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London irish women's centre



Introduction

The Reminiscence group met weekly over the year October 2009 - June 2010 for 30 weeks. The group was a space to remember and explore what it meant to be Irish both in Ireland, in the Diaspora and the journeys taken between. There were moving and fascinating accounts of horror, hardship, discovery and joy, bravery, disappointment, loss and gain, all generously shared experiences that I feel privileged to have been party to and part of and that also brought gifts of recognition and insight into my own and my family's history and experience. As writers, as many of the group are, poems and prose were a natural development and regular response to the sharing that took place and some of these are included here.

Philomena Galvin
Group facilitator

London Irish Women's Centre is very grateful to the Ireland Fund of Great Britain for their generous support which has made this project possible.



THE IRELAND FUND
OF GREAT BRITAIN



THE
FORGOTTEN IRISH

IF

If every DAY was Sunday
There'd be no time for Sunday.
Pray, reflect, confess, donate, rejoice
And BEWARE of Him in the Shadows
WHO KNOWS YOUR EVERY MOVE!
YOU... SINNER... Repent!

Poetry to fix things

It's happening now before our eyes, the world's been torn apart.
Whilst anti-war sentiment is expressed through the arts.
The writer's pen, it can be as deadly as the gun.
But will we ever see the day the artist's war is won?
Peacetime, love time, feed them now time, let us not ignore it.
It may seem far off to us now as we strive toward it.
Just visualise an ideal world and know that we can have it.
Write it, paint it, dance and sing,
However you express it.
Just don't give up
And never close your eyes.
One love alone can fix it, we artists realize.

Patricia Howlett

The Shoes

They were soft black leather and I mean soft. I cannot even begin to describe my Irish dancing pumps without emphasizing the softness first and foremost. They were soo soft! I never knew leather could feel like that. I loved to wear them. I loved putting them on and how special they made me feel. Criss-cross laces on snow-white patterned knee socks makes me want to point my toes just thinking about it.

"Hop back step one two three, step hop hop, step hop step back and one two three."

I loved the slip-jig it was one of my best dances. Murmurs of "she does a lovely slip jig" ring in my head now all of forty-something years later. I've forgotten a lot of my life but should I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget my Irish dance steps.

The shoes in turn conjure images of the whole Irish dancing experience, contests that is, not classes. Feis Cheols to be more precise. It began the night before the feis. It was a very painful experience having your mam put ringlets in your hair but it had to be done. (They wear wigs and hairpieces these days.) We did it with rags and a lot of ouches and clips round the side of the head with the brush. "If you'd just keep your head steady we'd be finished by now." Or "Vanity feels no pain." I know that's not true because vain I am and pain I have felt aplenty! Yes around the Irish countryside little girls, me included, went to bed in rags knotted tight to the head so our ringlets could bounce in unison to the music next day as we reeled, jigged horn-piped and slip-jigged our way hopefully to first, second or third.

"Hop back step one two three, step hop hop, step hop step hop back and one two three."

I never won a thing until I'd been dancing for about two years and I had to go to Drogheda to do that, with the Joan Herlihy Dance Troupe. I think it was only second place but it broke the spell.

"A good loser, she is" "Never let's it affect her."

"Such a good girl, not a bit put out by not winning" and "She's a lovely little dancer," They whispered loud enough for me to hear.

But I was 'put-out'; I'd just already learned to pretend.

"Hop back step one two three, step hop hop, step hop step back and one two three."

After Drogheda I won plenty of medals, cups and certificates. Two big black velvet covered shields hung with medals were on proud display in our front room for years.

"Hop back step one two three, step hop hop, step hop, step hop and back two three."

I vividly remember a time on a stage in Blessington. The music played and I counted in my head. I started to dance "And one and a two and a three and a four, and double step back, and one two three." But "oh dread, no-one else moved, I'd got it wrong". I



Kathy Doherty (filing) returned to Dublin with her mother to visit grandparents. Her Kathy's first cousin the Howletts display their skill at dancing a jig, a skill for which they have won national awards. Kathy says everyone in Ireland has large families and these are only a few of her thousands of cousins.

stopped and lined back up with the others. Only to find out later I had been the only one who got it right. Although I hadn't had the confidence to continue alone at that time, I was awarded first place.

A valuable lesson was learnt that day. Many times since, I've been the one person with my opinion on a subject but have found the courage to stick to my view and encourage others to join in the timing in my head:

"Hop back step one two three, step hop hop, step hop step back and one two three."

By: Patricia Howlett

St. Patrick's Day

16/3/11

Do you know what it's like to be Irish
in the land of the oppressor?

Do you know how it feels to be over-
looked? marginalized? excluded? invisible?

Do you know what it's like in the lead-up
to MARCH 17th? Every year!

To have each person you meet, in turn,
tell you:

"Drink plenty of guinness," or
"Have one for me."

When you don't drink alcohol!

Do you know St. Patrick was an English man
brought to Ireland as a slave to shepherd
sheep? IN 460 AD?

Do you know the snakes St. Patrick is
said to have driven out of Ireland

were Irish pagan clans?

As he used the three leaf shamrock to teach of the Divine Trinity - father, son & Holy Spirit & spread Christianity?

Do you know the Irish are a distinct, brave, noble, cultured people who have carried the Anglos on their back for generations?

Do you know that the Irish are the highest represented Minority Ethnic Group within the

Mental health;

Prisons;

AND Homelessness

systems of this, so-called, Great Britain?

Do you CARE?

I do!



A Cyclist's Tale

I'm not a "fucking idiot."
I'm entitled to be on the Road
You motorists who shout at me,
~~find~~ find elsewhere to vent.
Your aggressive selfish rantings
will not remove me from my bike
The freedom of the Road is mine
So get lost you dirty tyke!

Patricia Howlett



Happy Are Those

'What the world needs now is love sweet love' sang Dionne Warwick *'It's the only thing that there's just too little of'*. Mairead turned up the volume on the radio and stood in the kitchen, a tea towel in her hand, listening. *'No not just for some but for everyone'*. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her soft wrinkled face. She glanced up at the sprig of heather and the shillelagh hanging by the window. She looked out the window at the lone tree and her eye caught a movement in one of its branches. A little blackbird had perched and looked as though it was looking over at her. Mairead wiped her eyes with the tea towel and turned back to the sinkful of dishes waiting for her. "Aye" she said softly to herself "Love is right". The song ended and the news came on. House prices were down again. Another company had folded and massive job losses were forecast.

Mairead finished the dishes and wiped her hands. She turned off the radio and put on a cd of Daniel O'Donnell. *'This city life ain't no place for a country boy like me'* he sang. Mairead stared out at the lone tree. The blackbird had flown away. The ten story council block opposite hid the sun and the traffic outside rumbled on relentlessly. Mairead boiled the kettle and put a teabag in her favourite cup. *'World's Best Mum'* it said on the side. She fished her antidepressants out of her handbag and popped one of the pills from the blister pack. She'd become unwell after she stopped taking them last time so she took them regularly now. Daniel was singing *'The old rugged cross'*. Mairead could feel her eyes welling up again. She wondered why she was crying so easily today. She worried that she was becoming unwell again. Surely not now that she was taking her pills? She glanced at the phone but couldn't think who to ring. She didn't want to worry Roisin what with the new baby and them so far away in Leeds. She sighed heavily.

The clock in the living room chimed three o'clock. Three o'clock. The evening seemed to stretch endlessly before her. She

went into the living room and looked out the window. The Somali woman who lived next door was struggling up her steps with a pram and two toddlers. A black man was weaving down the street carrying a can of Special Brew. The cd had started skipping so she turned it off. The traffic rumbled on outside and the clock ticked in the living room. She could go to mass this evening she thought. There was one on in the Sacred Heart of Jesus chapel at seven. Then maybe she could pop into the Irish centre. They had a bingo session on this evening.

A thudding bass reverberated from the flat downstairs but Mairead was used to it. The music usually went on at this time from them. The floorboards vibrated slightly. Five past three. "Sacred Heart of Jesus I place all my trust in Thee" she whispered to herself. She could go to the local park perhaps. For a walk. But they let their pit bulls off the lead in there and Mairead was frightened of them.

She thought of the walks she used to take up behind the old farmhouse. They'd climb up the side of the hill and breathe the vanilla scent from the whin bushes. At the top, green field after green field stretched before them and the lough shimmered on the horizon. Mairead took a sharp intake of breath. She could almost smell the sweet scent mingled with the clear fresh air now. It was more than a memory. It was real. Mairead's heart beat rapidly. She could hear the sheep in the distance and the stone cross at the top of the hill getting nearer as they climbed. Her heart beat quickened and she felt a sudden pain shooting up her arm. She reached out for the kitchen chair. She missed and fell heavily on the floor. She moaned softly and tried to get up.

Memories flooded into her mind of the first time she had come over on the boat to England. Seventeen years old with the promise of a place training to be a nurse in St John of God's hospital. Wrenched from home with her heart haemorrhaging she had tried to settle in. Lumps of enamel had started falling

hoors

'it's a bestseller'
she squeaked
'a la maeve and marian.
it's set in dublin
in the media industry
about a 30 something
singleton who sleeps
with loads of men until
she finds The One'

we've come a long way
since the famine
haven't we

farewell cheyenne

so farewell then cheyenne
thirty five years gone
but the legend lives on
you roamed the streets of derry
the castle and the gweedore
and every dive in foyle street
on the road. goin nowhere
while pitched battles
raged in the bogside
and lesser men
moved up the food chain
you hung up your spurs
on that fateful night
shot down in flames
your sister heard the banshee's howl
the wild wind ceased then
and you no longer roamed
the silence you left behind
is still deafening

janet donaghey

God bless the weans

as my dear old granny used to say
dousing us in holy water
after we'd paid another duty visit
and you know what granny?
i think He did

over to you, jesus

i throw my hands up
in surrender
i've exhausted
my free will
travelled each and
every highway
done it my way
and to what end?
i'll spare you the
gory details
suffice to say
'242 there's a lot to do'

janet donaghey

so long ireland

it's all over ireland
you're a signed up member
of the new world order now
i look back to a childhood
in a country which no longer exists
to a time which is now
taking it's allotted place in history
it's over
& it ain't never comin back
so long ireland
and thanks for all the fish (fingers)

ulster television

"...and now the local news
a 300lb bomb exploded at
a british army barracks on the
strand road in derry
earlier this evening
causing extensive damage
a warning had been given
and the area was sealed off
no one has claimed
responsibility but
everyone is blaming
the dissidents
'it's an absolute disgrace'
said a sinn fein spokesman
and that's the local news
good night and sleep
well"

janet donaghey

memories v reality

i fly ryanair
misty-eyed
back to my homeland
visions of
meadowed fields
and the ould turf
when I meet them
i smile
a genuine smile
the first in ages
sure didn't they
know me
when I was a child
i profer my hand
to one of my tribe
to one of my own
expecting tales of
the bog
and of fairies
'you're the one that trained
to be a lawyer aren't you'
they say
'can you sort out my pension
the dss says i'm
not entitled to
the heating allowance'
i wipe the stardust
from my eyes
& settle down with
a cup of tea
to help them
fill in the forms
lush countryside
and the smell of peat
are too familiar to them
and i suppose you can't heat
your home with a sunset

janet donaghey

so what was it like living in derry in the '70s?

we clung to her
our only beacon of light
shining on the wreckage
of our young lives
daddy had bailed out
leaving us
high and dry
stranded
all at sea
she. fierce protective sober
kept it together
3 little ones to feed and 3 nights' night duty
at st. columb's hospital
it paid for the triumph toledo
and the piano lessons
AUI 949
SOS
molycoddled?
not us uncle. not us
coins spread across the kitchen table
each one counted to the last penny
she ran a tight ship
while we took turns
to plug the holes in the bow
hearts sinking as she left for work at night
balancing on tip toe at the window
awaiting her return on the morning horizon
today we look back
through the photo albums
'how did we get through it?' she asks
because of you mummy
because of you

janet donaghey

overhead the sound

overhead the sound
of a helicopter hovering
it's spotlight fixed
on the bogside
the taste of cs gas
still in my mouth
smarting my eyes
i stand on tiptoe
at the bedroom window
looking up eastway
past the shirt factory
towards creggan
where the sound of women
banging dustbin lids
on the streets
warns of an impending
raid by the british army
an everyday drama in derry city
i experience it without emotion
wondering where my father is

janet donaghey

untitled I

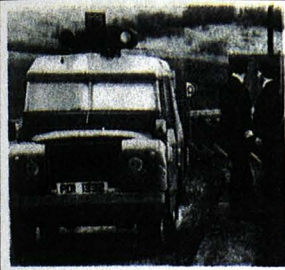
aping our 'betters'
like monkeys at a tea party
pissing away our heritage
grabbing at cast-off baubles
we settled for so little
and handed over so much
as always they
made the better bargain
no wonder they call us 'thick'

untitled II

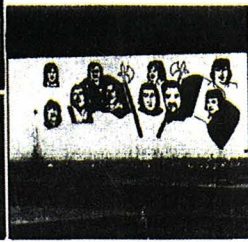
we surrendered our God
they in exchange gave us
received pronunciation
snickering behind hands at our
grafted on airs and graces
peasants playing at the class system
mortifying ourselves
we threw out our precious rules
and started losing at the wrong game

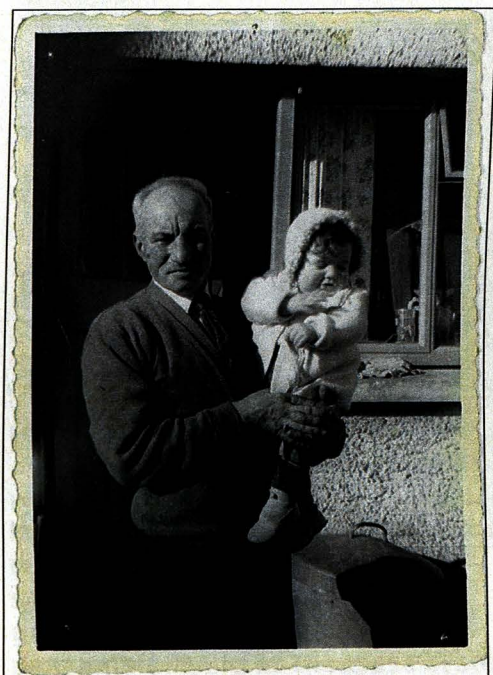
untitled III

oh but it's all too easy
to look back
in bitterness
at what they did
and what they failed to do
raging at the damage done
while i perpetuate
the madness



**GREETINGS
FROM
NORTHERN
IRELAND**





HOMECOMING

**At the top of Dundrum Castle
Looking out over the Irish Sea
stars glittering above us
you told me you would come home.**

**Being searched by British soldiers
on the way back from a ceili
our feet sore from dancing
you told me you would come home.**

**Gyrating madly in a Belfast disco
among the other dykes and queens
both of us cruising unashamedly
you told me you would come home.**

**Sitting in a London flat
listening to my Irish music
the pain etched in your face
you told me you would go home.**

**On a cold September evening
in the foothills of the Mourne
a breeze coming in from the sea
your brother told me you were home.**

**And, as the priest muttered a prayer
and the cold earth enveloped you
and my tears flowed like rain
you had finally come home.**

Siubhan Mc Nally

FOR MY AUNTS

1965-6

She always smelt like the perfume counters in the big shops in Town. I was fascinated by all the creams and lotions on her dressing table. All the different smells that I could dip my fingers into and imagine what it would be like to be grown up and be like her. Her breath smelt of the violet scented cachous that she'd give me if I was good. I can still taste them on my tongue.

Her wardrobe was huge and shiny; the wood polished lovingly. I'd open the door; my 5 year old self scared of getting locked in there, in the blackness and darkness. But my desire overcame my fear. I'd finger the different materials; chiffon, satin, silk, crimplene. I'd try on her shoes, narrow stiletto heels, wrap her chiffon scarf around me and pretend I was her. She was like a magical exotic butterfly; dancing the nights away in the Trocadero; her hair curled and set in the latest style, red roses on her dress. Different men would come to take her out, with Brylcreemed black hair and long black coats.

I remember the clack clack of her stiletto heels coming out of Sunday evening mass in St Mary's at the bottom of the Falls Road. Those heels that clack clacked their way through my childhood like the sound of British Army bullets.

1967

The early evening sun shines down on you both as you sit on the doorstep, hair wrapped up in chiffon scarves, brown legs stretched out in front of you; the smell of Granda's flowers all around us, his tobacco smoke sweet on the air as he contentedly digs the garden. A garden full of carnations, roses, polyanthus and the two conifers at the front door that I love running my hands through; releasing the scent.

In the kitchen the sheets are getting washed in the ould boiler and later I will help to put them through the mangle; a job I looked forward to all week. Then you will get me to practise my writing by doing the list for the messages; a pound of butter, 4 ounces of tea, 4 slices of bacon, half a stone of potatoes, a pound of onions, a turnip and a cabbage; all delivered from the wee shop, in a cardboard box, the next day.

As the sun sets you both go in to watch "Peyton Place" your favourite programme and I help granda to rake up the leaves from under the hedge.

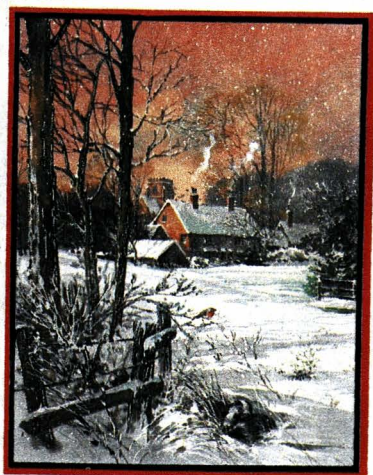
The comfort and familiarity of those childhood rituals in a working class neighbourhood in 1960's Belfast.

1969

Two years later I sit in the Parochial Hall of my primary school with my best friend Caroline, singing our hearts out to "Lily the Pink". We loved that song; thinking it was the funniest thing we'd ever heard. We needed something to make us laugh; The Falls Road and the Derry Bogside were burning, British soldiers were on every street corner; guns, smoke, bullets, barbed wire and fear everywhere. I will always remember your sobbing as the death of one of the first victims of the war, a young boy, was announced on the radio. Your terrified screams of "Oh my God, what's going to happen to us" forever echo in my mind.

As the decade ended so too did the innocence of childhood; the 9 short years of peace I knew, quickly becoming a distant memory.

Christmas Greetings from
BELFAST



FOR MY MOTHER

You used to burn everything! I'd come round the side of the house and black clouds of smoke would be coming out of the back door. You fried everything in lard in that old grill, blackened with time. Eggs, bacon, sausages, soda bread, potato farls all burnt to charcoal. You said that you liked things to be well cooked so that we wouldn't get food poisoning. How the neighbours didn't call the fire brigade I'll never know! At Christmas you started cooking the turkey at 5 o'clock on Christmas Eve, leaving it on all night so that by the time we were ready for our dinner it was so dry we could hardly swallow it. You certainly kept the Bisto and Oxo companies afloat, as the only way to make your food edible was by smothering it in gravy! When you died and I was at home for 4 weeks it took me a while to figure out what was missing, apart from you of course. I realised that as I came round the side of the house that there was no black smoke billowing out and that I could actually breathe in the kitchen. Right then I would have given anything to be served up a burnt-black plate of food one more time.



*In Loving Memory
of
Maureen McNally*

It was a typical grey Belfast day; rain bouncing off the foot-paths and a sea of plastic umbrellas all along Royal Avenue. The City hall was watching over it all in its colonial glory, the British soldiers at the security checkpoints getting soaked to the skin. You were taking me to buy a Claddagh ring as a reward for getting into Queen's University; so proud that your working class Catholic daughter could get an education in those days of government grants. My God ,we traipsed around half of Belfast, me trying on ring after ring until finally, in a jewellers in Castle Street, we found a beautiful gold one; a love token, "with these hands I give you my heart crowned with love." I never take it off .and every time I look at it I am reminded of a proud, loving mother who hoped that her daughter would one day achieve all the things she never had a chance to.

Siubhan McNally



REMINISCENCE GROUP

Boxes

I open up a box that hasn't been opened for twenty years. I am forced to do this as the council are doing renovation work on the flat and I am overwhelmed with junk and clutter. They last did work in 1990 and I packed up my stuff; it has never been opened since. There are boxes everywhere; I climb over them to get into bed; I negotiate around them to turn on the TV. It feels like I've reached crisis point; I can't put it off any longer; my past is smothering me; it has to be taken out and looked at.

So, I make a start; the dust of twenty years aggravates my asthma, but I get my inhaler out and keep going. Old photographs that I thought I'd lost evoke mixed memories; gladness that I've found them; sadness at the memories of the people I've lost. Me smiling and laughing with family and friends that are gone forever now; but I'm so happy that I have these pictures. Looking at them, I remember ceilis; Irish music sessions; ballroom dancing; long walks in the Mourne Mountains; weddings; funerals. I find memorial cards for my mother, my aunt and uncle, with pictures on them of Our Lady, the Sacred Heart, the Holy Family. I have long given up Catholicism yet I find comfort in these images and in the verses. It immediately brings me back to my Irish Catholic childhood in Belfast; I feel a deep connection with home.

What's in this wee brown plastic folder? Opening it I find my Ulsterbus ticket over to London; the plan to stay a few months stretching into years; twenty seven years. On the 22nd of July 1983 I got into a taxi, said cheerio to my mother and, for the sum of £25.50, I started a new phase of my life. I could never remember the exact date in July that I came over; now I know. The ticket goes back in the folder; I am never getting rid of that. I put it, with the photographs and the mass cards, in a box I bought especially in ~~Bond Street~~ for this purpose. I am not prepared to throw away all my past; I can't get rid of everything that I am.

I pull out ~~photos~~

Sarah M. McNally

WHY WRITING GROUPS ARE SO IMPORTANT

We met at the Irish Women's Centre,
spending our afternoons busily writing in the wee
back room,
encouraged to unleash our creative selves;
We quickly became close friends,
Walking on the Heath,
drinking endless cups of tea in each others flats,
While we listened to Van Morrison and Bruce
Springsteen
Your generosity of spirit and sheer love of life
pulling me out of my depressions
The shock and disbelief when they told you it was
terminal

I was going to lose,
My love and support weren't enough,
I was fighting a losing battle,
I remember your eyes lighting up at the bright
yellow of the daffodils that I brought you in the
hospice.

That last night,
Sitting with you till morning
knowing as I stumbled out of the hospice at
9am that I would never ~~see~~ see you again.

I've planted a rose bush on my balcony for
you.
The flowers will be orange, one of your favourite
colours.

I'm "Working on my dream" just like Bruce
Springsteen.

Your washing machine is doing well,
But Helen, I would happily handwash my
clothes for the rest of my life,
if it meant I could see you again.
Sleep well,

grá mór
Siubhán x



**'A nation that enslaves another
can never itself be free'**

- KARL MARX

8/4/11

TAIN DOWGAN

A WORK IN PROGRESS

~~A REFUGE FROM THE WAR TOWN~~

THE ~~WILD~~ WILD ATLANTIC WASHES THE SCARS
OF A LIFE SPENT TOO LONG ON WAR TORN STREETS
THE WILD WIND BLOWS AWAY THE PAIN AND SORROW,
THE POUNDING OCEAN ECHOES MY ANGER
MY SCREAMS, A BANSHEE'S WAILING,
THE SOOTHING LILT OF MY NATIVE TONGUE
A LUXE BALM ON MY WOUNDS
THE COLONISER LANGUAGE BANNED
THE WILD LANDSCAPE TOUCHES^{ING} ME DEEP INSIDE
CONNECTING WITH MY WILDNESS, MY IRISHNESS,
MY REBELLIOUSNESS,
THAT I AM FREE HERE,
SAFE FROM THE GUNS, AND ^{THE} BARBED WIRE,
THE HATRED AND ^{THE} FEAR
FOR ONE PRECIOUS WEEK,
~~ONE OF A WEEK~~ ^{WHEN} I CAN BE MYSELF
BE FREE, SPEAK MY OWN LANGUAGE,
DANCE AND SING WITHOUT FEAR OF BEING ARRESTED
ON THE STREETS OF MY OWN COUNTRY
JUST FOR BEING ME.

IRISH

Simman

AIDS POEM

6.30 am

A strange, in between time

too early to go to work

too late to sleep

now that I,ve been up all night

As I watch the early morning sun

creeping through the bedroom curtains

he asks me

"Do you think anybody will come to my funeral

will anybody care that I,m gone? "

Through a blur of tears

I see the desperation

the fear

the aloneness in his eyes

I take his hand

this friend of mine

dying with AIDS

and I can,t speak

We sit holding hands

until I find the words that reassure him

that help to take some of the fear from his eyes

In the next room lie all his paintings

his sketches

his costumes

his beautiful scarves and ribbons

and I mourn the loss of this talented Irish artist

from our community

A much loved and respected friend, performer, lover, son, brother, acquaintance

Yes, my friend

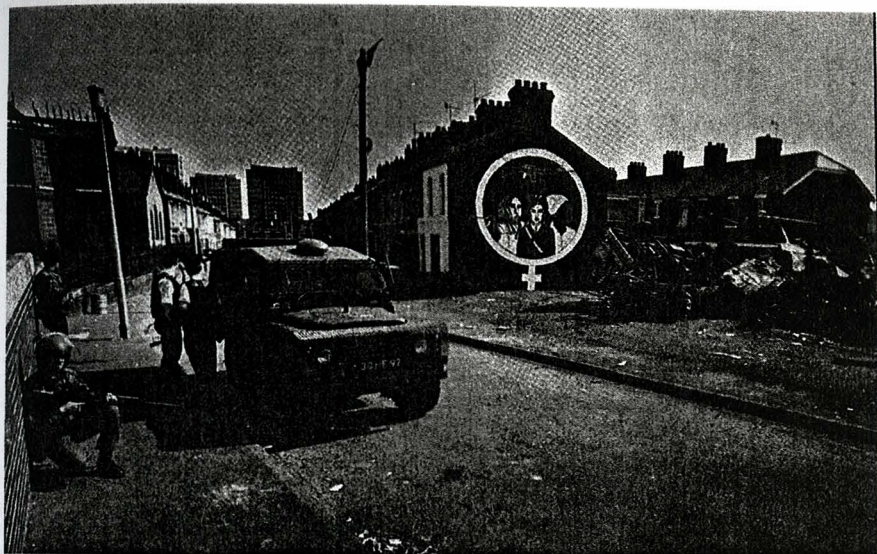
all the people who,s lives you touched

we were all at your funeral

(c)

Siubhan

10/6/1990



**Advice
Advocacy
Counselling
Information
Groups
Publications
Policy**

**For women of
Irish birth & descent
since 1983**

London Irish Women's Centre 2011

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