

# Troubles Women: A Creative Exploration of the Experience of Being a Woman in the Provisional IRA

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## *Abstract:*

What was it like being a woman in the Irish Republican Army? Drawing on her practice-led creative writing doctoral research Tracey Icton attempts to answer this question. Including extracts from Icton's PhD novel, *Herself Alone in Orange Rain*, this paper illustrates how her creative practice explores and represents the lived experiences of IRA women. A survey of Troubles fiction reveals how the genre stereotypes portrayals of IRA women and their experiences, misrepresenting the reality. Alongside this literary review, Icton presents factual accounts of female IRA volunteers and outlines, in author commentaries, how her creative writing practice draws on these accounts to ensure her novel offers a more accurate fictional portrayal of female IRA volunteers and their experiences of active service.

*Keywords:* Creative Writing, Herself Alone, IRA, Troubles, Women

## *1. Introduction*

*Herself Alone in Orange Rain* is part two of my Celtic Colours trilogy which will, when completed in 2019, explore a hundred years of Irish conflict from the 1916 Easter Rising to the centenary of that pivotal event<sup>1</sup>. It is also

<sup>1</sup> Part one of the trilogy, *Green Dawn at St Enda's*, was published by Cinnamon Press in March 2016 and explores the experience of fictional St Enda's pupil, Finn Devoy, in the years 1911-1916, including his involvement in the Easter rebellion. *Herself Alone in Orange Rain* will be released in the autumn of 2017, with part three (working title *White Leaves of Peace*) being published in 2019.

the creative component of my practice-based creative writing doctoral project. *Herself Alone* tells the story of promising art student Caoilainn Devoy, who, aged nineteen, puts down her paint brushes and picks up an Armalite. Joining the Provisional IRA after the 1981 hunger strike, Caoilainn operates for the movement throughout the 1980s, participating in several high profile missions. She endures the hardships of the life she chooses, giving up everything in the fight for freedom and independence for her homeland and herself.

*Herself Alone* was initially a novelistic idea but became a research project. For this development I thank a fellow writer who suggested I devote part two of my trilogy to exploring the Irish conflict from the perspective of a female IRA volunteer. Her suggestion raised interesting questions. Did women actually join the IRA, as opposed to the Cumann na mBan<sup>2</sup>? If so then, what was it like being an IRA woman? How did they think, act and feel while engaged in guerrilla warfare? Were fiction and media portrayals of such women accurate reflections of the reality? And, most importantly for me as a novelist, how do I write a novel that is compelling yet offers a credible account of the experiences of IRA women? In order to write such a work I needed to answer these questions thus my research entailed reading both factual accounts by/about IRA women to inform the novel's content and existing works of Troubles fiction to establish what methods other writers had employed in novels featuring IRA women. I then used this research to guide my creative practice, enabling me to develop a novel that represented, as faithfully as is possible in fiction, the experience of being an IRA woman.

While reference is here made to women who were at one time imprisoned for IRA activity, the extracts and commentary included in this article focus on the representation of IRA women on active service. Therefore, literature specifically about the experience of being a female IRA prisoner has not been included with this article although such material is included in the PhD thesis from which this article is drawn.

## *2. Exemplifying how Troubles fiction represents the lived experience of being an IRA woman*

Through concurrently researching fiction and non-fiction narratives about female Republican activists I realised the reported realities and fictional representations differed significantly. Troubles novels are mostly thrillers. Constrained by genre conventions, they employ implausibly dramatic adven-

<sup>2</sup> Cumann na mBhan (literally 'women's group') was the separate Republican organisation for women activists. It was established by women during preparations for the 1916 Rising and continued to maintain a separate role, command structure and membership policy until the late 1970s, when the Provisional IRA disbanded it and took women volunteers directly into the IRA.

ture plots over believable fact-based events and stock goodies/baddies instead of characters who imitate real people. Reading such novels I found books, both literary and popular, repeatedly invoking common misconceptions about women combatants and resorting to sexist stereotypes in their character portrayals. Despite reading extensively I did not find any novel based on factual experiences as reported by IRA women that developed a plausible cause-and-effect plot and, crucially, that had female characters depicted as realistically rendered individuals, not sexist stereotypes.

Critical analyses of women paramilitary characters in Troubles fiction generally agree that these female protagonists are represented as flawed. Either they allow themselves to become victims or some abnormality in their psychology is manifested through their military activities and connected to some sexual deviance. They are emotionally unstable, Bill Rolston describing how they “wilt under fire”, being “prone to tears” or do “not care about harming children, even when men do” (1989, 50). In fiction “The explanation of women’s violence is always at the emotional level” (*ibidem*, 52) he concludes. Ronan Bennett agrees, identifying depictions of them as “of low intelligence, ... driven by bloodlust. If they have politics, they are the politics of the fanatic” (1994, 6). Additionally, Aaron Kelly notes their portrayal as “unmanageable revolutionaries” (2005, 130). Rolston, Kelly and Bennett concur that fiction frequently misrepresents women combatants, depicting them being uncontrollably violent, implying they are psychopathic.

However, a perhaps greater misrepresentation in this genre is that which denies women activists their femaleness. Fiona McCann suggests that “in order to commit acts of violence, women must adopt aggressive (and stereotypically masculine) characteristics” (2012, 76). Similarly, Laura Pelaschiar notes they are bestowed with “violent male characteristics, as if their activism in political terrorism had necessarily forced them to define themselves in masculine or male terms and to give up their own female identities for more macho ones” (1998, 83). Michael L. Storey also acknowledges this trope, stating that most representations are “not a well balanced integration of woman and terrorist” (2004, 206). Such characters must be woman or terrorist. Rolston develops this view, suggesting these female characters are portrayed as “sad specimens of woman-kind” and “second-class ‘terrorists’” (1989, 50). Researching Troubles fiction and critical perspectives of it, I concluded that female combatants in Troubles novels are subjected to one or more of the following stereotypical misrepresentations; mother, whore, femme fatale, traitor, madwoman, devil woman, macho woman.

Rolston notes: “It is an unwritten rule of these novels that women’s most important role is that of mother ... even women who are not mothers have that potential” (*ibidem*, 44). One example is Tom Bradby’s Collette from *Shadow Dancer* who is labelled “Mother. Widow. Terrorist” (2012, rear cover); the syntactical order of the description suggests terrorist is the least important

of her roles, maternal and matrimonial duties taking precedence. Opposing maternal representations is the whore portrayal. In *1916* this is developed literally through Sile, a prostitute who says “we’re supposed to live the lives our mothers lived – or be disgraced forever, like me” (Llywelyn 1999 [1998], 257). It is disgraced Sile, not Mary the wholesome shop-assistant, who fights during the Easter Rising. The stereotyping of female combatant characters’ sexual behaviour is developed further by femme fatale and honeytrap<sup>3</sup> representations. A violent example of this trope appears in Liam Murray Bell’s *So It Is*. Independent Republican paramilitary Cassie lures Loyalist men into sexual liaisons, using a broken bottleneck inserted into her vagina to “inflict real damage” (2012, 80) on them during intercourse. Female paramilitaries depicted thus, as duplicitous and treacherous, are indeed common in Troubles thrillers and some even turn against their own organisation like Bradby’s Colette who informs on the IRA rather than face imprisonment. She is threatened “You are not going to see your children for *at least* fifteen years” (italics original; 2012, 51). This portrayal suggests motherhood causes her treachery, reinforcing the portrayal that mothers cannot be successful paramilitaries. Such depictions illustrate how women activists in Troubles novels are often either good women (sacrificing mothers) or good terrorists (calculating combatants) or bad at both (treacherous, weak, failing family and fight). Those striving to be successful paramilitaries are characterised either as madwomen, like Kate in Peter Ransley’s *The Price* who is called “the witch” (1984, 154) and described as being “nearer to the edge” (*ibidem*, 155) when she handles a gun, a phrase suggesting insanity, or as devil women, purely evil, like Norah from *The Savage Day* who, after killing a comrade, showed “no evidence of even the slightest remorse” (Higgins 2008, 338). Those female characters not depicted as mad or evil are made into macho women, as seen in Marion Urch’s *Violent Shadows*, when Tara coaxes her body into a male form: “Tara’s breasts became smaller, her stomach lost its curve, there was no more softness to her. When her period didn’t arrive she was pleased. She thought about what a man is ... trained herself to invulnerability” (1996, 88). This representation implies her success as a paramilitary depends on eradicating her femaleness and such masculinising of female characters often prefaces portrayals of their paramilitary activities.

However, many of the texts surveyed restrict depictions of women participating in military violence<sup>4</sup>. Unlike actual IRA women, they rarely have guns. Bell’s Cassie, for example, has “only broken glass” for protection (2012, 333). Cassie’s one kill is done with a hammer, under duress, and the lan-

<sup>3</sup> A honeytrap is a woman paramilitary operating to lure, through sexual temptation, their (male) enemies into a trap where the woman may or, more often, may not, carry out the execution.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. carrying out shootings, bombings or other means of engaging/attacking the enemy.

guage used emphasises her horror: “Hot tears bubble and burn at my closed eyelids and – suddenly, mercifully – I’m aware that I’m the only one making noise” (2012, 310). Douglas Hurd in *A Vote to Kill* gives Clarissa an implausibly complex weapon, a crossbow concealed in a box file<sup>5</sup>; she misses with it. In some novels women hold a gun, threaten to use it, but do not fire (Sile in *1916*, Kate in *The Price* and Isabel in Eugene McCabe’s *Victims*). In others they only wound, like Colette in *Shadow Dancer*, the text specifying she “took aim at the boy’s right thigh and fired” (Bradby 1998, 91). Another non-fatal shooting is Tara’s of Michael about which she reflects “she should have finished the job. But he was hardly a crow or a hare” (Urch 1996, 203). Previously she coldly killed animals but here she is portrayed as unable to kill a person, something real IRA volunteers had to do. Some writers only depict women killing in reported action like Roddy Doyle in *A Star Called Henry* who has a farmer tell Henry that Miss O’Shea is “killing those new Tan bastards” (2005, 269) or Cathy Spellman whose narrator in *An Excess of Love* only hints that Constance may kill:

Had he [their father] never taught her to shoot, might it be that I would never have seen her as she was that fearful Easter Friday morning at the barricade, commanding a troop of ragtag and bobtail rebels ... a rifle at her shoulder, carried with the casual pride of one who knows full well how to use it. (1986, 12)

Other writers allow female combatants to engage briefly in violence, like Beth in Valerie Miner’s *Blood Sisters* who participates in a bombing in the novel’s penultimate chapter (she is lookout for a male comrade who plants the bomb<sup>6</sup>) and Sorcha in Aly Renwick’s ... *Last Night Another Soldier* ... who does not join the IRA until the novel’s final section. Sorcha is then shown sniping at a British soldier but the portrayal ends once she has “squeezed the trigger” (1989, 173). The narrative switches focalisation to the shot soldier; the reader knows Sorcha fired but is given only a glimpse of her doing so. These two examples offer the most realistic portrayals of women paramilitaries found in my review of Troubles fiction. Both protagonists are complex, developed in detail, given some agency over their involvement and mainly political motivations. They are committed to the armed struggle but not depicted as mad or evil. However, as representations of their participation in active service are limited, neither novel is a credible exploration of the experience of being an IRA woman. This also applies to Tina in Danny Morrison’s *The Wrong Man* (1997). Tina, though an active service volunteer throughout the novel, is a minor character making too few appearances to be fully developed. Texts that do portray women’s sus-

<sup>5</sup> I found no accounts of any IRA operations involving a crossbow.

<sup>6</sup> See Miner 2003, 190-193.

tained participation in violence misrepresent women combatants in the sexist, stereotyped ways outlined above.

Wide reading of Troubles novels with Republican female combatant characters consistently demonstrated what Eve Patten calls the “superficially drawn terrorist presence” (1995, 132). Her assessment is difficult to refute when comparing fiction and non-fiction accounts about the lived experience of being an IRA woman. Undertaking as thorough as possible a review of Troubles fiction, uncovering existent portrayals of female republicans, enabled me to make informed decisions about how my representation of IRA women would be written to challenge these representations and offer a fictional portrayal that more closely imitated reality.

### *3. Representing the lived experience of being a woman in the IRA through creative practice*

#### *i. Extract 1*

Having joined the IRA, Caoilainn here takes part in her first mission, the planting of a car bomb. She is accompanied by Aiden O’Neill, a fellow volunteer and her childhood friend, now her boyfriend. The scene is set just months after Bobby Sands and nine other republicans died on hunger strike in HMP Maze while protesting for political status for those jailed for paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland.

Belfast – 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1981

“It’s a fu... it’s a disgrace,” Kelly jabs his finger at me, “sending a wee girl to do this. If it was up to me we’d not let you in.”

We’re in his sister-in-law’s front room, me, Aiden and Kelly who’s a hardboiled Belfast Provo.

“Well, it’s not,” I say, “and I am so...”

Aiden digs me in the ribs. I suppress angry words; they’ll only convince Kelly I’m not cool-headed enough for active service ops.

“This for the lads in jail, to show we haven’t forgotten them,” Kelly mutters, ice-cold eyes burning me. “There’d better not be any cock ups.”

“There won’t be,” Aiden says.

Kelly flicks his stare to Aiden. “It’s on you to make sure she does what she’s supposed to.” He slides a scrap of paper across the coffee table. On it is a north Belfast address and the details of a car, including reg number. “No mistakes, love,” he says, face stony.

Outside I vent, firing off oaths about Kelly’s bigoted bullshit.

“Forget him,” Aiden says. “You need your mind on this.” He waves the paper at me. “Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

“I’ve said, haven’t I?”

“Just be clear about it: this is a military attack on a legitimate target.”

I shrug Kelly off, think of Daideo instead, his matchstick arms and legs, the tissue paper skin holding him together, old pains flickering behind his eyes. “I am clear.”

At 2am, driving a commandeered car, we head for the address, bomb in the boot. The air is sleety; white flakes blowing into the headlights make it seem like we’re driving into a time travel vortex. I’ll wake up in my bed in Dublin last week.

Aiden drives sedately, stopping at red lights even when the junction is clear. Around one corner a cat darts from an entry; Aiden brakes and we’re flung forward. I smash my arm on the dashboard and feel the handgun tucked in my belt jab the small of my back as I rebound against the seat.

“Jesus. Did I hit it?”

We both check behind and see the cat scurrying off up the road.

“Christ, you alright?”

“Yes, but I reckon we’re all down a life there,” I joke, not letting myself think about the package in the boot being slammed around.

Aiden drives on. A few minutes later we’re there.

“You can stay in the car if you want,” he offers.

This bastard was one of them scrubbing the lads down with wire brushes, spreading them over mirrors and beating them up. He’s the enemy.

“No. I need to do this.”

“Fine. Don’t forget to...”

“I know what I’m doing,” I hiss, getting out of the car but leaving the door open.

The silver Cortina is parked on the drive; I double-check the registration then get the bomb. The house is asleep, no curtains twitching or telly flickering. I open the wrought iron gate; the hinges whine. I freeze but no lights come on so I creep up the drive and wriggle under the car.

It’s a small bomb, magnets for attaching it to the car’s underbelly, two primer switches, set on a timer. So it shouldn’t go off in my face, which is only inches from it in the cramped space beneath the car. Lying on my back the gun digs into my spine so I set it beside me and lift the bomb overhead, arms trembling with the strain. A second before touching it to the chassis the magnets snatch it from my grip, sucking it in place with a resounding clang that rebukes me for snapping at Aiden; he’s only wanting to keep me safe. Jesus, I’m a bitch sometimes. Get this done and I can be back with him, get us both safe. I pull a torch from my pocket and illuminate the switches I need to flick, starting the countdown that will end as the screw pulls up outside Long Kesh for another day’s grind.

There’s a sound, like a book falling flat onto a wooden floor. I click off the torch, turn my head and see a pair of tartan slippers, wrinkled socks rising from them. They point towards the street, back towards the house and back again: towards me.

I have the gun in my hand before I’ve picked it up. A face joins the slippers, peering under the car: there’s a moustache, grey and bushy; baggy, weather-worn skin. Eyes lock into mine, widening in surprise as they see me. The mouth opens to speak. I point and pull the trigger. The only sound is the gun’s crack.

Trapped in the narrow space the recoil jerks my hand, the gun smacks me on the nose. Shards of shock pierce my brain. Scrambling static clouds my vision. I blink back the burning pain and dazzling sparks; see the slippers, upended, worn-

through soles staring blankly at me. I fumble for the switches, feel the two raised pimples, and press. Then roll out from under the car.

The screw is on his back, a dark hole in his forehead, a blood trickle trailing from the wound and a larger pool of inky blackness saturating the ground beneath his head where the exploding bullet churned tissue, shattered bone, ripped skin. He's dead. And he's not the screw. I see now he's too old, frail, for the Kesh's brutal work.

Aiden flashes the headlights. I run down and throw myself into the car, not getting the door shut before he has his foot through the floor, speeding us away, the gun still in my hand. The stench of cordite fills the car.

"Jesus. What the fuck happened?" Aiden asks.

I can't speak. I'm trying to unload the gun but keep missing the catch that releases the magazine. He snatches the gun from me, tossing it on the back seat, speeds up. We're thrown round corners, swiping traffic bollards and lampposts, running red lights, heading for the Falls, the unlit streets that can hide us. My mouth fills with the salty metallic taste of blood. I feel myself ragged about but all I see is a pair of tartan slippers, the soles worn out.

We've stopped. Aiden's shaking me.

"We've gotta go."

A door slams, his. I'm dragged out, hauled to my feet. The street comes into focus; shuttered shops, up-tipped bins, piles of rubble. Aiden leans into the car, grabs my gun and tucks it into his belt. His hand grips my arm and he jumps into a run, towing me, my feet stumbling to find a rhythm. Then I'm running on my own, his grip gone. We're side by side, our boots belting over broken pavement slabs. I want to keep running, heart pumping, legs thrusting, lungs burning. I want to stay in my body; out of my head.

We sprint down narrow entries and into the Divis flats complex where the concrete warren of Lego-stacked blocks squats. Aiden turns left, right, bangs through a door, mounts a flight of stairs and races along a walkway to a peeling blue-paint door. He pummels it. A light snaps on. A woman opens the door, clutching a pink dressing gown to her throat. She looks us over, holds back the door, letting us tumble in, then slams and bolts it.

We stand there, panting. Blood drips from my nose, disappearing into the brown lino. I sag against the wall, shaking.

"Sorry to wake you, Cathy," Aiden says, the words gasped between breaths, "but we've a spot of bother."

"You better come through."

She strides down the passage. We follow her into a kitchen, bright with yellow Formica and green cupboards. She's at the sink, filling the kettle. Aiden pulls out a chair, makes me sit, tilts my chin, facing me into the light.

"Jesus, you're hurt."

I jerk my head away and pinch my bleeding nose.

"Bathroom's next door," Cathy says.

On trembling legs I stagger into the loo. The mirror above the cracked white sink reveals the result of my self-inflicted make-over; purple bruises shadowing my eyes, nose swollen and pulpy, blood rouging my lips. I wash off the sticky red film that's drying to a crust in my nostrils.

Back in the kitchen Cathy and Aiden are drinking tea, smoking. She pushes



her pack across as I sit. The lines around her mouth deepen as she takes a drag; she brushes frazzled brown hair off her forehead. Her roots are grey. She stares at me but doesn't ask my name which I guess means Aiden's already told her.

"Do I want to know?" she asks Aiden.

"You don't." He taps ash off the end of his cigarette. "Can you get a message across town for us?"

"Aye, tomorrow." She sighs. "I'll get yous some blankets for the sofa." She shuffles out.

"Are you alright?" he asks, reaching for my hand.

"Fine."

"What happened?"

"Weren't you watching?"

"Thought I saw something up the road. Next I knew he was by the car and..."

He takes my hand again. "He was going up in a few hours anyway."

"It wasn't him."

"What?"

"It was some ould fella. I didn't see until after..."

"Shite. Who then?"

"I don't know. Maybe his da? Is this going to get me disciplined?"

"Ach, no. You had to get away. You're no use in jail."

"I'm no use out of it if I'm shooting the wrong people."

"Don't think that. We don't know who he was. You were reacting to a developing situation," Aiden reassures, gripping my hand.

I rub at the ache in my forehead.

"You want me to see if she's got any pills?" he offers.

I tell him yes, but two Aspirin aren't going to make this better.

We doss down in the living room, me on the sofa, Aiden in an armchair with his feet, still in their boots, on the coffee table: next to the gun. The night plays on a loop in my head. I see the man's face, the eyes reading mine, the mouth open to plead, and the second face, staring sightlessly. The before and after images alternate, faces on a spinning coin. I lose whichever way up it falls.

A car collects us midmorning. A young lad drives, eyes welded to the road, while Kelly rages at me from beside him.

"That fella you shot was the screw's bleeding father-in-law. And they found the fu... the bomb before it went off." He faces me. "You'll not be doing any more ops here. It's alright yous running messages but, catch yourself on, you're useless at proper jobs."

"That's not fair," Aiden bleats. "She..."

"Don't you say fuck all to me, boyo. Letting your lass do your job, you're a fucking shower," Kelly barks.

His chivalrous sexism, how he curses Aiden instead of me because he won't swear at women, makes me long to call him a cunt just to shut him up, make him wither, but I'm in too much trouble to risk it, even for Aiden. I reach for Aiden's hand. He tears it free. I don't know who he's mad at; Kelly, me or himself.

I fix on the scrolling view, throat tight, eyes stinging. To Kelly the shooting is a chance lost, justification for his macho bigotry. To me it's a line crossed.

ii. *Extract 2*

Having been in the IRA for over three years and participated in some high profile bombings in England, Caoilainn is now on active service in Belfast. In this scene she is called upon to shoot a British sniper. The scene happens on the first anniversary of the death of Aiden O'Neill who she married in 1982. Aiden was killed in an SAS ambush along with two other volunteers. Danny, who accompanies Caoilainn during the scene, is another member of Caoilainn's Active Service Unit (ASU) and Aiden's younger brother.

Belfast – 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1984

A year ago today I was unaware the end of the world was coming. It's my first thought when I wake up hours before dawn, uncertain I was sleeping. I stay in bed, smoking and staring at the ceiling, trying to conjure Aiden's face in the curls of vapour that drift away from me, wondering if I'll be able to go to his grave later.

The door bangs, Ciaran leaving for his lunchtime shift. Alone now, I struggle up. In the bathroom I stand under a cold shower, numbing myself. It doesn't help.

I sit at the table, tea going cold, suffocating in the silence, eyes flicking from object to object, mind fighting itself to remember and forget.

There's a knock at the door.

One of the Fianna lads is on the step in his St Michael's blazer.

"Mrs Murphy says there's a Brit sniper across the way from her."

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"It's break. What'll I tell her, about the sniper?"

"Get to school, Eoin."

"Aren't you gonna do something?" His freckly face screws into an angry scowl.

His rage is infectious. I see Aiden, crumpled, bloodied: dead.

*The IRA volunteer acts most of the time on his own initiative.*

"Leave it with me." I slam the door, press up against it and rub at the tight band constricting my forehead.

Minutes later I'm walking up the road, an empty rucksack over my shoulder, heading for the butchers.

Fred acknowledges me with a nod as I cross the shop, pushing through the door to the back; queuing housewives throw curious glances my way.

I dodge the dangling carcasses in the cold store, moving out to the slaughterhouse in the yard. Fred doesn't do his own slaughtering anymore; the shed is our emergency weapons dump.

Inside the windowless shack fluorescent strip lights judder awake, illuminating the gore-stained floor. The stench of old blood, fishy and rotten, makes me gag. Squatting in a corner, I prise up the floorboards and rake around the hole until a plastic bag rustles in my fingers. Hauling it out, I peel back the polythene keeping the damp from an AR-15 and a half full magazine. Broken down, it'll fit in my rucksack. Fingers shaking, I drag bloody air into my lungs, exhale and recite the drill: check the chamber; shoot the bolt; press the pins through; pull from the other side; click the barrel free. I do the rear take down pin but fumble the front pivot

pin, not pulling it through far enough to release the barrel. Jesus, a recruit two days into basic training can do this. I put the gun down, take another breath; get it apart.

“Managing, love?” Fred asks from the doorway.

“Yeah. Any chance of me borrowing your car?”

“I took it round to Mick’s yesterday, brakes are knackered. If they’ve sorted it help yourself.”

The garage is a two minute walk away; the Divis Flats, where Mrs Murphy and the Brit sniper are eyeballing each other, is twenty. Even if Fred’s car isn’t driveable there’ll be another I can borrow. Urgency rakes my chest with jagged claws. I have to get the bastard: for Aiden.

At the garage Fred’s Vauxhall is on the forecourt. I poke my head into the workshop.

“Mick?”

He emerges from the loo, fag dangling.

“Hiya, Caoilainn, everything alright?”

“Fine. You sorted Fred’s brakes?”

“Aye.”

“Grand. I’m just borrowing it for a wee job. He said it’s O.K.”

Danny rolls out from beneath a Beetle. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Go back to work.”

He peels off his overalls.

“I said go back to work.”

“No.”

He charges past. I chase but he’s already in the driving seat when I emerge into weak winter sun. Yanking the door open, I seize his sleeve.

“Get out.”

“No.” He grips the steering wheel.

“Jesus, I’ve not got time for this.”

“So get in.”

“You best do it if you’re in a hurry,” Mick advises.

Fuck sake. I get in the passenger side. “You’re to stay in the car or I’ll have you bollocked for disobeying an order. Divis Flats.”

Danny nods and starts the engine.

He parks in front of Mrs Murphy’s block.

The lift is knackered again; I pound up the stairs. She opens the door as I’m running down the walkway.

“Caoilainn, grand, it’s yourself. Away in.”

She’s a fierce old Republican. Her husband was anti-treaty during the Civil War and pity help Dev’s immortal soul when she gets to heaven. She leads me to the bedroom. Net curtains swish and billow at the open window.

“He’s across the way. I saw him moving about and knew something was up; that flat’s been empty this past month. Here.” She offers me a pair of field glasses, her Dermot’s from his flying column days.

Adjusting the focus, I see the sniper stretched out on a table at the window, squinting through the scope of his rifle.

“Can you get him from here?” she asks.

I gauge the distance: six hundred yards at least.

“Hope so.”

“Good girl.” She pats my arm. “I’ll put the kettle on.” She slips out.

I check the sniper again, making sure he’s not about to wrap in and go. He’s motionless in his firing position. Calmly, I dig the rifle from the bag and reassemble it without fumbling. In a minute he’ll be dead and next 4 December there’ll be two of us waking up alone, grief suffocating us.

“There you go.” Mrs Murphy sets a china cup and saucer on the windowsill.

Clicking the magazine into place, I stare at her.

“I’ll not put you off, will I? Sure, I’d like to see you hit the so-and-so.”

My cheeks flame at the thought of Mrs Murphy witnessing this killing. I bolt myself. He’s an enemy soldier: a legitimate target. She knows it’s my duty as a volunteer to shoot him. He knows it too. But the hungry gnawing inside me that wants him dead and someone else aching with emptiness makes me know it’s not duty or patriotism or faith with the Cause that will have me pull the trigger today.

“Are you alright, love?”

I can’t not do this, for all the right, and the wrong, reasons.

“Fine.”

I crouch at the window, bracing the rifle against my shoulder and resting on the sill. The sight isn’t telescopic so I take another look with the binoculars for reference, then aim and fire.

My shot cracks the air, singeing a blackened hole through the net.

“Did you get him?”

I snatch the binoculars but before I raise them there’s a reply to my shot. We duck; the bullet crunches into the wall above and to the left of our window.

Shit.

He knows I’m here; he’ll be on the radio: “Shots fired.” Half the BA could be kicking Mrs Murphy’s door down in minutes. Protocol says I get out now.

“Shite, Caoilainn, you can do it,” Mrs Murphy encourages.

I sight along the barrel, centring the sniper’s window in the standard sight: fire again.

Two shots crack back. The second shatters the window, spraying me with glass.

“Fuck!” I recoil, glance at Mrs Murphy. “Sorry for the language.”

“Have a drink of tea,” she suggests. “My Dermot was after saying you need to steady yourself for these things.”

Hand shaking I get the cup to my lips, blistering my tongue on the scalding liquid. I should already be gone. When I set my cup down tea slops into the saucer.

I rub my sweaty palms onto my jeans. Either I get him or he gets me, nothing else is viable now. Mrs Murphy steps up beside me, training the field glasses on the opposite window.

“I’ll direct you,” she offers.

I fire.

“It hit the brickwork. Go a smidge lower.”

I fire again. The bullet flies from the muzzle.

I fly with it become it spinning and diving across the space between the flats air rushing past me the velocity making me feel like I’m boring through solid rock the world blurs into blue sky grey concrete the target rises up I close on it details emerge the pale lines of cement between the bricks a green window frame the paint flaked patches of dry dead wood exposed a face smeared with camouflage paint the

eyes young straining I strike the forehead between them with a jolt and spin down into the warm moist brain tissue coming to rest against the back of his skull my energy dissipated by the distance and the impact.

“Got the bugger! Maith thú!” Mrs Murphy whoops, lowering the binoculars.

I sit up, listening for boots thumping towards us, the crunch of a door splintering, voices screaming, “Hands up!” There’s only a post-apocalypse silence. My mouth is dry; I drain the teacup.

“Do you want another, love?”

“I best go.”

Sitting cross-legged below the window I unload and disassemble the gun before wiping off any prints and packing it, crushed by a tightening circle of urgency.

Two minutes later I’m running to the car. Tossing the bag in the boot, I open the driver’s door.

“Shove over.”

Danny clambers across.

“Did you get him?”

“Aye.”

“Grand.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

I u-turn in the quad between the blocks, pulling onto the main road.

Two Saracens are parked snout to snout across the street. I jam on the brakes.

“Fuck.”

“Are they for us?” Danny’s words quiver.

“I didn’t get him with the first shot. He must’ve radioed backup,” I confess.

Two foot patrols flank the car. A soldier, captain’s epaulets, climbs from a Saracen clutching a loud hailer.

“Get out of the vehicle with your hands up.”

“What’re we going to do?” Danny whimpers.

“Unless you’re wanting to be shot we’re gonna get out.”

“But the gun?”

“What gun?”

“In the boot, you...”

“What gun?” I repeat. “As far as those bastards know we’ve been visiting a weould woman, taking her shopping, in a borrowed car. Whatever’s in the boot’s nothing to do with us. That’s what you tell ’em, Danny. Mrs Murphy’ll back us. Apart from that you say nothing, not a fucking thing, O.K.?”

“Get out of the vehicle now. You have five seconds before we open fire.” The captain’s words echo robotically.

“Caoilainn?” Danny bleats my name.

“They can only hold us a week. Get through it with your mouth shut and that’ll be the end of it.” I forbid myself to think about what’ll happen when they realise he’s an O’Neill.

“Get out of the vehicle. This is your final warning.”

“And for Christ sake, keep your hands where they can see them. Don’t give them any excuse, Danny.”

Swinging open my door, I throw him a final look. His face is white but his jaw is tight, the muscle along it flexing under the strain. I mouth, “sorry.” He nods and opens his door.

Half a dozen squaddies have drawn up to my side of the car. I plant my feet so I can stand without hands to propel me up and, arms raised, climb out.

The squaddies are in full battle dress, aiming their Heckle and Koch rifles. I run my eyes over each of them; they blink their surprise at the sight of a wee lassie, her hands raised. For five seconds we’re locked in a tableau. Then one of them steps forwards, gesturing with his weapon.

“Hands on your head. Get on the ground.”

#### *4. Using factual accounts of the experiences of IRA women to inform the creative practice*

##### *i. Author commentary on Extract 1*

I did not want Caoilainn’s involvement with military activism to be the token participation found in other Troubles novels. Having researched women who were IRA members I knew women did the same things as their male counterparts; bombings, armed raids and sniper attacks: killing enemy targets<sup>8</sup>. A novel reflecting this reality and challenging the misrepresentation of them as “selfless assistants” (Ryan and Ward 2004, 54) required Caoilainn’s full participation in military operations. Throughout the novel, her involvement in violence is presented as legitimate military action because this is how IRA volunteers viewed their actions<sup>9</sup> and to be a credible fictional volunteer Caoilainn’s portrayal had to represent her being thus motivated. Furthermore, by embedding a degree of military professionalism into her characterisation, Caoilainn challenges the misrepresentations of IRA women that depict them as incompetent, incapable and unprofessional military combatants, Rolston’s “second-class ‘terrorists’ ” (1989, 50).

Many sources offered accounts of active service, inspiring Caoilainn’s fictional experiences. Firstly, quoting a 1977 IRA Staff Report, Coogan cites this IRA directive: “Women and girls have greater roles to play as military activists” (2000, 467) marking the point when more female volunteers became combatants. This reference assured me that it was credible to portray Cao-

<sup>8</sup> This is in contrast to women in the Cumann na mBan who were mainly deployed in supporting roles (e.g. as messengers, carrying weapons, helping to hide IRA members on the run etc.), although some did participate in active service (e.g. setting bombs).

<sup>9</sup> The IRA’s *Green Book* states “The Irish Republican Army, as the legal representatives of the Irish people, is morally justified in carrying out a campaign of resistance against foreign occupation forces and domestic collaborators” (Coogan 2000, 545). It further notes “Volunteers are expected to wage a military war of liberation” (*ibidem*, 547) and adds that “Tactics are dictated by the existing conditions” (*ibidem*, 552).

ilainn operating as a combatant during the 1980s, participating in military missions. Her first IRA operation, the planting of a car bomb (see Extract 1), was informed by several found facts. One female volunteer stated “Today [1970s] women volunteers in the IRA are used just as the men are. They take part in armed encounters against the British soldiers. They are asked to plant bombs” (Ryan and Ward 2004, 136). Another explained “If, for instance, you are doing a car bomb, you need to be armed too” (MacDonald 1991, 140). Both sources reassured me that Caoilainn’s role in her first mission, involving her in a bombing and shooting, were plausible.

While many Troubles novels contain stereotypically emotionless IRA characters my research revealed some of the emotions of real IRA members. Coogan notes “When thinking of the IRA operative one should not visualise hardened neo-psychopaths of ice-cold nerve” (2000, 379) and his remark is evidenced by IRA women’s comments about their emotions during missions. They spoke of being afraid but of needing to control that fear to be effective when carrying out IRA missions; these comments informed my portrayal of Caoilainn’s feelings during the car bombing scene. Of doing a bank job<sup>10</sup> Síle said “I was terrified ... You’ve no idea – the sweat broke out on me ... anyone who says they’re not afraid is lying” (Fairweather, McDonough and McFaydean 1984, 257-258). Another admitted “When I went on my first operation I was frightened and extremely nervous and lacked confidence ... after that first one you are still nervous about operations but not enough to stop you continuing” (MacDonald 1991, 145). Other volunteers emphasised the need to control emotions. Jennifer McCann, former Republican prisoner, said “You put up a sort of mental block. If you were thinking too much about what might happen you might panic, and then you would be no use to anyone. You have to be calm” (*ibidem*, 166). Caoilainn’s fear during the car bombing scene is explored implicitly to reflect the reality reported by IRA women who admitted they were afraid but focused on repressing those feelings. For example, on the drive to the address where she is to plant the bomb, Caoilainn reflects that it seems as though they are “driving into a time travel vortex” and she muses “I’ll wake up in my bed in Dublin last week” which together imply that the moment is surreal for her and one she wishes she wasn’t experiencing. This suggests her fear without explicitly stating it in order to maintain the idea that she is trying to control her feelings. This is further emphasised when, after they swerve to avoid hitting a cat in the road, Caoilainn admits to “not letting myself think about the package in the boot being slammed around” because she doesn’t want to dwell on the danger of death and injury she is facing at that moment.

<sup>10</sup> Armed robbery has been one means by which the IRA raised capital to fund their military actions.

As well as being afraid during missions, some IRA women expressed regret for the actions they felt compelled to take during the armed struggle. One female volunteer admitted “There have been mistakes which are horrible and brutal”. Speaking about the 1978 La Mon Bombing<sup>11</sup>, she explained “I thought of the suffering first and the panic and people dying in agony like that” and she added “It’s war itself that makes you callous ... It brutalizes people inevitably, not because they’re cold and callous to begin with, but simply out of sheer necessity and survival” (Fairweather, McDonough and McFaydean 1984, 252-253). Similarly Rita O’Hare, former Republican prisoner, said “We hate this war and all the suffering it has brought to all the people affected by it” (McAuley 1989, 85). Elsewhere she asked “Do you think that we rejoice when a busload of young Yorkshire soldiers gets blown up?”, the interviewer noted “She looked agitated and distressed when she asked this question” (MacDonald 1991, 153). Thus when Caoilainn realises the man she has shot was not the target, she is traumatised by the consequences of her actions. She “can’t speak” and struggles to unload her gun: “I’m trying to unload the gun but keep missing the catch that releases the magazine” which physical reactions emphasise that she is in shock. While fleeing the scene, Caoilainn’s mental trauma becomes more obvious as, despite the peril of their situation all she can think about is “a pair of tartan slippers, the soles worn out.” The slippers here symbolise and humanise the man “too old, frail, for the Kesh’s brutal work” who she has killed, offering a tragic, haunting image that illustrates Caoilainn’s emotional distress.

The car bombing scene and, in particular, Caoilainn’s shooting of the wrong man, also illustrate the sexist attitudes some female volunteers reported experiencing. However, it is difficult to judge how much sexual discrimination female volunteers did encounter; some women admitted suffering it personally while others denied this but accepted that the IRA, like other male dominated organisations, did have a sexual discrimination problem. Accounts by IRA women were read with an awareness of potential bias; there are obvious reasons why women in such organisations might state there was little/no sexual discrimination (e.g. loyalty to the organisation or fear of airing grievances). The following statements evidence the differing experiences of sexual discrimination that IRA women say they encountered.

One stated “I have personally never come across any sexism in the movement, but that’s not to say that it is exempt from it” (MacDonald 1991, 144). Another said “I’m in an ASU ... no allowances are made for me because I’m a woman ... you’ve to meet the same requirements as your male comrades and you take the same risks they do” (McAuley 1989, 50). One female vol-

<sup>11</sup> This IRA operation involved a homemade incendiary similar to napalm which resulted in many of those caught in the attack suffering horrific burn injuries.



unteer did admit “You are constantly fighting this battle for equal status ... The leadership recognizes this and I honestly couldn’t say that there’s much discrimination at that level. It’s the lower ranks mainly ... I constantly have to prove myself to them” (Fairweather, McDonough and McFaydean 1984, 241). This inspired Kelly’s opening remarks to Caoilainn: “ ‘It’s a fu... it’s a disgrace.’ Kelly jabs his finger at me. ‘Sending a wee girl to do this. If it was up to me we’d not let you in’ ”. Further to this, feminist Margaretta D’Arcy felt that, while imprisoned IRA women “stated time and again that there was sexual equality in the Republican Movement,” she believed them “only in so far as individual women could be equal to individual men” (1981, 110). This is something Caoilainn attempts to achieve when, in the scene, she restrains herself from responding to Kelly’s sexist remarks about women in the IRA because doing so would only “convince Kelly I’m not cool-headed enough for active service ops”. Additionally, one female volunteer, speaking of attitudes to women in the IRA, said “it’s particularly difficult if you make a mistake ... if a woman does, it just reinforces their prejudices that you aren’t competent” (Fairweather, McDonough and McFadyean 1984, 241) which I explore in the scene’s conclusion. After the shooting Kelly reprimands Caoilainn, gender, not inexperience, being blamed for her failure: “You’ll not be doing any more ops here. It’s alright you’re running messages but, catch yourself on, you’re useless at proper jobs”. Caoilainn comments that “To Kelly the shooting is a chance lost, justification for his macho bigotry. To me it’s a line crossed”. Her thoughts here acknowledge the discrimination some women reported experiencing in the IRA and reference her emotional response to her actions, accepting that she is changed forever by the shooting which echoes the idea, expounded by an actual volunteer (see above) that war brutalised those involved.

*ii. Author commentary on Extract 2*

Throughout the novel I strove to reflect, in Caoilainn’s fictional military activism, the factual accounts of women combatants to challenge the incompetent terrorist misrepresentation of IRA women in *Troubles* fiction. Caoilainn is, as IRA volunteers were, a soldier<sup>12</sup>. Depicting her as such required showing her participating in military operations with professionalism which, to me, meant thinking and acting as soldiers might (e.g. planning operations thoroughly, adopting appropriate tactics, having a strategic approach

<sup>12</sup> Although they serve an army, it should be noted that IRA members rarely use this term to refer to themselves, preferring to differentiate themselves from soldiers by virtue of the fact that they volunteered to serve to help their community rather than to earn a wage. Brendan Hughes, however, does call himself a soldier (see Moloney 2010, 263).

to combat etc.). This method of characterising her helps Caoilainn resemble a credible soldier and writing her as a credible soldier challenges misrepresentations in Troubles fiction that depict women paramilitaries as unprofessional. Caoilainn does her duty as a volunteer capably but without her representation resorting to either the unwilling/unable or too-willing/fanatical tropes.

While civilians may generally view killing others as deplorable, attitudes are different for those who consider themselves soldiers fighting a legitimate war of liberation, as IRA volunteers do. D'Arcy notes: "The republican prisoners remained unaffected by the intense battery of moralistic propaganda insisting that they should feel guilty for their crimes. They were fighting a war. Simply that" (1981, 98). IRA members accepted that their duty was to kill the enemy<sup>13</sup>. This is explored in my novel when Caoilainn has to shoot the British sniper (see Extract 2). She rationalises: "He's an enemy soldier: a legitimate target. She [Mrs Murphy] knows it's my duty as a volunteer to shoot him. He [the British soldier] knows it too." Caoilainn's credible competence as a soldier is demonstrated particularly in this scene, which exemplify how her portrayal throughout the novel challenges misrepresentations common in Troubles fiction that women were incompetent/incapable female paramilitaries whose actions are rooted in personal motivations.

Caoilainn's characterisation challenges the misrepresentation of female paramilitaries participating in armed struggles for personal, not political, reasons because accounts by female IRA volunteers refute such misconceptions. Of her reasons for joining the IRA, Mairead Farrell<sup>14</sup> said: "I've always believed we had a legitimate right to take up arms and defend our country and ourselves against British occupation" (Aretxaga 1997, 47) adding "you just accepted that you would be involved to defend your country against the Brits [sic] occupation" (McIntosh and Urquhart 2010, 163). IRA volunteer Cathleen said "Then internment was brought in. I felt I'd no other option but to join after that ... it became clear to me that the Brits were here to suppress the Catholic minority" (Fairweather, McDonough and McFaydean 1984, 236). An anonymous volunteer said she joined so "I could help remove the British from Ireland ... Throughout my life I have seen the way the British people abuse us" (MacDonald 1991, 139). Mary Doyle, former Republican prisoner, said "I came from a Republican family, but it was my own decision to join" (*ibidem*, 157). Another unnamed volunteer said "It wasn't a decision I took lightly at all; I was aware of the risks ... I had reached a point where I had to do everything I could" (McAuley 1989, 49).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Pat Coogan reports how one volunteer told him "We've nothing against them personally [British soldiers/RUC officers]. It's the uniform we are after" (2000, 380).

<sup>14</sup> Farrell was an IRA volunteer and former Republican prisoner who was shot dead on Gibraltar by the SAS in 1988 while on a reconnaissance mission for the IRA.

Important to me here was evidence of women choosing military activism because they believed it would help end the British occupation of Northern Ireland. However, I decided against portraying Caoilainn's every kill as a calculated act of war, devoid of personal involvement. Doing so, I would have inclined her towards the ice-maiden assassin stereotype, as misrepresentative of women's participation in military violence as the passive assistant trope. She needed to kill primarily for political reasons, as volunteers say they did but, considering James Wood's argument that "things that can be correctly said of persons can also be said of them [characters]" (2009, 93), I recognised Caoilainn should also be subject to emotional/personal reasons for killing, as real people potentially could. Furthermore, Linda Anderson notes the "conflicts within character" are what "make our characters credible and complex" (2006, 75) and I responded to such creative writing theory by establishing, within Caoilainn's emotional range, complex reactions to her military activism. The sniper scene therefore complicates Caoilainn's representation as a killer whilst still reflecting the reality that women did operate competently as snipers at various points in the Irish conflict.

Margaret Skinnider's account of being a sniper during the Easter Rising was the initial inspiration for my sniper scene. Skinnider said "I ... was assigned a loophole through which to shoot ... more than once I saw the man I aimed at fall" (1917, 137). Caoilainn is equally successful. Another IRA woman, Geraldine Crawford, who was an active service volunteer during the 1970s, confirmed that she also took part in a sniper attack:

I had a rifle and I was standing in the Sufflok Road, near Andersontwon. There was another girl with me and three fellows, but I was the only one with a gun. It was the first thing I had done. My group had gone round first to see if it was all clear, then I was going to take a snipe at the army barracks. (MacDonald 1991, 160)

Additionally, Brendan Hughes, an IRA volunteer who was at one stage Operations Officer, recalled an incident of a young girl being involved in a Belfast gun battle: "there was a wee girl ... a member of the Official IRA<sup>15</sup>, Patricia McKay you called her. She actually had an Armalite ... She was game enough to come out and do it" (Moloney 2010, 84-85). Furthermore, Sean MacStiofain, at one time Chief-of-Staff for the Provisional IRA noted "some of the best shots I ever knew were women" (MacStiofain 1975, 218). These accounts confirmed that Caoilainn's undertaking the role of sniper was credible and helped inform my writing of the scene.

<sup>15</sup> The Official IRA was the faction who voted in favour of recognising the partition governments of Stormont, Westminster and Dublin in 1970. Those members who voted against recognising the partition governments and subsequently broke away established themselves as the Provisional IRA.

As well as exploring her capabilities as a combatant and feelings about killing, the sniper scene also juxtaposes the private sphere of home with the public sphere of warfare, a feature of the Irish conflict. Several IRA volunteers commented on how the war invaded people's homes. Cathleen describes how her aunt's house was damaged by British soldiers during a raid: "They deliberately wrecked her new lino – danced all over it and laughed as they were doing it" (Fairweather, McDonough and McFadyean 1984, 236). The sniper scene at Mrs Murphy's flat is one example of how I portrayed the private/public dichotomy of the war that volunteers discussed. Caoilainn is served tea in a china cup while preparing to engage the enemy by firing on him through Mrs Murphy's net curtained window. The chintzy description is deliberately juxtaposed with references to Caoilainn assembling/disassembling her Armalite rifle to emphasise how, because the conflict entered their homes, many women felt compelled to participate in the fighting.

David Lodge notes that coincidence in novels is "all too obviously a structural device" (2011, 150), one I employed for the sniper scene to establish conflicting motivations for Caoilainn's actions. Setting the scene on the anniversary of Aiden's death, my use of coincidence offered Caoilainn a personal, as well as political, reason for killing the sniper. Interior monologue reveals Caoilainn's thoughts about this shooting's personal nature because I deemed her admitting it externally would be inconsistent with her characterisation and something IRA volunteers would be unlikely to do. To avoid representing her as wholly motivated by revenge, I first referenced her military duty then revealed what is really driving her to shoot: "the hungry gnawing inside me that wants him dead and someone else aching with emptiness makes me know it's not duty or patriotism or faith with the Cause that will have me pull the trigger today". Wood argues that a metaphor "floats a rival reality" (2009, 153) the purpose of which is "speeding us, imaginatively, towards a new meaning" (*ibidem*, 154) and I hoped the metaphor "hungry gnawing" would speed readers to better understand Caoilainn's grief by comparing her emotional pain to a rival physical one. Caoilainn also says "I can't not do this, for all the right, and the wrong, reasons", the double negative emphatically conveying her obligation to shoot while implying Caoilainn knows this is both a legitimate act of war and personal act of reprisal. Finally, I brought Caoilainn up close to the killing to demonstrate her emotional involvement with this enemy death. This is done in the section beginning "The bullet flies from the muzzle. I fly with it become it" where Caoilainn pictures herself as the bullet as it kills the soldier. Having her imagine herself thus, feeling the impact as a "jolt", a verb suggesting pain, reiterates her personal connection to and reason for this killing. Writing this section without punctuation further helps to emphasize the chaos of her emotions. By depicting Caoilainn, here and elsewhere in the novel, as emotionally *and* professionally motivated I strove to challenge the stereotypically binary portrayals of women's military violence by creating a representation including both, not either/or.

### 5. Conclusion

As my introduction discussed, my practice-led creative writing project aimed to write a compelling novel offering a credible fictional portrayal of the experience of being an IRA woman while challenging misrepresentations of such women in Troubles fiction. Gallagher, Lubelska and Ryan argue: “new approaches are required to enable feminists to interpret the past in a way which means that women are not only visibilised but that their roles as actors and agents are more fully understood” (2001, 4). Creative writing research could, I feel, be one new approach. Reading Troubles novels highlighted the extent to which female paramilitary protagonists are confined to misrepresentative stereotyped portrayals that bear little resemblance to the reported reality. Conducting research that revealed the roles played by IRA women enabled me to understand the reality of being an IRA woman. I was then able, through the writing of a novel, to explore ways of conveying the diverse experiences of IRA women that offered a more realistic fictional representation of them and their lives.

John Mullan suggests that fiction has a “unique capacity to live on in, even form, our imaginations” (2008, 4) and, if it may form our imaginations, perhaps it has a responsibility to do so with some accuracy, particularly when it appears to imitate reality as realist novels do. Furthermore, Lodge argues: “We read fiction ... to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of the world” (2011, 10). It is possible that some people’s only knowledge of particular experiences comes from fictional accounts. While readers know they are reading fiction, it is understandable if some believe fiction reflects reality, especially when that fiction is a work of realism seemingly based on facts. Furthermore, Monika Fludernik says: “Narrative texts create the illusion that the fictional world ... really does exist, and in the precise form in which it is described” (2009, 56). Considering these views, I felt my project had both an opportunity and a responsibility to challenge fictional misrepresentations of IRA women. By presenting an alternative portrayal of female paramilitary protagonists that reflected the information uncovered by factual research and by using writing methods I judged would best convey that information in a fictional narrative I have, hopefully, produced, in *Herself Alone in Orange Rain*, a text that offers such a challenge.

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