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"I was bullied in a way that was so horrific because it wasn't [just] by a group, wasn't [just] by one person, it was by the [whole] school"<sup>1</sup>

*THE ENEMY ACROSS THE BARRICADES: GAY MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE TROUBLES*

*Dedicated to Kieran Burns, 1961 – 2017*

Dr. Anthony Ó Donnghaile - Drummond,

From 2004 – 2009 I lived in Northern Ireland whilst I was completing my PhD.<sup>2</sup> I resided in Belfast for three years, then in Derry/Londonderry (euphemistically referred to as stroke city!). As a mature student then aged 44 I had reservations about leaving England for NI. On arrival, however, I was delighted to find a burgeoning post-'Troubles' gay scene in Belfast. I was struck by the way in which gay Catholics and Protestants engaged with each other seemingly unproblematically in gay venues.<sup>3</sup>

Relatively little is known about gay men's experiences during the 'Troubles.' Having heard anecdotes concerning cross-community relationships between gay men during the five years that I lived in NI, I wanted to know more. In November 2022 I was viewing a gay dating site when the profile of a 42 year old, gay male academic from NI appeared. Unusually for a such a site, under the 'about me' section of his profile he detailed his research specialism: queer studies. I got 'chatting' to him and as he was in the locale we met up for a beer that night and chewed the cud about gay men and Northern Ireland. Whilst I already knew some gay men in NI that I could interview, his interest in queer studies and offer to introduce me to some of his contacts sparked the beginning of a six month series of dialogues with 15 gay men aged between 34 –77 residing in or from Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> With regards to this expansive age-range the aim was to investigate and reflect upon the impact that the Peace Process has had on younger members of the group, given that many matured during the latter stages/end of the conflict. The forthcoming journal article on this project is to be called: *The Enemy Across the Barricades: Gay Men's Experiences of The Troubles.*<sup>5</sup>

The main aim of the study was to chart the impact of the 'Troubles' and of criminalisation on these men; men who to date have largely not had their voices heard. The impact of the 'Troubles' on some participants is conspicuous. What is also unmistakable is the way in

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from interview with 40 year old 'protestant' interviewee reflecting on his teenage years at school.

<sup>2</sup> The PhD was funded by DELNI, undertaken at Ulster University: Anthony Drummond, Irish Travellers and the Criminal Justice Systems across the Island of Ireland, 28 Oct 2008, accessed Sept 28, 2023, [British Library EThOS: Irish travellers and the criminal justice systems across the Island of Ireland. \(bl.uk\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> For a more nuanced reflection on this issue see: Claire Hackett, The Legacy of the Troubles and the Harms Inflicted on LGBTQIA+ People, 26 Sept 2023 accessed Sept 15, 2023, [History Club September 2023 Claire Hackett SD 480p - YouTube](#)

<sup>4</sup> The research was funded by CeASR Unit 20 funding Leeds Beckett.

<sup>5</sup> This will also hopefully be followed by a book on the research.

which, due to living in a society dominated by heterosexual ‘norms’<sup>6</sup> these males have experienced (and at times continue to undergo) formal and informal social control governed by those standards. Globally formal and informal social control is a given for LGBTs. As stated by van der Toorn *et al* it is experienced as a ‘daily affair’: heterosexual norms are ‘deeply ingrained in how people are socialized.’<sup>7</sup> Yet what really intrigued me was the belief held by one 77 year old interviewee that during the ‘Troubles’ gay men were viewed by the majority in NI as ‘the enemy’.<sup>8</sup> This quote is where the title of the research project derived from.

Whilst civil war raged in Northern Ireland for 30 years, the idea that gay men were perceived as the enemy implies a cross community consensus that gay/bisexual Catholic and Protestant men weren’t to be trusted, perhaps viewed as a threat to security.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the notion that gay men could be viewed as a common enemy appears rather extreme in comparison to the actions of paramilitaries and those of some members of the British Army/security services at times (some of whom would also of course have been gay/bisexual).<sup>10</sup> However, in a period of violent conflict where communities were divided on religious grounds it should come as no surprise that there may well have been accentuated distrust of the ‘other’ within one’s own ‘community’. Given the voices of those in positions of power such as Ian Paisley actively encouraging homophobia in his cries of “Save Ulster from Sodomy”<sup>11</sup> and later, the post ‘Troubles’ rant of MP Iris Robinson denouncing homosexuality as an abomination<sup>12</sup> - my job was to discern the impact of such damaging rhetoric under the guise of heterosexual norms on these men pre, during and post conflict.

Interviews began in January 2023 at the Queer Museum<sup>13</sup> in London with one Catholic and one Protestant man from Northern Ireland before engaging with all but one of the remaining contacts in Belfast.<sup>14</sup> Whilst snowball<sup>15</sup> methods were used to find other willing participants, I also placed an advert for my research under my personal profile on

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<sup>6</sup> For example, though there has been some progress lately, largely, as Louis Georges-Tin states: ‘Heterosexuality is celebrated – in films and television, in pop songs and opera, in literature and on greeting cards – and at the same time it is taken for granted’. Georges-Tin, ‘When, how, and why our society began to celebrate the heterosexual couple.’ Sept 23, 2012, Accessed: 25/11/23, <https://lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/when-how-and-why-our-society-began-to-celebrate-the-heterosexual-couple/>

<sup>7</sup> Jozanneke van der Toorn, Ruthie Pliskin and Thekla Morgenroth, Not quite over the rainbow: the unrelenting and insidious nature of heteronormative ideology, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* (2020) Volume 34, August, Pages 160-165.

<sup>8</sup> I had asked him: did he perceive Catholics to be more/less inclined to tolerate gay men than Protestants?

<sup>9</sup> Not overlooking the fact that there are also some gay men from other cultures/communities living in NI.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the story of John Lyttle and his recall of a relationship with a paramilitary male in the UDA in: Bill Rolston, ‘Children of the Revolution’, *The Lives of Sons and Daughters of Activists in Northern Ireland*, (Guidhall Press, Derry, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Rory Carroll, ‘New DUP leader says sorry for party members’ past homophobia’, *The Guardian*, Jul 2, 2021, accessed: Nov 2, 2023, [New DUP leader says sorry for party members’ past homophobia | Democratic Unionist party \(DUP\) | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jul/02/new-dup-leader-says-sorry-for-party-members-past-homophobia)

<sup>12</sup> No author, ‘DUP’s Iris Robinson: Gays are more vile than child abusers’ *Belfast Telegraph*, Jul 21, 2008, accessed: Nov 2, 2023, [DUP’s Iris Robinson: Gays are more vile than child abusers | Belfast Telegraph | BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/ireland/dup-s-iris-robinson-gays-are-more-vile-than-child-abusers-1.1111111)

<sup>13</sup> The Queer Museum kindly offered me a free space within their museum to engage in these two interviews. Leeds Beckett University made a donation to the museum. It should be noted that whilst christened either Catholic or Protestant most interviewees no longer defined themselves in religious terms.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewees were born and grew up in various parts of Northern Ireland.

<sup>15</sup> An academic term for the way in which one primary contact will lead to others by recommendation.

two gay dating websites: Grindr, and, Scruff. This elicited only three responses.<sup>16</sup> However, one of these, a 41 year old male echoed Katherine Fobear's claims about transitioning societies.<sup>17</sup> Fobear asserted that 'homophobia and anti-queer violence is often ignored or placed outside of other state and local directed violences.' The result, in her view, is that 'sexual and gender minorities' are ostracized 'from transitional justice processes' thereby allowing for 'further violence and violations against sexual and gender minorities to be committed in post-conflict periods.' The 41 year old anonymous male typed the following message into the chat facility: "I'm a voice of Ireland. Make it [the voices of the men in your research] heard." Yet when I asked would he like to participate in the research, his reply very much evidenced Fobear's arguments:

Don't think I'd be brave enough...wish I could say otherwise...but that's the honest reply. Gay people still don't feel comfortable/or secure enough to speak. That in itself says a lot. That's my lot....gonna run on here...Thank you for the work you are doing.<sup>18</sup>

For those that were brave enough to speak with me, every participant underscored the ways in which they had experienced social control via for example, families, religious organisations, in relation to accommodation, schools, by the media, in the rhetoric of politicians, in the work-place, by medics, and, as a consequence of law. Some also mentioned being controlled by paramilitaries in addition to being subjected to scrutiny by police and to discrimination as a consequence of anti-gay legislation<sup>19</sup> and policies.<sup>20</sup> It became evident, moreover, that all interviewees suffered from minority stress.<sup>21</sup> Homophobia acts as a catalyst for minority stress and an outcome of untrammelled stress is that LGBTQs are said to be at a higher risk of developing PTSD.<sup>22</sup> PTSD (in part, if not in whole) was reflected in answers to my questions posed on mental health. For example a third of the interviewees had

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<sup>16</sup> Potential interviewees were directed from my Grindr and Scruff profiles to my Twitter account and invited to contact me there in a message to continue the discussion off Grindr/Scruff.

<sup>17</sup> K. Fobear, "Queering Truth Commissions", *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6, no. 1 (March 2014): 51–68, cited in M. Duggan, "Lost in transition? Sexuality and justice in post-conflict Northern Ireland", *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (Summer, 2017):159–180, at 166.

<sup>18</sup> This chat occurred in December 2022. I asked could I use what he had typed in my research. He answered yes "so long as you don't out me" meaning that he didn't want me to identify his user-name on the site.

<sup>19</sup> For example the ban on LGBTs and adoption in NI was only lifted in 2013: Niall McCracken, BBC News, Same-sex adoption: 'I never thought I'd be a parent in Northern Ireland', Oct 27·2023, accessed Nov 11, 2023, [Same-sex adoption: 'I never thought I'd be a parent in Northern Ireland' - BBC News](#) It should be noted that most liberalisation of LGBT rights in Northern Ireland has been achieved under direct rule by the Government of the United Kingdom.

<sup>20</sup> Until 12/08/21 the ban on gay/bi males giving blood was one example of a discriminatory policy faced by gay men in NI (and across the UK at other periods) Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service, Fair Project, Aug 16, 2021, accessed: Nov 12, 2023, [FAIR Project – Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service \(hscni.net\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> The impact of minority stress is made clear in an article I wrote concerning equality law in NI and the rest of the UK: Anthony Drummond, 'LGBTQs and LAW'S Violence Within a Heteronormative Landscape,' (*Front. Sociol.*, 09 March 2021 Sec. Gender, Sex and Sexualities Volume 6 – 2021) accessed Oct 1, 2023, [Frontiers | LGBTQs and LAW'S Violence Within a Heteronormative Landscape \(frontiersin.org\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> The US Dept of Veteran Affairs states that: 'Minority stressors include..discrimination and violent victimization, as well as...Internalized stigma, expectations or fears of rejection, and identity concealment' adding that: LGBTQ+ individuals are nearly 4 times more likely to experience violent assault than their heterosexual counterparts. As a result, LGBTQ+ people are at higher risk of developing PTSD, see: Sarah E. Valentine, Nicholas A. Livingston, Anna C. Salomaa and Jillian C. Shipherd, Trauma, Discrimination and PTSD Among LGBTQ+ People, accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov 2023, [Trauma, Discrimination and PTSD Among LGBTQ+ People - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#)

something to say (entirely unprompted) about suicide/suicidal ideation.<sup>23</sup> Thus, I feel that the main contribution this research will make in terms of understanding the impact of the conflict on gay men (and of course others in the LGBTQ community) is to underscore the influence of minority stress as a consequence of living in a society in transition from conflict to relative peace yet dominated by heterosexual ‘norms’. This may also be relevant of course to comparing/contrasting and understanding the situation of LGBTQs in states where heterosexual norms dominate, and, conflict exists such as Palestine<sup>24</sup> and others that have undergone major changes such as Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the social control of gay men (and others in the LGBTQ community) occurred and continues to some extent to happen within a relatively small part of the island of Ireland: NI. This is not to deny the impact of occasional extreme acts of violence suffered by LGBTQs in other parts of the island of Ireland<sup>26</sup> and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> However, this is an area where some communities remain relatively tight-knit and as evidenced in the lived experiences of some interviewees, in the worst-case scenarios, they clearly remain under the unofficial rule/influence of paramilitary organisations. Consequently, gay men’s experiences in NI appear markedly different from those of others elsewhere on the island of Ireland as well as across the UK. Whilst some anecdotes were humorous in their telling, overall, the voices of these men cataloguing the many harms wrought on them demand to be heard.

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<sup>23</sup> The US Dept of Veteran Affairs caution that: ‘Substance use, PTSD, and depression are independent risk factors for suicidality; however, the extent to which these factors interact to predict suicidality is unclear.’

<sup>24</sup> BBC News (2022) ‘Gay Palestinian Ahmad Abu Marhia beheaded in West Bank’ accessed: Oct 2, 2023 [Gay Palestinian Ahmad Abu Marhia beheaded in West Bank - BBC News](#)

<sup>25</sup> Outright International: LGBT People in Afghanistan after the Taliban Takeover, Aug 15, 2021, accessed Nov 2, 2023, [https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover?gclid=Cj0KCCQjwJkqBhCaARIsAN\\_yS\\_m8sMXysmJSHK9ikgSNpMyUrF\\_mgl4FxIsVURNniZmC3YJaH6rdy4caAvyVEALw\\_wcB](https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover?gclid=Cj0KCCQjwJkqBhCaARIsAN_yS_m8sMXysmJSHK9ikgSNpMyUrF_mgl4FxIsVURNniZmC3YJaH6rdy4caAvyVEALw_wcB)

<sup>26</sup> Alison O’Riordan, Oct 23, 2023, ‘Yusef Palani Jailed for Life for the Murder of two Men’ accessed Nov 22, 2023, [Yusef Palani jailed for life for murder of two men \(breakingnews.ie\)](#)

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Weaver, ‘Two men injured after another homophobic attack in south London’, Aug 25, 2023 accessed Nov 3, 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/25/two-men-injured-another-homophobic-attack-south-london>