2025

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Recommended Citation
In Skelly, J. et al (co-ed.) Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World Textiles, Vol.8 (Politics and Power), 2025.

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Keywords:

Ireland, wounds, stains, blood, cloth, conflict, abuse, abjection, sacrifice, memory, mourning.

Abstract:
The fabric of the island of Ireland is marked by the leakage of persistent sores and unhealed wounds borne by the unhealed messy flesh of the national body, which is symbolically swaddled, shrouded, stifled and sheltered by cloth. Ireland is a stained and bloodied cloth, marked irreversibly by conflict and abuse, bloodied by repression and denial, sullied by hunger and history. Blood, flowing from stigmata onto cloth, haemorrhage *in extremis* from wounds, real or imagined, is steeped deep into the Irish psyche, reflecting a narrative of abjection, sacrifice, memory and mourning.

I made *The Big Red* in Belfast in 1994 before 'peace broke out' with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement **(Figure 1)**. Described as a "huge, livid wall of twining, twisting red fabrics, so all-enveloping that it…shrouds an entire wall with masses of ragged, falling fabric strands of different textures and densities…a sanguinary waterfall, which bleeds into a thick carpet of fleece that…fills the room with a warm, heady animal odour…,"[1] it is only one of many textile carriers of embodied meanings and embedded politics and power. Ireland is a stained and bloodied cloth,[2] marked irreversibly by conflict and abuse, bloodied by repression and denial, sullied by hunger and history. Blood, flowing from stigmata onto cloth, haemorrhage *in extremis* from wounds, real or imagined, is steeped deep into the Irish psyche, reflecting a narrative of abjection, sacrifice, memory and mourning.

[1] Dunne, A. "Private pain coloured red." The Sunday Tribune (11 September 1994).
[2] Harper, C. (ed.), *The Stained & Bloody Cloths of Ireland* (forthcoming from Peeters Publishers, 2023).

Figure 1. Catherine Harper, *The Big Red*, dyed domestic fabrics and unwashed sheep's fleece, 1994 (collection of Belfast City Council, image permission of the artist).

Bloody Sunday

The blood-stained handkerchief used by Catholic priest Father Edward Daly as a 'truce flag' to attempt cessation of firing by British Army Paratroopers in Derry (Northern Ireland/North of Ireland) on a Civil Rights Association march is one such textile **(Figure 2)**. John Hume, one of the principal architects of the Northern Irish peace process, recalled his father's assertion that "You cannot eat a flag…real politics is about living standards, social and economic development…it's not about waving flags at one another."[3] On 30 January 1972, however, Daly waved his flag, his

[3] John Hume – Interview (August 2016) https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1998/hume/interview/ (accessed 9 December 2022).

white handkerchief, to (unsuccessfully) signal ‘cease fire’ and to enable removal of the lifeless body of Bloody Sunday’s first victim – the seventeen-year-old Jackie Duddy – from a street in the centre of the city. Jackie had been fatally shot in the back. Thirteen people died that day, and a fourteenth died a few months later from their wounds.

Figure 2. Detail of Father Edward Daly’s handkerchief (Image: copyright Catherine Harper, courtesy Museum of Free Derry).

The Saville Enquiry concluded 38 years later that Bloody Sunday’s events were, in the words of British Prime Minister David Cameron, both "unjustified" and "unjustifiable."[4] It found that all of those who had been shot were unarmed, that none were posing a serious threat, that no bombs were thrown, and that soldiers "knowingly put forward false accounts…in order to seek to justify their firing.”[5]

[4] McDonald, H. et al. “Bloody Sunday report: David Cameron apologises.” The Guardian (15 June 2010), www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jun/15/bloody-sunday-report-saville-inquiry (accessed 8 September 2022).
[5] McDonald, H. et al. *Ibid*.

That humble hankie became a key historical, locational, and political artifact of The Troubles (so-called), preserved in the iconic, much reproduced, photographic image that was flashed around the world at the time **(Figure 3)**. A textile artifact, protected in the Duddy family home and subsequently in the Free Derry Museum's Bloody Sunday archives: the labor of love and of laundry translating it from functional fabric, through the stoic rituals of mourning and memory, into a memento mori of significant cultural importance embodying both personal tragedy and political transformation in Ireland's social imagination. It is a flag of humanity, providing an alternative textile to those traditional flags marking sectarian affiliation or heraldic triumphalism.

Figure 3. Father Edward Daly with the body of Jackie Duddy, Bloody Sunday 1972 (Image: copyright Fulvio Grimaldi, courtesy Museum of Free Derry)

The handkerchief is neatly embroidered with 'Fr. E. Daly' by the priest's mother, reflecting her domestic concern for loss in the laundry, through lending, or through the day-to-day activities of her son, a Catholic 'man of the cloth.' The careful letters picked out in navy thread speak volumes of a mother's love for, care of, and pride in her son. Their clarity and materiality articulate the provenance of the cotton piece – a simple cared-for handkerchief, a peace flag, a woman's stitching inscribing her maternal body, through her sewing fingers, into the life and onto the body of her son. And thence, through that son's compassionate priestly touch, onto the body of the other son – the other mother's son – Jackie Duddy.

All this inscription, invisible save for the seven stitched letters, is an unconscious precursor to Hélène Cixous's "white ink" and "écriture féminine."[6] In the warp and weft spaces around the navy letters is the sub-textual textile meaning: women of Derry, women who have stitched, laundered, mothered, and mourned, are women who made the city in the form of a sewn – and soiled – shirt, marginalized, bordered, pieced and partial in its narratives. Derry, on the contested and contingent edge of Britain's imperial remnants, is politically untidy, threatens to unravel, is continuously and cantankerously knotty, and bound in tribalism and discontent.

The woman's signature in thread expresses the contradictions and complexities of Ireland's maternal culture, female embodiment, and troubled feminine psyche. If an Irish woman must still write herself into history, transcend narrow uterine function and transgress reproductive pre-destiny, then could Mrs. Daly's modest monogram, its traumatic outing and canonization as an artifact of erasure, be used to examine the condition of Irish women? Martyred and blood-sacrificed, emblematic of sacred repression and the pious humility of the sewing stance, head bowed, sitting very still, that pocket handkerchief has a greater material, cultural, somatic and emblematic potency than its humble origin suggests.

Bloody Sunday was one sorry moment in the Northern Irish Troubles' three relentless decades of repetition, devastation, suffering, atrocity and execution. Women's rights – to reproductive autonomy, freedom from abuse, fear and loss, and to maternal choice – were obscured by the dominant discourse of the sectarian struggle. The haptic and symbolic linkage of the Daly and Duddy mothers to their sons, through cloth, thread and textile typifies a feminine 'other' in the masculinist symbolic order of terror and trauma that characterised memory, mythology and mourning in Northern Ireland.

Derry City, Bloody Sunday, the blood-stained cloth, its careful stitched signature, the violence and symbolism of its use to staunch the bleeding and stop the bullets, and its sanitised and laundered incarnation in the museum, activates insights into "the inherent tension of female sexuality and devotion…the…tragic, futile violence of bloody sacrifice in the name of a land and a civilization that is not always civilized."[7] The fragility of peace remains gossamer fine, as easily shattered as bone, as easily ripped as skin, as easily torn as the most delicate of textile membranes.

Bloody Blankets

Bloody marks on Jackie Duddy's boy-body and on Father Daly's flag-cloth augment other stains in Ireland's biographical tract. Bruised skins and bruised minds, savage anointments and ritual

[6] Cixous, H. (trans. Cohen, K. and Cohen, P.) "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1:4, Summer 1976, 875-893.
[7] Tipton, G. "Catherine harper, Project Arts Centre. Dublin." Circa Art Magazine, February 1993, 64, 56.

punishments, gagging and hooding of men,[8] tarring and feathering of women,[9] all in the name of civil or guerilla war.

In Armagh women's prison and the Maze Prison H-Blocks near Belfast, republican prisoners began 'dirty protests' in the early 1980s. Seeking restoration of their special category (political prisoner) rather than criminal status, men and women smeared their cell walls with their faeces, blood, urine, and sputum, and refused the criminalizing prison convention of 'slopping out.'[10] Stains on cloth and clothes, secretions, intimate smells, and seepage wove together memories and histories, politics and power, inside and outside, secular and spiritual, self and nation.

Female prisoners deployed their bodies to bleed and blot, enacting revolution and resistance through revulsion: "this is my blood, thick and reddy brown, but that is cloth, soft and porous; this comes from inside of me, but that lies outside of me."[11] Bloody clots, menstrual mucus and sanitary debris, the political use of their fleshy leaking bodies enabled a unique transgression of public space, gendered norms, community convention and Catholic acceptability. Normally hidden bodily matter, especially taboo in the social and sexual conservatism of Catholic culture, was exploited to counter degrading and controlling prison regulations that rationed sanitary wear and allowed strip searching of women during their periods. The women created their own stink and squalor, asserting their personal and political power through the abject juxtaposition of circumstance, environment, female bodies, and their unruly issue.

Long-haired, naked and bearded, the H-Blocks men, in filthy cells folded into their rough grey prison-issue blankets, performed a 'feminised', yielding and violated martyrdom as self-sacrificial, emaciated Christ-like wraiths **(Figure 4)**. The hunger strike protest that was part of the Maze dirty protest ceased when ten male prisoners – infant swaddled, blanket-comforted, cloaked and corpse-shrouded – had starved themselves to death.

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[8] In 1971, twelve men were detained by the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Special Branch, supported by the British Army, and subjected to hooding, stress positions, sleep deprivation, white noise, and food and water deprivation. In 2019, the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal confirmed their treatment would today be "characterised as torture." Individuals abducted, murdered and secretly buried during the Troubles have been found hooded with bullet holes in the fabric that indicate how they were killed. In other punishment killings, victims' heads and faces were concealed with hoods that served to terrorise them further and that contained the destroyed tissue caused by the beating or shooting that resulted in death.

[9] The bloody practice of cutting, shaving or 'bobbing' women's hair during the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) was a public, degrading and terrorising method for punishment of alleged 'sexual transgression.' In the early 1970s, such gendered reprisals reappeared in the Troubles. Women's heads were shaved, disfiguring hot tar poured onto them, and feathers applied to the sticky mess. Victims of such brutality were chained to lampposts, typically with a sign around their neck stating they had consorted or collaborated with British soldiers or police and were therefore traitors to their community and the Irish nation.

[10] The emptying of human waste from a chamber pot, bucket or chemical toilet when prison cells without flush toilets are unlocked in the morning.

[11] Barnett, P. "Stain," in Pajakzkowska, C. et al. *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 2008, 203-215.

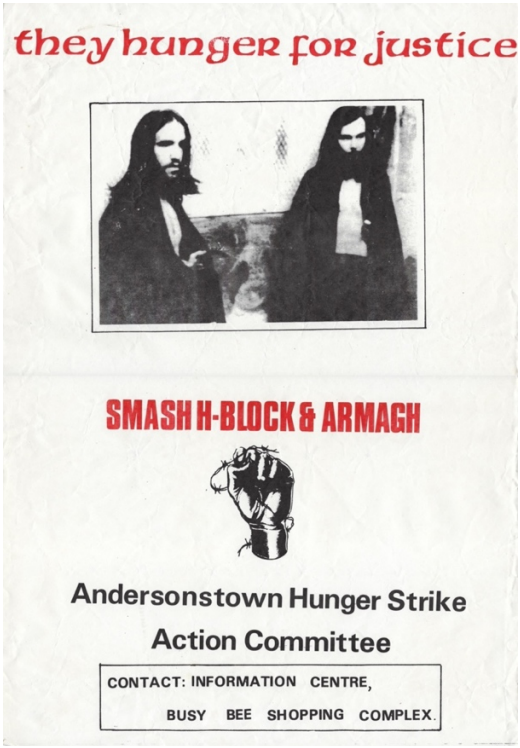

Figure 4. IRA Hunger Strike Poster, 1981 (Image: copyright Stuart Lutz/Gado)

The blankets themselves—flaccid, excrement-impregnated, penetrated by the intimate fluids of dying bodies—were destroyed as both materially degraded and politically incendiary objects. Steeped in sorrow and suffering, blanket relics hovered on the border between the living and the corpse: "cloth…receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even…both reassuring and terrifying, touching the living with the dead."[12] The blankets – devotional and miraculous objects – were textile carriers of meanings, the last membranes of the Blanket Men Hunger Strikers between life and beyond. The Turin-like imprint of the martyr, his blood sacrifice, was erased and silenced.

Bloody Sacrifice

The idea of the 'blood sacrifice' was as much a symbol of a theologically conservative Irish national spirit as an abject death-wish conjuring martyrdom, militant Irish nationalism, the price of independence and freedom from British colonial rule. The Proclamation of the 1916 Easter Rising asserted that "the Irish people must … by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves … prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called."[13] While Celtic mythological heroism informed this thinking, Catholic faith and devotion to Christ's crucifixion

[12] Stallybrass, P. "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things." *The Yale Review*, 1993, 81:2, pp.35-50

[13] The Proclamation of the Republic was issued during the 2016 Easter Rising proclaiming Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom. Its reading by Pádraig Pearse outside the General Post Office on Dublin's Sackville Street (now called O'Connell Street) marked the beginning of the Rising.

cemented it. Blood spilt was “a cleansing and sanctifying thing,” a glorifying, cleansing and warming flow that regenerated and re-energised a jaded nation.[14]

Bloody Sunday saw murdered civilians become martyrs in the minds of ardent republicans recruiting for armed conflict. Starving ‘blanket men,’ invoking a romanticised version of the Great Hunger (an Gorta Mór) of the Irish Famine of the 1840s, furthered the concept of the volunteer martyr. The blood-stained shirt of James Connolly, one of the leaders of the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, worn during the fighting in Dublin before his capture and execution, is preserved in the National Museum of Ireland **(Figure 5)**.

Figure 5. James Connolly’s blood-stained shirt, 1916 (Image: Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

[14] Pearse, P. *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches*. Dublin: Maunsel & Roberts, 1922.

In the same gallery is the bloodied greatcoat of Michael Collins, the murdered Irish revolutionary leader and Minister for Finance in the First Dáil (Irish parliament) of 1919. Both are iconic textiles, as much 'Republican relics' as those of sanctified saints, and they are potent reminders of how powerful and political cloths and clothing can be. The fabric of the island is marked by the leakage of persistent sores and raw wounds borne by the unhealed messy flesh of the national body, swaddled, shrouded, stifled and sheltered by cloth. Enduring stains on walls, cloths and hearts linger as indexes of existence, proof of happenings, evidence of desire or grief, memories traced on cloths, imprinting the sensations of smell, touch, sorrow and mortality into fabric's history, and – like prolonged death throes or the never-ending-ness of a death-rattle – resisting the Irish body's erasure.

Bloody Ireland

Blood, cloth and gender is a potent combination in Ireland, where the fight for women's complete reproductive autonomy – free and full access to all forms of contraception and abortion, and reparation for enforced adoptions, obstetric cruelty, and punishment and incarceration of 'wayward women' – continues both north and south of the border in spite of legal strides forward. The abject and metaphorical textiles of sexual shame and sexual trauma – as yet unhealed – index women on the margins, the hems, the frayed edges of the main cloth.

Ireland, for a very long time, suffered from a distorting veneer of sexual prudery and moral prurience. The prevailing message for young women was that female sexuality was dangerous; female desire or bodily pleasure was taboo; female bodies were potentially incendiary, volatile and inadvertently provocative; sexual deviance from the behavioral codes enshrined in constitution, legislation and religious convention was the way to self-inflicted social and moral damnation:

> Sin, through sex outside of marriage, queerness, abortion, all the various ways of being human, had to be confessed and forgiven. We learned what clean and what was dirty. That your own blood is a thing of shame, but that Jesus' blood would wash you clean.[15]

Ireland mythologizes and celebrates an ideal of femininity and maternity, which is exemplified by the mother's careful stitchery of the embroidered handkerchief, and its careful washing, ironing, and re-presentation. Mother Ireland enshrines the notion of land as woman, and Irish nationhood is heavily associated with, and constitutionally shaped by, an essentialist idea of female destiny as virginity giving way only to motherhood.

[15] Mitchell, C. "Missionary Blood," in Harper, C. (ed.), *The Stained & Bloody Cloths of Ireland* (forthcoming from Peeters Publishers, 2023).

Bloody Bastards

Blood on snow, blood on a school coat, blood on the lifeless skin of the infant that fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett gave birth to on the frozen ground beside a rural Virgin Mary grotto on 31 January 1984 **(Figure 6)**. Blood on the kitchen scissors she used to cut the umbilical cord joining her child body to that of her son. Slipping out of school, cutting the ties that bind, like mothers before and since. The baby was dead or dying shortly after birth, his mother found crying and hemorrhaging beside him. Ann died of blood loss that evening.

Figure 6. Unattributed newspaper cutting referring to the death of Ann Lovett and her child, 1984.

Irish women of my generation remember Ann's story vividly as a warning to us not to sin. Stains on the soul: Ann's community, clergy and family purported to have no knowledge of her transgressive pregnancy, but clearly had played their own parochial roles in a willful Irish national blindness concerning the 'illegitimate' consequences of sex.

Stains on sheets: extensive and systemic sexual, emotional and physical abuse of thousands of women and children by clergy, in religious-run industrial schools and orphanages, and in the infamous Magdalene Laundries and Bethany Homes. All of this was said to have shocked the Irish nation state **(Figure 7)**. But women were somehow still to blame. Stains on the ecclesiastical, governmental, civic and commercial clothing and other cloths washed out by the unmarried mothers of bloody bastards, so-called 'promiscuous and precocious' girls, some of them the victims of rape and incest, who were housed by the thousands in Irish Magdalene laundries, laboring as unpaid and unacknowledged laundresses. The last Irish Magdalene

Laundry was closed in Dublin in 1996, but thousands of women and girls lived, worked, and 'disappeared' in these institutions, incarcerated and abused, lives spent washing stains from cloth.

Figure 7. Unidentified Magdalene Laundry, Ireland, early 20th century.

Enda Kenny, then-Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), offered a State Apology to the Magdalene Women in 2013, referring to Ireland's prurient culture as "cruel, pitiless, and distinctly lacking in mercy, judgmental, intolerant, petty and prim…that welcomed the compliant, obedient and lucky 'us' and banished the more problematic, spirited or unlucky 'them.'"[16] Kenny was not wrong, but Ireland's cruelty and lack of pity extended to stains well beyond the laundries.

Bloody Women

The Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, introduced by the British across the whole island of Ireland, prohibited attempts to cause miscarriage, with this punishable by penal servitude for life. This was Ireland's sole legislation until the Criminal Justice Act and the 8th Amendment to the Constitution were introduced in Northern Ireland (1945) and the Republic of Ireland (1983), respectively. The former added a new offence of *child destruction* before the foetus "has an existence independent of its mother," while the latter clarified that the foetus' right to be born was equal to the mother's right to life, even if that foetus was already dead, dying, malformed, unviable, or the product of rape or incest.

The mother's right to life: until at least 1982, the barbaric symphysiotomy procedure was deployed non-consensually in Irish obstetrics on approximately 1500 women, some as young as fourteen, whose pelvis or birth canal was narrow. Caesarean section, which was considered to limit the safety of multiple births and therefore oppose Catholic doctrine, was withheld. During

[16] "A cruel and pitiless Ireland." The Irish Times, 20 February 2013. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/a-cruel-and-pitiless-ireland-1.1313469 (accessed 9 September 2022).

labor, the obstetrician sliced through pelvic cartilage and ligaments, or in extreme cases sawed through the pelvis bone, to allow vaginal birth. After delivery, women were immobilised, hips corseted together, to allow the broken pelvis to heal. Many women were left with life-long pain, incontinence, and difficulty walking, as well as sexual and emotional trauma. Soiled pads, bloody bandages, intimate wounds, contaminated sheets, debased women: cruel and pitiless indeed.

The period up to Repeal of the 8th Amendment (May 2018) in the Republic was tainted with scandal, infamy and disgrace that ultimately hastened the legislation that introduced legal abortion to Ireland from the beginning of 2019.[17] In 2012, a Galway woman – Savita Halappanavar – died of septic shock when medics delayed making any abortive intervention during the prolonged but unsalvageable miscarriage of a much-wanted baby because there was a faint foetal heartbeat **(Figure 8)**.[18] Savita's case was undoubtedly a tipping point.

[17] This permitted terminations up to 12 weeks of pregnancy; or where there is a risk to the life, or of serious harm to the health, of the pregnant woman; or where there is a condition present which is likely to lead to the death of the foetus either before or within 28 days of birth. By the end of 2019, fewer than 15% of the GPs in Ireland had signed up to provide abortion services, but the Repeal the 8th campaign was, nevertheless, a start and cause for celebration.

[18] In 1983, a Dundalk woman died of multiple diagnosed cancers two days after giving birth to her third child – she was denied cancer treatment while pregnant as the Catholic hospital ethos precluded harm to the foetus, which died shortly after birth in any case. In 1992, Child X, abused, raped, pregnant at fourteen was *constitutionally* forbidden to leave Ireland for termination. Supreme Court intervention permitted travel some weeks later as her extreme suicide risk threatened *both foetus and herself*. The problem exported, she miscarried on arriving in London and before her procedure. In 2007, a seventeen-year-old woman whose foetus was diagnosed with fatal anencephaly (absence of most of the brain, skull and scalp) was prevented from travelling to Britain by the Irish Health Service Executive for abortion, a decision subsequently ruled unlawful by the High Court. In 2014, a brain-dead fifteen-weeks pregnant woman was kept on life support for four weeks, when there was no genuine prospect of a viable birth – the High Court eventually permitted removal of support from what was essentially a deteriorating corpse and terminally distressed foetus. In 2014, a traumatised suicidal asylum seeker and pregnant rape victim, with limited English, was denied both an abortion in Ireland and legal entry to the UK for an abortion. On hunger strike, she was coercively hydrated by Irish High Court order, and her baby delivered when considered viable by enforced Caesarean section.

Figure 8. Protesters in Dublin in response to the death of Savita Halappanavar (Image: William Murphy, Dublin, Ireland, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons)

The Northern Ireland Assembly, formed in 1998 following the Good Friday Agreement, rejected attempts to allow for abortion of pregnancies caused by sexual crime, or in cases of foetal disability or fatal foetal abnormality. In October 2019, however, with the Assembly not functioning, the UK Parliament legislated in its absence. The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 allowed abortion in Northern Ireland up to twelve weeks' gestation; up to twenty-four weeks where there is risk to life or physical or mental health of the pregnant woman; and up to full term in cases of severe fetal impairment or a fatal fetal abnormality. As of May 2022, however, abortion clinics and treatments in Northern Ireland are limited,[19] and most women continue to travel to Great Britain for abortions.

The fabric of the island of Ireland is marked by the leakage of persistent sores and unhealed wounds borne by the unhealed messy flesh of the national body, which is symbolically swaddled, shrouded, stifled and sheltered by cloth.

[19] In Northern Ireland, the total number of terminations was twelve in 2017-18, eight in 2018-19, and twenty-two in 2019-20.