

# Daughters of the North

## *The Local Women of Belfast*

by Marcia Rock

*Cet article est le synopsis d'un document sur l'évolution des femmes et leurs rôles dans une localité du Nord de l'Irlande avec l'accent sur leur émergence à la tête de la communauté.*

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*Daughters of the Troubles: Belfast Stories* focuses on the lives of two working-class

Belfast women told against the backdrop of the city's violent history. The stories of Geraldine O'Regan (a Catholic) and May Blood (a Protestant) are chronicles of women forced by political and social upheaval to transcend the traditional roles of women assigned them by a conservative, and increasingly segregated, society. Their response to this challenge would change their lives, and those of their families, forever.

Filmed during the fragile 17-month paramilitary cease-fire, the documentary also looks at the daunting challenges facing women in putting their direct experience of grassroots problems on the agenda of the established political parties. Their strength was first exhibited on the community level; it is now reaching a wider public, with a growing self-confidence in mobilizing a political force which may well challenge the status quo.

### **Background**

The women of Northern Ireland come from a traditional, conservative, religious society where the woman's role was that of wife and mother. Men were masters of the house; everyone worked.

The industrial revolution made Belfast the centre of industry in Ireland.

It brought with it the tradition of hard work and a social life centred around the factory and the church. Little villages grew up around the factories with housing provided by the employer. Travelling through the city today one can still see vestiges of that culture; empty factories standing like stranded whales surrounded by little red brick two-up two-down row houses. These houses are slowly being replaced by new houses with modern conveniences, but residents will remember for some time the streets that welcomed industry; the streets that housed family and neighbours; the streets burned in discrimination and hatred; the streets divided and protected by walls.

Before the divisions disrupted life, and before the textile industry fled to the Far East, Protestant and Catholic women had similar lives. They left school at 14 or 15 and went to work in the factories and mills adjacent to their homes. Between 18 and 22 they married but often kept working to supplement the family income. Discrimination was more obvious to the men. Protestant men would get the best jobs in the shipyards and factories through a system of nepotism that extended from the family to the church and through membership in the Orange Order.

But both Protestants and Catholics thrived on the stable triangle of work, worship, and family. Although the Catholics tended to live near the Falls Road and the Protestants near the Shankill, there was mixing and overlapping in the factories and in the streets and on the Shankill Road where everyone shopped. They were neighbours. They shared many of the same values: belief in God and the family.

All that changed with the loss of jobs and rise of the civil rights movement, inspired by the American example in the late 1960s. As jobs decreased discrimination increased. The

civil rights marches demonstrated against this inequality and the political structures that ensured its existence. In 1969, Ian Paisley demonstrated the determination of the Protestants to resist change by organizing counter demonstrations to those of the Catholics. The demonstrations led to rioting and to a confrontation that resulted in Protestants fire-bombing their Catholic neighbours' homes. Northern Ireland erupted.

The men on both sides became totally focused on the struggle. An already gasping industrial base, died in the '70s. The growing violence by the Catholic Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Protestant Ulster Defense Association (UDA) precluded any new industry taking root. Ireland's pre-eminent city of commerce, wealth, and industry, was reduced to a series of barren buildings and dormant smokestacks. The focus of life moved from work to war. The economy shuddered to a stop.

Unemployment, deprivation, and fear permeated the streets. Working-class Protestants and Catholics withdrew into the security of housing estates based on religion. The isola-

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tion fueled a siege mentality. There were no parks or communal facilities; residents were lucky to have a post office and bakery in addition to one overpriced food shop and pub. New housing estates were planned to have only one exit and entrance; easily managed by the army if trouble started. Children were taught to fear the outside world; there were abun-

dant examples of innocent deaths and beatings. The British army reinforced that fear in Catholic estates with 3:00 a.m. searches, rubber bullets, and internment (arrest without trial).

The Protestant Shankill was also disrupted by new housing development that displaced young families, moving them to the outskirts of the city and breaking down the tightly knit generational family structure and support.

Catholic women got the first wake-up call by the "troubles," a term that refers to the political

violence that has broken out periodically since 1919 in Northern Ireland. Men suspected of IRA involvement were arrested and interned without trial for over a year and a half. The Catholic women found themselves alone for the first time. They suddenly had to confront financial problems like negotiating non-payment of mortgages, living on a meager income of as little as 16 pounds a week, and taking care of their homes and families. Changing a fuse without the help of a man became a lesson in independence.

Realizing the depths of their isolation, many young mothers reached out to each other to try to cope with their new circumstances. These conversations often started on the cramped mini-bus trips to visit their husbands in prison. Together they moved past self-preservation to community organization. Women would patrol the streets at night to identify which young men were picked up by the British Army and where they



*Geraldine O'Regan married at the age of 17 because, for her, there were no options.*

were taken. This would be the only information parents would have about their sons.

The women soon wanted to be proactive and started evening programs to get the teens off the streets and away from the temptation to throw stones and to heckle police and soldiers. The women provided support for themselves and their communities to face the daily traumas of fear and violence. They became community leaders.

Today these women are still working with their communities. Trusted by both parents and children, they may be in a unique position to help people make the transition from war to peace. To do this they must rethink their role; instead of protecting and insulating the young people, they must start opening doors. But an open door is not enough.

Entertained by violence, surrounded by boredom, contained within the narrow boundaries of their housing estates many young people on the

Catholic side have become passive, dependent, sometimes wild and often selfish. Drugs are a growing problem in the estates that have 80 per cent unemployment. These youth feel they have no control over their lives and certainly no future. The community centres are focusing on giving these young people a voice; showing them that adults want to hear what they have to say and that through organizing their own programs and talking about their needs and desires, they can move out of their mental and physical ghettos.

With the normal signposts to adulthood missing, the children of the troubles find other ways to achieve status. For the young Protestant and Catholic women of Belfast, status comes with babies. Living mainly in the present with no sense of the future they are starting sexual activity as early as 12. It is a quandary for the mothers and community leaders who fought so hard for contraception to ensure a more manageable life to see their children seeking refuge in the old roles without understanding their limitations. Now these women are faced with the overwhelming challenge of showing these teens that there are other ways to become an adult, get attention, love, and independence. The community leaders are not hiding from the problem, but are actively working to help the young mothers go back to school, care for their children, and find new directions for their lives.

In some ways, the Protestant women experienced a delayed reaction to the troubles. They noticed when services

to their estates were cut; they noticed when their extended families were disrupted by housing authority planning and rebuilding; they noticed when the paramilitary dictated their comings and goings. The women successfully lobbied to reverse these trends. But for a long time the women accepted the fact that the politicians were Protestant and therefore on their side—looking after their interests. It wasn't until unemployment finally hit the Protestant community and both men and women were out of work that this group realized it was probably no better off than the Catholics and that the Catholics were ahead of them in getting statutory resources.

Protestant women did not suffer from the effects of internment, but by the '80s many of their husbands were in prison and Protestant women had to struggle on their own. Their children started to suffer from the isolation of their housing estates, the violence in the streets, the lack of work. Teen pregnancy started to grow. It is the Protestant women community leaders who are now aggressively addressing these issues and responding to the emotional and educational needs of the women and children in their areas. Traditionally, Protestants did not value education. They always had work. Protestant women are now reassessing their attitudes towards learning for their children and for themselves. They are turning to women's centres for self-development, education, training, and the essential service of child care. The Protestant women are aware of the community's needs, but prefer a more focused approach to helping women.

Both Protestant and Catholic women have assumed leadership roles within their communities. Will this extend into the political realm as Northern Ireland faces the daunting challenge of reinventing itself? During the troubles women preferred to stay free of the sectarian labelling endemic in Northern Ireland politics. Since the first cease-fire in 1994, there is a kindling interest in politics evidenced by the start of the North-

ern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), a political party comprised of women from diverse religious, social, and economic backgrounds. They recently won two seats at the Multi-Party Peace Talks and one seat to a city council. Women who believe change must come from within the system are joining the parties. Women are now active in the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Fein, Alliance Party, and Progressive Unionist Party. They are still not very active in the front lines of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).

The women of Northern Ireland have grown through the pressures forced on them by the troubles. Change comes slowly to this traditional society, but stability can be stultifying. Perhaps one benefit from the troubles is that it tore up all the old rules and assumptions. The troubles transformed the roles of women, providing them with new opportunities. Women are becoming players in the society. Because many of these women community leaders grew up in a more mixed and stable environment, they are able to see a different future than the narrow one viewed by most of their children born in the last 25 years.

### **Geraldine O'Regan and May Blood**

The documentary tells this story through the lives of two women community leaders, Catholic Geraldine O'Regan and Protestant May Blood. Geraldine is now director of a youth health initiative and May Blood is director of a young mother's support network, as well as a campaign manager for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

Geraldine O'Regan married the year the troubles started in Belfast. Her house on Conway Street off the Falls Road, was the first to be burned in the riots of August 14, 1969. Soon after that, her husband was interned for over a year. Alone and isolated with two young children in a Catholic housing estate at the foot of the Black

Mountain, she noticed that the children in her community were constantly getting into mischief and that there was no organized activity; the children had nothing to do, nowhere to go but to play in the streets and throw stones at the police and army. She helped to start a community centre and her leadership skills are such that she could move into the broader sphere of city politics, but that doesn't interest her. She remains focused on helping the youth of her area, preparing them for the opportunities peace will provide. After being insulated for 25 years, they need guidance in how to embrace the new freedom

Protestant May Blood is in her late 50s. She learned her leadership skills when she became one of the few female union leaders in the Belfast textile factories where most young women of her generation worked before they married. May grew up on the other side of the Falls Road from Geraldine. They shared many similar experiences as young women; they both worked in the mills, they both shopped on the Shankill, they both mixed with Protestants and Catholics. Geraldine married; May never did. Geraldine was burned out of her house because she was a Catholic. A fire was set at May's door because her father defended a Catholic. Displaced from the streets where they grew up, both Geraldine and May moved into ghettos based on religion. May is angry at sectarianism but proud of her Protestant heritage. Above all she is a grassroots community worker. It gives her hope for her country when she can bring people together to work for the improvement of their communities and their quality of life. She believes women have an important role in the political future of the country. To achieve that goal she is helping women understand the political system and to vote.

The stories of these two women are joined by the stories of two younger women who have only known the troubles. Tracie Dougherty and Edna Peden, both in their mid-twenties, continue the narrative by describing their experience of growing up within



*The efforts of Geraldine O'Regan (left), a Catholic, and May Blood (right), a Protestant, to piece together shattered lives is documented against a backdrop of Belfast's violent history.*

the sectarian divides of Belfast and their isolation as young mothers. These two women were helped by the Windsor Women's Centre and are now helping other young women turn their lives around.

It is not all positive though. Eilish McCashin's Westrock community is struggling with drugs and the lack of law and order. Children play in the city cemetery and collect empty beer bottles and hardened bags of glue left behind by the hoods and glue sniffers. Many of these 13- and 14-year-olds are already experimenting with drugs and alcohol. The young women are getting pregnant. Eilish tries her best to stem this stream of chaos in their lives. She ponders the shift in fear. Just when people were starting to leave their homes and embrace the freedom the cease-fire provided, they were again driven inside, this time to protect their homes from theft and vandalism, a new kind of trouble. Northern Ireland still has an innocence that was lost years ago by most major cities; while coping with murder and sectarian violence Belfast was spared "normal" street crimes.

Women's centres have taken on a major role in helping women. They are assuming two new objectives—political education classes and support groups for teenage girls. The need to reach teens as well as young mothers is apparent in the lack of organized activity for 12- to 15-year-olds who are overlooked by the traditional youth centres that cater to the needs of boys. The Shankill Women's Centre has a dedicated group of teens who organize their own programs and learn about drugs and sex and enjoy the opportunity to talk and be heard. Geraldine O'Regan's Newhill Community Centre also provides groups for teenage girls and boys led by peer counsellors.

Women have become a growing force in Northern Ireland over the last 25 years. They are starting to turn their disaffection and alienation with the political system into an understanding of process and a desire to participate. After the 1922 independence in the South, the women who worked so hard for their country's independence were sent back to the kitchen. I don't think that will hap-

pen in 1996 in the North.

*Daughters of the Troubles: Belfast Stories* is a documentary by Marcia Rock, co-written with Jack Holland, and narrated by Anjelica Huston. It was aired on RTE 2 on October 8th, 1996, and on Ulster TV on January 29th, 1997. It premiered in the United States in March 1997 on PBS stations across the country.

*Marcia Rock, an independent producer, has produced five documentaries on Irish matters: The Bronx Irish at the Ramparts (1986), Sons of Derry (1992), No Irish Need Apply (1993), McSorley's New York (1987), and Daughters of the Troubles: Belfast Stories (1996). She is also director of Broadcast Journalism and a professor in the Department of Journalism at New York University. She co-authored Waiting for Prime Time: The Women of Television News (University of Illinois Press, 1988) with veteran newscaster Marlene Sanders.*