97 | book review

Ireland's hidden diaspora: the 'abortion trail' and the making of a London-Irish underground 1980–2000

Ann Rossiter, LASC Publishing, 2009, 237pp., ISBN 978-0-9561785-0-3 (Pbk), £8.00.
Distributed by Word Power Books www.word-power.co.uk

In 1992, 25 years after the Abortion Act was passed in the Westminster parliament, huge publicity was given to a shocking abortion story in the Republic of Ireland. The case concerned a 14 year old girl, known only as X, who had become pregnant as a result of rape and who wanted, against the law, to travel to England to terminate her pregnancy. Since 1983, the rights of the foetus have been enshrined in the Republic's constitution as equal to those of the 'mother', prohibiting the termination of a pregnancy for any reason other than to save the life of the pregnant woman. Abortion carries a penalty of life imprisonment for both women and providers. In the X case that went as far as the Irish Supreme Court, it ruled that because X was suicidal, the pregnancy could be legally terminated, as it posed a real risk to her life. She was therefore allowed to travel to England and have an abortion.

The X case drew the British general public's attention to the appalling implications of Irish abortion law, which, at the time also involved legal prohibitions on providing information on abortion services in Britain as well as on the right to travel abroad to seek abortions. Later that year, both these restrictions were overturned in referenda, though the constitutional prohibition on abortion remained, and is still in place. What was (and remains) common knowledge in Ireland, though rarely spoken of publicly, was that thousands of women have travelled to England, both from the Republic and from Northern Ireland (where the 1967 Abortion Act still does not apply), to seek abortions. Between 1968 and October 2008 it is estimated that over 150,000 women from the Republic, and over 53,000 from the North, travelled to England and Wales.

Ann Rossiter's splendid book documents the background to this hidden migration and the story of the support given by Irish feminists in England, particularly, in London, to Irish women who made the 'other journey' from Ireland to England to exercise the right to control their own fertility. Her book, informed by her own and other activists' stories, is a delight to read, ranging from oral history to campaign handbook, from reflections on St. Augustine's repressed carnal desires to an analysis of the case for and against Irish exceptionalism in relation to abortion. She describes in vivid detail the 'alternative' Irish community in London of feminists, lesbians, left

activists, atheists and agnostics from the Republic and the North, from the 1960s onwards, and examines the politics of abortion in both parts of Ireland in the context of British colonial rule. The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG), founded in the early 1980s, grew out the recognition by these émigré Irish women that the Irish abortion laws could and should be subverted.

The group, whose members supported and helped Irish women practically and financially when they came to England to seek an abortion, consisted of a wide range of women of different social, political, educational and occupational backgrounds. What united them was a feminist belief in the right of women to control their own fertility. Some of the members had a history of reproductive rights activism in Northern and southern Ireland, others simply wanted to support Irish women who lacked the choices they now had in England. In line with feminist practice at the time, the group's membership was women only. It was also restricted to Irish women or those of Irish descent: 'We have a shared past', the group wrote in *Feminist Review* in 1988, and 'we understand where women (abortion seekers) are coming from'. Rossiter attributes this Irish exclusivism largely to a reaction to anti-Irish racism, but also to a certain essentialism in discussions of reproductive rights in Ireland – which constructed the anti-abortion laws as something peculiarly Irish.

Although IWASG's primary purpose was to support individual women by meeting them at the airport, escorting them to clinics, putting them up overnight before the termination, it actually engaged in a good deal of campaigning and publicity. Pro-choice organisations in Ireland distributed a free handbook produced by IWASG with information about how to access English abortion clinics and IWASG members made leaflets and stickers to paste in public places such as toilet doors, buses and trains. They were also involved in demonstrations, gave evidence to tribunals and commissions on abortion and organised a conference with Irish and British organisations to improve access, after it became legal, in 1995, to give out information on obtaining abortions overseas.

IWASG was both a political and humanitarian project. It was political because it challenged both the power of the church and the state to determine women's lives, and its humanitarian project of practical assistance, was effectively carried out underground, for the sake of the abortion seekers' confidentiality and, for some of its members, to preserve their own anonymity in the face of upsetting their own families. This distinctive kind of humanitarian subversiveness expresses for me a characteristic form of grassroots resistance, which is often, sadly lost, as organisations gain respectability or become funded charities. One prominent Irish reproductive rights activist, interviewed for the book said:

They (IWASG members) were women who were completely comfortable in the practice of their politics in the sense of doing the practical work. They received women from Ireland, put them up, looked after them as human beings, even told lies for them if things need to be covered up, bought gifts for them to

take back to Ireland so they could camouflage the purpose of their visit to London, They didn't necessarily share each other's politics generally speaking For me having been involved in left-wing politics as a woman, it was the first time I came across sisterhood – feminism in practice.

The book documents the later development of the Irish Abortion Solidarity Campaign (IASC), an explicitly campaigning organisation to mobilise British activists, which was founded to solidarise with Irish feminists fighting anti-abortion referenda and the bans on travel and information, in response to the X case. IWASG itself was wound down as the abortion journey changed somewhat, with easy access to information via the internet, the introduction of cheap flights and daycare abortions. But abortion is still illegal in the Republic, and the 1967 Abortion Act still does not apply to Northern Ireland. Ann Rossiter describes her own and others' anger and frustration that Diane Abbott's amendment to the 2008 Human Fertilisation Bill calling for it to be extended there, was cynically filibustered in the House of Commons.

Both IWASG and IASC have been partially reincarnated as the Abortion Support Network (ASN) part of an international coalition of agencies helping women to travel to obtain abortions. The continuing necessity of such assistance was highlighted during the 'volcano' shutdown of most European airspace when the ASN issued an appeal for donations to support several Irish women forced to change their travel plans to the UK to obtain terminations, and who consequently incurred huge new costs.

This appeal reminds us that *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora* is not there to preserve in aspic a glorious period of 'feelgood' activism before its participants are too forgetful to remember. Rather it is a contribution to breaking the continuing silence about the lack of abortion rights in the whole island of Ireland, and a mobilisation to others to carry on the struggle so vigorously engaged in by an earlier generation in the period covered by the book. The book bursts with energy and conviction. It is easy to read, excellently annotated, often funny, and provides a contextualisation that combines scholarly analysis with the authenticity of the participants' own voices.

Rayah Feldman

doi:10.1057/fr.2010.44