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Given the dominance of the Roman Catholic church on its culture, Ireland was a country in the closet until relatively recent times.

Under a British law of 1634, "buggery," or male-male sodomy, was a crime punishable by death. This law remained in force until 1861, when the Offences Against Persons Act changed the penalty to life imprisonment. The next legal development came with the Labouchère Amendment (1885)--the statute under which Oscar Wilde was prosecuted--which criminalized all homosexual relations between men as "gross indecency" and imposed sentences of two years at hard labor.

When the Republic of Ireland's constitution was adopted in 1922, the repressive British legislation was retained.

Historically, gay men have had little visible presence in Irish life, lore, and literature. Lesbians have also been virtually absent, but their social situation was somewhat different: although stigmatized by the church, they were not subject to prosecution under law, which was silent on the topic of lesbianism. (Eventually, in 1895 and again in 1922, measures were proposed to criminalize lesbian sexual activity but never passed into law.) Lesbians were thus marginalized as a class whose very existence was not legally recognized yet whose members were condemned within the religious culture.

Two of the very few visible Irish lesbians, cousins Lady Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831), ran off together to Wales, where they became known as the Ladies of Llangollen. They jointly devoted their lives to reading and writing and frequently had literary figures as guests at their country cottage.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, issues of homosexuality began to enter the public discourse when Irish-born Oscar Wilde was convicted of "gross indecency between males" in 1895.

### **Irish Nationalism**

Around the same time, there were stirrings of the nationalist spirit that would lead the Irish to fight for independence from Britain. Éibhear Walshe argues that "colonialism itself generates a gendered power relationship and, inevitably, casts the colonising power as masculine and dominant and the colonised as feminine and passive." He further asserts that in a post-colonial era there is a need for the new nation to forge an identity that excludes "the sexually 'other.'" In such a culture, he contends, "lesbian and gay identity is acutely threatening and unsettling."

Nevertheless, gay men and lesbians were part of the nationalist movement. The great patriot Roger Casement (1864-1916), though closeted because of the serious threat of criminal prosecution, kept journals in which he recorded his enjoyment of sexual encounters with other men. These so-called "Black Diaries" were seized by the British and used to dissuade potential sympathizers from intervening for clemency after Casement was tried for treason in an English court and condemned to death for his role in the cause of freedom for Ireland.

Another hero of the Irish national movement was Pádraic Pearse (1879-1916). A highly respected scholar in both Old Irish and Modern Irish Gaelic, he founded St. Enda's College in 1908 to promote and preserve the

Irish language and culture against British domination. He was also a poet, among whose works are homoerotic verses, including "Little Lad of the Tricks," which begins "There is a fragrance in your kiss that I have not yet found in the kisses of women." While Pearse, like Casement, did not speak publicly of his sexuality, and conclusions about it must remain speculative, such writings strongly suggest a gay identity.

Pearse was commander-in-chief of the Easter Rising on April 24, 1916. It was he who proclaimed the provisional government of the Irish Republic, of which he was named the first president. When British forces overcame the rebels, Pearse was court-martialed and executed.

Another writer close to the rebels was lesbian poet Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926), whose sister, Countess Constance Markievicz, was a fervent nationalist and became the first woman elected to the Irish parliament. Writing during the Celtic Revival, Gore-Booth often chose themes from Irish mythology but recast them in a way that, in the words of novelist and scholar Emma Donoghue, "feminise[d] and lesbianise[d] the stories handed down to her."

Despite her devotion to her Irish heritage, Gore-Booth spent much of her adult life in Manchester with her life-partner, Esther Roper. The two women are interred beneath a joint headstone bearing a quotation from Sappho.

### **Republic of Ireland**

Nationhood, achieved in 1921, did not bring an improvement in the status of gay and lesbian Irish citizens. The new constitution incorporated the oppressive elements of the old British laws with respect to gay men and made no mention of lesbians. The pervasive Roman Catholic culture of the country strongly inhibited people from acknowledging any identity other than a compulsorily heterosexual one. Those who came forth risked rejection--and possibly violence--from their families and communities, ostracism from the church, loss of employment, and, in the case of men, criminal prosecution.

Glbtc people were long a largely invisible segment of the population and absent from the public discourse. A rare exception came when the government banned a novel, *The Land of Spices* (1941), by lesbian writer Kate O'Brien (1897-1974). At issue in the case was the depiction of gay male rather than lesbian desire. O'Brien did write of lesbianism in other works such as her 1958 novel *As Music and Splendour*.

In many countries the 1960s were a time of considerable social and political activism, but for gay men and lesbians in Ireland little changed. Emigration, often to England or the United States, was the choice of many glbtq people seeking to escape the homophobia of Irish society.

### **Post-Stonewall Organizing**

A watershed event for the Irish gay rights movement occurred not in the Republic but rather in New York City. The riots at the Stonewall Inn in June 1969 proved the catalyst that led to the formation of gay rights organizations in Ireland. According to activist Kieran Rose, the "gay liberationist values [of American organizations] were to provide the ideological bases of the first generation of Irish gay rights activists."

Among the earliest of the Irish gay rights groups to achieve a certain visibility and prominence was the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM), founded in Dublin in 1975. In addition to providing social activities for gay men, IGRM had a telephone help-line, a women's group, and a law reform committee. Branches were established in other cities around the Republic including Cork.

The law reform group had the goal of expunging the repressive 1861 and 1885 statutes from the books. To this end David Norris, an activist and James Joyce scholar, mounted a challenge to the constitutionality of these laws. Begun in 1977, this action initiated an odyssey through the courts of Ireland and Europe.

Faced with financial difficulties and divisions over mission and direction, IRGM disbanded in 1983. Meanwhile other gay and lesbian associations had organized, including the Cork Gay Collective and the Gay Defence Committee, which evolved into the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men's Collectives (DLGMC).

### **Murders of Charles Self and Declan Flynn**

The Gay Defence Committee formed in response to the actions of the gardaí (police) after the murder of Charles Self, a gay man.

Self was stabbed to death in his Dublin home on January 20, 1982, perhaps by a man whom he had met in a gay cruising area that night. The gardaí, who had a description and sketch of the suspect, interrogated, photographed, and fingerprinted nearly 1,500 gay men, almost none of whom resembled the man sought. The interrogations often centered on the private lives of the men questioned rather than the solution of the murder.

The Gay Defence Committee spearheaded the effort to end the harassment. They organized a picket of the main gardaí station on Pearse Street (ironically, named for the writer of homoerotic verse). Support from other civil rights groups--including the Irish Council for Civil Liberties--and media coverage of the gardaí's practices eventually brought a halt to the wholesale interrogations.

The gardaí never arrested anyone for the murder of Charles Self.

A few months after Self was killed, another man, Declan Flynn, was beaten to death by a homophobic gang of youths in Fairview Park, a gay cruising spot. This time the assailants were brought to trial and found guilty, but the judge suspended the sentence and released the convicts, whereupon they held a "victory march" in Fairview Park. The DLGMC countered with a second march calling for an end to violence inspired by homophobia and violence against women. The march, which had the strong support of feminist groups, drew a large crowd but unfortunately did not lead to any improvement.

### **The Irish Lesbian Movement**

The Irish lesbian movement had its roots in the wider campaign for women's rights. Lesbians were prominent members of the short-lived Irish Women United (1975-1977), an organization that focused on equal pay for women and issues of reproductive rights but did not take on specifically lesbian concerns.

Liberation for Lesbians (LIL, 1978-1985) addressed this need. LIL ran a telephone help-line and held discussion groups and conferences as well as offering social events.

### **The 1980s**

The decade of the 1980s was a low point for the glbtq movement in Ireland. The political climate was generally conservative. AIDS was taking a toll among gay men, which only added to the stigma already imposed by the Catholic culture.

Nevertheless, David Norris's case challenging Ireland's repressive laws was moving through the courts. Norris's lawyer, Mary Robinson, initiated the case in November 1977. It was eventually heard in 1980, at which point the presiding judge found for the state despite acknowledging that there was significant discrimination against gays. The Supreme Court upheld the ruling in 1983.

After this adverse decision Norris and Robinson moved on to the European Commission on Human Rights. When the Commission ruled in favor of Norris, the Irish government had an automatic right to contest the decision in the European Court, which it chose to exercise.

The case was finally heard in April 1988, and the following October the Court found by a vote of eight to six that Irish law violated Article 8 of the Convention on Human Rights. The onus was then on the Irish parliament to pass corrective legislation, a process that dragged on for another five years.

### **The 1990s**

Finally, on June 30, 1993 homosexuality in Ireland was decriminalized. The age of consent for all people was set at seventeen. David Norris, by then a senator, had led the campaign, and Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland, signed the bill into law.

By coincidence the ratification of the legislation came just days before Dublin's annual pride march, which consequently was a particularly jubilant event in 1993. Journalist Mary Holland wrote, "one would need a heart of stone not to have been moved by the great waves of happiness that surged through the centre of Dublin last Saturday afternoon as Irish gays and lesbians took to the streets. They threw pink carnations into the crowd, walked hand in hand and chanted 'We're here, we're queer, we're legal.'"

Another victory was scored that October when the parliament passed a law forbidding discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation.

### **The New Century: Challenges and Opportunities**

As important as these developments were, the challenge of overcoming long-embedded homophobic attitudes remains daunting. Change has been gradual but tolerance for gay people has increased in the new century.

Violence against gay men and lesbians remains a problem, and, particularly in conservative rural areas, the lack of a supportive network can cause lesbians and gay men to feel isolated and alone. One result is a tragically high suicide rate, especially among young men.

Larger cities like Dublin and Cork offer a more gay-friendly environment. The social scene is still rather limited, but the glbtq community now has more options and a greater visibility than ever before.

Several cities host annual pride parades. Dublin's, which drew only about 400 people when it began in 1992, has grown into a two-week festival. In 2003 approximately 6,000 glbtq people marched proudly through the streets of the capital. By 2010, the number of participants had grown to almost 25,000.

Technology has brought new opportunities for communication for Irish glbtq people, with chat rooms and on-line dating services. Television programs, some produced in Ireland and others imported, feature gay men and lesbians in increasing numbers.

Issues of parental rights and domestic partnership are of prime concern to the glbtq community in Ireland. Gay men and lesbians are now able to foster children but do not yet have the right to adopt them.

A major victory for transgender rights was attained in 2010, when the Irish government announced that it would not appeal a High Court ruling that Irish law on transgender rights is in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The case arose when Dr. Lydia Foy, a dentist who was registered at birth as male, requested a new birth certificate showing her sex as female. After thirteen years of litigation, her right to a new birth certificate was finally recognized.

### **Civil Partnership Bill**

The goal to provide legal recognition of same-sex couples also finally came to fruition in 2010. Several events helped propel the eventual adoption of a civil partnership bill.

With the adoption of same-sex marriage by such European countries as the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Norway, Sweden, and Portugal, and of registered partnerships or civil partnerships by most other Western European countries, including the United Kingdom, Ireland was on the verge of becoming isolated in Europe for its failure to extend equal rights to gay and lesbian couples.

In addition, the country was rocked by a number of scandals involving the abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests and nuns. These scandals weakened the moral authority of the Church and enabled politicians to work for social justice without worrying about political pushback from the Church.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century several proposals were floated to recognize gay and lesbian couples, from marriage to civil unions and domestic partnerships. Senator David Norris was the foremost spokesperson for marriage.

In 2009 and 2010, concrete proposals for a civil partnership bill were developed and refined. The bill that was finally signed into law on July 19, 2010, provides a wide range of protections, rights, and obligations for same-sex couples in areas such as pensions, taxes, social welfare, domestic violence, inheritance, and joint tenancy. It grants all the rights and responsibilities of marriage except the right to adopt children.

The bill, modeled on the U.K.'s civil partnership legislation, was, despite opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, passed without a vote in the Dáil and with an overwhelming majority in the Seanad at the beginning of July. It went into effect on January 1, 2011.

After it was signed into law by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern described the civil partnership bill as "one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation to be enacted since independence," adding that "Ireland will be a better place for its enactment."

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