Critical Military Studies

ISSN: 2333-7486 (Print) 2333-7494 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcms20

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To cite this article: Hannah West, Eleanor Williams, Huw Bennett & Thomas Leahy (06 Aug 2025): Encountering research in Northern Ireland, Critical Military Studies, DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2025.2542614

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2542614

Published online: 06 Aug 2025.

CRITICAL MILITARY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2542614

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Encountering research in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

As Northern Ireland marks 25 years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the political afterlife of the conflict persists in affecting the everyday lives of communities, kept alive through individual and institutional memories and stories. With state archives continuing to be released and living actors in the conflict still available to interview, they offer opportunities and challenges for researchers trying to understand the Troubles to navigate. This paper reflects on our different research encounters considering how our research has been affected by questions of access and positionality in the making of new and critical knowledges on the conflict in Northern Ireland.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 July 2025
Accepted 29 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Northern Ireland; positionality; access; knowledge production; archives; criticality

This paper reflects on the different research encounters of four academics working in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, presented as a conversation. We start by introducing each contributor, before asking each to respond to five different questions which explore how their position impacts on their research lens and access and how they feel knowledge production about the conflict is being affected by control over the release of archival material. We go on to reflect on how we maintain critical distance in research encounters, on our moral responsibility as researchers examining the legacies of the Troubles in light of the contemporary political situation and finally consider what questions are left unanswered in making new and critical knowledges on the conflict.

Huw Bennett is Professor of International Relations specializing in strategic studies, the history of war, and intelligence studies. Huw's research focuses on the experience of the British Army since 1945, in the contexts of British politics, the Cold War, the end of empire, and the War on Terror. He recently published *Uncivil War: The British Army and the Troubles, 1966–1975* (Bennett 2023).

Thomas Leahy is a Senior Lecturer in British and Irish Politics and Contemporary History. His research specializes in the Northern Ireland conflict and its intelligence war, Irish republicanism since 1969 (Sinn Féin and the IRA), politics in and about the island of Ireland, and dealing with northern conflict legacy including in the Republic of Ireland.

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His first book the *Intelligence War Against the IRA* was published in 2020 and won the Political Studies Association of Ireland's Brian Farrell book prize (2021).

Eleanor Leah Williams is an Assistant Professor in Security at Dublin City University. Prior to this Eleanor was a Junior Research Fellow [JRF] in the Northern Ireland peace process at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. A key part of this position was working with the Quill Project, which uses innovative technology to understand negotiated text. Eleanor was specifically working on the 'Writing Peace' project at Quill, which was a team designated to researching the Northern Ireland peace process. Her research during this period specifically considered the covert role of British and Irish civil servants during the peace process. Eleanor completed her PhD research at Queen's University Belfast where she researched the ethics of state intelligence activities during the Northern Ireland conflict and compared it with the Colombian case study.

Hannah West is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Uniformed Public Services at Anglia Ruskin University and a former Royal Navy Air Engineer. Her inter-disciplinary research employs creative methods to explore military cultures/behaviours, women's military history and counterinsurgency/human security. Her PhD at the University of Bath explored women as combatants and counterinsurgents in the British counterinsurgency campaigns of Malaya, Northern Ireland, and Afghanistan. Following a PhD exploring women as combatants and counterinsurgents in British campaigns, she extended her research on the Troubles in Northern Ireland through an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship at Cardiff University. Her research has illuminated British servicewomen's experiences on covert and conventional operations, including the Women's Royal Army Corps, Ulster Defence Regiment, and Royal Ulster Constabulary, as well as creative collaborations including films and a virtual exhibition based on her research.[1]

How does your position impact your research lens and access in Northern Ireland?

Hannah West

It was only when I served in Afghanistan that I really came to understand the significance of the Troubles in the British Army psyche. Growing up in rural England during the 1980s and 90s, my only recollection beyond news coverage is of the bomb checks under the car as we went for my weekly swimming lessons in a local RAF base. But hearing how my Army colleagues drew on their experiences of patrolling in Northern Ireland as a frame of reference for their time in Helmand helped me to see this as *the* formative setting for the mid-ranking officers of the British Army in Afghanistan.

When I first reached out, via regimental museums and associations, to find servicewomen with experience of the Troubles, I didn't think it especially significant when they came forward to be interviewed. I had included my background as a former Royal Navy Air Engineer in the emails to potential participants. It was only afterwards, on chatting to other researchers and seeing their surprise at the access I had, that I realized the implicit trust that came with being ex-military.

And I think there is greater nuance to it than 'you were a woman who served, you get it'. I believe that being ex-Navy and not having served in Northern Ireland were

significant here. Had I been ex-Army there would have been questions about which regiment and the enduring politics of rank structures that seem to pervade the veteran community but being ex-Navy meant I was a bit of an unknown quantity. I was unlikely to have served with anyone they served with – I joined up in 2000 - and yet I understood what it was like to be in a minority as a woman in the military and could speak the language of operations and, to some extent, the Army (having served on land operations). I joined up after the disbanding of the women's services, so I can't be dismissed as a 'Wren'[2] and being from a technical branch also distinguishes me from the traditionally 'feminine' branches and helps me to be taken 'seriously' in what are patriarchal institutions. And at the same time, not having served in Northern Ireland, meant I was less of a threat to those I spoke to as I was unlikely to question their story.

But I am conscious that I am ex-military researching the military and, as such, very much on safe ground. I haven't approached women who operated within paramilitary groups, so I remain uncertain about how I would be received by them. The ongoing political situation in Northern Ireland means I retain a heightened consciousness of my veteran identity when I am visiting – echoing the behaviours I see in the female veterans that live there – in not wearing running T-shirts with military insignia or being careful who I tell about what I am researching. So my past life in the military opens doors for my research but there are doors I haven't tried to open yet.

Huw Bennett

I came to studying the military aspects of the Troubles as a double outsider, without any military background and with no connection to Ireland. This status has brought both limitations and advantages to my research. In late 2008 a colleague asked me to fill a slot in their seminar series on prisoners in conflict by talking about Northern Ireland because the original speaker had dropped out and my research on the Kenya insurgency in the 1950s took prisoners into account. So I was launched into studying the Troubles from a position of almost total ignorance. Like Hannah, growing up the Troubles was a constant background noise. The whole thing seemed inexplicable. Later, I read M.L. R. Smith's article about the intellectual internment of the conflict and saw how in Britain we have tried to ignore the Troubles (Smith 1999).

My mixed English-Welsh identity proved a mixed blessing. The Celtic connection means people in Northern Ireland sometimes perceive me as likely to be more sympathetic than an English person might be. But my distinct English accent can prompt suspicion. When reaching out to veterans and military museums I usually mentioned my teaching experience at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. Sometimes, the resulting familiarity with military jargon, and perhaps the positive contribution to the defence community, opened doors. Other times it made no difference; I was just another outsider prying into a sensitive subject or even worse, brigaded into the collective enemy category, 'academics, journalists and lawyers', who were never to be spoken to. Though being outside the military might have helped me adopt a more independent-minded stance, I have come to believe such a conclusion is probably false. There is no shortage of critical thinkers in the military. My position as a permanently employed academic means I can speak out without having to worry about the consequences.

Thomas Leahy

My research has focused on the British intelligence war against the Irish Republican Army (IRA), how the Irish state addresses the northern conflict legacy and the decommissioning of IRA weapons. Whilst mileage is gained by researching in the British and Irish state archives, interviewing people from different perspectives has been essential. Neither the British nor Irish archives can give us complete insight. On intelligence and security matters, files related to various incidents are withheld. And as the conflict remains contemporary history, it permits interviews alongside other research methods.

My family and academic background influences my approach. As my surname suggests, I have family background from the north and south of Ireland, including famously Charlie Hurley, former Irish and Sunderland soccer player. Irish history formed part of my upbringing. For instance, I remember the IRA's August 1994 ceasefire alongside Loyalists' reciprocal ceasefire being discussed at home whilst growing up. At the same time, I was raised in southern England where conflict experience centred on IRA attacks in London.

I undertook my degrees in History at King's College London. I was an Irish Research Council postdoctoral fellow in Galway University thereafter, before joining Cardiff University. Studying at these institutions has exposed me to contrasting opinions. Any preconceived ideas have been tried and tested by colleagues. This background convinces me that interviews for Troubles research are important.

They uncover unheard voices across political groups, former combatants and victims/survivors. At times, they create fresh insight. For instance, alongside other sources, the consensus from interviewees was that the IRA was not pressurized into peace by British intelligence to any significant extent (Leahy 2020). Accessing interviewees has generally been straightforward; although state secrecy makes obtaining interviews with British and Irish politicians alongside security veterans challenging.

Eleanor Leah Williams

Compared to some of my colleagues, my background and position within the Northern Ireland context is less interesting. Born in the mid-1990s, I am the only one among us who does not have a living memory of the conflict itself. Instead, I was shaped more by watching the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror unfold on the evening news. My mother often recalls my unusual fascination with these events. Apparently, I became particularly animated whenever Tony Blair appeared on television, which, in hindsight, is perhaps more concerning than endearing.

Ironically, this early interest in global conflict is what first led me towards studying the Troubles. During my undergraduate degree at Cardiff University, I was determined to 'talk to terrorists' for my dissertation. Fortunately, my lecturers, well aware of the ethical and practical barriers involved in researching and interviewing al-Qaeda members or the Tamil Tigers, encouraged me to explore Northern Ireland instead. They pointed out that studying the Troubles would not only be more viable but also allow me to engage with former combatants in a meaningful and ethically sound way. That redirection proved pivotal, and I've been hooked ever since.

However, being Welsh has been an interesting lens to view the Troubles. Growing up in a Welsh-speaking area, I was aware of the strong cultural and historical affinities many Welsh people feel with Ireland. However, I've also come to realize just how little we, like many ordinary citizens in England and Scotland, really understand about Northern Ireland. Its complexities, history, and ongoing challenges are alien to many in my community. I've found this disconnect quite striking, especially given the shared histories and proximity of these islands. As Huw mentioned, one might presume the Celtic connection has made me more sympathetic to the Irish cause, but I don't believe my Welsh background has neither significantly advantaged nor disadvantaged me when engaging with different communities in Northern Ireland.

What has shaped my perspective more profoundly, however, is my academic journey. Since first becoming interested in Northern Ireland during my undergraduate studies at Cardiff University, I have had the privilege of studying and working at institutions like Queen's University Belfast, the University of Oxford, and now Dublin City University. Each of these environments has provided a distinct vantage point from which to research and present on the Troubles, each exposing me to a different range of perspectives on Northern Ireland's history and conflict legacy. It's been particularly interesting to see what precisely these communities know and remember about the Troubles, and what they do not. This range of experiences has highlighted to me how different contexts and audiences influence our framing and interpretations of the Northern Ireland conflict. These experiences have also underscored the importance of being reflexive about our own positionality when conducting research in a deeply contested and emotionally charged field like this one.

How is knowledge production about the conflict in Northern Ireland being affected by control over the release of archival material?

Huw Bennett

Working on a long conflict in multiple archives will inevitably result in individual researchers finding different sources. Approaching museums and archives can be really hit and miss: a curator can be away, or new documents might have recently been acquired. At one museum in particular, the role of serendipity could not have been more obvious. In the morning, the senior archivist who welcomed me regretfully presented a disappointingly small set of documents for examination. She went home at lunchtime. In the afternoon, her deputy literally opened a door to another room lined with archive boxes the senior archivist seemed to know nothing about. What this demonstrates is the importance of understanding research on the Troubles as a collective endeavour over many years. No single scholar can hope to uncover all the sources. We each bring unique skills and experiences to the research process and should endeavour to support each other as collective knowledge is advanced.

Another major factor in determining archive accessibility is resources. Austerity measures after 2008 limited the capacity of government departments and military museums to make sources available. Releases to the National Archives under the Public Records Act process slowed down and was exacerbated when the 30-year release rule was changed to 20 years in 2013, creating a huge increase in workload for archivists.

Response times to Freedom of Information Act requests have deteriorated as well. Finally, there is obstruction, by central government and by regimental museums. The Ministry of Defence, which has sent hundreds of files about Northern Ireland to the National Archives in recent years, also denied possessing certain records requested under the FOI Act, only to release them later at Kew without informing me. Some regimental museums ignored requests for access to information, or said no, or said yes before changing their minds under pressure from unknown quarters.

Hannah West

Building on my earlier reflections on positionality, I have come to the realization that my access to military archives has also been enabled by my ex-military identity. I just haven't met with any difficulties with gaining access, whether in archives in England or Northern Ireland. Beyond the influence of my positionality, the subject of my research predominantly being servicewomen is also unthreatening to the custodians of these archives. There is an unspoken assumption that this is about uncovering forgotten histories but that they won't challenge the dominant campaign narratives, servicewomen were a minority and on the periphery so there is nothing to worry about.

Thomas Leahy

With the Irish or British state archives, there are understandable national security restrictions. But it is not always clear why certain files are retained. For instance, my book considered in one section: why did the IRA call a ceasefire in 1975? Available evidence suggested it did so because the British Government signalled it would discuss political 'disengagement' from Northern Ireland (Leahy 2020, 63–80, 108–117; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 117–149). I became convinced of this argument after cross-referencing British state papers alongside Irish Republican perspectives in the Ruairí Ó Brádaigh (former Sinn Féin President) and Brendan Duddy (back-channel contact for the IRA) papers at Galway University alongside papers by Irish ministers. Nevertheless, as Ó Dochartaigh notes, we do not know whether the British said they would quietly disengage to Republicans. Some files are still retained, despite being long past the 20-year -release rule (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 126). It is unlikely that releasing these papers would endanger lives. Most of those involved are deceased.

Having said that, available archival material still provides fresh insight. Contrary to some memoir and interviewees' belief, most British and Irish state papers indicate the IRA was not facing terminal decline by 1998. Cross-referencing available state papers fills in knowledge gaps too. With the Dublin-Monaghan bombings in 1974, we find little reaction within Irish records. But British archives include discussions between the Prime Minister and Irish ministers where those potentially responsible were anonymously discussed (Hennessey and Leahy 2024; Urwin 2016, 55–65).

Nevertheless, state archives can reflect elite perspectives from one side (Schwartz and Cook 2002). They may not always accurately explain what happened. The latter could be said for papers by any conflict participant. That is why cross-checking *all* archival releases alongside other sources including interviews and memoirs is crucial. Even if the British and Irish governments release *all* of their papers (very unlikely), triangulation of sources

remains paramount to spot inaccuracies. Otherwise, we risk repeating unconscious groupthink reflecting one state's perspective. To demonstrate, initially, after the IRA's August 1994 ceasefire, government documents show the British believing that the IRA would not decommission weapons to try to force further concessions. Blair and British military commanders sustained that perspective until the early 2000s. Yet Irish archives alongside memoirs by and interviews with Republicans, British, and Irish civil servants and politicians generally suggests otherwise. The IRA would not decommission before Unionists and the British outlined when they would implement promised political and security reforms (Leahy 2025a).

Eleanor Leah Williams

Accessing governmental papers has been central to my own research and the Quill Project. Institutions such as the Irish National Archives, PRONI, and the UK National Archives have been instrumental in reconstructing the narrative of the conflict. I have increasingly relied on the Irish National Archives as they have overtaken their British counterparts in releasing material from the period. This shift has significant implications, as it puts the British official narrative at a disadvantage. The British official narrative risks falling behind as scholars rely on the readily available Irish archival records to shape their interpretations and writing.

The Quill Project has also expanded its focus to include personal papers and private collections. These sources, often acquired through carefully cultivated relationships and trust with individuals, have proven invaluable. The papers have allowed a fresh perspective and helped us bypass the overwhelming volume of repetitive and irrelevant material which one often encounters in state archives. Collecting the personal papers of the key actors has allowed Quill to add depth to the historical narrative whilst simultaneously uncovering stories and details that might otherwise remain buried in bureaucracy.

How do you maintain critical distance in research encounters (whether with archives or interviewees)?

Thomas Leahy

Cross-referencing all interviewees accounts alongside other sources is essential. *All* sources (not just interviews) equally carry the risk of politicized accounts or mistaken groupthink. Not that I generally think interviewees, state papers or memoirs deliberately produce inaccurate accounts. Within any organization or government, unconscious collective thinking is possible. Hence, scholars must cross-check multiple sources to find the consensus views. If there are lone opinions, it is important to explain why individuals believe their view to be accurate – if only to give the reader a sense of why contrasting perspectives exist.

With IRA decommissioning, the consensus view for many British Government personnel before 2001 about the IRA withholding weapons to acquire more concessions was not supported by their Irish counterparts nor most other sources. Eventually, leading members of the British Government, including Blair, accepted instead that Republicans

delayed decommissioning over concerns about slow British troop and security infrastructure removal (Leahy 2025a).

My *Intelligence War Against the IRA* book relied on: British state archives; interviews with Republicans (those for and against the peace agreement), British veterans and others; Irish Republican archival material in Belfast and Galway; memoirs by former British and Irish political, intelligence and security personnel, Irish Republicans alongside self-confessed IRA informers among other sources. It ensured individual research encounters were tested within this diverse range of evidence. It was also crucial to check which views were consistent with events on the ground in different localities. A plausible argument must coincide not only with people's opinions, nor just specific IRA or British security operations and setbacks, but the general pattern of events too.

Eleanor Leah Williams

One of the key advantages of the Quill Project's software is its ability to provide a systematic account of the events that occurred during negotiations during the Northern Ireland conflict. Integrating detailed records from the accounts of the meetings from government archives and personal papers are inserted into Quill, subsequently the Quill website allows us to track who made certain suggestions/proposals at different stages of the peace process. This systematic approach offers a structured manner to assess the role of various actors of the peace process from 1986 onwards. However, we recognize that this is still a rather top-down methodology, primarily reflecting on the perspectives and narratives of those who held power, often the so-called 'victors' of the conflict and peace process. Understanding this limitation, we prioritized the inclusion of the voices of those who were marginalized or excluded during the process. To address this, the Quill team are in the process of creating a comprehensive timeline of all significant events that occurred during the Troubles, noting if and when these events were raised in negotiations. Furthermore, not everything that happened was recorded on the official record. To fill these gaps, the Quill team has undertaken oral history projects, interviewing a diverse range of individuals involved in the negotiations. These provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the conflict, shedding light on overlooked perspectives and unrecorded dynamics of the conflict.

Hannah West

Convening a research showcase in Belfast in September 2023, we brought together a panel of researchers, including Huw and Eleanor, with an audience of men and women who had largely served in the Ulster Defence Regiment. With many arriving in small groups representing different regional branches, their impassioned interaction with the panel conveyed their collective investment in the legacy of a regiment whose public record is tarnished by collusion (Chesse, 2024). Asking critical questions of a community whose legacy is contested and who are desperate to rehabilitate its image, is not easy.

The showcase saw the launch of our virtual exhibition, Petticoat Patrols[3] and the screening of a film 'Youse are so brave',[4] which both presented a feminist retelling of the Troubles, foregrounding the voices of former servicewomen. As their stories sought space amidst the regimental memory and campaign narrative, the women grew in

confidence to ask questions and have their voices heard, in what is a traditionally male veteran space. But the servicewomen's stories were critical of their leadership and the heightened risk they had encountered through being unarmed and wearing skirts[5] on the 'front line'. Our exhibit sought to be respectful of their service and sacrifice whilst exposing the critical tensions manifested in the military power over servicewomen's war labour but leaving it to the reader to interpret.

Huw Bennett

Most of my research has been archive-based, and Thomas is quite right about the need to compare multiple sources against each other. Doing more oral history interviews would have made sustaining a critical distance a more demanding task. Nonetheless, the archives also carry emotions within them, especially when describing traumatic events and their aftermath. Empathy with those who lived in the past is an essential requirement for historical interpretation. Understanding why people make decisions or hold beliefs, is impossible without accepting our common humanity. At the same time, simply re-producing the thought processes people had in the past is not sufficient, perhaps especially when writing about violence. What helped maintain a critical distance and evaluate the merits of competing claims to historical truth, was the wide diversity in opinions within the British state at the time. Even formally mandated policies from high up in the Whitehall machinery were subject to intense debate and disagreement. In my earlier work on violence in Britain's decolonization conflicts critics sometimes com-plained about historians imposing today's moral standards on the past. So, when writing about the British Army's most controversial episodes in the Troubles, such as Bloody Sunday or internment, I tried to show the wide range of reactions from many quarters of society. The Army's harshest critics could often come from within the military's own ranks, or from the other government departments working alongside them. In future work on armed conflicts, I think more attention needs to be paid to the risks of researchers being traumatized by extended exposure to deeply upsetting material. This would help protect researchers whilst simultaneously enabling them to consciously monitor and uphold their critical distance from the subject matter. Hannah Richards informs me that the *Powerful Perpetrators* project she is working on at Bristol is building these concerns into their practice, and I think that's a valuable model to be replicated elsewhere (Powerful Perpetrators, 2024).

What is our moral responsibility as researchers examining the legacies of the Troubles in light of the contemporary political situation?

Eleanor Leah Williams

The big questions surrounding the ethics and morality of the Troubles, how we approach the Troubles, and the legacy of the Troubles is what drove me to apply for my PhD at QUB in the first place. Indeed, it appears to be a debate which continues to be highly contested and controversial in Northern Ireland, highlighting the delicate balance that research must navigate between uncovering truths and respecting the pain that continues to linger within communities across Northern Ireland. One of the fundamental questions

we face as researchers is whether it is best to leave certain stones unturned for the sake of preserving peace and stability or rather confronting these issues head-on is necessary for justice, reconciliation, and understanding. Of course, this debate is beyond academia, as it has real implications for victims, survivors, and communities still grappling with the unresolved trauma of the conflict. I think it is worth highlighting researchers' responsibility in approaching the conflict's history delicately and acknowledging that our work can impact individual and collective memories positively and also negatively. In addressing this role in my own research, I've attempted to analyse the conflict using ethical frameworks whilst prioritizing sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect. Indeed, my research using ethical frameworks and software to understand the conflict could be perceived as a hands off approach, but in doing this we must amplify voices which are overlooked in the historical narrative, including victims, marginalized communities, and those excluded at varying points from the peace process. Ultimately, our moral responsibility lies in striving to contribute to healing and understanding, rather than division.

Thomas Leahy

It is vital that scholars gather and engage with multiple perspectives. Any research on British and Irish state policies, Republicanism, Unionism and Loyalism can only be convincing if it is situated within a wide range of sources. That includes interviews, archives, and memoirs that reflect different outlooks. Studying the views of victims and survivors is also important. Academics thereafter can piece together what they believe is the dominant interpretation.

We must explain for readers the dissenting perspectives from our own and why we disagree. I've outlined how many British ministers and security personnel believed the IRA stalled decommissioning before 2001 deliberately as a bargaining tactic. But available British and Irish archival evidence alongside interviews and memoirs disagrees. Nonetheless, I explain *why* British personnel thought otherwise; partly to comprehend why they were reluctant to grant Republicans more reforms. Similarly, some Irish state representatives (past and present) argue their state has done its utmost on conflict legacy. Available evidence suggests more could be done. Nonetheless, outlining dissenting view helps us to understand *why* there are delays with some legacy cases involving the Irish state (Leahy 2024).

With the conflict ending as a stalemate,[6][1] it is unlikely (bar some incidents such as Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972) that an objective truth about it will emerge from neither political nor historical nor security studies. Instead, we collectively contribute to a democracy of knowledge and interpretations. It is fellow academics and the public who decide which arguments become the most convincing. The evidence alone cannot make that decision. Otherwise, there would not be the sheer volume of academic studies and contrasting views about the conflict.

Hannah West

The very first interview I did in Northern Ireland was with a former servicewoman of the Ulster Defence Regiment, and she started in tears. She hadn't shared her story before and was overcome by the emotion of saying aloud what

she had experienced. Up to this point I had no idea that women had served on the 'front line' – a manifestation of the myth that 'women can't fight' exposed by Megan MacKenzie (2015) - and as I learnt more through my fieldwork I realized that she was no exception, servicewomen had been on patrol day and night. The moral obligation to make known their stories was only reinforced by the limited academic literature about women and the conflict with what little had been written being dominated by women in peace movements or paramilitaries. Servicewomen were almost completely absent. But this moral responsibility extends beyond championing 'herstory' (Filene 1980) to questioning why it is that their stories have been marginalized. When the Ministry of Defence grappled with the opening up of ground close combat to women, with the ban lifted in 2018, I do not believe there was any dialogue with the former servicewomen who had served on the 'front line' during the Troubles.

We have a moral responsibility also to bring women's military service to the attention of the public. This means working with museums, as the custodians of public histories, to integrate women's stories. We need to go beyond 'the nurses and the home front' so commonly depicted as the nod to gender representation and ask more questions about where else women were in the landscape of the conflict. Servicewomen were a part of the everyday lives of the community in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. They were the searchers at the checkpoints of the Ring of Steel in Belfast city centre, and they were the notetakers, radio operators, and searchers out on patrol.

Huw Bennett

The historian's overriding responsibility is to describe what happened in the past as accurately as possible and attempt to explain why people acted in the ways they did. The underpinning linkage between description and explanation, the claims made about cause and effect, must be clearly articulated and supported by evidence, so readers can question the conclusions drawn. History is always a dialogue between multiple voices, and there should be no pretence about achieving 'total' or 'final' answers. When writing about the Troubles, as with all conflicts, there is a responsibility to portray human suffering sensitively yet directly, and to recognize terrible deeds were committed by all sides. Of course, some actors in the conflict may be considered more brutal or incompetent than others, but these judgements are for readers to make for themselves. I believe historians have a role to play in holding decision-makers, whether in government or not, to account. I don't think this makes scholars writing today any different from those writing in the 1970s or 1980s, for example. The post-war international human rights regime existed throughout the conflict, and the United Kingdom's democratic norms remained constant as well. What seemed outrageous in 1973 seems outrageous now too. As well as being an academic I am also a citizen who has a moral obligation to uphold democratic values. One of those values is the rule of law, so when I have been asked to provide expert advice to the courts on conflict legacy cases, I have done so. The advice is objective and based on archival sources: decisions about how to interpret those sources in relation to a particular case are ultimately made by the judiciary, and the judiciary alone.

What are the questions left unanswered in making new and critical knowledges on the conflict?

Eleanor Leah Williams

Over the past few years, my work across various higher education institutions has increased my awareness of the fascinating and cutting-edge interdisciplinary research that addresses the Northern Ireland conflict, but also attempts to understand peace processes and conflicts more broadly. Institutions such as Krock at Notre Dame University and Quill at University of Oxford are using cutting edge and innovative technology to reframe and understand peace processes in a new light. Furthermore, other institutions, such as Queen's University Belfast [QUB] and Dublin City University, have an impressive track record in engaging with policy makers and legislation, bridging the gap between academic inquiry and real-world impact. Therefore, to advance our understanding and knowledge of the Northern Ireland conflict, greater collaboration and engagement between institutions is necessary. Integrating pioneering technologies, such as those developed at Quill and Krock, could produce brand-new information regarding the 'Northern Ireland problem'. Furthermore, research centres such as Krock and Quill have many projects beyond Northern Ireland, which offers invaluable opportunities for greater comparative analysis of the Northern Ireland case study. As Richard English states, it is only through comparative analysis can we see what is truly unique about our case study, or what are general patterns and challenges within the field. Additionally, institutions can learn from institutions like QUB with their approach to community-engaged research. Expanding this model could help us prioritize and ensure bottom-up research, ensuring that victims' voices remain at the heart of research surrounding Northern Ireland. More broadly, greater collaboration between universities researching Northern Ireland would allow for a greater discussion between individuals with different perspectives and lenses to understand Northern Ireland. Finally, I believe there is a need to integrate our students into our research more, making the students across the UK and Ireland active participants in researching their own history, present and future. This would foster multigenerational research that pushes the boundaries of our understanding, and allows students to be contributors to knowledge creation, particularly in relation to their own communities. Despite these opportunities, the greatest challenge remains the sheer scope of work to be done and the scarcity of funding to support it. Addressing these limitations will be crucial to unlocking the full potential of collaborative and innovative research on the Northern Ireland conflict.

Huw Bennett

Coming to the Troubles as an ignorant outsider, the largest body of literature to get on top of seemed to be about Irish republicanism. I found it much more difficult to comprehend the Ulster loyalist community because there is a lot less written about people from that tradition. The best work situates the paramilitary groups within their wider communities and there is a lot of potential for more social and cultural history in this vein, which empowers local voices (Mulvenna 2016). There is no archive-based history about the Royal Ulster Constabulary during the Troubles, which is an enormous gap that can only be filled when the necessary records become publicly available.

Similarly, little is known about how constabularies in Britain policed Irish communities and co-operated with MI5 in counter-terrorism once the IRA bombing campaign moved to England in the early 1970s. A lot more remains to be written about the Army's experiences from 1975 onwards. Many battalion war diaries and operational reports covering the 1980s are now available at the National Archives and waiting to be studied. Almost all the files created by Headquarters Northern Ireland, the command responsible for directing the military campaign, are closed, and the same is true for most brigade records as well. Cabinet ministers receive classified intelligence assessments on a wide range of topics from the Joint Intelligence Committee. These files could probably be opened to the public, at least in redacted form, without endangering national security or putting anyone in danger. The detailed operational files created by the intelligence services and the police Special Branches will probably never be released, however.

Hannah West

The popular story of women and the Troubles conjures up their image as peacemakers, Mo Mowlam perhaps, the various peace movements and, beyond that, the notion of some exceptionalised and infamous paramilitary women. This is echoed in siloed scholarship with a focus either on women in the paramilitaries, as peace brokers or in the political movement. Theresa O'Keefe has reflected on how literature has tended to concentrate on single groups or initiatives, grounded in assumptions based on the relationship between women, feminism and peace, which mask 'the contested history, intricacies and fissures of the wider feminist movement there throughout the decades of violence and political instability' (2021). Making visible new and critical knowledges on the conflict requires an exploration of the points of intersection between these groups whether it be searching, political campaigning or in moments of violence. By diversifying the 'women's story' of the conflict, future research is encouraged to explore difference between units or groups, the regional dimensions to their experiences and the relationship with social attitudes towards women among different communities. We must respond to Margaret Ward's call to understand why women's stories have been left out and what this means for how we understand knowledge production as gendered and a manifestation of military power (1989). Through gendered analyses of this campaign, we can seek opportunities for collaboration between scholars with different research foci, strengthening the impact of this work and providing a platform from which to challenge the overwhelming body of scholarship that does not consider gender as relevant. By harnessing untold women's stories of the conflict, we can catalyse feminist retellings that seek to disrupt and overturn popular and mainstream narratives.

Thomas Leahy

First, the regionalized experience. McBride explains which conflict participant was the primary cause of injury or death differs by region (McBride 2017, chapter 1). I found the intensity of the IRA's campaigns in Belfast, Derry, east Tyrone, Fermanagh, south Armagh and England varied for multiple (often local) reasons (Leahy 2020). Other researchers have advanced regional studies of the IRA,[7] British Army,[8] Loyalism,[9] and Irish state interactions with the conflict.[10] For academics to offer plausible explanations

for conflict incidents, research on the regional dimension is vital. We must better understand why some places were almost untouched by the conflict compared to others, sometimes a few miles apart.

The second area is conflict legacy. Further studies about *all* conflict participants' actions on legacy would significantly assist academic, societal, and political understanding. There are excellent existing studies.[11] Attempts to create a comprehensive legacy process would be assisted by a better sense of what has influenced each conflict participant to engage or disengage from legacy debates.

Third, we need more studies that consider how often overlooked groups interacted with the conflict. Studies on the role of women within different political and armed groups have developed with rich contributions.[12] Work on the experience of the LGBTQ+ community,[13] religious groups,[14] victims and survivors,[15] people with different health conditions and the health services[16] have progressed too. More research would aid a comprehensive appreciation of the conflict's impact across society.

Fourth, further studying Scottish and Welsh public perspectives during and after the conflict could nuance accounts about British responses.[17] British veterans from Scotland and Wales had a similar experience to their English counterparts. For the public, it was quite different – partly because the IRA did not bomb Scotland nor Wales. Scotland's additional Republican and Unionist historical divisions in Edinburgh and Glasgow add further complexity.[18]

Notes

1. British servicewomen during the Troubles in Northern Ireland – Hannah West.
2. 'Wren' is the military slang for a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), eventually disbanded in 1993.
3. Dr Hannah West (Project Lead, Cardiff University) | Hannah Richards (Co-Investigator, Cardiff University) | Dr Laura Patrick (Regimental Heritage Officer for The Royal Irish Regiment). Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and in collaboration with The Royal Irish Regiment and Nifty Fox Creative.
4. British servicewomen during the Troubles in Northern Ireland – Hannah West.
5. It was assumed that the IRA would not target a female profile due to the potential backlash in the media if they killed a servicewoman (West 2024).
6. Examples of this view include Richard English, *Armed Struggle: A History of the IRA* (London: Pan Books, 2012 updated edition). See adaptions in Ó Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*, Leahy, *Intelligence War* and Thomas Leahy, '"Tactical Use of Armed Struggle"?: The IRA's Purpose in Irish Republican Leadership Strategy, 1969 to 2005' (forthcoming 2025b). The stalemate view is rejected somewhat by others, including John Bew *et al. Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country* (London: Hurst and Company Publishers, 2009).
7. Examples include Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Ó Dochartaigh 2005, 2nd edition); and Gearóid Ó Faoleán, *A Broad Church: The Provisional IRA in the Republic of Ireland 1969–1980* (Dublin: Merrion Press, 2019).
8. Examples include Edward Burke, *An Army of Tribes: British Army Cohesion, Deviancy and Murder in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018) and Huw Bennett, *Uncivil War: The British Army and the Troubles 1966–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

9. For instance, see Aaron Edwards, *UVF: Behind the Mask* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2017); Edward Burke, *Ulster's Lost Counties: Loyalism and Paramilitarism since 1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Connal Parr, 'Getting Beyond No: Ulster Loyalist Political Thought During the Troubles', in L. McAtackney, M. Ó Catháin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 77–90.
10. Examples include Patrick Mulroe, *Bombs, Bullets and the Border: Policing Ireland's Frontier: Irish Security Policy, 1969–1978* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2017); Brian Hanley, *The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland 1968–79: Boiling Volcano?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); and Henry Patterson, *Ireland's Violent Frontier: The Border and Anglo-Irish Relations During the Troubles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
11. Examples include Lawther (2011), 26(3), 361–382; Eleanor Leah Williams and Thomas Leahy, 'The ''Unforgivable'?: Irish Republican Army (IRA) informers and dealing with Northern Ireland conflict legacy, 1969–2021' in Williams and Leahy (2022), 38(3), 470–490; C K Martin Chung, 'Twenty Years After: Statute of Limitations and the Asymmetric Burdens of Justice in Northern Ireland and Post-war Germany' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 74, Issue 4, October 2021, Pages 979–1004; K. McEvoy et al. (2020): https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/203198685/Prosecutions_Imprisonment_the_SHA_LOW_RES.pdf. < accessed 26 May 2025 > .
12. See examples including Sandra McEvoy, 'Loyalist Women Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland: Beginning a Feminist Conversation about Conflict Resolution' in *Security Studies* (2009), 18:2; and Mia Bloom et al, 'Tiocfaidh ár Mná: Women in the Provisional Irish Republican Army', in *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2011), 4:1.
13. For example, see Marian Duggan, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012).
14. For example, see Margaret M. Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles 1968–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Vladimir Kmec and Gladys Ganiel, 'The Strengths and Limitations of the Inclusion of Religious Actors in Peace Processes in Northern Ireland and Bosnia Herzegovina', in *International Negotiation* (2019), 24:1, 136–163.
15. Examples include Susan McKay (2008); and David McKittrick *et al., Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Troubles* (McKittrick et al. 2008).
16. For example, see Ruth Duffy, *Healthcare and the Troubles: The Conflict Experience of the Northern Ireland Health Service, 1968–1998* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024); and G V McDonnell and S A Hawkins, 'Multiple Sclerosis in Northern Ireland: A Historical and Global Perspective', in *Ulster Medical Journal* (2000), 69:2, 97–105.
17. For example, see Graham Dawson et al. (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: Impacts, Engagements, Legacies and Memories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
18. For examples see Graham Walker, 'Scotland and Northern Ireland: Constitutional Questions, Connections and Possibilities' in *Government and Opposition* (1998), 33:1, 21–37; and Tom M Devine (ed.), *Scotland's Shame? Biogtry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland* Devine (2000).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [Postdoctoral fellowship]; Research Ireland's Government of Ireland postdoctoral funding; Institute of Historical Research's Scouloudi Grant; Irish Department of Foreign Affairs/Trade's Reconciliation Grant; Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account; Royal Historical Society's Research Grant [RHSResSuppGrnt-0000000130]; Cardiff University.

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