

Toilets, nakedness and harassment emerged from women's accounts of life in 1916, writes **Lucy McDiarmid**

FEW histories of 1916 have yet focused on toilets, nakedness, or sexual harassment. These topics might be considered marginal, irrelevant, or inappropriate, but so many of the stories in the women's accounts cover these subjects that they constitute an important part of their experience of the Rising.

They are associated with the feeling that a physical boundary has been violated, and that something 'wrong' has happened, 'wrong' in a deeper way than the merely physical.

Episodes relating to the sexualising and de-sexualising of bodies are the most prominent. Notable among these is one told by Brigid Foley (later Brigid Martin), a Dubliner who had been active in the Gaelic League since the age of 15. She was a member of Cumann na mBan, and during the Rising she worked at two outposts of the GPO garrison, carrying dispatches and doing whatever work was needed. She was arrested the week following the surrender during a raid on her house. This anecdote is from the part of her narrative that takes place in Kilmainham. Of the women imprisoned there, she writes:

"They were all marvellous. We sang all the national songs through the night, although the soldiers tried to shut us up. The prison was filthy as it had not been used for 16 years. There were no chairs, or forms or tables. We had to sit on the dirty floors with our backs against the dirty walls. We got skilly in bowls that night; this was a sort of watery porridge. We got the same in the morning. We had no appetite for our skilly that day as we heard the shots that killed our leaders. The military sergeant did not leave us in any doubt. He came in and told us with great satisfaction that 'four more were gone today'.

"When we wanted to go to the lavatory we had to knock at the door and two soldiers with fixed bayonets brought us to the lavatory which was a dry closet that had no door. The soldiers stood jeering at whatever girl was in the closet, with the result that for the 11 days I was in Kilmainham I

never went to the lavatory and on my transfer to Mountjoy I had to be treated at once and for a long time after by Dr Cook, the prison doctor. This horrible experience had a permanent effect on my constitution."

Foley is not attacked by a weapon or touched by anyone, but she is injured, and the injury 'had a permanent effect on my constitution'. She is injured by the soldiers' gaze and by their words; that is the 'horrible experience'.

Hers is a narrative of the body, but no body parts are mentioned: they don't need to be. The attack is psychological, not physical, and it is a complete humiliation. Because Kilmainham is 'filthy' and the closet is 'dry', the lavatory must already be disgusting, but in addition it 'had no door'.

The boundary that is violated is visual: an adult woman requires privacy on the toilet, certainly privacy from men. By not only gazing but

'The women show how in a very practical way they contributed'

jeering, the soldiers call attention to the violation.

Modestly, Foley never mentions the way she helped the other women, but Marie Perolz praises Foley in her account: "At Kilmainham I was very depressed when I knew the men were being executed. I could neither eat nor sleep. Only for Brigid Foley I would have died. She kept up my courage and tried to force me to eat."

Visual boundaries work both ways: the women themselves are uneasy about seeing men's nakedness. Concern about a woman treating a wound near the sexual parts of a man's body occurs in Aine Heron's witness statement. Her family on both sides 'had all been Fenians', and, as she says about the Rising, "it was what I had been looking forward to always and I wanted

to be in it, though the time was not really opportune for me as I expected a baby — my third — in August".

She was 'in it', one of about three pregnant women (on record) active in the Rising. She did first aid work mostly at the Four Courts garrison, but on the Monday of Easter Week she and another woman set up a temporary medical centre in a shop on Church Street. As Heron writes:

"It may have been Monday evening we had our first casualty. Someone came along and asked were there any Cumann na mBan here? We asked what the wound was and got the reply, 'A deep cut in the thigh'. Miss Hayes suggested that as I was a married woman I should take it on. It was Eddie Morkan who had cut himself with his sheath knife when jumping over a barricade. I dressed the wound and Eddie told me afterwards that the dressing lasted for three weeks and was finally taken off in Knutsford Gaol."

The salient line — 'as I was a married woman' — is a minor point in the passage, but it forms an important element in women's narratives of the body in 1916 because it doesn't exist in isolation. The marital, maternal sexuality of Aine Heron licences her to treat a male thigh wound. 'Miss' Hayes, unmarried and therefore innocent of the naked adult male body, should not dress a wound in the thigh — or so Miss Hayes herself thinks, and Heron accepts the taboo and mentions it in her statement. She then shifts the emphasis to Eddie Morkan's gratitude.

The women are concerned to construct themselves as part of a collective, as Cumann na mBan, or Citizen Army, or a descendant of Fenians. All of the accounts appear motivated by an interest in showing what work they did, how in a very practical way they contributed to 'the movement for Independence'.

Lucy McDiarmid is the author of *'At Home in the Revolution: What Women Said and Did in 1916'*. This article is adapted from her chapter in *Women Writing War: Ireland 1880–1922*, edited by Tina O'Toole, Gillian McIntosh and Muireann O'Cinneide, and published by UCD Press