

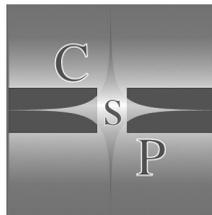
# Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives



Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives;  
Histories of Sexualities: Volume I

Edited by

Mary McAuliffe and Sonja Tiernan



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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For Eva Gore Booth and Esther Roper, who have inspired us both  
to uncover the untold histories of sexualities.

Sappho was right:  
Life that is Love is God, and Mercy wise  
Is that which never dies—  
Life, Love and Light.

—Eva Gore-Booth: “In Praise of Life.”



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## FOREWORD

The annual Lesbian Lives conference has been held in University College Dublin since 1993. The success of the conference held in 2006 entitled 'Historicising the Lesbian' inspired this collection of essays. From the dozens of papers delivered the following chapters chosen for inclusion cover a wide period in history from the medieval to the very modern, a huge range of subject areas and diverse historical interests. In the Introduction Katherine O'Donnell historicizes and contextualises the conference itself, in light of Irish LGBTQ activism and politics of the last fifteen years. In chapter One '*Frames and Narrative Struggles*' Edith Benkov discusses lack of primary source records detailing lesbian same-sex desire in the pre-modern. Benkov examines how we get some view of deviant female same-sex desire and how this desire is positioned as a 'lack', a lack of the phallus. The French twelfth to fourteenth century fabliau concentrate mainly on the body and bodily functions, including sexuality. In reading two versions of 'Les Trois Dames...' Benkov states that the phallus-finding women and the phallic confiscating abbesses show what we can often find in the margins of pre-modern primary source texts. Here we find no 'real' lesbians in the Foucauldian terms of clear, self-conscious identities, but we do find the obvious depiction of one pre-modern form of lesbian identity, the phallus-wielding female. This sense of finding lesbian same-sex desire and occluded identities on the margins of life narratives, mythologies and folk tales continues in Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka contribution in Chapter Two, '*The ensign nun, the witch and the goddess – some Basque lesbians of history and myth.*'

Mentxaka writes of Katalin Erauso, the sixteenth century Basque 'ensign nun' as a woman who 'choose' to embody in dress and behaviours a type of masculinity which, despite her seeming 'otherness' as Basque, as one which the ideology of the sixteenth century Spanish conquest, imperialist, racist, and misogynist. While Erauso might have been able to transgress sexual and gender boundaries in the New World, women who remained in the Basque country would not be so indulged. Mentxaka notes that the most horrific witch-trials, where the accusations often included same sex female deviancy at the Akelarre', conducted by the Spanish Inquisition happened in the Basque country, while Mari, the pre-Christian Basque country of abducted young girls and women for her own

deviant purposes. Mentxaka sees these myths used, in some senses, to self identify, as a way the Basque people differentiated from their more powerful and dominant Spanish and French neighbours.

Self-identification on moral, gender and sexual issues of a minority group surrounded by what is perceived as a threatening majority 'other' is also a theme in Chapter Three *'Done her wrong with a Kiss'; Women and Contagion in Early Modern Ireland – the case of Florence Newton.* The new-founded colony of Puritan English who settled in Yougal, county Cork, Ireland in the seventeenth century demanded of its population only the highest moral standards. In particular the behaviours of its women were regulated and controlled, with those who fell short of the standard demanded, seen as the inside threat. Sexual deviancy, especially among women was the main threat to the moral fibre of the community and, as in the Basque country, this deviancy had to be excised at all costs.

Pre-modern female sexuality, almost invisible in the writing of histories, can, as these chapters show, be seen in the margins of texts, tales and myths, especially those which deal with the body and sex. This 'lesbian' body is often heavily disguised as the deviant witch, the voracious, kidnapper Goddess, the phallus-wielding female or simply the cross-dressing nun. In Chapter Four Lillian Faderman continues this theme of 'hiding' when she discusses the apolitical solutions lesbians and gay men devised to fend off their enemies in mid twentieth century homophobic America. As a response to the prejudices and demands of the period, lesbian-gay 'coupling' was widespread, and numerous terms emerged to describe it such as 'front marriage' (or front dating), 'twilight tandems,' 'lavender couples,' 'beards' and so on. Using interviews with men and women who participated in this hiding in plain sight, Faderman analyses the reasons why they did it and why they eventually ceased.

Section two provides accounts of lesbian lives uncovered through the use of journals and private diaries. In the first chapter of this section Elizabeth Kirwan provides an insightful history of the life and times of Frances Power Cobbe. Kirwan documents the accomplishments of an almost forgotten woman and focuses on Power Cobbe's relationship with her life partner, Mary Lloyd. Through Kirwan's research it is evident why historians and biographers need to acknowledge such life-long female partnerships as lesbian. This need has been addressed by Helena Whitbread when she discovered the diaries of Anne Lister buried in a county archive, she spent over six years deciphering and documenting the extraordinary contents. Whitbread's groundbreaking work editing and publishing the journals of Lister has resulted in the discovery of 'the first modern lesbian.' In chapter Six, Whitbread focuses on the 'strategies of

seduction,' described by Lister in her graphic accounts of lesbian sexual activity in the Georgian era. Chapter Seven '*Engagements Dissolved: Eva Gore-Booth, Urania and the Lesbian Challenge to Marriage,*' demonstrates that despite the sexologist's medicalisation of lesbians, some groups within the first wave feminist movement endorsed radical opinions in relation to sexuality. Journals, such as *Urania*, present a challenge to our current narrative about the history of lesbian activism.

Clare Rogan discusses the claim made in 1920s Berlin by two magazines, *Die Freundin* and *Frauenliebe*, for a public forum for women who desired other women – an artistic discourse that was presented to the viewer as healthy and modern, although not, supposedly, erotic. However by early 1931, as Rogan outlines, the changes in Weimar Berlin's sexual politics and visual culture allows women to select images of other women for other women, placing them within a new, more openly homoerotic context. Weimar Germany is continued as a theme in Amy Young's discussion of lesbian clubs and the 'affiliated' periodicals during this period. By 1933 both the magazines discussed by Rogan and the clubs and periodicals discussed by Young were gone, however, these articles throw a welcome light on lesbian histories in pre-war Germany.

In Chapter Ten, Angela Mazaris provides a succinct biography of Reverend Phebe Hanaford and her powerful 'wife.' Through this biographical account, Mazaris applies an interesting analysis which exposes 'cultural anxieties about gender, women's relationships, family and power in the late nineteenth century.' Izabela Filipiak, in her writing on Polish modernist poet Maria Komornicka, writes of Komornicka's constructed male identity, which the poet used to define herself. A groundbreaker in her 'feminine' phase, unfortunately she became a recluse when the 'masculine' identity took over. Komornicka may have been labelled as an invert by sexologists at the turn of the century and Chiara Beccalossi provides an insightful analysis of leading sexologist Havelock Ellis' research on lesbianism. Through a reading of the notorious publication *Sexual Inversion* and an examination of the Bedborough trial of 1898, Beccalossi argues that Ellis 'considered lesbians independent, intelligent and even remarkable women.'

The more recent psychoanalytic study of same-sex desire is examined by Eva Watson, in the '*The Elusive Lesbian of Psychoanalysis – Subjective Affects of a Writing-in and Exclusion.*' Watson examines Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic constructions of lesbian desire and 'femininity' and evaluates their affective value on explicating lesbian desire and subjectivity. She concludes that by taking account of our own gazing, the gays might gaze back and see a presence signified more by

presence than absence. While Joanne Passet details the life and works of Jeannette Howard Foster in chapter fourteen. Passet focuses on Foster's unique contribution to Alfred. C. Kinsey's monograph *The Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female* (1948) and examines how Foster 'gained access to literature that shaped the content of her pioneering work, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956.)

Moving away from medical studies of sexual behaviour, Laura Harris looks at the absence of the 'pillow-queen' from most accounts of lesbian history. She argues for the queer potential and deserved articulation of the 'pillow-queen' within sexuality studies, queer studies and lesbian histories. LaShonda Mims in her look at the southern United States and the 'the southern belle' construct of femininity and persistent expectations of southern femininity often define how lesbians here negotiate feminine and masculine identities. Continuing the theme of absence, in her chapter on '*The Lesbian Witch Hunt: The Threat to Masculinity in the United States Military*', Kristina McCauley focuses on how common female sexual stereotypes and accepted heteronormativity allowed the military to both obscure and condemn the existence of lesbian women. The many subject areas dealt with in this Volume will, we hope, allow a widening of our knowledge of lesbian history and encourage more in-depth investigation into the many issues raised within.

## INTRODUCTION

### LESBIAN LIVES AND STUDIES IN IRELAND AT THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

KATHERINE O'DONNELL

This volume of essays had its genesis in an Irish conference known as the Lesbian Lives Conference that has been run annually by the Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre (WERRC) in University College Dublin (UCD) since 1993. As I was centrally involved (from 1997) in organising many of those conferences the editors asked me to reflect on the place of this annual event in Irish lesbian lives and academia, and in the field of Lesbian Studies more generally.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, the title is one of the last things that is composed when writing an article and this is what has happened here. In completing this essay I was left with the realisation that what I had charted was a series of changes so profound that it is better understood, not as the passing of some fifteen years, but as the shifting of eras, the end of a cycle, the *Fin de Siècle*.

#### **Prevailing Winds: The Early Context**

The first Lesbian Lives Conference, held in the spring of 1993, was organised by Dr Ger Moane, Ailbhe Smyth and Rosemary Gibney, in conjunction with a Dublin lesbian community group called LOT (Lesbians Organising Together), which had been founded in 1991.<sup>2</sup> There were a little over forty women in attendance for the day and all sessions were plenary. There had been lesbian and gay conferences in Ireland before, in Belfast, Dublin, and Cork and as far back as 1978 a 'Women's Conference on Lesbianism', was organised by lesbian-feminist activists and held at Trinity College Dublin.<sup>3</sup> What marked the Lesbian Lives Conference as unusual was its explicit focus on the lesbian as a distinct entity rather than being aligned to gay or feminist or any other concern. That first conference combined activist issues, academic papers, topics of social

interest and literary readings. This combination continues to be a hallmark of the Lesbian Lives Conference to the present day.

Lesbian activism in Ireland began in the 1970s, following the form of lesbian activism in other parts of Europe in that it was strongly inspired by feminism and to a lesser extent, gay liberation, and socialism.<sup>4</sup> Irish lesbian activism in the 1970s and '80s was also strongly influenced by the nationalist civil rights movement and armed struggle in the North of Ireland and the Irish nationalist and socialist critique of European colonialism. The war in the North was a vexed issue for southern Irish feminists and lesbians: a significant cohort identified as 'unaligned' to Irish nationalism preferring to focus on the assumed commonality of gender and sexual identity and the shared project of combating sexism and homophobia. Irish nationalism in more general terms was regularly dismissed by middle-class southern Irish feminists as a retrograde, patriarchal movement, too closely aligned with the repressive Catholic Church and armed violence.

In spite of two decades of lesbian activism, lesbian life in Ireland in 1993 was still lived very much in the realms of the closet. There were very few lesbian women living in Ireland 'out' as lesbians in all aspects of their lives and homophobia was securely expressed in every area of Irish society. The university administration at UCD, the venue for the Lesbian Lives Conference, had only recently, and with great reluctance, followed the decision made by University College Cork in 1990 to finally grant formal recognition to an organisation of lesbian and gay students. The first Gay Pride march was organised in Dublin by Gays Against Repression as far back as 1976 and there had been sporadic Gay Pride marches in the early 1980s. Even so, the 1980s was a decade of economic depression, large-scale emigration and division among the small community of gay activists on how to deal with the crisis of AIDS.<sup>5</sup> Galway Pride (now known as *Bród Ireland West*) was established under lesbian leadership (most prominently Nuala Ward) in 1989 and is the longest-running Pride festival on the island.<sup>6</sup> However, in the early years only a few dozen people took part in the parade. In 1992, 32 lesbians, under the thin disguise of fancy dress costumes, paraded in Cork's St Patrick's Day parade behind a banner that read 'Hello New York', in solidarity with the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO) who were prevented from joining the New York St Patrick's Day parade by the organisers there. A photo of the group and their banner made the front page of *The New York Times*, and the Cork Chamber of Commerce awarded them a prize, but on the whole, lesbians in Ireland were rarely visible.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1980s and into the '90s the

focus of lesbian activism was in providing local Lesbian Line services.<sup>8</sup> The Lines were based in Belfast, Cork, Dublin, Galway and Limerick and lobbied local media (with varying degrees of success) to advertise the service. The work of the Line provided a telephone contact service that gave information and non-directive support to lesbians and women questioning their sexuality. Volunteers were also trained to meet with women who wished to go to lesbian events and venues and the collectives were the core teams for much of the activism throughout these years. The Lines met formally to discuss training and other issues and became affiliated to the National Women's Council in the 1980s and formed a lobby there to raise lesbian issues.

In 1992 the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) funded GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) to research the material effects of discrimination that lesbians and gay men in Ireland experienced due to their stigmatised identity. The report was published by the CPA in 1995 under the title *Poverty and Lesbians and Gay Men*, and documented clear evidence of social oppression and the ensuing multiple and cumulative disadvantage for Irish lesbians and gay men. The report detailed how lesbians and gay men experienced marginalisation, harassment, violence and exclusion in education, work, and social life, in their families of origin and even in their own domestic situations. Every social service was potentially fraught with difficulties: housing, insurance, health, policing, and the experience of emigration and migration. Mary Robinson, a strong feminist and passionate advocate for human rights, had been elected President of Ireland in 1990.<sup>9</sup> Her election was understood to be a protest vote against the casual practice of political corruption that had been the metier of the dominant ruling party, Fianna Fáil, while under the leadership of Charles J. Haughey.<sup>10</sup> In particular she owed her election to women's votes: women in Ireland do not tend to vote as a class but many were angered enough by the snide comments of Fianna Fáil politician PJ Flynn who said that Robinson had displayed no attachment to her family before the photo opportunities presented by her election campaign. By 1993 her Presidency had begun to make a profound difference in Irish public discourse. In December 1992, just a few months previous to the first Lesbian Lives Conference, Mary Robinson had invited a large group of activists from lesbian and gay communities around the country to the President's residence, *Áras an Uachtaráin*. It was an historic occasion that gained a lot of press attention and it is a sign of those times that no lesbian who attended was able to publicly identify herself through the media.

The lesbian and gay community had been waiting for many years for the State to follow the ruling from the European Court of Human Rights to

strike out the legislation under which Oscar Wilde had been criminalised for homosexuality. The legal case had been fought and eventually won by Mary Robinson when she was a lecturer in law at Trinity College, on behalf of a fellow academic, Joycean scholar, David Norris.<sup>11</sup> Both Robinson and Norris were elected Senators to the Irish upper house. 'Decriminalisation' as it has come to be called, did not occur until June of 1993. The first female Minister for Justice, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, explained that her motivation to take this action was largely impelled by a direct appeal by a mother of a gay man to stop making her son a criminal: the language of equality and social justice was yet to be readily applied to the status of Irish lesbians and gay men. However, the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Pride parade by happy coincidence was scheduled for the Saturday after the historic decriminalisation, and was by far the largest and most exuberant public gathering of lesbians and gay men seen in Ireland, with a few hundred people in joyful attendance.<sup>12</sup>

Rosemary Gibney was the prime organiser of the Lesbian Lives Conference for the first four years of its existence, except for the conference of 1995 when Grainne Healy filled that role. Potential participants were contacted by phone, using personal contacts by the lesbians in LOT and the UCD-based organisers (some, such as Dr Ger Moane, were affiliated to both LOT and UCD). The conference grew, it was still held over one day (generally a Saturday in February) but there were parallel sessions, and presentations were more likely to take the form of workshops rather than academic papers. Once business was concluded at UCD, the Lesbian Lives Conference party was held at a city centre venue and this attracted hundreds of women, a multiple of those who attended the conference proper, thus ensuring the place of the Lesbian Lives Conference in the social calendar of Irish lesbians.

Social venues for gatherings of Irish lesbians in the early '90s might be best described as marginal spaces, in that they were annual events or otherwise sporadically organised, or they depended on what might be the intermittent toleration of publicans (owners of bars) or they were often held in less than salubrious locations. Lesbians in Cork and Galway fared quite well in that they found welcome spaces in the pubs: Loafers (Douglas St, Cork) and Taylors (Dominick St, Galway) particularly on Thursday nights, Thursday being the day that Social Welfare payments were made. The Cork Women's Fun Weekend was first held in 1984 and it still attracts hundreds of women to that city for a weekend in May. In 1988 Galway lesbians ran a Women's Camp during the height of the intimidating Loyalist marching season in the North of Ireland (it has been run every July for two weeks since then and is now known as the Irish

Women's Camp). Belfast was a war zone in the early 1990s and while lesbians seemed less able than gay men to ignore political affiliations when it came to finding partners, lesbians did sidestep the polarisation created by the sectarian colonial conflict to create lesbian political networks and social spaces. As far back as 1974 Belfast had a lesbian discussion group called Sappho, later called LIB (Lesbians in Belfast), which organised an all-Ireland women's conference in 1977. Perhaps because it could be critical of nationalism as an ideology as well as its appeal to women to unite as a class, feminism was even more effective than Marxism in cutting across the pernicious sectarianism of the war in Northern Ireland and lesbians took a leading part in this movement.<sup>13</sup> The journal *Women's News*, particularly under the stewardship of Carola Speth, was very supportive of lesbian issues and the celebration of International Women's Day in Belfast became a rallying point for lesbians from Belfast, Derry, Cork and Galway.

Throughout the 1980s and early '90s there was a strong network of lesbians from the north, south and west of the country which coalesced in the annual events of the Belfast International Women's Day celebrations, the Cork Women's Fun Weekend and the Galway Women's Camp in the summer. The lack of a significant number of lesbian women from Dublin at these events can be explained in terms of that city's size and role as capital. The Dublin lesbian scene was larger, without any great need for a regular injection of new faces and hence more self-contained. Dublin had had a weekly Lesbian disco since 1977 when Joni Crone was DJ in The Tailor's Hall (Back Lane, Christchurch). The longest-running venue, for some eleven years, was the narrow room over the pub, JJ Smyths (Aungier St), however, a sensational front-page tabloid story revealing the existence of this club led to the owners' decision to stop renting the room to lesbians in 1992. After the demise of JJ's, weekly lesbian discos were held in the upstairs room of The Trinity (Pearse St) and on a barge on the Grand Canal. Gay venues in Dublin such as The Parliament (Parliament St) and The George (South Great Georges St) did not always accept and certainly rarely welcomed a lesbian clientele, so the open-door policy of Out on the Liffey (Ormond Quay) was warmly appreciated by lesbians in Dublin when it opened in 1991.

By the time of the second conference in 1994 there was more visibility of lesbians in the Irish media. In 1993 the lesbian music group, Zrazy, had won a critics' award for best new Irish band. Emma Donoghue joined Mary Dorcey in the ranks of 'Irish lesbian writer' with the publication of her first novel in 1994, (a coming-out story set in Dublin called *Stirfry*) and she had no less than two appearances on the Irish top ratings TV

programme, *The Late Late Show*.<sup>14</sup> Joni Crone had made a sensational appearance on this avidly watched, much-discussed show in 1980, when her coming-out as lesbian was carried by the State broadcaster.<sup>15</sup> However, it seemed that not very much had changed in the intervening fourteen years. Gay Byrne, the famous host of the show, declared that he had made the somewhat unprecedented gesture of inviting back Emma Donoghue within a short space of her first appearance because he had felt concerned that her coming out as lesbian had perhaps been a youthful, rash pronouncement on her part and she might benefit from the chance to qualify herself. She clarified that she was a lesbian.<sup>16</sup>

The following year saw further assertions of Irish lesbian pride and visibility when lesbians in Cork organised a protest in support of Donna McAnnellan, who was dismissed from her job for allegedly giving a kiss to a woman at her place of work. The protest was timed to coincide with Valentine's Day and on 14<sup>th</sup> of February the *Irish Times* published a photograph of a chain of women across the gate of the leisure centre where Donna had worked, wearing T-shirts proclaiming '*I kissed Donna McAnnellan*'. McAnnellan went on to take a case on the grounds of gender under Employment Equality legislation – arguing that it was discriminatory to fire her because she allegedly kissed a person of the same gender. The court, rather reluctantly, did not find in her favour and urged the government to bring in legislation to protect lesbian and gay workers.<sup>17</sup>

## **A Shift in Pressure: The Challenge of Increased Visibility**

LOT continued to be involved in the Lesbian Lives Conference until the demise of that group which may perhaps be seen to have begun in 1995 with the awarding of a large grant (IR£50,000) by the Labour Party Minister for Social Welfare, Proinsias de Rossa. The tabloid press decried this unprecedented sum of money being awarded to a lesbian or gay group and ran with the front page banner headline 'Lesbian Lunacy' and a photograph of LOT member, Anita Thoma, on Capel Street where LOT had their offices.<sup>18</sup> LOT was founded with aspirations to support lesbian visibility and support, as the acronym attests, 'lesbians organising together.'<sup>19</sup> The injection of State funding was a challenge to an organisation that had to rapidly cope with changing from a group of volunteers (who could remain safe from the homophobic scrutiny of press and public) to one that was now answerable as an employer: women were taken off the unemployment register to work for LOT part-time under the FÁS Community Employment (CE) scheme. LOT also were increasingly

being contacted by the media on the assumption that they were a representative organisation with a clear mandate from its membership for intervention in public discourse but there was neither media strategy nor media training in place. LOT's management structures could not cope with the challenges and there were major difficulties and strife. At the AGM in early 1997 a new management team came into being to answer the crisis, and in spite of an impressive and clearly structured programme to manage and develop the organisation, LOT's activities effectively came to an end with the winding up of the CE scheme that year.<sup>20</sup>

The organisation continued to exist in a ghostly fashion, as the nominal hosts for a three-year project entitled LEA (Lesbian, Education, Awareness) which ran from 1996-1999 and which was funded by the European measure entitled New Opportunities for Women (NOW). The time-span of this project (1996 to 1999) coincided with the beginning of an extraordinary period of economic growth in Ireland, a boom that has become known as 'The Celtic Tiger' and which saw the Irish Republic move from being one of the poorest members of the European Union to being regarded as one of the EU's wealthiest economies.<sup>21</sup> For the short number of years that LOT flourished it had provided a drop-in space and a level of resource and structure for lesbian community development in Dublin, the most successful endeavour being the weekly Saturday night gatherings run by the social committee.<sup>22</sup> LEA was an entirely different project in that its activities were designed to fulfil the NOW mission with its template of objectives and activities designed to empower women from disadvantaged backgrounds such as Traveller women and women from 'economically deprived' areas. The template was not readily applicable to the needs of lesbian community building.<sup>23</sup> The first phase of the LEA project was an educational programme for a small group of lesbians to enable them to be able to raise consciousness about lesbian issues in the wider world as well as provide leadership within their own communities.<sup>24</sup> Funding was also spent on providing a resource pack for educators on combating homophobia towards lesbians, the pack veered between being designed for a facilitator working with heterosexuals in raising consciousness about lesbian issues and being a resource designed for lesbians who wanted information on their social issues and (lack of) legal rights.

One of the final projects was the 'Lesbian lives billboard campaign' mounted in June 1999.<sup>25</sup> It achieved a moderate amount of media attention, but, significantly, the coverage was positive.<sup>26</sup> The billboard campaign asked parents – 'How should you feel if your daughter's a lesbian? and answered: 'The same way you'd feel if she wasn't.' The

accompanying image of two smiling women was designed to suggest a mother and a daughter, though at least one commentator thought it was two lesbians.<sup>27</sup> Considering the deeply entrenched levels of homophobia and the massive bulwark of protections given to heterosexuality (Ireland at this time had just recently, by a narrow margin, introduced divorce legislation in 1995 and close on 100% of all State primary and secondary schools were religious-run institutions) it was rather a stringent demand that parents should feel no worry or grief if their daughter was lesbian.<sup>28</sup> In its focus on families of origin the poster demonstrates the central dominant position of the family unit in replicating Irish mores, and how, even by 1999, Irish lesbians were still largely concerned with issues of coming out and making visible a lesbian identity: the language of social justice, human rights, equality and fair treatment for lesbians was still not to the forefront.



By 1997 the Lesbian Lives Conference had grown to the extent that there were now parallel sessions, more academic papers and a few visiting international activists and academics; attendance figures were also steadily rising. These trends continued year by year by with the organisation of the conference depending more on more on email and internet. The Lesbian Lives Conference placed a particular emphasis on accessibility with low registration fees for 'community' as opposed to 'academic' registrants; childcare was made available; as were Irish Sign Language interpreters; lunch, teas and coffees were provided and venues for both the conference and the social event were held in wheelchair accessible venues. Every year Lesbian Lives has been organised around a broad central theme: one of the most popular of these was 'Lesbians and the Arts' which inspired Dublin lesbians to organise aLAF (a Lesbian Arts Festival), this small community arts festival has run almost annually since 1999. As the millennium turned, the Lesbian Lives Conference, (or perhaps more accurately, the party after the Lesbian Lives Conference and the social events such as the cabaret and literary readings organised around the conference) had a prominent

position in Irish lesbian lives. It was a very popular occasion for meeting friends from different parts of the country, for hearing about what other lesbian communities were doing, and sharing (and generating) that vital gossip that lubricates the whirl of all social circles. For middle class women the Lesbian Lives Conference (held at a respectable university venue) was often the occasion for a tentative step in the coming-out process. In the late '90s the after-conference parties were organised by Sharon Hargrave and Emma Haugh who built on the success of the Lesbian Lives party to run a club called *Libida*, which brought a whole new standard to lesbian night-life in Ireland: sexy flyers, chic club names, swish venues with late-night drink licences and professional DJs, and men welcomed (when accompanied as guests of women): a new era had arrived as all around the country this became the norm for lesbian 'clubbing'. This change was facilitated by a general rise in affluence due to the 'Celtic Tiger' economy; a rise that benefited a significant number of Irish lesbians.

The end of the nineties also coincided with the enactment of progressive legislation such as the *Employment Equality Act* of 1998 which ensured that lesbians like Donna McAnnellan would have protection against discrimination in the workplace. This act, however, gives a *carte blanche* to church authorities to discriminate as employers if an individual is deemed to have contravened the 'religious ethos' of the institution in question, and considering the vast majority of hospitals and schools are under religious control - lesbians who work in schools and hospitals remain in insecure positions. The *Equal Status Act* of 2000 extended protection to lesbians and gay men, among other disadvantaged groups, in the provision of goods, services, accommodation and education. One of the first actions of the newly established Equality Authority was to commission reports on equality issues pertaining to lesbians and gay men.<sup>29</sup>

### **Climate Change: 'Progress', Peace Processes, Priests and the Lesbian**

It is not coincidental that the economic boom in Ireland was marked by the passage of liberal legislation. Since independence from British rule in the 1920s, the Free State, later Republic of Ireland, constructed State economic discourses in tandem with a discourse on nationalism and Catholicism. Under the leadership of Éamon de Valera, this part of Ireland waged a protectionist 'economic war' with Britain in a nationalist effort to assert independence, this effort to be 'self-reliant' was ultimately

regarded as economically stultifying with its emphasis on shoring-up the traditional life of small rural holdings. Sociologist, Tom Inglis, demonstrates how Catholic religious belief fostered a reluctance to pursue the generation of personal wealth and generally promoted suspicion of economic expansion and success.<sup>30</sup> Hence Irish (Catholic) nationalism came to be associated with an introverted, ‘backward’ attitude to economic expansion and prosperity. Under the leadership of Seán Lemass, a newer nationalist discourse took hold and that was that in order to survive, let alone thrive, the Irish Republic must ‘modernise’: the iconic image of Lemass is the launch of a national airline (Aer Lingus).<sup>31</sup> Farmers were encouraged to improve, expand, modernise, diversify and operate as business men; Ireland attempted to gain membership of the (then) European Economic Community (EEC) and began a concerted, sustained (and ultimately highly successful) effort to attract international investment, most notably through the Irish Development Authority (IDA, founded in 1949). One of the conditions for membership of the EEC was that the Republic was impelled to enact what became known as ‘social legislation’ to bring it into line with the other member states. One of the most far-reaching of these changes was the removal of what was called the ‘marriage bar’, that is legislation which prohibited women from most public service employment once they got married, this ‘bar’ was also enacted as customary by many private employers. The sense that Ireland should join the wider world (or rather participate in more developed economies) went hand-in-hand with discourses of social liberation to create a polyphonic discourse of modernity that rang with a new inflection on Irish nationalism.<sup>32</sup>

By the beginning of the 1970s an accent of liberalisation could be clearly heard: a call for a relaxation of attitudes on what were considered to be hard-core traditional Irish (Catholic) nationalist tenets in the interest of Ireland ‘modernising’ and joining the world of modern commerce: ‘progress’ or to be ‘progressive’ was understood to pertain to commercial development as well as socially liberal attitudes. This was a national discourse that was strangely ‘anti-nationalist’ in that, to varying degrees, it eschewed the traditional reverence for the lifestyles of rural Ireland, the Catholic Church and Irish language.<sup>33</sup> This anti-traditional and secular ‘modernising’ discourse was galvanised when the 6-counties of the North erupted in armed state and paramilitary violence in the early 1970s, as the government of the Republic increasingly sought to maintain state stability in the South by distancing itself from the cause of Irish Catholic nationalists in the North. However, it was not partition but the role of women and the performance of sexuality in general that became the

occasion and venue where the voices of traditional and modern Ireland encountered and competed with each other. Feminists were prominently positioned in the vanguard of the anti-Catholic, modernising discourses, leading the way on highly emotive public debates on contraception, abortion and divorce, when the essence and future of 'Irish identity' was commonly understood both as the battleground and prize.<sup>34</sup> Writing in *The Irish Reporter* in 1990 gay activist Kieran Rose pointed out that as all sexuality was so repressed (except pro-creative sex within marriage) in a Republic so dominated by the teachings of the Catholic church, that Irish homosexuals experienced a common sympathy from, and cause with, many Irish heterosexuals. In a curious way, male homosexuality became totemic in the modernising discourse of 'Ireland Inc.'<sup>35</sup> Irish gay men were regarded in this imaginary as model citizens of the cosmopolitan cities of the capitalist and consumer world: their nationality was rendered insignificant given their assumed affiliation to, and participation in the transnational, international style of global, consumer culture.<sup>36</sup> This transcendence of Irish nationality was considered positive by those such as economist and Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald, who argued that membership of the EEC not only provided Ireland with opportunities to develop economic infrastructure but that the forum of European politics might be an arena for solving issues arising from partition. Throughout the '90s the Republic of Ireland benefited enormously from European monetary subsidies and investment and continually proved itself to be the least 'national' of all the member states of the European Union in consistently voting overwhelmingly in favour of acceding powers of sovereignty to the EU.

Lesbians in Cork took advantage of the opportunities presented by increased levels of funding for community development in the central exchequer and the new discourse around liberalisation and equality for lesbians and gay men: they broke from organising with gay men and left the community centre The Other Place (North Main Street) to form their own group. Initially they were called Cairde Corcaigh ('Cork friends') but they became firmly established as L.Inc (Lesbians in Cork) with a thriving community centre (and three staff) in White Street.<sup>37</sup> The range of community services, peer support groups, social activities and political lobbying that are co-ordinated or facilitated by L.Inc is very impressive. Lesbians in Belfast and the North of Ireland generally, proved astute in inserting themselves into the peace-building discourses engendered post the 'Belfast Agreement' (aka the Good Friday Agreement) of 1998, which brought a formal end to what are euphemistically called 'The Troubles'. The subsequent *Northern Ireland Act 1998* contains a crucial Section 75

known as the equality procedural duty that transformed the question of LGBT rights and issues after 1998 as there was now a mechanism (designed largely to eradicate sectarianism) whereby the LGBT community could lobby to ensure that any legislation passed by the Northern Assembly could not discriminate against their group interests. Lesbians have provided key leadership roles in the Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSo), Gay Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI) and QueerSpace.<sup>38</sup> The successful lobbying of CoSo and QueerSpace provided a trigger for the work of LASI (Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative), which brought out a report in 2002 conducted by Marie Quiery on the needs of lesbian and bisexual women in Northern Ireland.<sup>39</sup> This comprehensive report has been used effectively in political lobbying and lesbian community-building in the North. Northern Irish members of the parliament at Westminster, divided deeply through sectarian strife, were united in preventing progressive social legislation (such as the legalisation of abortion and the decriminalisation of male homosexuality) from being extended to Northern Ireland. However, strategic lesbian organising ensured that UK homosexual civil partnership legislation equally applied to Northern Ireland, in fact, the legislation came into effect in that territory a day before anywhere else under Westminster rule.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere around the country as the '90s turned into the '00s, lesbian communities continued to expand: lesbians in Derry worked with gay men in the Foyle Friend community centre; in Dundalk, Bernardine Quinn was instrumental in establishing Outcomers as an impressive community space that facilitates lesbians and gay men in Co. Louth, and smaller cities such as Limerick and Waterford began to have regular club nights and social spaces open to lesbians and gay men. There was a short-lived lesbian community development project in Galway known as GALA but mostly lesbian life in that city focused on the three lesbian-owned bars: Stranos (Dominick Street) Zulus (Dominick Street) and the wine bar, Le Graal: with a big annual gathering at the end of October, centered on the Diamond Cup soccer tournament. Outwest was established in 1997 and was initially involved in organising discreet social venues along the Shannon where gay men and lesbians could meet. It has since expanded to become more involved in providing social support and networking for gay men and lesbians in the Irish Midwest. As house prices continued to soar with the boom in the economy, many lesbians availed of the cheaper house prices in the Northwest and a vibrant lesbian community became established around Sligo/Leitrim which now hosts an annual lesbian weekend party; a Lesbian Line, and a small and colourful gay pride parade.

Perhaps the biggest story of the 1990s and one that had a direct impact on the position of lesbians and gay men was the astonishingly quick collapse in the dominant influence of the Catholic Church on Southern Irish social policy and cultural expression. The 1990s saw a growing awareness and revulsion of state and church collusion throughout the twentieth century in the incarceration of girls and women in Magdalene institutions on the grounds of corralling their sexuality. The revelation in 1992 that Bishop Eamonn Casey had a secret family shocked a nation, and every year after that there was one sexual scandal after the other in the church. From 1993 there was a continuous stream of stories of physical and sexual assaults on children (mainly boys) by priests. The perception that the Attorney General's office of the government led by Albert Reynolds had been negligent in extraditing child rapist Fr Brendan Smyth to answer charges in Northern Ireland led to the downfall of that Fianna Fáil /Labour coalition government in 1994. The revelations that populist demagogue, Fr Michael Cleary, had fathered a number of children continued throughout 1995. Just when it seemed that the worst of the stories of what had become known as 'clerical abuse' had been brought to light, the decade ended with the exposure of the horrific rapes perpetrated by Fr Seán Fortune. The documentaries made independently by Mary Raftery, entitled *States of Fear* (1999) revealed decades of state inertia and church cover-ups concerning the abuse of poor and disabled children in institutions run by the church and generously funded by the state. A clergy, given all the dues of reverence, was revealed to run the gamut from negligent ignorance through cynicism to sadism. The revelations might have been understood to pertain to the actions of a corrupt few were it not for the evidence of systematic institutional protection by the Catholic church of hypocrites who had enforced a puritanical sexuality as well as the torturers and rapists of children. Further pain was inflicted in the spectacular unwillingness of the church to apologise. The church demonstrated more fear of litigation and potential financial compensation than caring for its flock. In 1990 85% of Irish adults in the Republic attended weekly Mass, in just seven years this had fallen to 65%. There were 129 priests ordained in 1990; eight years later there were only 44 ordinations with the numbers continuing to plummet: in 1999 there was just one ordination in the Dublin diocese.<sup>41</sup>

### **Current Weather Conditions**

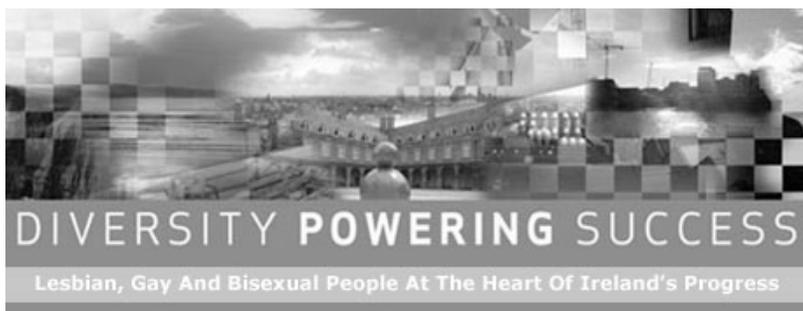
Besides the implosion of the power of the Catholic Church and the extraordinary level of economic growth in the south, the peace-building

process in the north, and the concomitant discourses of social justice and equality in both parts of the island, among the biggest factors affecting lesbian life in Ireland in more recent years are the development of a strong network of peer support groups for college and secondary school students and the increased accessibility of the internet and international ('budget airline') travel.<sup>42</sup> Ireland, we are told, ranks as one of the most 'globalised' locations in the world: capital assets, digitised information and people move back and forth from the island in numbers unforeseen fifteen years ago and unmatched (certainly in proportional terms) by most other nation states.<sup>43</sup> We can now see in Ireland, for the first time, different generations of lesbians, with the younger cohort having a vastly different economic, technological, political, legal and social context to the ones that were there just a bare dozen years previously. It is becoming more common for girls to come out at school (this was almost unheard of fifteen years ago). While secondary school education is still largely sex-segregated, community-based LGBT youth groups around the country and third-level LGBT groups create spaces where lesbians meet, socialise and (maybe) become politicised in the company, and with the support, of their gay brothers. Hence the experiences of Irish lesbian girls or young women in coming out, and of lesbian love and friendship circles, are radically different to women who came out as lesbians even just a decade ago. When the Lesbian Lives Conference started fifteen years ago the Lesbian Line Collectives were faced with opposition in advertising their telephone help-lines, now their services are rarely accessed given the many platforms that the internet alone supplies in providing community, entertainment, information and merchandise to 'women-seeking-women'. Irish lesbians in the South have every reason to expect that like their sisters in the North, the State will shortly grant them partnership rights analogous to marriage.<sup>44</sup>

Lesbian space in Dublin is almost purely a commercial experience: there is a social scene centering on lesbian and gay (or 'gay friendly') pubs and clubs rather than community projects. The most popular of these pubs: *The George* and its sister pub *The Dragon* (both on South Great Georges St) are part of a chain of large pubs owned by a cartel of business men who are not gay and this is not an issue for their customers. Listings in gay publications show that the LGBT community building OUTHouse (105 Capel Street) is not often used. In OUTHouse's web pages the list given of groups who use the centre demonstrate that the AA, NA and AI-Anon groups are the only groups that can be considered to be truly active.<sup>45</sup> Staff at the centre make the cafe available in the afternoons and some evenings but the OUTHouse accounts show that there are few beverages consumed.

In the early days of the centre, controversy ensued over the reluctance of the board (dominated by gay men with a background in architecture) to make the listed Georgian building wheel-chair accessible, and certainly the renovation of the building (which is in poor repair) seems to remain a prime focus.<sup>46</sup> For whatever combination of reasons OUTHouse is not a hive of grassroots community activity.<sup>47</sup> An exception to the emphases on commercialism might be seen in the brilliant, queer performances of the Dublin Drag King troupes, The Shamcocks, and the later formation of the Doppelgang and the characters spawned by the talented Tracy Martin (although these queer performers depend on performing in commercial venues).<sup>48</sup>

GLEN, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network, who in the early nineties researched the effects of poverty on lesbians and gay men, has also moved with the times. For most of its existence GLEN has been a group of four gay men.<sup>49</sup> They are funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, and while they speak on behalf of lesbians they have had little consultation with lesbians.<sup>50</sup> Their logo (below) might be mistaken for that of the IDA: it encapsulates Ireland Inc.<sup>51</sup> Given how gay men positioned themselves in the modernising discourses that have eventually dominated in Ireland, it should be no surprise then that in the multinational, neo-liberal glow of the Celtic Tiger economy, gay male global culture rules supreme as the self-appointed representatives of Irish lesbian, gay and bisexual people. GLEN's 'programme for change' explicitly makes the argument that: '...there is growing evidence that cities and societies that embrace and resource diversity, minorities and difference are also more successful economically than those that don't.'<sup>52</sup>



GLEN style themselves, without irony, as 'principled pragmatists' - a website phrase that was recently taken up with relief by the Green Party, still new to government, when they opposed the Bill sponsored by the

Labour Party that would have given the partnership rights of a marriage contract to lesbians and gay men.<sup>53</sup> Even though N stands for network, GLEN has never wanted to be a grass-roots community organisation and shuns the processes of consultation, collectivity and consensus: GLEN seeks to change legislation and lobby effectively on the national stage for changes in social policy and it is more expedient to do this without the burden of being a representative organisation, although it is useful to pose as one in terms of asserting a lobby. There is a strategic necessity of maintaining, what in the old-days was known as an ‘assimilationist’ position, and as spokesmen for this position they are very effective communicators. We may perhaps forgive GLEN’s rush to the vanguard position for the mainstream when we remember that these men were criminalised until 1993 and release from this oppression might have inspired gratitude or a euphoria that cannot be understood by those of us who were not in their position. Given the current *zeitgeist*, the wholesale adoption of triumphalist Celtic-Tiger economy-speak might indeed be the best strategic ploy in getting the gay voice heard but the lack of a visibility within the gay scene of a radical lesbian and gay critique from what we used to call the Left means there is no ensuing rich middle-ground between, and lesbian life in Dublin (in distinction to the provincial capitals of Belfast and Cork) is largely lived under the lights of a commercial scene.<sup>54</sup> A feminist critique of the current Irish status quo has also been notably lacking: this is unsurprising given that the great institutional enemy of the Catholic church seems to have effectively imploded, that the world of paid work has opened up to women and Irish feminists are being credited as key agents in bringing the new liberal order into being.<sup>55</sup> In the hey-day of success it is difficult perhaps to marshal a critique.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the voice from the Left will become stronger as the headiness of Ireland’s economic miracle abates.<sup>57</sup> Lesbian and gay activists within the Labour Party who to date have been the most successful in terms of lobbying for civil partnership rights have certainly shown the way in terms of charting an inclusive and dynamic vision for LGBT life in Ireland, making LGBT rights a central plank of that party’s manifesto and providing a sharp contrast to GLEN’s vision.<sup>58</sup>

The Lesbian Lives Conference has also changed since the advent of the twenty first century. The conference experienced a shift in its scope and size in 2003 when Noreen Giffney came onto the organising team for that year and exploited the internet much more widely than had been used before to broadcast the call for papers. That year was the first year we saw a large-scale presence by international academics, addressed by some of the major figures in Lesbian Studies and the conference spread, in multiple