

## LESBIAN AND GAY VISIONS OF IRELAND

### Towards the Twenty-first Century

Ireland is at a critical stage in its socio-political history, not least because of the encouraging prospect of an end to the war in the North, but also because of the improved position of lesbians and gays. The Republic's Law Reform Act of 1993 was the result of a campaign which established an age of consent equal with heterosexuals, and, by default, a recognition by the state of a lesbian presence in Ireland. More recently the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Unfair Dismissals Act guarantees rights for lesbian and gay workers. Abroad ILGO's fight to march in the St Patrick's Day Parade in New York City forced worldwide attention on a redefinition of Irishness, while at home, President Robinson welcomed lesbians and gays into the Áras for the first time.

These events have resulted in a lively public discussion of lesbian and gay issues in Ireland. In this volume we present a range of voices of those who have been at the centre of the changes that have occurred for Irish lesbians and gays. The writers engage in a process of reflection on their work, their involvement in the lesbian and gay community, and their envisioning of a future Ireland.

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Photograph by Gavin Harrison

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we need to remember the lessons of past decades. If we ignore our history we are doomed to repeat it.

One major event in gay history, the Stonewall Riots, needs revision. The anniversary celebrations which fuelled the Gay Pride movement internationally have concentrated too much on gay males. It is as if the riot happened in isolation, as if a few drag queens suddenly decided they had had enough and were going to start a revolution. The Stonewall riots undoubtedly did have a major effect on the lives of the gay men involved, but they also concerned straight men, lesbian and straight women, latinos and those of mixed race. A whole range of social minorities had suffered harassment and decided to fight back. We need to appreciate the significance of this if we are to place our concerns in a broader political context. We need to keep these connections and build on them, so that lesbian women and straight women, gay men and straight men, can build a future together where:

there is only one religion, the religion of love,  
there is only one caste, the caste of humanity,  
there is only one language the language of the heart.

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## *The Tenderness of the Peoples<sup>1</sup>*

Kieran Rose

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Hey Ronnie Reagan, I'm Black and I'm pagan,  
I'm gay and I'm Left and I'm free.  
I'm an unfundamentalist environmentalist,  
Hey Ronnie don't bother me.

John Maguire<sup>2</sup>

OUR community, and indeed this country, is now at a critical moment. Nineteen ninety-five is the twenty-first anniversary of the founding of the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM). The law reforms of 1993 and the forthcoming equality legislation mark the end of an era. Most, if not all, of the legal programme we set out to achieve many years ago is, or soon will be, in place.

These fundamental and radical reforms which established our equal citizenship in turn create many challenges and opportunities. We cannot now claim that progress is not possible in this country or that our movement is without any power to effect change. We could, of course, squander these opportunities in self-doubt, complacency or factionalism, but there is now a great challenge for us to bring together an optimistic, feasible and principled programme of community development for the next twenty years. There is an international dimension to such a programme.

We can now develop a set of policies and priorities which will provide a radical improvement in the daily and practical lives of lesbians and gay men and also contribute significantly to the betterment of the wider society. In particular, as equal citizens, we now

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have the responsibility to make our contribution to the peace process. Peace within and between these islands is too important a matter to be left to a few political leaders.

It has often been said that there can be no peace without justice. The fact that the killings have stopped is a wonderful achievement. But we know that a society whose structures produce intolerable levels of poverty, unemployment and oppression, whose structures destroy the lives of thousands of people (including lesbians and gay men) cannot be at peace with itself. As Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin, put it on the eve of the cease-fire, 'There must be equality of treatment, equality of opportunity and parity of esteem across the entire political, economic, cultural, social, legal and security spectrum'. Whether he intended to or not, Gerry Adams has presented us with a programme for the rights of lesbians and gay men as well as other disadvantaged groups. The demands of the lesbian and gay community, Travellers, people with disabilities, and others, for equality of treatment, equality of opportunity and parity of esteem must be incorporated into any peace settlement.

The immediate contribution we could make to the peace process is to involve ourselves in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, perhaps along with groups from Northern Ireland and Britain. (GLEN has recently made a submission to the Forum.) The war has blighted both islands and, besides the deaths and injuries, it has resulted in a pressure on democratic rights and a significant increase in oppressive legislation, which is directly and indirectly inimical to the interests of lesbians and gay men.

There are few models for a lesbian and gay contribution to a peace process. This reminds us again that while the lesbian and gay movement is quintessentially an international movement it tends, because of the unequal world we live in, to be dominated by the politics, culture and priorities of advanced capitalist countries and, in particular, of their metropolitan centres such as New York and London.

In examining the complexities and contradictions resulting from this domination we need to look at some issues relating to colonialism and neo-colonialism, and also to look at the current effects of imperialism – military, economic and cultural. Words such as 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' have become unfashionable and

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clichéd. But these concepts are necessary in any analysis of the reality of the world in which we live. At this point I would like to make clear that I am presenting a point of view for discussion and that I do not intend to be dogmatic or dismissive of other viewpoints. I am mindful of Edward Said's reminder in his illuminating study, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that

In our wish to make ourselves heard, we tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife. (Said, 1993, p. xxiii)

Clearly much of the impetus for, and the ideology of, the modern lesbian and gay movement has come from metropolitan centres. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was set up in New York in 1969 shortly after the Stonewall Riots. This radical activism soon spread to London, where a GLF was set up in 1970. There were reverberations in Ireland, and in 1974 the IGRM was established in Dublin.

However, in relation to many basic issues – historical, economic, social and cultural – Ireland is, arguably, almost the polar opposite to those situations in which the modern lesbian and gay movement was formed. Even if we are to understand our psyche and sexuality, let alone devise a feasible political project, we need to understand the historical forces shaping us. Joe Lee (1989) has written of the 'traumatic shocks' of nineteenth-century Ireland, not only colonization but famine, depopulation, language loss and religious revival. John Waters (1994) reminds us that the Great Famine is but three generations away and that its effects are to be seen in 'the cravenness of our dependencies, in our fear of self-belief, in the culture of amnesia in which we live our lives, in our willingness to imitate anything rather than think for ourselves'.

Traumatic shocks continued in the twentieth century: the War of Independence, the Civil War, Partition and the 'carnival of reaction'<sup>3</sup> which followed. The economic and social failure of the new state, according to Sean Lemass, a government minister at the

time, 'created a situation in which the very disappearance of the race was a possibility that could not be ignored'. The crisis continued so that by the 1950s there was a sense of 'ignominious defeat'. Meanwhile the Western capitalist world was booming and engaging in significant domestic social reform. According to some commentators, the disillusionment of the 1980s in Ireland harkened back to the open despair of the 1950s (Breen *et al.*, 1990).

So, if the political projects developed in other countries in such radically different circumstances were transferred to Ireland, unthinking and undigested, without regard to the particular problems and opportunities that existed here, they would have been almost bound to have failed. In fact, I would say that perhaps the greatest achievement of the Irish lesbian and gay movement over the past twenty years is the development of an indigenous, organic political analysis and practice appropriate to the particular Irish circumstances, including the capacity to assess the usefulness of the latest lesbian and gay initiatives coming from metropolitan centres.

A core element of our strategy was a rejection of the once prevalent notion that Irish society was inherently reactionary on socio-sexual issues and that progressive change would only happen under the influence of external forces such as the European Union. For us, real and positive traditional values arose from the struggle against colonialism and for civil, religious and economic rights. We could activate them. We certainly were not going to allow reactionary forces using New Right ideology, tactics and money from the USA and Britain to hijack the deeply felt values of most Irish people. Carol Coulter (1993) makes a similar point regarding a vibrant but hidden tradition of Irish feminist politics which, since the nineteenth century, has had 'a profound, if not always amicable, relationship with Ireland's nationalist tradition'.

In addition we were not interested in just being 'right'. We deliberately set about winning a majority from all sectors of Irish society for our radical but feasible programme of equality. The building of coalitions, initially with other disadvantaged groups and organizations such as the trade unions, was an important strategy. As Bob Cant (1995), the Scottish gay activist, put it, 'Ghetto politics had no part in this scenario'.

At the height of our lobbying effort on law reform (between 1992 and 1993) we were also preparing a detailed research proposal for the state agency Combat Poverty. This study<sup>4</sup> examines the processes of discrimination that increase the risk of poverty for lesbians and gay men and that further disadvantage those already living in poverty. In carrying out this research we were surprised that we were not able to find evidence of similar projects in countries where the lesbian and gay movement has more resources and research facilities at its disposal. A central recommendation of this study is that we should prioritize community development, and that these efforts should be integrated into the existing Community Development Programme which is based on a (problematic) partnership between disadvantaged communities and the state.

This evolution of appropriate political projects is not inevitable. For example, writing about Brazil – another post-colonial, peripheral country – Joao Trevisan (1986) comments that

Its cultural élite copies the latest fashions from Paris or New York, but is seldom inclined towards real change. As a result, modernity in Brazil is easily reduced to a phenomenon that simply follows the latest fashion. Gay liberation has developed along the same lines. If it arrived in Brazil at least a decade late and then entered a cul-de-sac, this is largely due to the basic conservatism, insensitivity and self-indulgence of a cultural élite which feeds on fashions in order to recycle itself.

In explaining the many defeats in this country in the past decades in terms of abortion, divorce and contraception, John Waters 'Living at the Crossroads' (1991) makes a similar point about an élite in Ireland, which he describes as 'Dublin 4', and which he says became synonymous with such issues:

It did not seem to occur to them that the people of Ireland might be more open to change and progress if from time to time they were asked for an opinion or were made to feel entitled to participate in the creation of this promised land. ... Dublin 4, however, had got used to losing, and perhaps

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even a little in love with it. It derived so much pleasure out of being able to berate the rest of the country for its backwardness that it had excluded the possibility of the entire country being ever able to move forward together. It was prepared to go on losing, so long as this allowed it to feel superior.

One of the basic concepts brought forward by lesbian and gay liberation was 'self-oppression' and, in this description by John Waters, I think one can see elements of such 'self-oppression', identification with the values of the dominant group and rejection of one's own positive traditions. The condescension of 'Dublin 4' echoes that of the English liberal establishment, which seems to regard this country as a charming, backward, priest-ridden and sometimes threatening place beset by the anachronistic politics of nationalism. Discordant facts are either forgotten or else, as in the case of the equality-based gay law reform and anti-discrimination legislation, regarded as merely another peculiarity of this quaint state, not requiring serious political reflection.

Tasmanian gay activist Rodney Croome makes a related point about Australia:

Tasmania has been the nation's whipping post for 200 years. The place where Australians project all those things Australians don't like about themselves: their racism, their homophobia, their environmental pillage. The mainland media tries to portray Tasmania as being a backward place populated by rednecks to make the mainlanders feel a bit more enlightened about themselves. (Personal communication to Galbraith)

A conflict then arises because these metropolitan areas are also the source of the dominant gay and lesbian imagery, a conflict which must be resolved, because as he says: 'I can't be free as a gay man unless I'm free in that place that has shaped my sexual identity, and that place is Tasmania' (Hand, 1994). The ways in which we construct our identities as lesbians and gay men are inextricably bound up with our strategies for political action.

The problem of adapting ideologies and strategies for change developed in advanced capitalist countries is not unique to the

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lesbian and gay movement. The Irish labour and trades union movement has faced similar dilemmas since the nineteenth century. One labour historian (Foster, 1990) recently put the question or paradox as follows:

Irish immigrants in England, Scotland and Wales played a leading role in Chartism, in new unionism and in the rise of socialist politics at the end of the nineteenth century. In Ireland itself, agrarian conflict repeatedly produced mass movements of epic proportions. Yet organized labour in Ireland achieved very little. (Foster, 1990, p. 67)

Different reasons have been put forward to explain this apparent contradiction. One answer relates to what has been described by Emmet O'Connor as the 'mental colonization of contemporary labour' (Howell, 1993, p. 85), whereby the Irish movement adopted the British model of labour ideology and strategy, one that proved particularly unsuitable to Irish circumstances. This has been described by Howell as 'the endorsement of a damaging form of industrial organization and the abdication from the most vital political issue of all [the National Question] moreover one that had been regarded hitherto as a labour question' (Howell, 1993, p. 64). The subsequent creation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) in the early years of this century was the first step away from that 'disastrous option', and this initiative began 'a process of modernization more relevant to native conditions'.<sup>5</sup>

This is not at all a call for a narrow xenophobic politics. It has been said of James Larkin<sup>6</sup> that 'he had always believed in the solidarity of labour the world over, but it might be that the best way to bring workers into line with the workers of the world was to organise them on Irish lines first'.

Similar problems beset the international women's movement. These are discussed in a recent article by Ethel Crowley (1991) entitled 'Third world women and the inadequacies of Western feminism'. One of her basic points is that 'Freedom certainly does not mean the same thing to all the women of the world'. She continues:

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The issues around which women's demonstrations of dissent are organized are very different throughout the world and while western feminists have sometimes provided a blueprint for protest, the final plans are necessarily tailored to suit the specific needs of women world-wide.

She points out that the risks arising from overt revolutionary action by women in many Third World countries may range from social ridicule to torture to death. She describes various forms of resistance and includes a delightful quote from James C. Scott (author of *Weapons of the Weak*). He describes the everyday resistance of peasants as

The ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth ... To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does 'between revolts' to defend its interests as best it can.

Writing of the 1980s, Noam Chomsky (Said, 1993, p. 343) stated that:

the North-South conflict will not subside, and new forms of domination will have to be devised to ensure that privileged segments of Western industrial society maintain substantial control over global resources, human and material, and benefit disproportionately from this control. ... It is an absolute requirement for the Western system of ideology that a vast gulf be established between the civilized West, with its traditional commitment to human dignity, liberty, and self-determination, and the barbaric brutality of those who for some reason – perhaps defective genes – fail to appreciate the depth of this historic commitment.

The conviction that the imperialist countries are more advanced and therefore entitled to dominate less powerful countries

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is a constant colonialist theme. Writing in 1910 Jules Harmand, the French Commissaire-general in Indochina observed:

The basic legitimization of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. (Caherty *et al.*, 1992)

In the sixteenth century Edmund Spenser argued that Gaelic Brehon Law should be forbidden and the Irish must be subjugated by force so that they could be brought 'from their delight of licentiousness and barbarism into love of goodness and civility' (Curtis, 1984). Part of this civility was the criminalization of homosexuality, which was regarded non-judgementally under Gaelic law as merely a reason for divorce. Centuries later, according to Edward Said, even those elements of a (metropolitan) society we have long considered to be progressive were, so far as empire was concerned, uniformly retrograde: 'Eurocentrism penetrated to the core of the workers' movement, the women's movement, the avant-garde arts movement, leaving no one of significance untouched.' (Said, 1993, p. 268)

There is an unfortunate tendency among some gay people in Western countries to ignore the brutal realities of history and contemporary politics. I have heard activists divide the world into three categories in terms of lesbian and gay rights: at the top are countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands; next come countries such as Ireland; and finally, at the bottom, are countries such as Russia and Iran. There is, of course, a strong element of truth in such a description, but, besides being insensitive and insulting, it ignores the fact that the so-called progressive countries have often worked to destabilize the economies, the social structures, the cultures and the democracies of the supposedly 'backward' countries. The heroic and ultimately victorious struggle of the USSR against fascism is of course elided.

Iran is another prime example of this tunnel vision. A leftist and popular government of the 1950s was ousted by Western forces when their oil companies' interests were challenged. What followed

might be described as Iran's 'carnival of reaction'. The brutal dictatorship of the Shah was installed and given the weapons of war and torture to oppress the Iranian people so that the economic and geo-political interests of the West could be supreme. The Shah was eventually overthrown by the combined forces of secular leftists and the fundamentalists led by Khomeini, with the latter finally winning control. Adding insult to injury and ignoring history, Iran is now demonized by the West.

However, I would suggest that it is precisely the struggles for justice and freedom of people in Iran, Nicaragua, South Africa and other beleaguered countries which will build a world order that will respect the human dignity of all people, including lesbians and gay men. Commenting on the cultural resistance of writers such as Yeats and Synge, Declan Kiberd (Caherty, 1992) writes:

Central to all this was a healthy refusal to play the victim's part, and a generous insistence that the deformities visited by colonialism upon the Irish were as nothing compared to the repressions suffered by the British, rulers as well as ruled. In saving themselves the Irish would also save their erstwhile masters, and ultimately the whole colonial world.

Some forms of intervention such as military action are obvious. However, there are more subtle and covert forms of domination and exploitation, for example through such organizations as GATT, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Structural Adjustment Programmes implemented by the IMF and the World Bank are further impoverishing Third World countries and directly undermine the life chances of lesbians and gay men (*New Internationalist*, 1994). In his excellent international study of HIV and AIDS, Dennis Altman (1994) quotes the Inter-Church Coalition statement that the 'single greatest factor' contributing to the poor health of the developing world is the World Bank's emphasis on the diversion of resources to debt servicing and the development of export industries.

In Ireland we have long argued that economic rights and independence are of vital importance to lesbians and gay men, and

that these right-wing economic programmes directly threaten such economic autonomy both in developed countries but more severely in Third World countries. The new 'global economy', we are continually warned by right-wing commentators, demands that the gains made by the labour movement in terms of wages and conditions of work, social welfare support and legal protections must be cut back if we are to compete with 'new low cost producers'. (I have often been struck by the irony that the gains we have slowly achieved in terms of labour protection legislation and trade union support could be so quickly undermined by resurgent and harsh capitalist imperatives.) This economic domination and exploitation in the absence of a strong socialist alternative encourages a fundamentalist and xenophobic reaction, which also directly threatens the lives of women, gay people and other minorities particularly, but not exclusively, in Third World countries such as Algeria.

We know now in Ireland that there can be no peace without justice, but we need to contribute to this perspective at an international level if we are, as lesbians and gay men, to have any secure future. I am not calling for any grandiose plan of action, merely that we should make a realistic contribution from our perspective, which includes colonization, a struggle for self-determination and an economically peripheral status.

We have already made a significant contribution to the development of the lesbian and gay communities and movements internationally. Perhaps most importantly our emigrants have helped build the communities and movements of London, New York and other metropolitan centres. But these high levels of emigration continually undermine our communities at home. An economic study of Northern Ireland argues that emigration is one of the processes by which peripheral areas remain disadvantaged and by which core areas retain their economic and political dominance. Emigration involves losses or costs to the exporting area and considerable gains and subsidies to the importing area (Dignan, Haase and Healy, 1990).

The two successful Irish cases at the European Court of Human Rights set the international precedents. Interestingly, the next major precedent has been established by another peripheral island, with the success of the Tasmanian case at the UN Committee

of Human Rights. The Irish Section of Amnesty International lobbied very effectively to have Amnesty adopt lesbians and gay men as prisoners of conscience. The Irish delegate at the UN Economic and Social Committee also argued persuasively for the official recognition of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). It seems that Ireland's status as a post-colonial and Catholic country makes our support for the rights of lesbians and gay men more acceptable to countries who would otherwise be resistant to what might be seen as the cultural and historical insensitivities of the USA or Northern Europe.

In 1994 the then Minister for Justice, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, put on record that lesbians and gay men persecuted because of their sexuality would be granted asylum under new refugee legislation. On a lighter note, Jeff Dudgeon has written of our equality-based law reform that

It will be both a spur and a magnet in Whitehall if the recognition grows that the UK has been upstaged by a new Ireland that is no longer given a fool's pardon for Catholic excess, but can instead swank around Brussels with a modern image.

What can our relatively small lesbian and gay movement do to advance the rights of lesbians and gay men internationally? Given the complexities of our country's history and current status, there is a great opportunity for us to make a realistic and much-needed contribution through the government and its agencies, through the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and through ILGA. We need to encourage the government to continue its equality commitment at the UN, the International Labour Organization, the European Union, the World Health Organization and other international bodies.

There is a strong Third World solidarity movement in Ireland, and Catholic Church groups such as Trócaire are an important element in that movement. We need to continue to encourage these groups to incorporate an awareness of the needs and role of lesbian and gay communities and organizations. We also need to learn from

the analyses developed by Third World organizations and incorporate them into our work at home and internationally. We need to help build an alternative perspective within the international lesbian and gay movement which will benefit us all. We need to recognize the integrity of the various struggles for peace and justice around the world and the crucial importance of links between different peoples. This international solidarity has been described by Tomas Borge, a leading Sandinista, as 'the tenderness of the peoples'.

### *Acknowledgement*

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### *Notes*

1. This article is based on a lecture given by Kieran Rose in 1994 as part of the Public Lecture Series in Lesbian and Gay Studies organized by the Centre for Women's Studies, Trinity College, Dublin.
2. This song was made popular by Christy Moore during the widespread protests against the visit of President Reagan to Ireland in 1984
3. Writing in 1914 regarding the proposed Partition of this country, James Connolly stated that such a scheme 'would be a betrayal of the National Democracy of industrial Ulster, would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, and would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements while it endured'. See 'Labour and the proposed partition of Ireland', *Irish Worker*, 14 March 1914, republished in P. Berresford Ellis (ed.), *James Connolly, Selected Writing* Harmondsworth: (Penguin, 1973).
4. Eoin Collins and Íde O'Carroll, *Poverty, Lesbians and Gay Men: The Economic and Social Effects of Discrimination* (GLEN Combat Poverty Study). Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
5. The imitative nature of Irish society is a central obstacle to economic development according to many commentators. In the view of Peadar Kirby, the greatest development challenge facing us now, as at the turn of the century, is to find a contemporary alternative to the assimilationist and neo-traditionalist options.

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The assimilationist model sees the answer to our ills in integrating us ever more firmly as a dependent element into multinational capitalism and the European Union. The neo-traditionalist 'alternative' proposes turning aside from the outside world and its polluting influences back to some illusory native, utopian, religious past. See 'Challenging passivity, a pre-condition for Irish development', *Irish Reporter*, no. 12, fourth quarter, pp. 27-30.

6. James Larkin (1876-1947) was born in Liverpool of Irish parentage. He organized the National Union of Dock Labourers, reformed the Irish branch of the Independent Labour Party and in 1908 founded the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. Imprisoned in the USA in 1920 for 'criminal syndicalism', later Labour T.D. (member of parliament). His statue is in O'Connell Street, Dublin. (Foster, 1989: 438)

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