

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to attend the committee today.

I will talk briefly about the theme from the perspective of a northern Protestant woman, and author of a recent book, 'The Ghost Limb: Alternative Protestants and the Spirit of 1798'.

The book includes interviews with about 20 northern Protestants, more women than men. It is about people from Protestant backgrounds reconnecting with the politics of the United Irishmen - and women; their thoughts about Irishness and the future of the island.

My comments will make more sense if I briefly explain the Ghost Limb.

I grew up in a family of religious dissenters. My parents are now Quakers. Our faith was anti-sectarian, pacifist and internationalist. We were never unionists. We always supported reunification and our passports were Irish.

As a result of having this alternative, dissenting Protestant identity, I often struggled feel fully at home in the very red, white and blue areas where I have lived in Northern Ireland.

This is the ghost limb - a feeling of being out of place, like part of you is cut off. That you need to hide your politics, hide your Irishness. A feeling that you're quite alone in your difference.

About 5 years ago, I was given a book - Sites of the 1798 Rising in Antrim and Down. A friend and I started to take our kids on trips after school, to 1798 sites close to where we lived.

We soon realised that our very unionist, loyalist presenting town was once a hub of United Irish activity.

We began to talk about this to others, and it emerged that very few of us had been taught anything about this history. We realised, growing up, that we had very limited ways to engage with our Irishness. Although I am happy to say this is now changing.

By learning more about 1798, I began to realise that northern Protestants like us have always existed. From Mary Ann McCracken to Alice Milligan to Betty Sinclair. At each crucial juncture of Irish history, people from Protestant backgrounds - and Protestant women - have been at the fore. Anti-sectarian; people who believed in equality; democrats, socialists and/or civic republicans for whom Ireland was home, regardless of DNA.

During the Troubles, these histories fell silent. Alternative Protestants lived in a cultural underground. Fearing to speak. Politically homeless.

So the book was us beginning to find one another, and tell our stories out loud. Through this process, we realised that we have a lot to say about politics on this island.

Until the book came out, it was quite difficult to create space culturally, politically and in the media, for alternative Protestant stories. We would find ourselves invited to participate in a project about northern Protestants, only to end up on the cutting room floor.

Often, we found the tape that made the cut was very male, very muscular. It was a very particular type of loud and conservative unionism and loyalism. This has skewed people's perceptions of the northern Protestant community, which is very diverse, often progressive. In fact we have a lot in common with everyone else on this island, in terms of our values, hopes and fears.

An adversarial news media environment exacerbates this imbalance. I have been asked to commentate multiple times since the book, but with children and a disability, it is difficult to participate in last minute, confrontational debates. Especially when the consequences of speaking up can be so serious.

All of the people in the book have been Lundyed in some shape or form. That is to say, charged with being traitors to our own community. Sometimes this is online. Other times, it spills into the real world. There are many similar issues in the Republic of Ireland. So you will know the chill effect for people, especially women, who speak on sensitive political issues.

It is also important to say that unionist and loyalist women are subject to intimidation and harassment as well.

There are alternative Protestant northern women, of course, who have refused to be silent.

Linda Ervine tells her story in the book about her work creating a different narrative about Protestants and the Irish language. Linda set a popular Irish language centre in east Belfast, in a traditionally loyalist part of town, with an integrated bunscoil on the way.

Rev. Karen Sethuraman speaks in the book about coming from a working class loyalist family in east Belfast and how she ended up as chaplain to a series of Sinn Féin mayors. Karen has recently joined the Board of Ireland's Future.

Kellie Turtle, a feminist activist, talks in the book about the cross-community nature of the women's movement in the North of Ireland, and how working with feminists on Repeal the Eighth, and subsequent campaigns, has deepened all-island relationships in this sector.

In terms of the constitutional question, about half of those in the book want Irish unity. The others are pragmatically waiting to see what unity might look like. Some have British layers to their identity as well as Irish.

A few of us have made the choice to participate in constitutional debates publicly.

For nearly all northern Protestants - women and men - who publicly support a new Ireland or are simply willing to discuss it, there is a moment of somber discussion at the kitchen table about whether you are prepared to put your head above the parapet, what the implications might be for your safety and family.

This issue impacts women deeply. You might notice that the northern Protestants who have decided to participate in the larger Ireland's Future events are predominantly male. That is not a coincidence.

However, I do not think this reflects the level of interest in constitutional change amongst northern Protestant women. I know discussions have taken place recently on the topic of unity with unionist women, on the condition that they were not recorded. Many of the events I've done to support the book have been all women panels with very mixed audiences.

I have been following the work of Professor Jennifer Todd, Dr Joanne McEvoy and Professor Fidelma Ashe. All have made recent submissions to this committee about the types of civic deliberation that are most likely to be productive and amplify women's voices in the constitutional debate. I concur with their findings. Small deliberative events and cafes. Bringing the conversation to where people live. Creating psychological safety. This deliberative work could transform conversations on Irish unity.

Whatever the constitutional outcome, grassroots dialogue is essential for the times ahead.

I believe many northern Protestants will want to be part of this dialogue, including many Protestant women.

Alternative Protestants may have a role to play in these conversations, as a bridge, as interlocutors. Perhaps this book could help people locate these alternative northern Protestant worlds.

Claire Mitchell 11.04.24