

Northern Ireland prior to the agitation ("from within the closet") that led to the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, wasn't radically different from the rest of the United Kingdom in its sexual politics. There weren't any. 'Feminism' was a quite genteel tendency, a desire held by Left-Liberals and Left[ish] members of the Labour Party, that women ought to be more prominent in politics. It wasn't regarded as a particularly radical matter. A major 'Backbench' Labour MP was 'battling' Bessie Braddock, who was on the Right of the Party. It would be unwise to over-emphasise this, Braddock was fervently anti-Communist, but helped hold up the construction of the Roman Catholic cathedral for about thirty years, because she prioritised putting working class families into decent housing over what she clearly regarded as a 'prestige' matter.

This may seem an absurdly roundabout way to introduce a short history of NIGRA (the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association), named in emulation of the NI *Civil* Rights Association, which radically reformed politics in the region. There had been a CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) group in Belfast in the late 1960s / early '70s. It was described by one of its founder members as "for snobby English men". A Gay Liberation Society was set up in the QUB Student's Union by an ethno-sectarian male mixed double from Derry in 1972. In 1973 it decided on 'outreach' to the 'scene', which wasn't very large at that time (probably the climactic year of the war), euphemised into 'Troubles' by journalists safe in the Europa hotel, or the fortress-like BBC building, UTV's headquarters were not readily get-at-able either.

GLF took off in a radicalised Belfast, and absorbed such members of the CHE group as were willing to accept its confrontational style. An early effort was the picketing of a large newsagent-cum-bookshop, Gardners, that refused to stock *Gay News*. That led to (literally) bruising confrontations with the RUC. It also led to enmity on the part of some in the police, who were on the lookout for a way to get at the new movement. Some in the RUC regarded NIGRA (presumably like NICRA) as part of a gigantic conspiracy against their wee Ulster. Run, presumably, by the Kremlin and the Vatican in cahoots with each other to bring down NornIrl. This is, and was, paranoid, self-important nonsense, but the notion that NIGRA was part of the Republican 'onslaught' was held by some Special Branch men (they were all blokes at the time), with a certain fervour.

The G - 'gay' in Nigra was taken to mean anyone not 110% heterosexual, the Association was made up of Sappho groups in Belfast, Coleraine, Derry / LondonDerry, and Craigavon, the name led to something of a confrontation with the owner / editor of the Lesbian-feminist magazine *Sappho*, but as the local groups had no imperialist ambitions on organising in the Other Island, and wanted to contribute to *NIGRA News* and *Women's News*, both based in Belfast, this led to a useful alliance, not unlike that with *Gay News*. The latter, under politically savvy editorship, of the gracefully laid back, but politically clued-up, Denis Lemon, knew how important the rounding out of the legal situation for Gay people was, in the allegedly United Kingdom. '[P]eople' there is not a 'disappearing' of gay women, any advance in legal rights for queer men had a knock-on effect on women. The public at large tended to view us less suspiciously if the law accepted (just about)

our right to exist.

And it was an existential matter, the attitude in the Anglosphere was that we ought not to exist