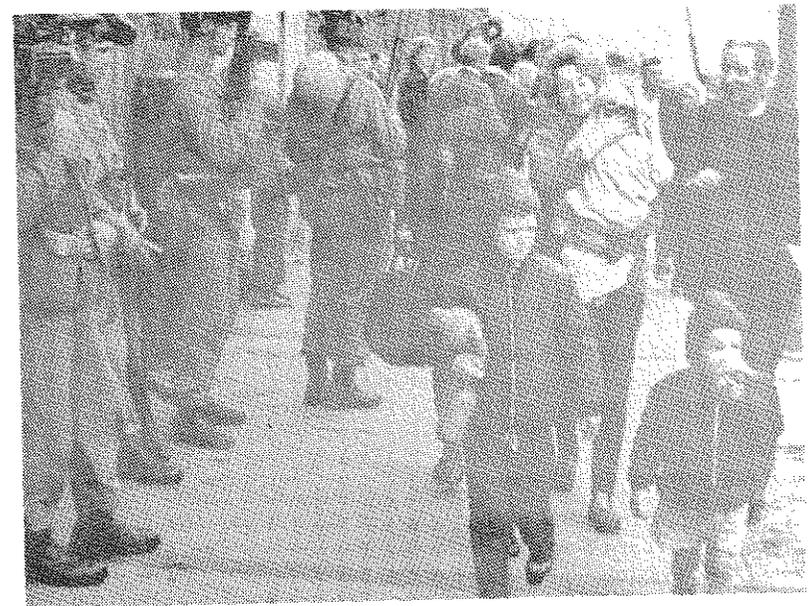
British army redeployed in Six Counties

THE VIOLENT reaction of the Unionist government and its armed agencies, the RUC and 'B'-Specials to the peaceful civil rights movement, changed the course of history. In August 1969, loyalists burnt Catholic families out of their homes in Belfast; in Derry, their backs to the wall, the nationalist people fought for three consecutive days against the RUC in what has become known as the Battle of the Bogside.

On 14th August, British soldiers were redeployed to relieve an

over-extended RUC. Their main purpose, however, is described by Belfast Republican Chrissie McAuley:

"From 1969, when colossal numbers of reinforcements were brought in to join what had previously been a token garrison, the British army quickly re-established itself in its historical role in Ireland as an imperialist army of occupation. From a position of postured impartiality, the British government and its armed forces switched to open support of the Unionist supremacist position in order to protect British strategic and economic interests. Barricades initially erected in nationalist ghettos to defend communities against loyalist attacks became the only means of keeping back soldiers lobbing CS gas."



THE LOWER FALLS CURFEW — WEST BELFAST, JULY 1970

"It was the Lower Falls Curfew in July 1970 which effectively catapulted large numbers of nationalist women into political and defensive action against the escalating repression of the crown forces. During the curfew, hundreds of families were held at gunpoint in their

homes by the British army. We were told we would be shot if we so much as put our heads outside the door. Deliveries of food supplies, particularly milk for young babies, were stopped, until a solid wall of fearless and determined women broke the curfew by marching into the ghettos burdened down with armfuls of groceries." — Chrissie McAuley.

Lily Fitzsimmons, now a Sinn Féin Councillor, was one of the thousands of women and children who participated in the relief of the Falls Road that day:

"It was one of the greatest days of women's solidarity that I can remember. The march was led by Maire Drumm and it started in Andersonstown and as it progressed women joined in the whole way down to the Springfield. The soldiers didn't know what had hit them, they were literally overwhelmed by a sea of determined women. The people who had been imprisoned in their own homes for three days were all cheering. You just felt like crying with emotion and many did."

STREET PROTESTS ESCALATE

"The early '70s were a political awakening for women who normally had taken on a traditional role of mother, housekeeper and in a great many cases, breadwinner as many women worked in the mills." — Lily Fitzsimmons.

By the beginning of 1971, more nationalist women came to be sent to Armagh prison, usually on six-month sentences. 'Riotous behaviour' was the usual label affixed by the Unionist judiciary. "Assaulting a Brit patrol with an offensive weapon — a yard brush," is how Ballymurphy woman Anne Maguire describes her 'offence'. She recalls that Madge McConville, a grandmother from Divis Flats, got six months for hitting a British soldier with a bin lid.

On February 26th 1971, 38 women and six men were arrested outside Chichester Street court in Belfast on one of the famous 'combat jacket' pickets, organised to protest at the arrest of republicans who had been wearing uniforms at Volunteers' funerals. A similar protest two days later in Beechmount Avenue, Belfast, resulted in a dozen women being sentenced to six months imprisonment.

"Stormont was incensed at the military funerals, they saw them as a snub to the RUC. Men were pulled in and charged with wearing 'a military uniform' which contravened some ancient law. A group of republican women decided to picket the courts during the trial of the

men, to show their contempt for the Unionist 'law'. The women wore combat jackets and carried hurley sticks. Many young women were later to swop their hurley sticks for Armalite rifles.

"When the news reached the rest of us who had not been present at the court, we came out and picketed all the RUC barracks while wearing combat jackets and, of course, carrying hurley sticks. The following Sunday a mass parade of women wearing the dreaded 'uniform' took place. There was no doubt, women were on the streets to protest for as long as necessary." — Maire Drumm.



● It was women and children who defeated the British army's Lower Falls Curfew of July 1970

Internment introduced

BALLYMURPHY woman Joan Donnelly, a mother of nine children, was shot in the head by British soldiers and died instantly on Internment night, August 9th 1971. She had been out searching for some of her youngsters. Her death and the death of eight others in the immediate Ballymurphy area, bore testimony to the outright brutality with which internment was imposed throughout the North.

Tess Cahill recalls:

"The Paras carried out a reign of terror that whole week after Internment. If you opened a window, they'd fire a rubber bullet at you. They were continually on the streets, at every corner, grabbing young lads and pinning them against the wall, kicking their legs out from beneath them."

SOLDIER, SOLDIER, BEWARE OF THE HENS

Widescale repression in the form of arrests and raids followed Internment. Women were pushed more and more into the front line, defending their families and their communities.

"We began to organise ourselves against the presence of the British army. We saw our role as alerting people that the Brits were in but now, on reflection, I see that we were protesting against the whole British presence, the whole system which had oppressed us for years.

"The 'Hen Patrols' came about because we used bin lids and whistles to create a commotion once the Brit 'Duck Patrols' sneaked into the areas late at night or in the early hours of the morning. We broke up each 'Hen Patrol' into small groups, ironically along the lines of the Brit patrols and we followed them about everywhere they went. We did it in rota, from darkness until dawn. We eventually broke them down to the extent that the c/o on one occasion in Turf Lodge, wee Ronnie he was known as, couldn't stick it any longer and he jumped out into the street and started screaming at us. It wore down their morale. They were probably saying to themselves 'What kind of women are these?' All we had to defend ourselves was a whistle while constantly looking down the barrels of British guns." — Lily Fitzsimmons.

As always the British government's answer to any form of protest was to use terror and violence. Women paid a high price for taking part in protests. On October 23rd 1971:

"Two sisters, Maura Meehan and Dorothy Maguire were in a car going around the Lower Falls warning people that the British army was raiding by using a siren. The soldiers fired at the car, hitting both women in the head and injuring another woman and the driver. Maura and Dorothy died instantly. The British claimed they were gunmen and were wearing combat clothing but everyone knew this was a barefaced lie. The British soldiers heard their siren and knew they were simply protesting. Maura had five young children. It deeply affected the whole community.

"About three weeks afterwards, the Brits opened up in the



● Volunteer Maura Meehan after being shot dead by the British army in 1971

● VOLUNTEER MAURA MEEHAN

Clonard area on the women and I was shot in the foot. On the news the next morning they said I too was a 'gunman'. Kathleen Thompson from Derry was also shot dead by the British army on 6th November. She'd been trying to alert people in the areas with her bin lid. They shot her,



Volunteer Dorothy Maguire, who, along with her sister Maura Meehan, was shot dead by the British army in October 1971

● VOLUNTEER DOROTHY MAGUIRE

in her back garden, and claimed it was 'an accident'.

"The fact that so many women were shot in so short a space of time made women afraid not just for themselves but for the repercussions it would have on their families. The 'Hen Patrols' died down but

the women would continue to sit in houses and listen for raids and go out with the bin lids." — Belfast republican Marie Moore.

PRISONERS' RELATIVES ORGANISE

"Helping to assist the prisoners' dependents has been a part of my life, indeed has been my life for decades. But women have always been involved in this crucial type of work ever since there were prisoners being sent to jail by the British and the Free State. We have women of all ages and from all social backgrounds. The oldest collector we have in the North is Gretta Reel from Belfast who is in her mid-eighties. Week after week they do their door-to-door collections in all weathers, hail, rain and snow. There's never a complaint from one of them and the work is totally voluntary. They are harassed by the state forces on both sides of the border but they continue to raise essential finance to supplement the meagre income of prisoners' families and the prisoners themselves. They are without doubt, one of the most important vanguards of the Republican Movement." — Rita McGlynn, An Cumann Cabhrach.

The Internment years of 1971 and 1975 left many hundreds of families who were already existing well below the official poverty line in even greater financial hardship. The arrest of a wage earning member of the family or a member on welfare payments seriously reduces the quality of life for the prisoner's family. In effect, the arrest and detention of a loved one throws the entire family into a financial crisis. The family has to cope with extra costs incurred as a result of the imprisonment, including transport costs to jails, supplying the prisoner with footwear, clothing, cigarettes and weekly food parcels.

The community response to this was spearheaded by women. They established Prisoners' Dependents' Funds (PDF) to offset, in a small but important way, the financial position of prisoners' families. The bulk of this work was carried out throughout Internment up to the present day.

Similarly, as the struggle intensified over the years more and more Republicans found themselves being incarcerated in the 26 Counties. An Cumann Cabhrach took on the responsibility for organising functions, ballots and raising finance for prisoners' families.

Undoubtedly, without the tireless enthusiasm of these voluntary workers the prisoners and their families would be much worse off.

Bloody Sunday

"The honourable lady member has no rights in the house save those granted through the chair." So said the Speaker in the British House of Commons to Bernadette Devlin MP, following the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in January 1972 when 14 unarmed civil rights marchers were gunned down by British paratroopers.

She had been the only MP who was an eye-witness to the massacre, yet British parliamentary 'democracy' was attempting to silence her by closing the debate in the House of Commons in spite of the fact that she was next in line to speak. Twenty years on, she recalls:

"I got up on a point of order and I asked that the debate be reopened and the Speaker said I had no rights... I just walked across the house and said 'The hon lady member has whatever rights she chooses to exert'. I walked over and hit the Home Secretary (Reginald Maudling). The consternation broke out. There was more press coverage of the violence in the hallowed chamber than of why it was done."

"They will never put the women down"

— Maire Drumm

"IT SEEMED THAT the Brits had suddenly realised that the women were active." — Former Republican prisoner.

The first woman to be interned was Liz McKee from Andersonstown. She was arrested on December 29th 1972 and transferred to Armagh Jail on New Year's Day 1973.

Between November 1972 and the end of 1973, about 650 nationalists were interned, over 60 of them women. (A total of 2,000 people experienced internment).



● Liz McKee (third from right), the first woman interned, taking part in an anti-internment rally in August 1989

On the streets, there was an angry, emotional reaction to Liz McKee's internment. On January 7th 1973, several hundred women marched in protest through Andersonstown and were addressed by Maire Drumm. In one of her most fiery speeches, she told the crowd at the Busy Bee:

"For every woman they try to intern, I am confident that another 50 women will step forward to take their place in the struggle for justice. The British can't put the women down and they will never put the women down."

Maire had been in Armagh the previous July when she got a six-month sentence for a speech she delivered at Free Derry Corner: *"It is a waste of time shouting 'Up the IRA'... the important thing is to join."* She was bound over to keep the peace for two years on a surety of £500 which she refused to sign.

SOLIDARITY IN ARMAGH

A few weeks after Liz McKee's internment, she was joined by Teresa Holland, then Margaret Shannon and Anne Walsh. The jail itself was archaic and conditions were harsh. Medical care was primitive.

From 1973-75, the women POWs had almost full control of Armagh Jail. The numbers had risen above the 120 mark.

They came from all corners of the Six Counties and from all age groups, from grandmothers to teenagers — indeed in one instance mother and daughter were interned together. Many came from the nationalist ghettos of Belfast.

Republican prisoners in Crumlin Road Jail had gone on hunger-strike in May and June 1972 and successfully won political status. The women POWs were to insist successfully that those hard-won rights be extended to them. The women formed 'A' Company, Armagh Jail. The company was eventually divided into three sections, one for each Wing, and named after Volunteers who had been killed on active service: Ethel Lynch from Derry, who had died in 1974; Vivienne Fitzsimmons from Downpatrick, who had died in August 1973; and Julie Dougan from Portadown, who had died in August 1972.

The women POWs would drill and parade in the exercise yard in full uniform. They supervised their own classes and debates. Ex-POW Eileen Hickey:

"It was very important in keeping the women together. It kept them aware that they were soldiers. In Armagh, you could feel so far removed from the Movement, from the struggle outside."

'It was the people who asked for the IRA'

"THE BRITISH made a wrong decision in introducing Internment and they know it to their cost. We were glad of the IRA. All you hear is 'The Provos did this, the Provos did that' but they never go back to the root of what's happening here. Well, the IRA weren't on the streets in '69 when the mills were burning, when the people of Bombay Street were burned out, so it was the people who asked for the IRA. The people needed them and it was the people's voice that called them on the



● Mairead Farrell, later assassinated by the SAS in Gibraltar, inside a cell in Armagh Jail during the no-wash protest in 1980

streets to protect us." — Catherine McCullough, Ballymurphy.

The brutality of Internment steered increasing numbers of women onto the streets in protests and into the ranks of Cumann na mBan, Cumann na gCailíní and Oglai na hEireann (the IRA). The women Volunteers undertook every kind of role: intelligence gathering; transporting weapons to and from operations against the enemy; making and planting incendiary devices and bombs against commercial targets; training other Volunteers in the use of weapons and explosives.

"Living in Belfast was a political education in itself... living on the Falls Road I saw Internment, I saw the British soldiers; and that in itself was a political education. I was very young when I became involved in the Republican Movement. At that time we were protesting about Internment on the streets. The Brits came into the area and we were always out banging at the bin lids. From that you began to say 'I have to do something here, this isn't right'. You find yourself wanting to become more and more involved... and I became involved then in the military campaign." — IRA Volunteer Mairead Farrell, executed by the SAS in Gibraltar, March 6th 1988.

Belfast sisters' epic hunger-strike

"YOU MUST all understand about the hunger-strike. We are not accepting Criminal Status because to do so would be an insult to us, our family and most of all to the Army. We thought about it all the time we were in Brixton and we know what Terence MacSwiney suffered there, so how could we accept what he died resisting?"

"We are petitioning the Home Office to be returned to Armagh or else given political status here, that way they won't be able to say they know nothing about our demands. We depend on all of you at home to support us, as we know you will, so long as we know you are behind us we will be able to do what has to be done... This is only our second day so we have a hard road ahead of us but it's one that has been walked by many before us and from their example I hope we will draw strength. Don't waste time worrying about us, get marching!" — Dolours Price, in a letter to her family from prison.

In March 1973, Marion and Dolours Price, two sisters from Andersonstown, West Belfast, were arrested with seven men and another woman and charged with the Old Bailey and Whitehall bombings in London. Prison conditions in English jails were atrocious and Republican prisoners were being held then, as now, as political hostages because of the British Home Office's refusal to transfer them to prisons in Ireland.

The Prices embarked on an epic hunger-strike to secure their transfer. It was to last a gruelling 206 days. They suffered indescribable pain as a consequence of being restrained, then force-fed through plastic tubes inserted down their throats and into their stomachs.

The reaction on the streets of the North and throughout Ireland to the British governments' brutal treatment of the sisters prompted thousands of people, mainly women, onto the streets in protest.

"The way the British government were force-feeding the Price sisters sent shockwaves of revulsion throughout Ireland and further afield. Across the North, women from teenagers to grandmothers, took to the streets in protest and in solidarity with Marion and Dolours. We

strongly identified with them as women and, in a very real sense, we felt just as much under attack by the British state. It was using barbaric methods to break the women's resistance and equally barbaric methods to crush any manifestation of opposition to British rule in the North." — Chrissie McAuley.

The Price sisters' endurance and sheer determination, despite their weak condition, eventually defeated the British authorities who conceded and transferred them to Armagh.

WELCOME HOME!

The women Republican prisoners in Armagh were ecstatic when Marion and Dolours arrived in the jail on March 18th 1975. The women POWs gave them a tumultuous welcome. Former POW Teresa Holland recalls:

"We had been practising for weeks, with flags, uniforms, the lot, and they hadn't come. And then suddenly there they were. So we got out the flags, the uniforms and had another parade just for them. They were lost, they couldn't believe their eyes. Everybody felt brilliant. For a full week, every time they went into someone's cell, the girl would make a big feed. It actually took them a long time to settle in, with all the fuss."

Criminalisation policy introduced

"THE BRITISH presence unified women in a determination where we organised ourselves against the military repression of the British army. It also made us realise our strength as a group. So that when the British government introduced the criminalisation policy there was a network of women already there who rallied behind the prisoners in even greater numbers than before." — Lily Fitzsimmons.

Internment, which was aimed at crushing the IRA and support



● A photograph smuggled out of Armagh Jail of women internees parading in 1974

for the national liberation struggle, was an abysmal failure for the British. The IRA was stronger than it had been in decades.

As the last of the internees were released in 1975, the British government was at an advanced stage in its Ulsterisation policy which attempted to de-politicise the struggle and present Republicans as common criminals.

After March 1st 1976, special category political status was removed. It was the beginning of the battle of wills between Republican prisoners incarcerated in the North's jails and the British government. Simultaneously, another battle in support of the prisoners was being fought on the streets and, again, it was women who formed the Relatives Action Committees throughout the Six Counties.

"I was involved in forming the RAC in Turf Lodge. We carried out a token hunger-strike which lasted seven days. It was the first time anything like that ever happened and there was international press interest. I lost a stone in weight." — Lily Fitzsimmons.

There were demonstrations, rallies, pickets, takeovers of British government buildings and speaking tours to Europe and the US.

ON THE PROTEST — THE ROAD TO HUNGER-STRIKE

"... We are in a war situation. We have been treated in a special way and tried by special courts because of that war, and because of our

political activities we want to be regarded as prisoners of war." — IRA Volunteer Mairead Farrell, speaking during the no-wash protest in Armagh Jail, 1980.

The prison administrations tried unsuccessfully to criminalise the POWs in Armagh and the H-Blocks of Long Kesh. Conditions in the years leading up to the 1980 H-Block/Armagh hunger-strike were appalling. The Republican POWs in Long Kesh refused to wear prison clothes and were confined in their cells, wearing nothing but a blanket. They smeared the walls of their cells with their own excreta. They were savagely beaten, hosed down with freezing cold, then piping hot water; many refused visits for years because of the degrading anal searches carried out by prison screws.

In Armagh, the no-work protest meant solitary confinement and being subjected to a range of petty disciplinary devices aimed at crushing the women's spirit. They were left in their cells for hours after asking to go to the toilets. In May '78, male screws were used to baton-charge remand prisoners engaged on a protest action against the removal of political status.

Two years later, the women POWs were savagely attacked and put on complete lock-up and denied access to the toilets.

Eileen Morgan was among those who were severely beaten:

"I was sitting in my cell when the door burst open and three male screws, with riot gear, came charging in.

"One of them jumped on top of me and kept punching me on the arms and chest, while the other held both my legs, swung my legs round so that I was lying flat on the bed.

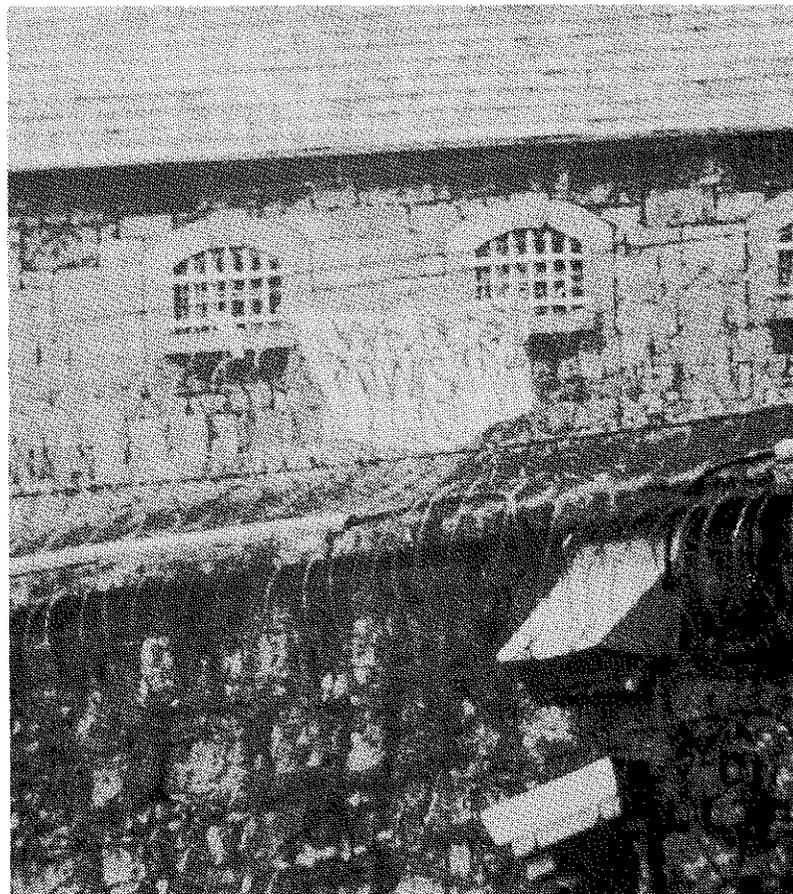
"One sat on my legs and another on my chest, while another put his hand over my nose and mouth so that I could hardly breathe. I was kept this way for a few minutes.

"Then three more male screws came in with four female screws. They lifted me off the bed and carried me out of the cell into the wing.

"My arms were twisted behind my back and my legs were held spread-eagled in the air, which is how they carried me down the stairs. One of the male screws kept kicking me, while one female screw had me by the hair.

"I was brought in to the governor like this.

"Male screws were behind me while eight female screws held me spread-eagled in the air the whole time. The governor told one of the



● A banner demanding political status hanging from the cells of Armagh Jail

screws to take my shoes off and to keep a firm hold of me and not to let go — even though my jumper was up around my neck I was held spread-eagled in the air.

"When the governor had finished the adjudication, the male screws grabbed me again and threw me into a cell head first. One of them kicked me on the backside.

"I was left lying in the cell with nothing but a smelly mattress and was refused permission to use the toilet.

"I reported this to the medical staff who took note of the bruises on my arms, legs, chest and neck."

The women were locked in their cells and denied access to toilet facilities. In the next week, their chamber pots overflowed and they had to slop out by throwing the contents out of the cell windows. It was the beginning of the 'no-wash' protest which was to last 13 months. More attention was focussed on Armagh Jail than at any other time during the decade.

The cost to the prisoners was high. In an old jail like Armagh, dirt accumulated quickly. The women's periods were a particularly dangerous time for infection. Several women developed skin diseases and bowel trouble. Yet their morale was higher than it had ever been.

Interviewed in *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, August 30th 1980, the mother of Republican POW Mairead Farrell, also named Mairead, described visiting her during the no-wash protest.:

"I think it's inhuman that the girls are being forced to live in these conditions. I think it's absolutely desperate that such conditions are allowed to continue. Mairead says the flies are terrible and there are some kind of fleas and other insects hopping about the cells.

"Mairead was pretty well built. Her weight was over eight stone. She must be about six stone now, and she has lost a lot of weight since February. She is very, very thin, her skin is all flakey, her hands are very, very thin, and she is dirty, with a generally offensive smell about her. It's terrible... Her spirits are very, very high, you never see her any way but laughing and in really good form."

Mass mobilisation begins

ON THE OUTSIDE, the mass mobilisation of people throughout Ireland began to gain momentum as anger mounted against the barbaric methods being used against the prisoners.

The atrocious conditions and the British government's refusal to grant five simple demands to the POWs prompted the 1980 H-Block/Armagh hunger-strikes. On October 27th, an initial seven H-

Block POWs began a hunger-strike which lasted 53 days.

THREE WOMEN POWS JOIN HUNGER-STRIKE

In November, the women political prisoners in Armagh decided to join the hunger-strike "in an intensification of the campaign for political status". This decision immediately undermined the attempts of the British government and others to make the issue of 'civilian clothing' the central point of dispute in order to confuse and divide the supporters of the prisoners. This courageous action of the women made it clear to the world that the political prisoners were fighting for political status.

On Monday, December 1st 1980, three women (Mairead Farrell, who was o/c, Mary Doyle and Mairead Nugent) went on hunger-strike. In a statement, they said:

"We women in Armagh wear our own clothes, but we refuse to do prison work, or to co-operate with the prison regime, which is under orders from the British government to criminalise us in an attempt to criminalise what we believe in and have struggled for — Irish freedom. The cause of Irish freedom is not a criminal cause, but a political cause, and in order to assert this we are going on hunger-strike..."

"Jail makes you more determined. The more barriers that they put up the more determined you are to get over them." Former POW and



● While the POWs fought for their rights inside the jails, the Relatives Action Committee took to the streets to support their demands

Armagh hunger-striker Mary Doyle.

Mary Doyle, from the Bawnmore estate in North Belfast, was serving her second term of imprisonment in Armagh when she decided to embark with her two other comrades on hunger-strike. She recalls:

"There was a lot of discussion beforehand about who would go on the hunger-strike. We were determined to play our part. We were not ordered on hunger-strike, we were Volunteers, we discussed it openly among ourselves and we were under no illusions about it. We knew we were on it until the death."

"The other women were very strong, there was great comradeship in Armagh. At the beginning of the hunger-strike, the three of us were on the wing together. The screws brought food into the cells at meal times and it was hot. What's more, they would bring steaming plates overflowing with chips which was a real luxury. This was a petty attempt to entice us off the hunger-strike. We laughed about it, and of course sent the food back."

"The salt water solution usually made me sick so after a few days they gave us salt tablets. We were on lock up 23 hours a day, with one hour's exercise. I had a few dizzy spells after the first few days. We were moved to a clean cell once the prison authorities discovered our bowels were not moving. The second week we were moved to the hospital wing. It was the first time we had been able to wash since the no-wash protest commenced in February and that was December. We weren't affected psychologically by the no-wash because you were there for what you believed in. Things like that made you more determined."

They stayed on hunger-strike until December 19th, one day after the men in the H-Blocks ended theirs. The women had refused to come off the protest until they received official confirmation about the H-Blocks.

The prisoners believed they had extracted sufficient concessions from the British government to make a settlement possible. Having secured the end of the hunger-strike, however, the British did a U-turn and reneged.

Prior to and during the hunger-strikes, H-Block/Armagh committees sprang up throughout the 32 Counties and support groups mushroomed abroad. Women predominated the H-Block/Armagh committees, rallying support for the POWs. Once again, the British government's reaction was to use violence against peaceful protests and against those women in particular who held key positions on the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.

The ultimate sacrifice

"I've always believed we had a legitimate right to take up arms and defend our country and ourselves against the British occupation."

— IRA Volunteer Mairead Farrell, killed on active service, March 6th 1988, in Gibraltar.

ROLL OF HONOUR

Cumann na mBan Volunteers Maura Meehan and Dorothy Maguire.

Maura and Dorothy were killed by the British forces on October 23rd 1971.

Maura had joined the movement a short time before her death but her sister Dorothy had been active in the ranks since the summer of 1970. In the early hours of October 23rd, they heard rumours that heavy raiding was taking place in the Lower Falls area. Along with two others, the sisters were driving into the district to alert local people by sounding a siren, when their car came under fire from some British army vehicles. No warning was issued by the British. Maura and Dorothy were killed instantly and the two passengers were wounded.

Cumann na mBan Volunteer Julie Dougan.

Volunteer Julie Dougan from Portadown was a dedicated and hard-working activist. She died as a result of a road accident on July 8th 1972. Hooded UDA members fired 15 shots into her home at 5am on July 12th, the day of her funeral. Her comrades had intended to give her a Republican funeral but this was abandoned on information received that the UDA intended to attack the cortege.

Cumann na mBan Volunteer Anne Parker.

Volunteer Anne Parker from West Belfast joined Cumann na gCailíní in February 1972 and then Cumann NA mBan in April 1972.

She was a highly dedicated volunteer and was conscious of the need to avoid civilian casualties. She was subsequently killed just four months later on August 11th 1972 in an explosion, as she and Volunteer Michael Clarke were transporting a bomb away from a target which they felt would have endangered civilians in the area.

Cumann na gCailíní Volunteer Eileen Mackin.

Loyalists were responsible for the killing of 14-year-old Cumann na gCailíní Volunteer Eileen Mackin from West Belfast on May 17th 1973. Earlier that day, rioting had taken place in Springhill Avenue. However, around 9pm, when the area was quiet, Eileen and a friend were out walking when loyalists opened fire from the nearby Springmartin estate. Eileen sustained a stomach wound and died shortly after midnight, her friend was shot in the leg.

Cumann na mBan Volunteer Anne Marie Petticrew.

Anne Marie Petticrew joined Cumann na mBan in Belfast in 1971. She was an Explosives Officer attached to a particularly active unit which planted incendiary bombs across the North. She and Volunteer Francis Hall were seriously injured in an explosion. She died as a result of her injuries a week later on September 1st 1973. Volunteer Hall had died two days earlier.

Cumann na mBan Volunteer Vivienne Fitzsimmons.

Vivienne was a member of Cumann na mBan in Downpatrick, County Down, where she was a very active Volunteer. She was killed in an explosion while on active service on February 10th 1973. IRA Volunteer Leo Hanlon was killed in the same explosion.

Cumann na mBan Volunteer Pauline Kane.

Volunteer Pauline Kane of Cumann na mBan and IRA Volunteer Alphonsus Cunningham from Newcastle, County Down were killed in an explosion while on active service on July 21st 1973. They were travelling along the Causeway Road when the explosion took place.

**Cumann na mBan
Volunteer Ethel Lynch.**

Ethel, from Derry, first joined Cumann na mBan in 1972. She was in charge of an ASU which was attempting to place bombs in Derry City centre and was seriously injured. She died as a result of her injuries three days later, on December 17th 1974.

**Cumann na mBan
Volunteer Bridie Dolan.**

Bridie Dolan joined Cumann na mBan in Belfast in her youth. Up until her death on February 9th 1975, Bridie was always involved in Republican activities. This was in spite of injuries she received in an explosion which seriously damaged her eyesight and hearing and severed both her hands.

**Cumann na mBan
Volunteer Laura Crawford.**

Laura Crawford, from Lenadoon, West Belfast, joined Cumann na mBan in the later part of 1973. She was an extremely active Volunteer, participating in successful bomb attacks on the British forces. She was killed in an explosion while on active service on December 1st 1975. IRA Volunteer Paul Fox was killed in the same explosion.

**Cumann na mBan
Volunteer Rosemary Bleakley.**

The British forces continuously came under attack from operations in which Volunteer Rosemary Bleakley was involved. She was a highly active Cumann na mBan Volunteer, who felt no fear of the British war machine. She was killed in an explosion while on active service during a commercial bombing attack on Belfast city centre on January 13th 1976. IRA Volunteer Martin McDonagh was also killed.

Maire Drumm, Sinn Féin.

Maire emerged after the firey pogroms of August 1969 as a gifted leader and organiser. She worked tirelessly to rehouse refugees from the Ardoyne area of North Belfast. Following the reorganisation of Sinn Féin after the split, Maire was elected Vice-President of Sinn

Féin. She was a dynamic speaker and refused to be silenced despite constant harassment by the British forces and gardai. She served two successive six-month terms of imprisonment in Armagh Jail, followed by two further periods of incarceration in Mountjoy Jail Dublin, for 'seditious' speeches.

Maire had eye trouble but was refused a visa to go to the US to have treatment for cataracts. She instead underwent an operation in the Mater Hospital, Belfast, but while she was recovering loyalist gunmen, posing as doctors, burst into her room and shot her in her bed. She died instantly.

**Oglaigh na hEireann, GHQ Staff
Volunteer Mairead Farrell**

Volunteer Mairead Farrell came from West Belfast and first joined Oglaigh na hEireann in 1975. She was the first woman republican to be jailed after the withdrawal of political status in 1976. Mairead was convicted of bombing the Conway Hotel outside Belfast. Her comrade, Volunteer Sean McDermott, was shot dead by the RUC. Another Volunteer on the same operation was Kieran Doherty, who in 1981 died on hunger-strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.

Mairead was one of three women POWs who participated in the 1980 hunger-strike. During the second hunger-strike of 1981, Mairead was one of several prisoner candidates in the 26-County elections. She was released after serving 10 years and six months of her 14-year sentence in September 1986. Mairead immediately reported back to Oglaigh na hEireann for active service. She and her two comrades, Volunteers Sean Savage and Daniel McCann, were subsequently killed by the SAS while on active service in the British colony of Gibraltar on March 6th 1988.



Elimination of political opponents

ON JUNE 26th 1980, loyalist death squads brutally carried out the murder of Miriam Daly. Many believed she was targeted because of her prominence within the National H-Block/Armagh Committee

Miriam Daly, a Queen's University lecturer was shot five times in the head in her Belfast home. She had been tied to a chair and a pillow used as a silencer. She was found by her young son.

The professional style of the murder as well as the weapon used (believed to have been a Browning) pointed to a possible British army undercover involvement. At the time, Bernadette McAliskey suggested it bore all the characteristics of an SAS operation.

On January 16th 1981, Bernadette McAliskey and her husband Michael were seriously wounded when a UDA murder gang used a sledgehammer to break into their house and then shot them.



● Bernadette McAliskey confronting the RUC after they had stopped a protest march from going to Armagh Jail in December 1980



● A Derry hunger-strike march in October 1981

British U-turn paves way for second hunger-strike

THE 34-PAGE document drawn up by the British government and presented to the H-Block hunger-strikers on December 18th 1980 appeared in theory at least to meet the five demands of the political prisoners. The hunger-strike ended and at first it seemed as if there would be a new era of co-operation inside the prisons, unprecedented since the British government embarked upon its policy of criminalisation in March 1976.

However, as soon as the international spotlight shifted away from the jails, this atmosphere disappeared within a matter of days.

In the British parliament on January 9th 1981, the then British direct-ruler Humphrey Atkins publicly reneged on his December 18th statement in regard to the H-Block POWs receiving their own clothes.

The H-Block and Armagh POWs attempted to de-escalate the protests in a principled fashion but they were met with hostility and stubbornness by the prison regimes. Blanketmen prepared to come off the protest before Christmas day were prevented doing so because of the administration's insistence that they don prison-issue clothing and conform.

In Armagh, where the women wore their own clothes, the regime was equally obstructive, refusing even to discuss the question of self-education classes as outlined in the Atkins document.

Forced back to square one, the prisoners declared: "We the republican POWs in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, and our comrades in Armagh prison, are entitled to and hereby demand political status, and we reject today, as we have consistently rejected every day since September 14th 1976 when the blanket protest began, the British government's attempted criminalisation of ourselves and our struggle." — Bobby Sands, then o/c of the blanketmen, who embarked on hunger-strike himself on March 1st 1981.



● Mother of hunger-striker Bobby Sands speaks at a demonstration during the 1981 hunger-strike

ELECTIONS

The most dramatic rebuttal of the attempted criminalisation of the resistance movement manifested itself in the thousands of votes cast in support of the prisoners on both sides of the border during the second hunger-strike.

In the Six Counties, the nationalist electorate of Fermanagh/South Tyrone on two occasions fully endorsed the prisoners with more than thirty-thousand votes, electing Bobby Sands in the Westminster elections in April and, after his death in May, returning Owen Carron with an increased majority.

In the local elections in the North, several councillors supporting the prisoners were also elected.

In the 26 Counties hunger-striker Kieran Doherty was elected to the Dublin parliament, as was H-Block blanketman Paddy Agnew.

Although the women in Armagh did not participate in the second hunger-strike, Mairead Farrell was one of a number of other prisoner candidates who polled extremely well, against all the predictions of the media pundits. Mairead stood in Cork North Central and came in ahead of two Fianna Fáil and one Workers' Party candidates, receiving a total of 2,751 first preference votes. Hunger-strikers Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson narrowly missed being elected by only a few hundred votes.

The death of Bobby Sands on May 5th, after 66 days on hunger-strike, was followed by the deaths of nine of his comrades: Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Martin Hurson, Thomas McElwee, Mickey Devine, Joe McDonnell, Kieran Doherty and Kevin Lynch.

The hunger-strike is for many a key event in recent Irish history and a watershed in the development of the republican struggle. The criminalisation policy of the British government, which was central to its policy in Ireland, lay in tatters, while a more invigorated, committed, politicised Republican Movement grasped the tactic of electoralism and inflicted further political defeats in the following years.

Women and politics

"TOWARDS THE END of 1981, I began asking myself 'where do I go from here?' We'd come through a lot as a

people since the early days of the civil rights and 1981 was a particularly traumatic year, watching ten young Irishmen die on hunger-strike. But their sacrifice had made us all the more stronger and more resolute in our determination, once and for all, to end the conditions which deny us unity and peace in this country.

"When the hunger-strike ended I just couldn't go back into the house and close the door behind me and forget all about what was happening. How could I anyway when there were British soldiers and the RUC pointing guns at me and my neighbours on the streets?"

"By that time the community identified me as a person they could go to with their various problems whether it was about housing conditions, harassment or lack of local amenities. Consequently, by the end of 1981, I joined Sinn Féin because I could see it was a political party of ordinary people, made up of the people in my community.

"They weren't politicians, you could identify with them, they understood the problems of the community because they were experiencing the same repression. So on reflection, I wouldn't say that at some point I sat down and said 'I'll join Sinn Féin', it was more a question of a logical political progression for me than a conscious decision." — Lily Fitzsimmons.

The numerical shortfall of women within Sinn Féin is a reflection of the status of women in general within Irish society and Irish politics. Breaking away from their traditional role within the home, even to attend a weekly half-hour meeting, can present women with major difficulties.

Sinn Féin recognises that the involvement of women is necessary at all levels and the organisation has gone some way, through its policy of positive discrimination, in trying to encourage women to join. It is committed to providing childcare facilities to enable women to play as full a role as they choose and is committed to redressing sexism through an ongoing process of education.

Steady progress has been made and over the past decade increasing numbers of women have come through the party and are gaining not only self-confidence but political confidence.

In the 1985 local elections in the North, 12 women stood as candidates for Sinn Féin and six were elected. In the May 1989 council elections, 14 women stood and five were elected.

The fact that two of the women candidates, Una Casey and Pauline Kennedy/Davey stood at all after loyalists assassinated Una's husband, Gerard, and Pauline's father, John Davey, is an indication of their individual courage and determination. On the political side, it reflects the deep-rooted commitment of all Sinn Féin candidates and councillors to continue to represent the views of the nationalist electorate in spite of the fact that their lives are at risk on a daily basis from loyalist death squads.

Una Casey stood as a Sinn Féin candidate in the predominantly loyalist district council area of Ballymoney, while Pauline Kennedy/Davey stood in Magherafelt where she was subsequently elected to the council. Pauline took the place of her late father, life-long Republican John Davey, who was assassinated by loyalists as he returned from a council meeting on February 14th 1989.

Una Casey's decision to contest the election came only weeks after she witnessed her husband Gerard, an IRA Volunteer, being assassinated by loyalists.

Una, now left to bring up four young children, brought out the Republican vote in this predominantly Unionist council area.

Women in Sinn Féin

"THIS WAR COULD never have continued without the involvement of women. I think the young women of today are marvellous. When I joined Sinn Féin, there was only the odd woman member, there are more now. I was involved in helping to set up the Women's Coordinating Committee in 1979 and then the Sinn Féin Women's Department in 1980. There were about five of us in Belfast. We did all sorts of things to raise money to get ourselves started. We didn't get much help either. Even during the hunger-strike we kept going; we felt it was important to continue to organise as women, as well as all the other commitments that most of us had at that time." — Gretta Reel, Belfast veteran.

Sinn Féin women considered that the party's commitment to

equal rights and equal opportunities was no absolute guarantee that women would be automatically treated as equal citizens once the British withdrew. The position of women in Irish society in the 26 Counties following partition had largely worsened their social and economic status.

Sinn Féin women felt that they should highlight their oppression and put their demands on the agenda, realising, however, that the success of the struggle for national liberation is the pre-condition for socialism and the liberation of Irishwomen.

They began discussing the problems they faced in fulfilling their roles as political activists and the need for Sinn Féin to have strong, progressive policies on issues important not just to women, but to society as a whole. They came together from all over Ireland and pushed for a women's department, which was established in 1980. A radical women's policy document was overwhelmingly passed at that year's Ard Fheis (national conference).

In 1983, positive discrimination was adopted by Sinn Féin, so that a minimum of one quarter of the Ard Chomhairle (National executive committee) positions are reserved for women.

Extracts from a recent interview in *Spare Rib* magazine with Mairead Keane, head of the Women's Department, examined the issues which affect Irish women and men today against the background of partition.

"Today, 20 years on in the struggle, we believe that the maximum



● Sinn Féin candidates for the 1989 Six-County local elections

number of people must be mobilised to achieve Irish unity. There is a need for a broad anti-imperialist movement to mobilise on the issue of self-determination for the Irish people. There is a need for women to link their self-determination with the core demand of self-determination for the nation.

"In order to do this, we must make this demand relevant to working-class women. We must be involved in the struggles which affect a broad section of women. We must show them — through involvement in their struggles on social and economic issues, which are our struggles — that their freedom is intertwined with the reunification of our country.

"British interference in Ireland has brought about the existence of two conservative states whose continuing presence demands the oppression of certain sectors of society and women in particular.

"The mobilisation of the new right has put the women's movement on the defensive in the '80s. Although new women's groups have sprung up in the towns, across the country and in local city communities, women have not managed to assemble effective opposition.

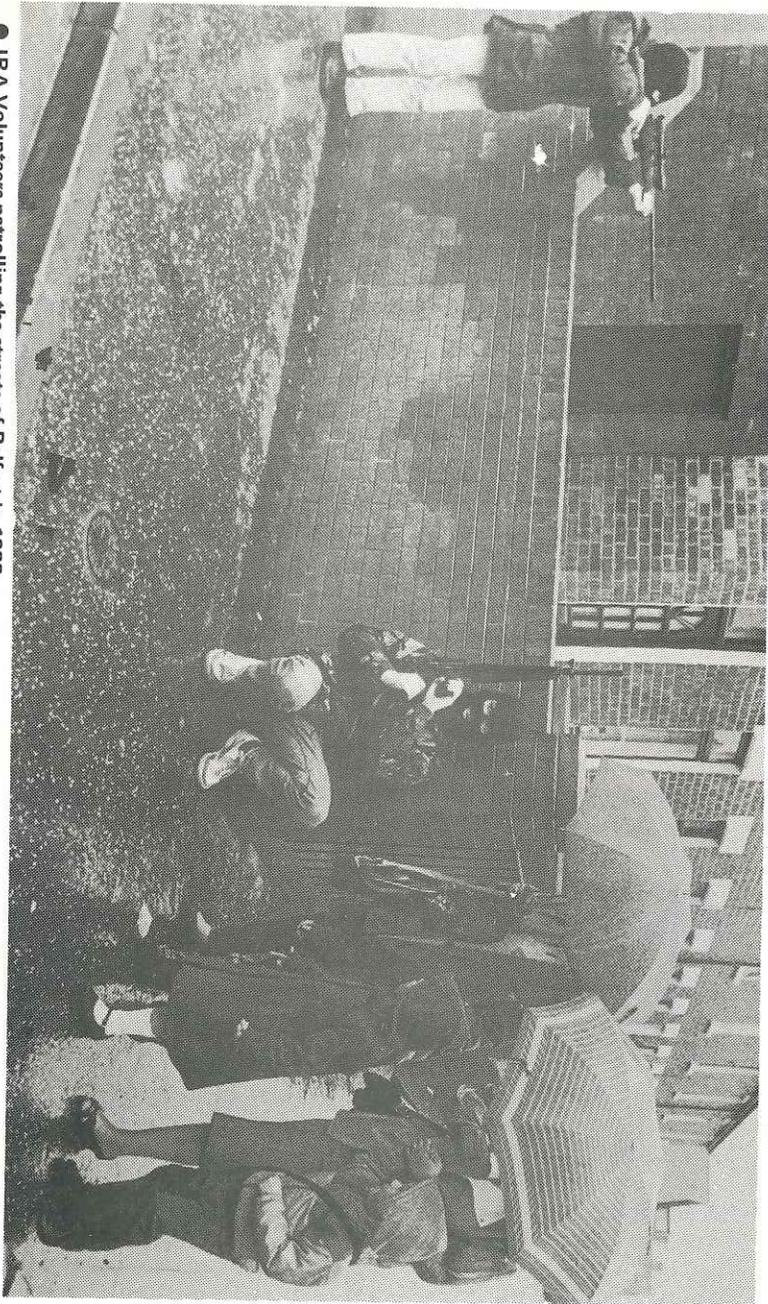
"The failure of the women's movement to develop is directly related to its emphasis on equal rights and equal opportunities. It has failed to address the central issue of partition. Partition sets the political face of both states; the North, based on sectarian privilege, while the 26 Counties are deeply conservative in social terms with the strong influence of the Catholic Church.

"We believe women will not experience any real change until they address this issue. Social and economic deprivation, the influence of the church, the repression that women suffer in the Six Counties, are all inter-related issues.

"For as long as Britain remains in Ireland, its presence distorts the political landscape. We believe the only solution is the ending of partition, a British disengagement from Ireland and the restoration to the Irish people of their right to sovereignty, independence and national self-determination."

In the words of Mairead Farrell:

"I'm oppressed as a woman but I am also oppressed because I'm Irish. Everyone in this country is oppressed and we can't successfully end our oppression as women until we first end the oppression of our country. But I don't think that's the end of it. It happened before where women took the back seat. But women today have gone through too much, no way will they allow that to happen."



The IRA

"The only logical road towards lasting peace in Ireland is British withdrawal." — IRA Volunteer.

"Peace and democracy in Ireland can only be achieved when British occupation is finally brought to an end. Its denial of self-determination and sovereignty to the Irish people is the biggest stumbling block towards peace. The British presence is actually perpetuating the conflict and causing widespread pain, suffering, death and imprisonment right across the board. It is our sincere wish to remove the cause of all this suffering. That is what motivates all Volunteers." — IRA Volunteer.

"I was only 12 when my father and brothers had to defend our community against loyalist mobs who burned families out of their homes. Our people had nothing but stones and sheer guts, the IRA was more a folklore than a reality then. Although I was very young, the pogroms influenced me greatly. I remember at home there were always Republicans coming in and out of the house and there was a picture of Kevin Barry on the wall. But I would say that events from 1969 and the civil rights struggle, in which my relatives participated, that I began to realise there was going to be important changes taking place in my life and in Ireland.

"When the British army was redeployed on the streets of the Six Counties, I remember the words of my mother who labelled them 'Black and Tan pups', in other words, they were cut from the same cloth as the infamous Black and Tans who waged a policy of terror against the Irish people in the 1920s. We weren't allowed to talk to the soldiers for my mother would warn us that it wouldn't be long before their guns were turned against us. She was so right."

The Volunteer outlined that she joined Cumann n gCailíní at 14, then Cumann na mBan. Later on, following the first hunger-strike of 1980, she joined the IRA.

"It wasn't a decision I took lightly at all; I was aware of the risks and aware of the consequences. I had reached a point where I had to do everything I could to ensure that what had been happening to our people since 1969, and indeed for decades before, would not happen to the children growing up around me. I don't want them to be treated as sec-

ond-class citizens, to be discriminated against, to be harassed on the streets, to be arrested under repressive legislation, to be beaten into signing statements in interrogation centres, to be shot by plastic and lead bullets."

Speaking about her male comrades she said:

"One thing I could always say without reservation is that I wasn't treated differently because of my gender. Now I'm not saying that some women haven't experienced sexism, but they've been quick to point it out to their male comrades. I think anyway that breaking down stereotyping is an ongoing process worldwide and breaking down sexist attitudes is achieved by educating both men and women. We need to begin challenging the attitudes with our children.

"Let me put it this way, I'm in an ASU and I'm treated as an equal — no allowances are made for me because I'm a woman and I don't want any allowances made either. You've to meet the same requirements as your male comrades and you take the same risks as they do. The only allowance made — and one which I'm not complaining about is that I'd be given more advance notice of when I was needed in order to facilitate my family commitments."

And what of the future?

"I would love to live a normal life and do all the normal things that people do. But we are not living in a normal society. We have an army of occupation on our streets, backed up by the RUC and UDR militias. It has been said many, many times that the IRA is a symptom of a much greater violence, the British presence. This is true. Would I have any motivation to take up arms, to risk my life against one of the most highly trained, better equipped armies of the world if I could bring about the conditions for peace by simply asking the British to go? The IRA needs to keep pressurising the British, otherwise we would return to a pre-1969 situation when a wall of silence surrounded the acts of state repression being carried out against the nationalist population.

"In the final analysis, there needs to be a political settlement and Britain needs to be convinced, and firmly convinced, that the Republican Movement's position is the only logical answer to creating the conditions for lasting peace in Ireland."



● Women in the early 1970s announced the arrival of British troops into areas by banging bin lids

Twenty years on... "We're not quitting" — Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey

"WHAT OF the future?" asks Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey looking back at the early civil rights days. She has been vilified by the British press, been shot and seriously wounded by loyalists, has earned a grudging respect from Unionists and is still campaigning for the basic dignity she demanded for the nationalist people when she first set out in Derry in 1969.

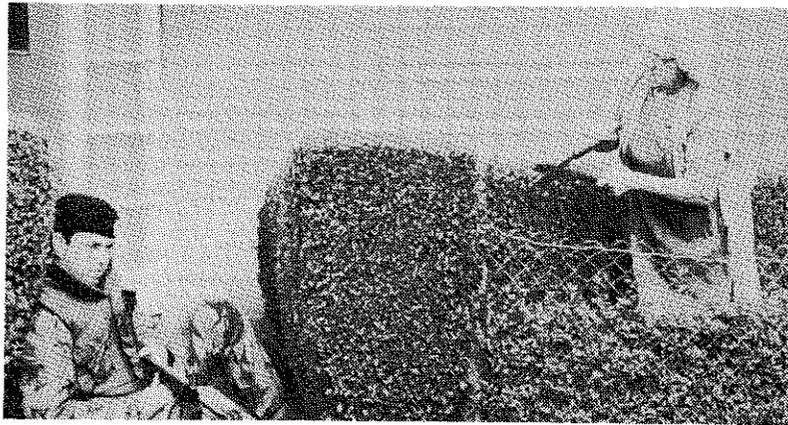
"We have clarified in 20 years that this state doesn't work. Charlie Haughey for his sins put it most simply: 'The North is a failed experiment.' Charlie forgot that if the North doesn't work, the South doesn't either; there's two sides to the Border. Twenty years of increasing oppression that would have been incomprehensible to us 20 years ago has failed to stifle the movement here. Britain can't repress this movement. So we're in a bit of a stalemate. We have to look at how we move it. I think we have got to make a turnaround in the attitude of

people in Britain and the South to make any dramatic progress.

"I think it's clear today that Sinn Féin are the leadership, whether they're the revolutionary party or not is temporarily neither here nor there. It is a party which has broadened, learnt from its experience, radicalised, deepened its political understanding and sophistication. And a lot of how we develop depends on how deep and how far that process goes.

"Twenty years ago, I trundled out there and I didn't know where I was going. Twenty years later, I know exactly where we're going. I know the price that will be paid for even trying to go there. And I know we're not quitting. That's what is scary: you know what they're going to throw at you and you know you're going on ahead. I don't mean that simply in a personal sense, that's where this movement is going, with the knowledge of all that has been done to destroy us, discredit us, disable us, it is going on. Not because we haven't the wit to quit, not because we're fanatics but because that's the reality of life. Out there is what we need, out there is basic freedom, dignity. Most of us now know the price of freedom and we're prepared to pay it.

"Twenty years ago, we thought it was standing out on the street shouting 'One man, one vote' and not even realising that was a sexist slogan. But now it's overthrowing an entire social/political/economic system, taking on the might of the British army, of imperialism. That's what's standing between us and the basic dignity we were looking for 20 years ago. And I think the difference is that if we'd know that 20 years ago, we probably wouldn't have started. But 20 years on, we say: 'Well, if that's what we have to do, we better get on with it'."



● The British military presence intrudes on every aspect of life in the North



● Women hold up bread and milk as they break the Lower Falls Curfew



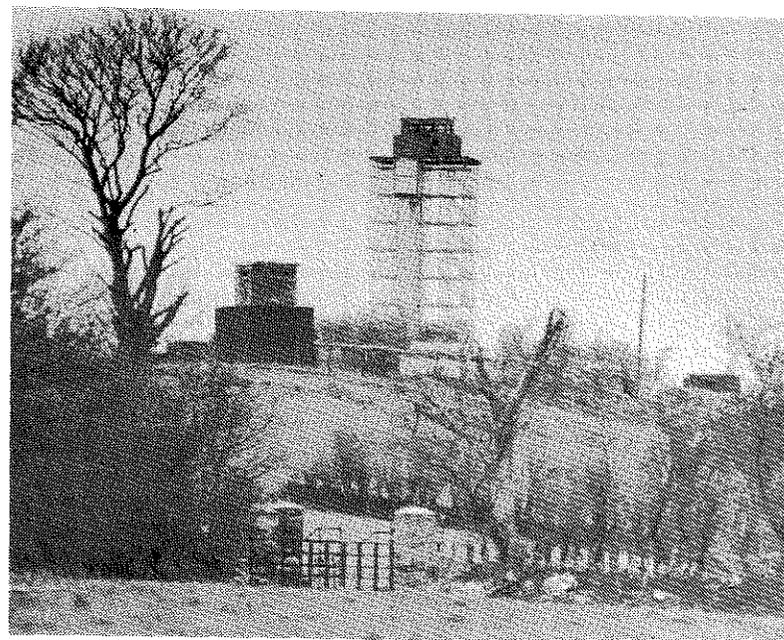
● A 1985 picket for road safety is harassed by the RUC



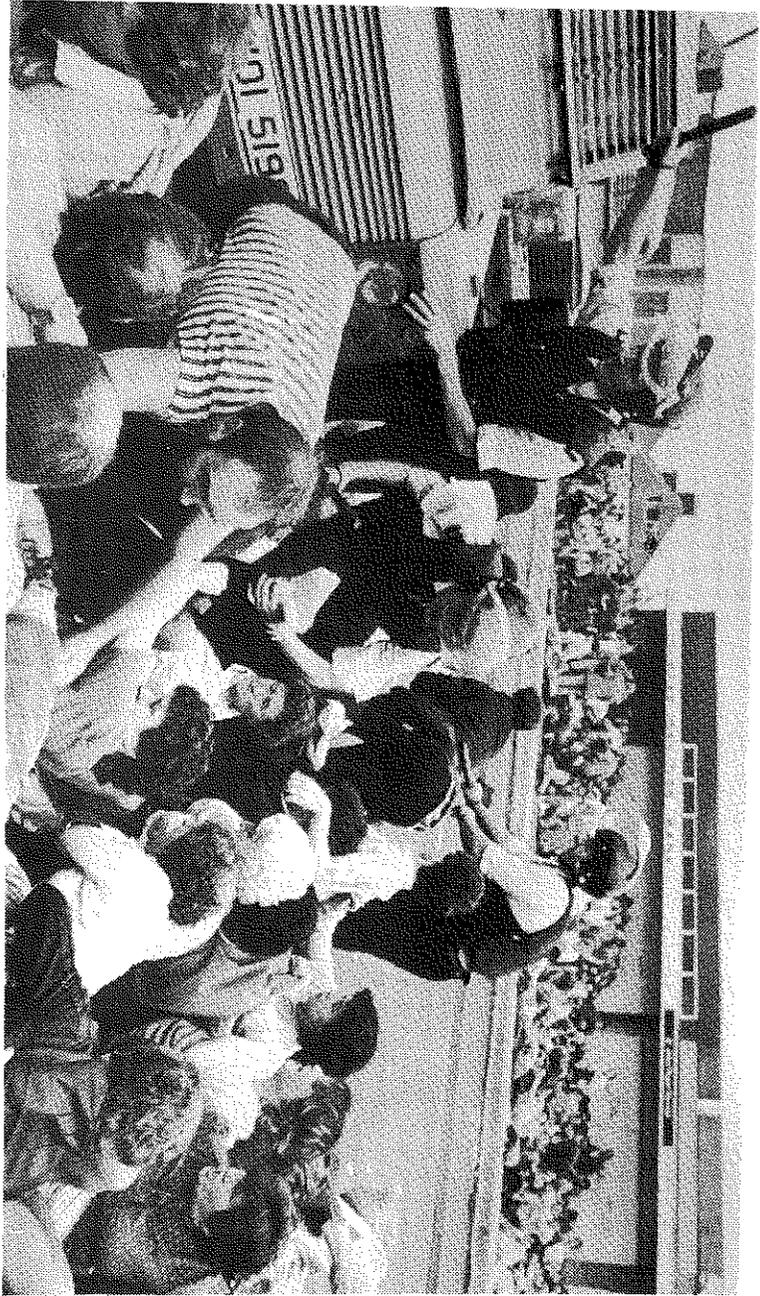
RUC men indiscriminately firing plastic bullets



● The militarisation of the North includes checkpoints and spy-posts which intrude on people's lives



● The RUC attacking the peaceful anti-interment rally in August 1984. Sean Downes was shot dead by a plastic bullet at the rally



● Protests demanding the release of political hostages, outside Armagh Jail (*above*) and Belfast (*below*)



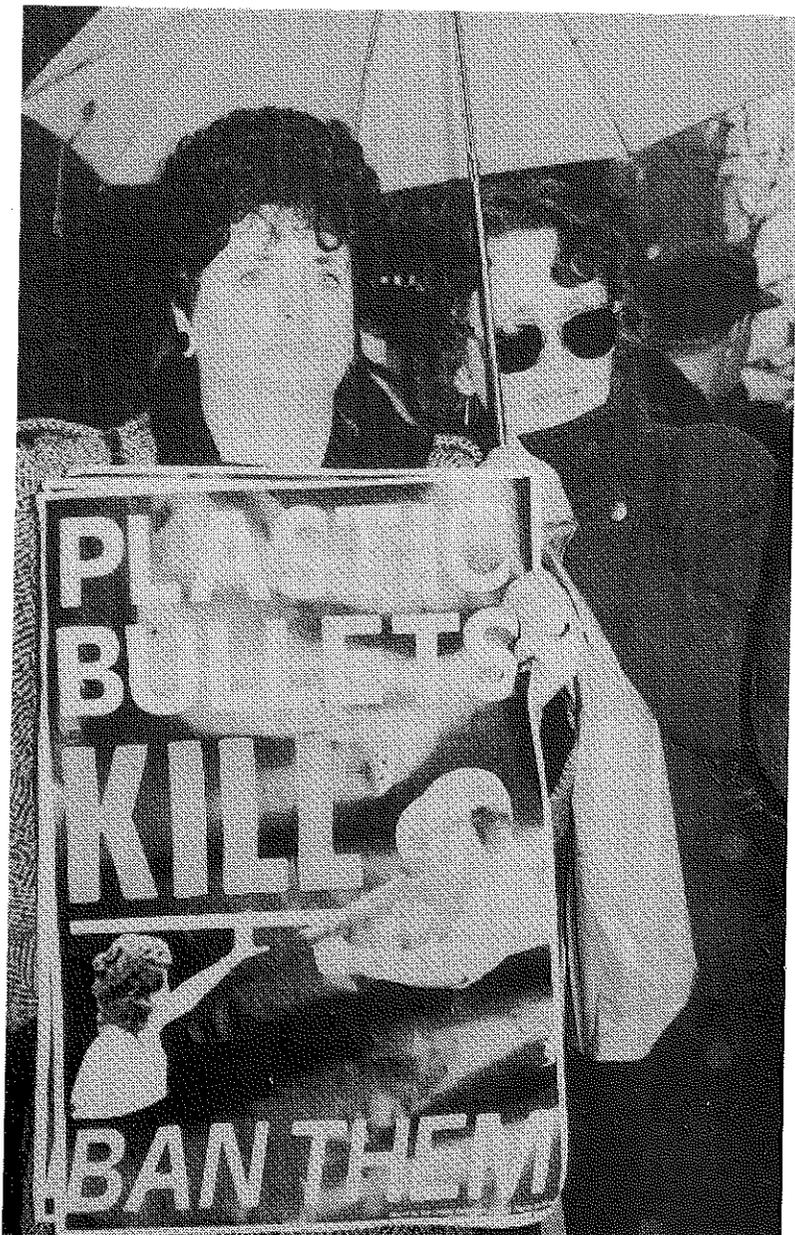
● Women protesting against the H-Blocks



● Goretta McDonnell, wife of hunger-striker Joe, and their two children at the coffin of her husband in July 1981



● The coffin of IRA Volunteer Mairéad Farrell, flanked by former Armagh Jail comrades, being carried from the family home in Belfast



● Emma Groves, who was blinded by a plastic bullet, pictured at a demonstration in London in 1989



● Standing up to RUC brutality during IRA Volunteer Larry Marley's funeral in March 1987



● RUC men attacking IRA Volunteer Finbarr McKenna's funeral in May 1987

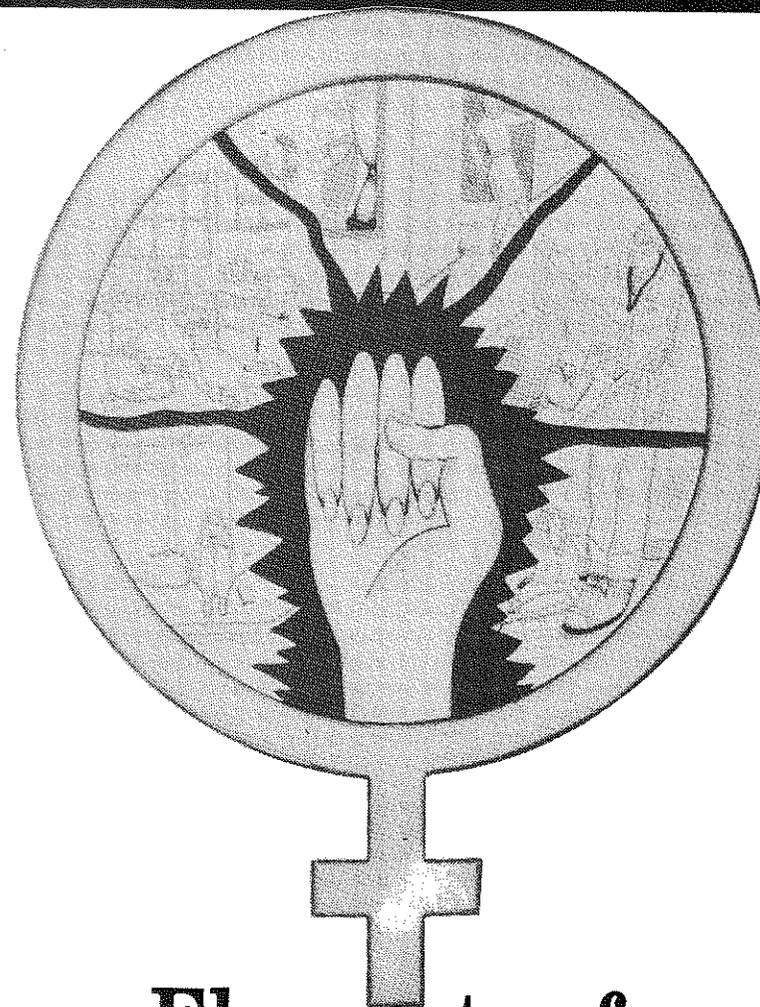


● Commemorating Ireland's patriot dead at the anti-internment rally in Belfast, August 1989



● An anti-extradition march in Belfast in 1989

PART TWO



Elements of repression



● Janet Donnelly standing in the ruins of her kitchen holding her child after the RUC destroyed it in a 'raid' in 1989

House raids

"WE'RE NOT even safe in our own homes" — the trauma of house raids.

From 1973 to December 1988, a staggering number of 294,071 domestic homes and premises were searched by the British army/RUC. In 1988 alone, there were 8,500 houses and private properties raided, surpassing the 1973 peak figure of 7,456. These are the 'official' statistics of the British government and are taken as being gross underestimates. They do not include the thousands of homes raided from 1970 to

1972 prior to and following the introduction of Internment.

The majority of homes raided belong to nationalists. The British government asserts that raids are conducted to "protect lives and property". The reality is that weapons and explosives have been found in less than 1% of the total number of homes raided. The psychological damage to the women who are left to pick up the pieces after destructive house searches is immeasurable.

The following experience of Turf Lodge woman Janet Donnelly, who has three young children, graphically describes the attitude of the crown forces during a raid on her home in 1988.

"They came at half-past eight in the morning and told us they were going to search the house. I said to them, 'This is private property, I have my rights.' They laughed and said, 'You don't have any rights.'

"We were ordered to remain in the sitting room. I objected because I wanted to get my eldest child off to school. Anyway, it's best to try and keep your eye on them, otherwise they might plant ammunition round in your house and pretend they've found it there. Finally, they agreed to let me do what I wished, though my husband had to stay where he was with the little ones.

"The soldiers, there were about ten of them, stripped down and put all their weapons in a corner.

"They started by pulling all the carpets and the floorboards up. In the kitchen, they were smashing the cupboards with axes. One was making Xs on the floor with a piece of chalk.

"I had to ask him four times what he was doing before he would answer. He then told me they were going to dig the floor up.

"You must be joking' I said. 'You dug a hole in the floor the last time you came, and I was told that if ever we had another raid, I was to say that the floor was made of reinforced concrete.'

"So what?' he laughed. 'We're going to do it all over again.'

"They brought in a pneumatic drill and a generator was put outside the front door. You had to step over it to get out. It was leaking, and I felt sure that it was really dangerous. The noise was terrible.

"The soldiers put masks on their faces, to protect them from the dust caused by the drilling.

"In the living room they took down our holy pictures and tore them up. They threw our books onto the floor and read all our letters, even the bills.

"They took notes all the time, like the colour of the carpet and the

wallpaper. All the time they were doing it, they were making vile remarks.

"I couldn't stand it, so I went upstairs.

"There, the soldiers were going through my underwear, saying disgusting things for me to hear. I couldn't stay there either, it was too humiliating.

"This went on all day long.

"I tried asking the soldiers why they were doing it, but they said they weren't allowed to talk to me.

"Some of them were exhausted, and really fed up, but their officer was always there to push them on.

"My eldest boy came home from school at three o'clock.

"He told me that some jeeps had followed him when he'd gone to school that morning.

"At the top of the road the soldiers had jumped out of the jeep and surrounded him, laughing and calling him names like 'cry-baby' and 'Andy Pandey'.

"They took his satchel and tipped everything out, and searched him. He was in an awful state. He's only nine.

"I made a complaint to the officer in charge. His reply was, 'It wasn't me. I don't want to know.'

"My son could see how upset I was, and he was trying to comfort me.

"The children's toys were getting smashed and he was angry. At one point, when of the soldiers came near, he spat in his face.

"I didn't want him to do that. I didn't bring him up that way, so I told him it was wrong.

"He just broke down and cried.

"About half-past-five, the soldiers were cracking jokes about the kitchen floor, asking the kids if they liked their indoor swimming pool.

"They were crying their eyes out.

"One soldier asked what time the kids went to bed. I thought he was serious and asked what time they thought they'd finish.

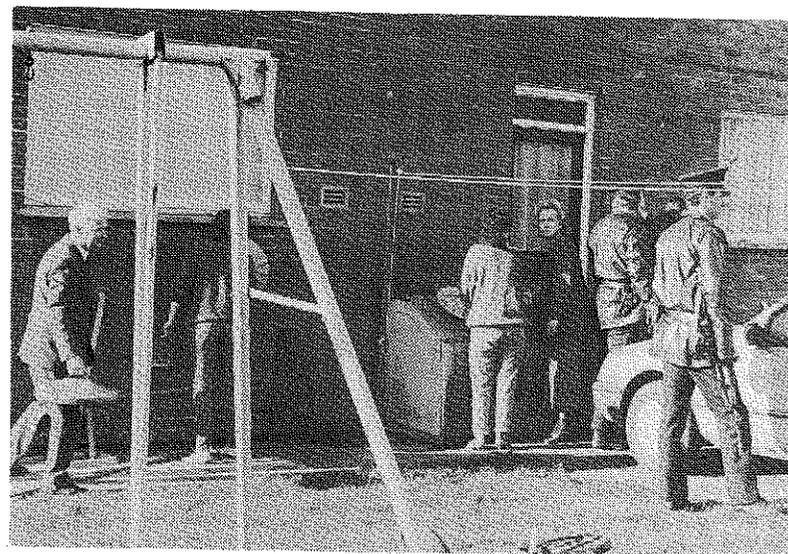
"He was joking. Next thing I knew, they'd brought an even bigger drill and a more powerful generator.

"That evening there was a protest meeting on the estate about what was going on, and the traffic was held up.

"You see, they didn't just pick on us.

"There were 12 houses raided on this estate that day.

"There was a pensioner, here on the corner, with a handicapped



● Local people banging bin lids to protest against the heavy-handed behaviour of the RUC while raiding a house

son. In her house they were even knocking the walls down.

"In another house, the soldiers had urinated on the beds.

"There was a lot of anger, and some trouble started between some youths and the soldiers.

"We are people you know.

"A few days before, they had wrecked people's homes on another estate. It's as if they've got a new policy... to seal off an area and pick houses at random.

"They don't bother with search warrants. If you open your mouth at all, you will probably get arrested. And if you close your door, they will knock it down.

"Around half-eleven that night, the soldiers started putting their coats on. I asked them if they'd finished. They wouldn't answer, they just laughed.

"One said, 'Come and check the damage we've done.' So I went round the house with him, noting it all down on paper.

"When we'd finished he said, 'Well, that's the damage we've done, but I don't know about the next squad.'

"And as they walked out, more jeeps drew up and another squad piled in, and began going through all the rooms again.

"My children had to go to a neighbour's house.

"About 2am, I went upstairs and there were two soldiers asleep on my children's beds. So I went down to speak to the officer in charge.

"What the are you complaining about now?" he asked.

"I told him that if my children couldn't sleep in their beds, then neither could the soldiers. He had to make them get out and sleep on the floor.

"About 4am, they cut through some pipes in the kitchen floor and the water had to be cut off so that they could continue drilling.

"The whole street was without water all the next day.

"They went through 10 inches of concrete, then a layer of wire and insulation, then more concrete, through the foundations of the house, to the soil underneath.

"At 7am, another squad came in, and it all began yet again.

"I was walking up and down the street by then. I just couldn't stand the noise and the dust anymore.

"The rubble from the kitchen was being taken away in bin bags. I didn't know at the time that half our belongings were in there as well... clothes, photo albums, memory cards from when my father died, books and letters.

"Later that morning, two reporters came from the Irish News and were chased out by the officer in charge.

"I was told then that, if I let anyone in at all, they would lock the front door.

"At one point they were talking about putting 'Plan X' into action. There was talk of bringing a bulldozer in. One said, 'Oh, we couldn't do that.' I think now that they were just pretending, but at the time I thought something even worse was going to happen to the house.

"I said: 'For all I care, you can get your bulldozers and knock the whole house down.'

"I wouldn't cry in front of them. I went in next door to do that... but I couldn't stop myself from shaking all over.

"They finally left at three in the afternoon but before they got into their jeeps they went into everyone's house, as if to say... 'we're going to raid yours now'.

"They banged on one door and there was nobody in.

"The neighbours stood between the soldiers and the door so they couldn't kick it down.

"The women were pushed about all over the place, but they didn't give way.

"The first thing I did when they'd gone was to get the priest to



● The RUC's wanton destruction of houses during raids has been well-documented

bless the house. I couldn't go back in until that was done.

"Everything was wrecked.

"The carpets were stained with food that had been trodden in, with spilt coffee and with oil. All of them had to be thrown out.

"I would have liked to have thrown my clothes away after seeing them handled the way they were. I did wash them all but they still seemed dirty.

"Of course we couldn't stay there. The council put us up for one night in a hotel, and after that we had to go and stay with my mother, sleeping on the floor.

"It took six weeks of solid work to get it liveable again.

"Now we're terrified that it's going to happen again. It's like a punishment they deal out.

"On the streets they do everything they can to cause trouble with their vile abuse, and they're only too eager to let off a round of plastic bullets.

"When anyone is ill or injured, they walk about with grins on their faces.

"Not long ago, a woman died leaving eight children. Coming back from the funeral, the soldiers were taunting them, singing that song 'Where's your Mama gone?' They just don't seem to be human. Now, we are not even safe in our own houses."

Sexual harassment, arrest and interrogation

"THE SOLDIERS came up close behind me as I tried to walk from one room to the other. They were almost touching me and I could feel their breath on the back on my neck. They made really embarrassing remarks about me, like about my body. It was very intimidating. I feel sick and at the same time angry every time I think of it.

"The worst part was the things they said in front of the children, they were just disgusting. They ran their eyes all over my body. One of

them said to the other 'F... no wonder I prefer men when you look at what's on offer here'." — A nationalist woman describing the attitude of British soldiers raiding her home.

Women are subjected to sexual harassment by the British forces on the streets, in their homes, in interrogation centres and in the prisons, where strip-searching is carried out on the pretext of 'security' but is effectively another weapon used to degrade and humiliate women prisoners.

The vast majority of women who are subjected to this abuse react in the classic manner: they keep it to themselves. Very often those women who are subjected to sexual harassment in interrogation centres are threatened that if they make complaints they will be targeted for more of the same harassment, or worse, they will be sexually assaulted.

"We are stopped in the street and ordered to open our coats in front of a leering patrol of soldiers and RUC. Our bags and personal belongings can be searched. We can be questioned about where we're going and where we've come from. The forces will question us about our families, about what members of the family work at, about what they worked at before their present job, or why they are not working, and therefore what they do all day... The questions can go on and on;



● Harassment such as checkpoints, body searches and arrests are daily occurrences in the Six Counties

you can be standing around in the street for an hour or more. It is very distressing and embarrassing.

"If you refuse to answer questions to establish your identity, then you'll be arrested and taken to one of the numerous RUC barracks which are dotted all over nationalist areas. They can hold you there for hours without informing anyone of your whereabouts. These military establishments are, in appearance and in function, very intimidating to any woman, whether she's a political activist or not. You can be held for seven days under the Prevention of Terrorism Act; for many women this can be a terrifying and traumatic experience, particularly if they have children.

"All personal items such as a watch, or jewellery, a wedding ring for instance, are taken off you. This is part of psychological warfare, the dehumanising process which tells you that you are firstly, a prisoner and secondly, totally isolated and under the control of your captors. I have talked to countless women who have been verbally abused, and I don't just mean sworn at. I'm talking about a woman sitting in a small claustrophobic room while two RUC detectives shout gross obscenities into the woman's face about her sexual relationships, or a situation where a woman's body is made the subject of mockery and abuse, or women who have been physically assaulted during interrogations and threatened that if they tell anyone they'll be arrested again and receive more of the same.

"One of the most sickening aspects of such interrogation is that women with children are put under tremendous emotional strain to cooperate under threat that their children will be taken from them and put into care." — Chrissie McAuley.

Strip-searching — psychological rape

"NO ONE can quite imagine what it is like to go through a strip-search until they have actually experienced it. But I know the disgusting memory will stay with me always." — POW Marie Wright.

Strip-searching was introduced into Armagh women's prison in



● A 1985 anti-strip-search picket outside Armagh Jail

November 1982 as an attempt by the prison administration and the Northern Ireland Office to break the spirit of the women prisoners.

It was introduced on the pretext of security but in reality it is another method of repression employed by the British in its war against republicanism.

Over 4,000 strip-searches have been carried out on women prisoners, firstly in Armagh, then Maghaberry Prison and on women

republican prisoners Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson in Durham prison, England.

All women prisoners from the age of 15 to grandmothers, pregnant women, women menstruating, women returning to prison after hospital or from work-out schemes have been subjected to this degrading treatment.

Accounts from prisoners present a disturbing picture of how strip-searches are carried out. Jacqueline Moore had just given birth and was strip-searched. She recalls:

"Despite my medical condition I was strip-searched. Once naked I attempted to cover my breasts with my arms as I was embarrassed with my breasts leaking milk. I was ordered to remove my arms to facilitate the warders inspection of my naked body." Her baby girl was viewed as a 'security threat' and her body was constantly frisked although her clothes were intact.

Professor Ivor Browne of the Department of Psychiatry in University College Dublin has compared the psychological damage of strip-searching of women to the violence experienced by rape victims:

"It [strip-searching] is a violent act, and I think, in this sense, rapacious. Most people think of rape as a sexual act; in fact the more



you go into studying rape the more clearly it is revealed as an act of hatred and violence and strip-searching has all the connotations of this."

THE CASE OF MARTINA ANDERSON AND ELLA O'DWYER

"The British government is using women's nakedness to tyrannise them. We feel that our bodies are used like a weapon to penalise us with the intention of making us collapse under the pressure. If we haven't collapsed by now, I don't think that we will." Martina Anderson, April 22nd 1987.

In 1985/86, Republicans Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer were held on remand in the all-male Brixton Prison in England. Between July 1st 1985 and September 30th 1986 when their case came to trial, both women were strip-searched a staggering 400 times each.

Ella wrote:

"I doubt that it is a lack of confidence in their technology that provokes them to strip us. The place is littered with cameras and a metal detector or one of their many sniffer dogs would successfully replace strip-searching. It is a form of psychological rape."

MOVE TO MAGHABERRY

On March 18th 1986, the women prisoners from Armagh were moved to a new top-security prison at Maghaberry. The prison, considered to be one of the most secure in the world, cost £30 million and is equipped with hi-tech surveillance equipment. None of the women were strip-searched on transfer but, in the first month, 17 strip-searches were carried out on remand prisoners. In the first six months a total of 210 strip-searches were conducted. The prison authorities also introduced a system of random strip-searching, which causes prisoners even further distress since they never know when they will be singled out.

Despite all the modern technology and the high ratio of warders, 180 compared to the present number of 17 women, strip-searching continues.

UPDATE ON CONDITIONS

In addition to strip-searching, women in Maghaberry today have to endure isolation, censorship and poor medical facilities.

Recently remand prisoner Jackie Burke was locked in her cell although she was in the advanced stages of labour. One of the women POWs said:

"At 8am when the cell doors were unlocked, we went straight to Jackie's cell in the belief that the child had been born. We immediately requested a nurse to the wing while we comforted her and helped her clean up. She was crying and covered in blood and vomit, unable to move with pain. As soon as the nurse arrived, she declared that Jackie was indeed in the advanced stages of labour, a fact that both doctor and screws had ignored for five hours. An ambulance arrived and she was transferred to hospital, where her baby was born just 20 minutes later."



● A picket outside Maghaberry Prison in 1989

Plastic bullets — legalised terror

"IT IS NOW 18 long years since I have been able to see the faces of my 11 children and my 27 grandchildren as a result of being blinded by a British soldier. My youngest child Bronagh was only five when it happened, when he shot me with a rubber bullet as I stood in my own livingroom; I have missed so much, not

being able to see their laughing faces, to go shopping for them at Christmas and pick their clothes, to ever see the sun again.

"So many people have been killed and maimed by rubber and plastic bullets that if it were happening in any other country there would be an international outcry. The fact is that the British army and the RUC are not accountable to the law and know they can kill nationalists and get away with it.

"Eileen Kelly's 12-year-old daughter Carol Ann went out one day for a pint of milk. She never came home. She was killed by a plastic bullet. I don't ever want another mother to have to bury a child murdered by this lethal weapon. It should be banned but instead they're now going to arm thousands of UDR members with it." — Emma Groves, blinded by a rubber bullet on 4th November 1971.

Since 1970, over 110,000 rubber and plastic bullets have been fired by the British forces, resulting in 17 people been killed, seven of them children under the age of 16. Hundreds of others have been seriously injured and maimed.

The overwhelming majority of those killed were shot in "non-riot" situations yet according to the British government the weapon is only supposed to be used in "riot" situations. No member of the British forces has been charged with murder.

The 1981 hunger-strike period saw a savage escalation in the use of plastic bullets which was meant to terrorise the mass mobilisation of people off the streets.

Between April and August 1981, seven people were killed by plastic bullets, three of them children. In April alone, as thousands took to the streets to support hunger-striker Bobby Sands, 1,959 plastic bullets were fired. When Bobby died in May a staggering total of 16,656 were fired. The turnout for his funeral surpassed even the attendance at the funerals of the 14 victims of the Bloody Sunday massacre. Plastic bullets were a brutal response to this massive demonstration of solidarity: peaceful vigils, prayer meetings and street meetings were attacked without provocation and hundreds were injured by plastic bullets.

As the bulk of protestors consisted of women and children, inevitably the plastic bullet guns were turned on them without mercy.

Julie Livingstone, aged 14, was hit on the head by a plastic bullet and died on May 13th 1981. She had been walking home from a shop.



● Nora McCabe who was killed by a plastic bullet on her way to the shop in 1981

Nine days later, 12-year-old Carol Ann Kelly was murdered on May 22nd while going to the shop for milk. On July 9th, mother-of-three Nora McCabe was killed as she went to the shop for cigarettes.

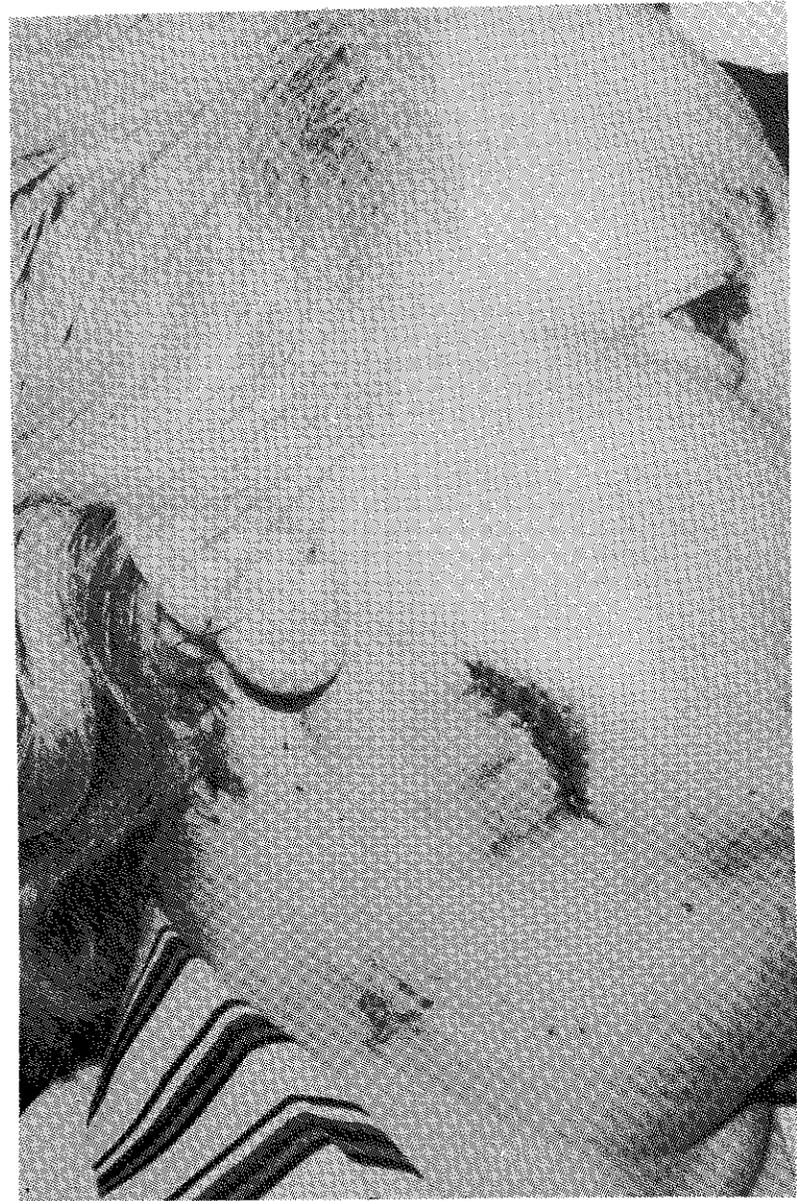
The latest plastic bullet victim was schoolboy Seamus Duffy (15) who was killed by the RUC in August 1989. The weapon continues to be used as a means of terrorising people off the streets and now there is growing alarm that the 6,300 members of the UDR are to be equipped with this lethal weapon.



● Julie Livingstone (14) was returning from the shops when shot dead by a plastic bullet in 1981



● Carol Ann Kelly (12) died when struck by a plastic bullet in May 1981



● A woman injured by a plastic bullet



● Brenda Downes (wife of Sean) and Emma Groves, picketing outside Leinster House in 1985 to demand an end to the use of plastic bullets



● British soldiers firing plastic bullets

Conclusion

I'VE NEVER been as sure that we are going to win as I am after reading this little book. In the recounting of their experiences of the last 20 years of war, these women impart the confidence that their contributions to the struggle have all built into an unstoppable force for freedom, justice and peace.

As Republican women, in common with our comrades and our communities we bear the brunt of Britain's war in Ireland — the raids, the beatings, the deaths and imprisonments. The oppression of being women in the repressive Northern state is added to that suffering. For 20 years it has been Republican women who have been the very heart of the struggle — and this book acknowledges that in the clearest way possible — through the words of these women.

From their words rises the desire for peace and the determination that peace will be achieved.

It has been a hard and bitter 20 years for the women of the North. The fact that that has not lessened our humanity is illustrated here.

One of the biggest weapons in Britain's arsenal during its war against the Irish people has been that of black propaganda and republican women have suffered most from this.

In the early Seventies we were the "grandmothers of hate". Maire Drumm who was targeted in this way paid for it with her life, gunned down in a hospital ward. In the late Seventies and early Eighties we were the female dupes in a man's war when we raised the oppression of Northern women and the treatment of women prisoners.

During the grim year of the hunger-strikes, the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the hunger-strikers were bombarded with demands from media, clergy and politicians to remove their support from the prisoners. Women whose opinions had never been sought before were now being wooed, blackmailed and guilt-tripped in an attempt to break the hunger-strikers through them.

Through it all, republican women held firm, working in every aspect of the struggle. We challenged the propaganda, resisted the intimidation, refused to be broken, either by guns, prisons or propaganda.

Our desire for freedom has survived the onslaught and is

stronger than ever.

Freedom for Irish women is inseparable from the freedom of all our people. True freedom, real justice and lasting peace will come and it has to mean freedom from the oppression of military occupation, second-class citizenship and poverty. That is what we have fought for all these years and we will be content with nothing less.

In May 1987 Sinn Féin issued *A Scenario for Peace*. It reiterates the Irish people's right to national self-determination and seeks a new constitution for Ireland with equal rights and guarantees for all, including those Irishwomen and Irishmen who at present regard themselves as loyalists. It states:

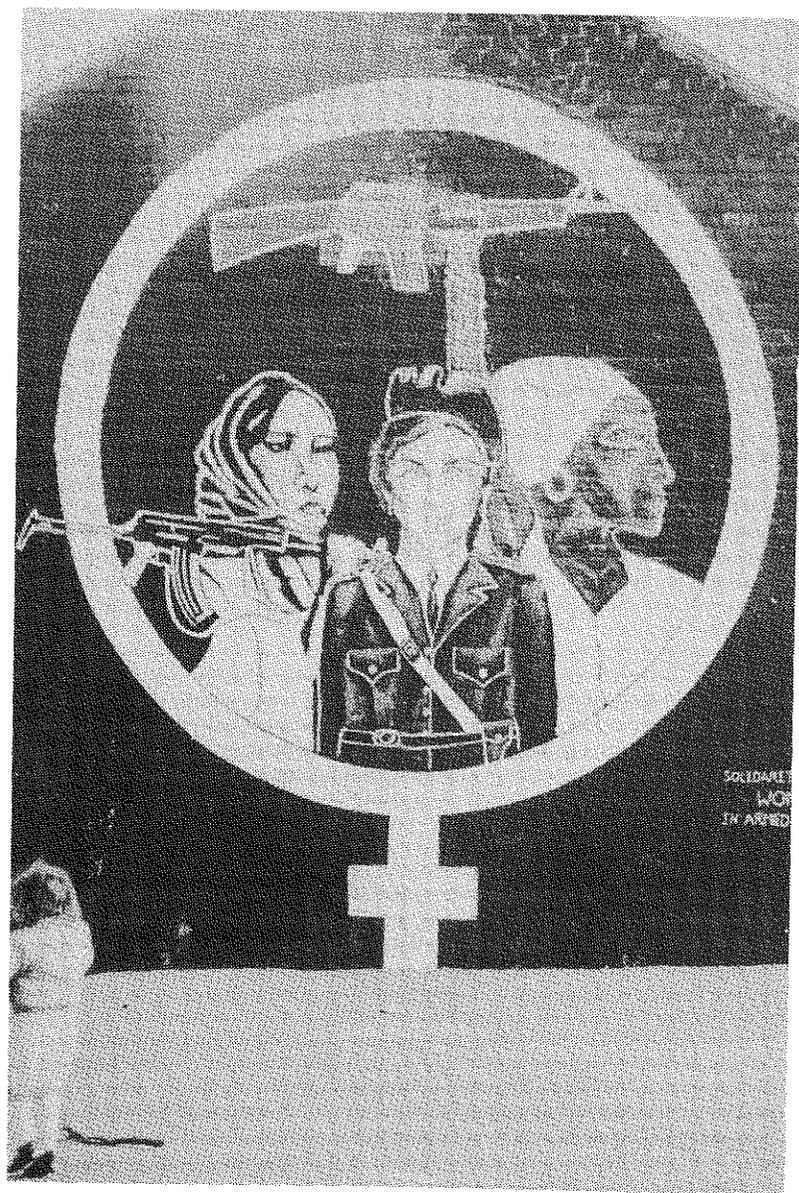
"Sinn Fein seeks to create the conditions which will lead to a permanent cessation of hostilities, an end to our long war and the development of a peaceful, united and independent Irish society. Such objectives will only be achieved when a British government adopts a strategy for decolonisation."

Many Republican women active today were not even born when this phase of Ireland's long fight for freedom started 20 years ago. Many more have raised their children only to see them in prison or dead.

We hate this war and all the suffering it has brought to all the people affected by it. Our desire is to see it ended and a free Ireland based on liberty and equality. Only that will ensure that our children will be able to live in peace. — **by Rita O'Hare,**

Editor of *An Phoblacht / Republican News*





*"We must take no steps
backward, our steps must be
onward, for if we don't, the
martyrs who died for you, for
me, for this country will
haunt us for eternity."
— Maire Drumm,*

Reading list — historical and current, on the Irish struggle

WOMEN

- Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, by Margaret Ward. Brandon Press.
Soul of Fire, A Biography of Mary MacSwiney, by Charlotte H. Fallon. Mercier Press.
Terrible Beauty, A Life of Constance Markievicz, by Diana Norman. Poolbeg.
The Tale of a Great Sham, by Anna Parnell. Arlen House.
These Obstreperous Lassies — A History of the Irish Women Workers' Union, by Mary Jones. Gill and MacMillan.
Peggy Deery, by Nell McCafferty. Attic Press.
Only the Rivers Run Free, by Fairweather, McDonough and McFadyean. Pluto Press.

GENERAL

- The Politics of Irish Freedom*, by Gerry Adams. Brandon Press.
Ireland: The Censored Subject, by Danny Morrison. Republican Publications.
Twenty Years On, edited by Michael Farrell. Brandon Press.
Ireland The Propaganda War, by Liz Curtis. Pluto Press.
Ten Men Dead, by David Beresford. Grafon Books.
Ballymurphy and the Irish War, by Ciarán De Baróid. Aisling Publications.
Murder on the Rock, by Maxine Williams. Larkin Publications.
A Pathway to Peace, by Gerry Adams. Mercier Press.

PAMPHLETS

- Waiting for Justice? One Woman's Story*, by Martina Shanahan.
Stop the Strip Searches.
Nationalist Women and the RUC.

Available from the Sinn Féin Book Bureau,
44 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Ireland.
FOR A COMPLETE BOOK LIST
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