Editorial:

The Irish Issue: the British Question

This is the fiftieth issue of *Feminist Review* and we have turned our attention, not before time, to Ireland. Since 1992 the project of *Feminist Review* has been to explore the interconnexions between the politics of gender, ethnicity and 'race' (see particularly the editorial of *FR* No. 40, Spring 1992) and our belated concern with Ireland comes out of this commitment. The London bombings of 1992 finally focused the attention of a feminist collective based in the 'metropolis' on the curious silence among British feminists on 'the Irish issue and the British question'. Despite the central importance of Ireland and the Irish to British politics, feminists in Britain, along with the left in general, have been exceedingly reluctant to address the ways in which Britain and the British have historically been the central agent in the shaping of Ireland and, currently, the struggles over the North. Crucially, British feminists have neglected the place of the Irish population in Britain. No doubt this reluctance relates primarily to the unresolved issues of the colonial and postcolonial relation – issues which many British people find it hard to confront, whether in the context of the African Caribbean, South Asian, African or Irish presence in the contemporary UK. The British/Irish colonial relation has its own particularities. It has been peculiarly extended – for the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland was in the twelfth century; and particularly complex – for Ireland has always been placed differently from other colonies on account of its geographical proximity, its white population and its position as the colony within, incorporated directly into the British state. Ambivalence and binary thinking are always part of the colonizers' relation to colonial Others and are locked into British ways of thinking about Ireland and the Irish. But the Irish have been both racialized and included, constructed as threatening and yet part of the British 'family', because they are white.

This is a joint issue, produced both in Ireland and in Britain. Many of the pieces we are publishing come from Ireland and we have relied heavily on the interest and generosity of women there. For this issue we have had two Irish guest editors, Ailbhe Smyth who lives and works in the Republic, and

Mary Hickman, a second-generation Irish woman living and working in London. The four members of the *FR* collective on the issue group are Clara Connolly, Irish born and living in Britain, Ann Phoenix, Vicentian born, Black British and of African Caribbean descent, Gail Lewis, Black British and of African Caribbean descent, and Catherine Hall who is white English. Such a diverse issue group brought many different voices and ways of thinking into what we hope has been a productive relation. This is the first time that *Feminist Review* has been jointly produced with women outside of Britain and we hope that this may be a pattern which we can develop. It seems particularly important that our attempts to rethink the postcolonial world should be informed from the different places of the erstwhile empire, from both the ex-colonies and the so-called metropolis. This is not to abrogate responsibility but in recognition of the partial understanding which is likely from only one of the different sites of empire. The diasporic identities which seem to hold promise for the future and break with the imagined binaries of the past have to be struggled over and constructed rather than assumed. That struggle focuses on, to name only some of the processes, issues around essentialism, the claim for rights to certain national identities and the tensions internally within diasporic communities about what it means to belong where, and indeed what it means to belong in several places.

As a collective we have certainly faced difficulties with this issue which in part derive from aspects of the postcolonial relation. Historic tensions overlaid with *Feminist Review* practices have been played out in the ways in which we in London have dealt with authors and issues, have caused offence through carelessness, lack of understanding and political differences. The erasure of Irish questions in British political life has meant that, for some of us, working on the issue has been an overdue political education in itself. It has filled in gaps which we should have filled long ago, made us more aware, but only through uncomfortable recognitions of inflections which we have not understood, and cross-currents which we were unprepared for.

Since the eighteenth century the Irish have been the largest migrant group in Britain and the questions which arise around 'race' and ethnicity in that context have been central to our thinking. The construction of a narrative of homogeneity around whiteness in Britain has obscured the full recognition of racialized exclusions and the ways in which they are gendered. The Irish have always had their own kind of 'special relationship' in Britain (and 'special relationships' are often fraught with difficulty and power imbalances), a relationship which again most British feminists have been slow to address. Second-generation Irish women and men in Britain have had to construct identities in the face of fierce stereotyping and

racist practices – this has effects at every level, on the ways in which Irish people ‘here’ relate to Irish people ‘there’, on the ways in which both groups relate to those they construct as representatives of the British state/nation, in all their diversity, and indeed how diverse populations in Britain relate to the Irish.

The British state has formulated Ireland as a British concern and assumes that it alone has the capacity to solve Ireland’s problems. However, in practice, these responsibilities have never been taken on. In British popular discourse there is both a sense of being historically caught in the colonial relation and wanting to be rid of it – contradictory feelings which are common to the postcolonial relation. For it is in the nature of postcolonial relations that the ex-colonizers look back, albeit in peculiarly obfuscating ways, while ex-colonial societies look to a different future. There is a semi-amnesia about colonialism which characterizes British government and popular thinking about Ireland, albeit in different and contradictory ways. The government would now like to be rid of the boil which constantly threatens to burst, and which did indeed burst on the domestic political scene through various bombing campaigns in Britain. Ireland is a part of the colonial heritage, as indeed is the whole of the erstwhile Empire. It is Britain’s problem and until that relation is better understood and recognized, it will not be possible for Britain’s position to change, and for the British to move to a new kind of figure, a genuinely postcolonial moment.

Since the 1970s the Irish Republic has leapfrogged over Britain and looked to Europe, just as the ‘modernizers’ in Britain see Europe as the way forward. The Irish presence in Britain casts some questions over that leapfrog. The Irish in the Republic tend to cast the Irish in Britain as the dinosaurs, lost in the old society, while the modern Ireland speeds ahead to a new age. Yet some argue that it was the migrations of the 1950s and 1980s which, in part, paved the way for the reforms and regeneration which have provided the material base for the late twentieth-century republic. Women have, of course, played a critical role in these migrations and in the maintenance of connexions between the two societies.

The British have long constructed Ireland as a backward Other. This has been a staple of anti-Irish jokes for centuries. Britain, meanwhile, represents itself, in the dominant narrative, as a liberal secular state. Anti-Catholicism plays a critical part in this, for popular Protestantism has always been central to English/British nationalism. But the secularization which has been going on in Ireland for the last twenty years is significant here. Indeed, while we have been producing this issue of the journal, the

Irish government has been toppled on questions relating to sexuality and honesty and the authority of both Church and State have been seriously challenged, events which undermine the dichotomy which Britain makes between itself and Ireland. The dramatic events in relation to the ceasefire and the peace talks, which again have transformed the situation while this issue was being produced, are not disconnected from these events in the Republic.

Feminist Review is now committed to an exploration of ways through the harsh boundaries of racialized identities. Our special issue on nationalisms and national identities (*FR* No. 44) and on ethnicities (*FR* No. 45) are part of that project. In thinking about ways of countering the cruel logic of ethnic absolutism one possibility as, already indicated, may lie in the construction of diasporic identities, which allow people to belong simultaneously in different places and in different ways. Our turn to Ireland is part of that same project, and this can only stand as a beginning. There are many issues not addressed here which we would hope to see addressed in the future – the voices of women from Protestant and Unionist communities are not heard in these pages, questions about the use of the Irish language have only begun to be explored, the tensions which can exist between first- and second-generation migrants, associated with such issues as the moment of migration or with positions on relations between Britain and Ireland are absent. Many more British feminists need to know about these voices and inform themselves on these matters. As our title says, the Irish issue is a British question.

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 Catherine Hall
 Mary Hickman
 Gail Lewis
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 Ailbhe Smyth