

BERNADETTE DEVLIN: A VOICE OF ANTI-COLONIAL SOLIDARITY AND TRANSNATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM

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Abstract

By highlighting the significance of transnational solidarity within the context of civil rights activism, this article focuses on County Tyrone-born Bernadette Devlin (now McAliskey) and her commitment to defending the “peasants” and the “havenots” (as highlighted in her maiden speech at Westminster in April 1969) in and beyond the six northern counties. This study provides insights into how Devlin’s memoir, The Price of My Soul (1969), revealed the universality of her commitment to the defense of civil rights and anti-colonial solidarity. Moreover, it analyzes the importance of the African-American non-violent civil rights protest song, We Shall Overcome, in the North of Ireland between 1968 and 1972, arguing that the communal performance of the song functioned as an act of solidarity with not only the protesters “walking hand in hand” but also with those across the globe following non-violent resistance and civil disobedience against oppression.

KEYWORDS

Transnational solidarity, civil rights activism, non-violent resistance, Northern Ireland, protest songs

INTRODUCTION

The image of Bernadette Devlin (now McAliskey) became inseparable from the civil rights movement in the North of Ireland after 1968.¹ Together with the members of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), Devlin's commitment to solidarity across borders (and not only the Border) linked her activism to the Black liberation movement in the United States of America, while highlighting her support for disadvantaged, marginalized or oppressed communities in Palestine, South Africa, or Quebec, among others.² Notably, Devlin's "imagined community" (as per Benedict Anderson³) did not exclude Protestants; she argued that "we cannot build an island, we cannot build a nation, we can't build a state, we can't build a new republic, that has at its core a new disadvantaged, marginalized, isolated community, which is the Northern Protestant. We can't do that."⁴ This thought demonstrates the universality of solidarity in her rhetoric as well as her actions up to the present day.

After providing an overview of the historiographical context of transnational solidarity connecting Ireland with civil rights movements, anti-apartheid activism, and anti-colonial struggles, the present paper provides a detailed analysis of the significance of transnational acts of solidarity in Devlin's activism before the massacre of Bloody Sunday (January 30, 1972), when British paratroopers shot dead thirteen unarmed protesters in Derry, leaving several others wounded.⁵ The American civil rights anthem, *We Shall Overcome*, became an indispensable part of civil rights protests in the North; the final section of the paper demonstrates how performing the song proved to be a powerful act of transnational solidarity. As American folk singer Pete Seeger pointed out: "it wasn't just the black people of Alabama who were going to overcome,

¹ Among other scholars, Brendan O'Leary has addressed the questions regarding objectivity with regards to terminology on Northern Ireland as a formal political unit, highlighting that while the "North of Ireland" is employed by nationalists or republicans, "the North" was an expression agreed to in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The present paper uses "Northern Ireland", "the North", the "North of Ireland", and "the six northern counties" interchangeably. See Brendan O'Leary: *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume I: Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, 2019, xxix-xxiv.

² Bernadette Devlin McAliskey: "We took the notion" in Zeina Maasri – Cathy Bergin – Francesca Burke (eds.): *Transnational solidarity. Anticolonialism in the global sixties*, Manchester University Press, 2022, 32.

³ Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

⁴ Devlin McAliskey, "We took the notion", 35.

⁵ Emer Nolan: *Five Irish women. The second republic, 1960-2016*, Manchester University Press, 2019, 119–120.

but, I said, you and I are going to overcome, all of us in this world are going to overcome someday”.⁶

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

...Once you do what you know to be right because you can't sit and look at what you know to be wrong... See, once you do that, and people do it together, something inside you changes. You know, you get a sense of... it's not power in a way powerful people think of power – it's the power of people. It's the power of solidarity. It's a strength and a courage that comes from being together. And once you get it into you, it's very-very hard to knock out.⁷

Fifty years after the civil rights movement transformed the North, the above words of Bernadette Devlin continue to inspire and attest to the power of solidarity in social movements across the globe. The present paper focuses on the years 1968–1972, tracing the transnational⁸ networks of solidarity that informed her activism. As the editors of the volume *Transnational solidarity: Anticolonialism in the global sixties* (2022)⁹ argued, Devlin's “border-crossing identification with radical anti-racism” demonstrated that she refused to be kept in her place – both literally and metaphorically. Their book has been a recent addition to the study of transnational solidarity as a central element of “radical imagination that connected New Left and civil rights movements with anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles” of the Global South in the 1960s.¹⁰ In addition, Crozier-De Rosa investigated anti-colonial solidarity in Irish republican feminist discourse in particular, shedding light on “how republican Irish women identified the operation of colonial power dynamics in their identity formation” in a Global North-South framework, analyzing

⁶ Patricia Woodard: Beyond “We Shall Overcome”: The Lasting Legacy of Freedom Songs, in Victor V. Bobetsky (ed.): *We Shall Overcome. Essays on a Great American Song*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 99.

⁷ “Bernadette Devlin McAliskey”, *The Blindboy Podcast*, 14 November 2018, <https://shows.acast.com/blindboy/episodes/bernadette-devlin-mcaliskey>, (accessed 26 October 2025), (33:41-34:13).

⁸ Transnational history traces the movement of people, ideas, and goods across borders. Within the study of transnational Irish history I consider the following research the most relevant: Niall Whelehan (ed.): *Transnational Perspectives on Modern Irish History*, New York, Routledge, 2015; Enda Delaney: *Our Island Story? Towards a Transnational History of late Modern Ireland*, *Irish Historical Studies* 37:148 (2011).

⁹ Zeina Maasri – Cathy Bergin – Francesca Burke: Introduction: transnational solidarity in the long sixties, in Zeina Maasri, Cathy Bergin, Francesca Burke (eds.), *Transnational solidarity: Anticolonialism in the global sixties*, Manchester University Press, 2022, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Devlin's strategies for constructing her political identity in comparison with other republican feminists writings.¹¹

Along with many people on the island of Ireland (not limited to Republicans), Devlin also drew attention to the struggle of black South Africans during the years of apartheid (1948-1994). In the Irish context, Kevin O'Sullivan's transnational assessment of *Ireland, Africa and the end of empire* has provided the most thorough investigation of (among others) anti-apartheid activism in Ireland, completing Guelke's studies from the late 1990s that had traced the relationship between Ireland and South Africa throughout the 20th century.¹² Furthermore, Kylie Thomas presented Irish identification with anti-apartheid struggle through the investigation of "how affective archives of music, images, and poetry travel across time and space and serve as a conduit for raising awareness about injustice and for forging transnational solidarity".¹³ Similarly, commonalities between Ireland and Palestine had played an important role in Irish Republican¹⁴ rhetoric since the last three decades of the 20th century. Louvet (2016), among others, addresses the use of the Middle East conflict in the discussions of the island of Ireland, providing a scholarly assessment of the so-called "Durban strategy", comparing segregation and apartheid in Israel with those on South Africa.¹⁵

BERNADETTE DEVLIN: CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND ANTI-COLONIAL SOLIDARITY

When addressing what drove her (and others) to the civil rights movement, Bernadette Devlin explained that when watching civil rights protesters marching

¹¹ Sharon Crozier-De Rosa: Solidarity and colonial analogies in Irish republican feminists' discursive practices, 1890s–1980s, *Third World Quarterly* (2024), doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2421986, 14.

¹² Adrian Guelke: Ireland and South Africa: a Very Special Relationship, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 11 (2000), 137–146; Adrian Guelke: The influence of the South African transition on the Northern Ireland peace process, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 3:2 (1995), 132–148.

¹³ Kylie Thomas: Bitter Emotion: Affective Archives and Transnational Solidarity against Apartheid, *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 23:1 (2021), 42–60, 42.

¹⁴ A detailed exploration of Devlin's relationship with Sinn Féin and its armed wing, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), is beyond the scope of this paper with the main focus being on her civil rights activism. As she pointed out in her memoir, she realized that "the task was not to free the Six Counties but to start again the national revolution", highlighting that Ireland's problems were first and foremost economic and social. Thus, even though she was associated with left-wing republican groups during the Troubles, later she distanced herself from republican militarism and was never, as Nolan pointed out, "reluctant to criticise Sinn Féin or the IRA". See Devlin: *The Price of My Soul*, 88; Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 119–21.

¹⁵ Marie-Violaine Louvet: *Civil Society, Post-Colonialism and Transnational Solidarity. The Irish and the Middle East Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 133, 24, 29.

on television, “we could see people in America, whose skin was a different colour to ours, but I don’t remember noticing that as a matter of distinction. What I saw was a matter of commonality. [...] Simplistically: they were us, and we were them!”¹⁶ Therefore, the American civil rights marches were not merely an inspiration for speaking up against inequalities and social injustice (which in Northern Ireland included the treatment of the Catholic population as second-class citizens), but they also fostered a deeper sense of solidarity across religious or class lines or state borders. Devlin described herself as a socialist along with the other leaders of the People’s Democracy movement at Queen’s University Belfast: “I’m not a socialist because of any high-flown intellectual theorizing: life has made me one.”¹⁷ This explains why she was of the opinion that the Protestant working class was not the enemy, arguing that “If we get the Protestant working class on our side, the fun will really start.”¹⁸ Her maiden speech as the MP for Mid-Ulster at Westminster in April 1969 attested to this commitment to representing “poverty-stricken” Catholics as well as Protestants: “There is no place in society for us, the ordinary ‘peasants’ of Northern Ireland”, she argued. “There is no place for us in the society of landlords because we are the ‘have-nots’ and they are the ‘haves’.”¹⁹

Therefore, her alliances were not limited by the confines of traditional Catholic Irish Nationalism but demonstrated a strong commitment to solidarity across religious, class, and racial lines due to the influence of the African-American civil rights campaign, among others.²⁰ Notably, her maiden speech revealed that although Devlin was committed to the “non-sectarian [civil rights] movement”, she was by no means naïve enough to expect “true reforms” by the Unionist Government: “If they introduce the human rights Bill and outlaw sectarianism and discrimination, what will the party which is based on, and survives on, discrimination do? By introducing the human rights Bill, it signs its own death warrant.”²¹ The same sentiment is to be found in her memoir; she did not expect a change to come from Westminster. This distrust and resentment proved to be mutual, as, according to Devlin, the “self-respecting” Members of Parliament in the House of Commons “have discovered that their little child of Parliament is a monster who doesn’t care about their Parliament, or their parliamentary system, or their parliamentary formalities, or their parliamentary parties”.²² She, on the other hand, cared about the people of Ulster and their right to work,

¹⁶ Devlin McAliskey: “We took the notion”, 29.

¹⁷ Devlin: *The Price of My Soul*, 45; Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 115–116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁹ NORTHERN IRELAND HC Deb 22 April 1969 vol 782 cc262-324 [282], https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1969/apr/22/northern-ireland#S5CV0782P0_19690422_HOC_27

²⁰ Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 115–116.

²¹ NORTHERN IRELAND HC Deb 22 April 1969 vol 782 cc262-324 [288], https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1969/apr/22/northern-ireland#S5CV0782P0_19690422_HOC_27

²² Devlin: *The Price of My Soul*, 49.

fair housing and an equal right to vote (all of which are interrelated). It was this that drove her and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) into the streets in the first place. Eventually, “the civil rights movement’s demand for simple justice sent the country up in flames”.²³

As Nolan highlighted, Devlin’s commitment to fighting for the poor of Northern Ireland was rooted in her worldview as an egalitarian socialist, which rendered her different from feminists who focused on self-expression or individual liberation in the personal sphere as opposed to Devlin’s commitment to challenge the public discrimination of the powerless.²⁴ She was convinced that the “best feminists in Ireland [were] those who grew out of the anti-imperialist movement in the north”,²⁵ pointing to the strength of anti-colonial solidarities across borders. Thus, her voice has been unapologetically anti-imperialist as she drew attention “to the violence of the British colonial state” and its long-term impact on the present of the (North of) Ireland, disrupting the “parochial lens through which the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ have been understood”.²⁶

Although in her maiden speech in Westminster she claimed that she represented the “same tradition as the first woman ever to be elected to this Parliament, Constance Markievicz, who was elected on behalf of the Irish people”, her inspiration was not limited to the island of Ireland. For instance, even though she had been vocal about her sympathy with the Black civil rights movement, the fact that “most of her ‘good learning’ about feminism came from African American women” after her visits to the United States in and after 1969, is a lesser known fact.²⁷ The influence of militant black leader Angela Davis, whom Devlin visited in prison in 1971, was particularly noteworthy, since Devlin stressed that they were “involved in the same struggle ... for the liberation of our own people”.²⁸ The interest was mutual, as Davis recalled meetings debating whether in the late 1960s Northern Ireland “belonged politically to the Third World because of the situation of colonization because of the continued repression and because of the similarities and the way people – Catholics – were treated in Northern Ireland”.²⁹ Interestingly, when Davis

²³ Ibid., 164.

²⁴ Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 116–118.

²⁵ Crozier-De Rosa: *Solidarity*, 10.

²⁶ Maasri et al.: *Introduction*, 20.

²⁷ Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 135–136.

²⁸ Dooley, Brian: *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland & Black America*, London, Pluto Press, 1998, 3, 66.

²⁹ Ibid., 53.

first visited Northern Ireland in 1994, the military presence and the vigilance of security measures reminded her of South African apartheid³⁰— a parallel not lost on many Irish Republicans.³¹

In *The Price of My Soul*,³² Devlin also highlighted the comparison between the “violent settler-colonial authority”³³ in the six northern counties and the apartheid government in South Africa.³⁴ She put words into action when she participated in the protest organized in Dublin (and Limerick) against the visit of the Springboks, the South African rugby team, in January 1970. Besides the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM), the march was “headed by Patrick Lynch (Professor of Economics in UCD and chairman of the IAAM), Bernadette Devlin, Conor Cruise O’Brien and Alec Foster (a former Irish international)” and included a wide range of trade union activists, socialists, members of the *Coiste Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* (the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement), People’s Democracy, and the Students for Democratic Action, among others.³⁵ Crucially, the Irish protest against the tour constituted a part of the wider wave of international boycotts.³⁶ Anti-apartheid campaigners managed to use boycotts to their advantage north of the border as well, as illustrated by the success of students at Queen’s University, Belfast, to force the university rugby club to cancel their proposed tour to South Africa in June 1971.³⁷

As a republican socialist feminist, Devlin’s solidarity with those “similarly oppressed” has also included analogies with Palestinians or Native Americans due to their shared “history of being driven off our lands”.³⁸ In her keynote

³⁰ Ibid., 125–126.

³¹ Gerry Adams’s 1986 book illustrates the persistence of the South African analogy in the 1980s, well after the heyday of the Northern civil rights movement, in the rhetoric of Irish Republicans, which continued after the end of apartheid in 1994, mostly in hopes of inspiring trust in a peaceful transition of power modelled on the successes of the African National Congress (ANC). Gerry Adams: *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, Dingle, Brandon book Publishers Ltd., 1986, 5, 22, 26, 27, 130.

³² The Hungarian translation of *The Price of My Soul* is not only noteworthy because it was published as early as 1969 but also due to the fact that the translator was Árpád Göncz, later President of Hungary (1990–2000). See Bernadette Devlin: *A lelke árát*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1969.

³³ Crozier-De Rosa: Solidarity, 9.

³⁴ Devlin: *The Price of My Soul*, 113.

³⁵ As O’Sullivan noted, the banners of the marchers included slogans in Irish such as “‘Boks Amach [Springboks out]’ and ‘Ná bac leis na Boks [Ignore the Boks].’” Undoubtedly, the message of 8000 protesters was noticeably amplified by these bilingual puns. See Kevin O’Sullivan: *Ireland, Africa and the end of empire. Small state identity in the Cold War 1955–75*, Manchester University Press, 2014, 151.

³⁶ Booth highlighted that after 1968, international federations began expelling or suspending South Africa, following the International Olympic Committee’s lead – with the exception of rugby. The lead of the charge against apartheid was thus taken by civilian movements when it came to rugby. See Douglas Booth: Hitting Apartheid for Six? The Politics of the South African Sports Boycott, *Journal of Contemporary History* 38: 3 (2003), 480.

³⁷ O’Sullivan: *Ireland, Africa*, 164.

³⁸ Crozier-De Rosa: Solidarity, 10.

lecture at the 2019 conference at the University of Brighton, entitled “The Radical Sixties: Aesthetics, Politics and Histories of Solidarity”, she “reconfirmed the anticolonial politics of this transnational solidarity by noting: ‘where we came to in 1968, where Palestine came to, where South Africa came to, where Quebec came to, where the Afro-Americans came to in the sixties was written in the sands of the birth of the British Empire, and European empires’.”³⁹ Her people were not the Irish Americans but those who knew about oppression, discrimination, prejudice, and poverty; they were “black, Puerto Rican, Chicano”.⁴⁰ These alliances were not simply rhetorical; Devlin’s transnational solidarity was put into practice as concrete acts of solidarity. One of the most memorable instances occurred in March 1970, when Eamonn McCann, on behalf of Devlin, presented the honorary keys to New York to the Black Panthers, as a “gesture of solidarity with the Black liberation and revolutionary socialist movement in America”, castigating Irish Americans as “hypocrites”.⁴¹

This act of solidarity was not without precedents since in August 1969, Devlin had decided to visit civil rights leader Jesse Jackson instead of the Mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, on her tour of America. Devlin resented Daley, who “even suggested that the money for relief in Northern Ireland should be given to the Red Cross instead of Devlin. Devlin responded by saying that during the Battle of the Bogside in Derry⁴² ‘we saw no Red Cross coming in when the police bombarded us for forty-eight hours with tear gas, a weapon I believe not uncommon to Mayor Daley’.”⁴³ Furthermore, the day before arriving in Chicago, she refused to speak in Detroit until the sponsors allowed the young African Americans to enter the Ford Hall auditorium.⁴⁴ Altogether, her words and actions during the tour evoked the criticism (and even hostility) of Irish Americans. What happened in Philadelphia, however, demonstrates a lesser-known dimension of Devlin’s transnational solidarity: namely, the significance of the song “We Shall Overcome” in the civil rights movement both in America and the North of Ireland.

³⁹ Maasri et al.: Introduction, 6; Devlin McAliskey: “We took the notion”, 32.

⁴⁰ Maasri et al.: Introduction, 6.

⁴¹ Devlin received the keys from Mayor John Lindsay in September 1969. For a detailed assessment on the political divide between Devlin and Irish Americans, see Matthew J. O’Brien: *Irish America, Race, and Bernadette Devlin’s 1969 American Tour*, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 14:2 (2010), 97–98.

⁴² The Battle of the Bogside took place shortly before Devlin’s tour, between 12 and 14 August, 1969, and it marked the start of “The Troubles” in the North. Devlin was in the Bogside and “supervised the erection of barricades and the making of petrol bombs. She believed that the violence involved was purely defensive and she took no direct part in it herself.” She was there to organize resistance; her words were aimed to “build solidarity and to foster cooperation”. See Nolan: *Five Irish Women*, 129–131.

⁴³ On many occasions, Devlin drew attention to the fact that they called the Chief of Police in Derry after Mayor Daley. See Dooley: *Black and Green*, 89.

⁴⁴ O’Brien: *Irish America*, 85.

WE SHALL OVERCOME

The controversy Devlin caused in Philadelphia was sparked by the song she asked the local black tenor, John Russell, to sing at the fundraiser. When at the end of the performance, Russell asked Devlin, “the guest of honour, what she would like him to sing for her”, she requested “We Shall Overcome”.⁴⁵ According to O’Brien, this happened after “she impetuously jumped onstage for a duet version of ‘We Shall Overcome’,”⁴⁶ but in several interviews, Devlin emphasized that she was asked to request a song. In 2018, she admitted having regretted “putting a person in a position I shouldn’t have put them in”, realizing what implications it would have to have a black singer performing “We Shall Overcome”:

It was at that point that the colour of the tenor’s skin became important. Because he was black and I knew when I said it, I probably cost this man his job. If he doesn’t sing, what is he going to do? If he does sing, what is he going to do? I started to sing first and he joined in. And you could feel the tension in that place. And the singing started up here with the black young people and then people in the crowd started to sing. But when I looked down amongst the dignitaries who had the best seats at the front, only a very few brave people stood up.⁴⁷

But why *this* song in particular? *We Shall Overcome* became one of the most iconic songs of the American civil rights movement in the first half of the 1960s, with its popularity peaking between 1963 and 1965. As Geary and Sheehan pointed out, the song’s “most commonly accepted lyrical ancestor is the 1901 spiritual, ‘I’ll Overcome Some Day,’ composed by a Methodist minister, Charles Albert Tindley”.⁴⁸ The song became a political song during the 1940s at the Highlander Folk School, which is where “the song’s ‘I’ became ‘We’”, when white anti-racist musicians (most notably Pete Seeger) “hybridized and instrumentalized it”.⁴⁹ The significance of this change cannot be overstated when examining the significance of solidarity and protest across communities.

In Ireland, the earliest documented stage performance of the song dates back to Luke Kelly’s concert (from Dubliners) in April 1964; thus the song had enjoyed general popularity several years before it was adopted by the civil rights movement in the North.⁵⁰ The summer of 1968 also proved to be

⁴⁵ Dooley: *Black and Green*, 87-88; Daniel Geary – Jack Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome” and Ireland. The Transatlantic Politics of a Protest Song, in Timothy H. Parsons (ed.), *Black 1968*, Routledge, 2025, 105.

⁴⁶ O’Brien: *Irish America*, 85.

⁴⁷ “Bernadette Devlin McAliskey”, *The Blindboy Podcast*, 14 November 2018, 01:00:47-01:02:45).

⁴⁸ Geary – Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome”, 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 108–111.

a watershed from the point of view of the song since after July that year, “We Shall Overcome” would be associated only with the cause of the civil rights movement.⁵¹

Given the impact of the African-American civil rights movement’s influence on the civil rights movement of the North in terms of their tactics and political vocabulary, it was hardly surprising that the iconic black American anthem was also adopted by Irish activists as an act of solidarity.⁵² In *The Price of My Soul*, Devlin drew attention to the power of folk songs when she argued that

...there was more real politics in the Folk Music Society than in any of the parties. They sang black civil-rights songs in the Folk Music Society before anybody else in Queen’s was interested in the race problem, and they were singing songs about unemployment in Belfast long before the civil-rights movement took it up. That was a good society. It had a strong American influence in it, but because of this there was another section that was determined to keep Irish influence, so you had the best of both American protest songs and traditional Irish folk music.⁵³

Consequently, even though there was occasional conflict between the singers of *We Shall Overcome* and those of Republican rebel songs such as *A Nation Once Again*, Devlin highlighted that on the long march to Derry in January 1969, they were “singing Orange songs, Green songs, red, black, and white songs, and just general pub-crawling and rugby songs, to keep us marching, and the whole tone of the thing at this stage was very good-natured”.⁵⁴ Therefore, rebel songs and *We Shall Overcome* were often sung alongside one another without causing any friction within the civil rights movement. As Geary and Sheehan argued, “the coexistence of ‘We Shall Overcome’ with rebel music refutes the simple binary that is often drawn between the ‘good’ peaceful civil rights activist and the ‘bad’ physical force Republican [...]”.⁵⁵ Curiously, when Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams met veteran civil rights activist Rosa Parks in September 1994, he told her how he used to join the marches in the streets of Belfast, singing *We Shall Overcome*.⁵⁶

Undoubtedly, solidarity had been at the very heart of *We Shall Overcome* in the African-American as well as the (Northern) Irish context: what connected

⁵¹ Press reports and first-hand accounts named Fionbarra Ó Dochartaigh as the first (civil rights protester) to sing “We Shall Overcome” in Derry. As Dooley claimed, “within months, tens of thousands of people who had never been on a protest of any kind would be marching across Northern Ireland, demanding civil rights and singing ‘We Shall Overcome’.” See Dooley: *Black and Green*, 48; Geary – Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome”, 111, 120.

⁵² Dooley: *Black and Green*, 3–5.

⁵³ Devlin: *The Price of My Soul*, 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁵ Geary – Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome”, 114.

⁵⁶ Dooley: *Black and Green*, 124.

them beyond the words (even though there was action behind those words as they did “walk hand in hand”) was the importance of the beat and rhythm, which created a common sense of identity and togetherness among protesters, unifying “crowds of individuals in a single, clearly and rhythmically articulated cause” and hope in the future.⁵⁷ Indeed, as Geary and Sheehan highlighted, *We Shall Overcome* was more than “a symbolic reflection of the movement but an active instrument in its struggle”.⁵⁸ This sense of shared community, Smith noted, could also be interpreted along the lines of Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities”.⁵⁹ As one of the best-known performers of the song, folk singer Joan Baez, (literally) one of the most vocal supporters of American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., demonstrated it when she performed *We Shall Overcome* in support of the Free Speech Movement in December 1964: the song “was not simply a voting rights song but applied to all people who saw themselves as oppressed”.⁶⁰ The song uniquely allowed civil rights activists across the globe to “define their struggles away from nationalist framings”, focusing rather on the universality of human rights, creating connections between oppressed peoples, thereby linking the Northern Irish movement to African Americans as well as the liberation struggle, for instance, in the apartheid state (1948-1994) of South Africa.⁶¹

Rosenthal drew attention to how elements of folk culture, such as *We Shall Overcome*, act as bridges between people across time or space, and serve as outstanding examples demonstrating the power of solidarity. More specifically, he argued that when South African activists rallied against apartheid by singing *We Shall Overcome*, they “forged an explicit connection between themselves and black Americans during the civil rights movement” in hopes of a victory already achieved by the African-American civil rights movement.⁶² One of the most memorable renditions of *We Shall Overcome* may be attributed to the American Senator for New York, Robert Kennedy, who “was one of the first major American (or foreign) politicians to go to South Africa to attack apartheid”.⁶³ Kennedy, who identified closely with the African-American civil rights movement, toured South Africa in 1966 and was widely reported to have

⁵⁷ Thérèse Smith: Chapter 24: “We Shall Overcome”: Communal Participation and Entrainment in a Protest Song, in Aileen Dillane – Martin J. Power – Eoin Devereux – Amanda Haynes (eds.): *Songs of Social Protest. International Perspectives*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 394, 398.

⁵⁸ Geary – Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome”, 115.

⁵⁹ Smith: Chapter 24, 399.

⁶⁰ Michael Scott Cain: *Folk Music and the New Left in the Sixties*, Jefferson, N.C., McFarland & Company, 2019, 73, 109.

⁶¹ Geary – Sheehan: “We Shall Overcome”, 120.

⁶² Sam A. Rosenthal: A Folksong in Flight: Pete Seeger and the Genesis of “We Shall Overcome” in Victor V. Bobetsky (ed.): *We Shall Overcome. Essays on a Great American Song*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 24.

⁶³ Dooley: *Black and Green*, 73.

led the crowds singing the song, standing on the roof of his car.⁶⁴ As the South African Nobel Peace Prize Winner Desmond Tutu explained after the end of apartheid, the song was “not about eliminating the enemy” but about “winning over a new friend”.⁶⁵ Therefore, by singing “We’ll walk hand in hand” together, across religious and racial lines, “We” are not merely expressing symbolic solidarity with an imagined “other” but “we” are including them in “us” as an act of solidarity. It needs to be added, however, that South African music had a much more complex role in the world of anti-apartheid activism. For instance, in contrast to “*Senzeni Na?*” [*What have we done?*], one of the most iconic songs which became the emblem of mourning and desolation in the post-Sharpeville period,⁶⁶ the reach of *We Shall Overcome* was more limited in South Africa. Still, both freedom songs were adapted in the post-apartheid period among protesters in 2010, highlighting the role of freedom songs as not only facilitators of collective bonds but also as “tactics of a liberation struggle against the ravages of war, against colonialism and most notably, against apartheid”.⁶⁷ Notably, in June the same year, Roger Waters (Pink Floyd) re-arranged and released a version of *We Shall Overcome* in support of Palestine, encouraging global support for peace efforts in the Middle East.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

While the impact of the American civil rights movement on the strategy and rhetoric of the civil rights movement in the North of Ireland has been widely acknowledged in historiography,⁶⁹ studies addressing the significance of transnational transfers, connections, and acts of solidarity connecting Irish activists with groups and movements across the globe have recently started to nuance our understanding of the complexity of solidarity. This paper

⁶⁴ Stuart Stotts: *We Shall Overcome*, Baker & Taylor, 2010, 53.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The Sharpeville massacre took place on 21 March 1960, when the police opened fire on peaceful protesters who demonstrated against South African pass laws, killing 69 people and wounding another 180. The tragedy marked a milestone in both the brutality of the apartheid regime as well as the outrage it attracted internationally. On the transformative role of music in South African anti-apartheid activism, see Anne Schumann: The Beat that Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance against Apartheid in South Africa, *Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* 14: 8 (2008), 25.

⁶⁷ Omatoyo Jolaosho: Chapter 16: “Freedom is a Constant Struggle”. Performance and Regeneration Amidst Social Movement Decline, in Aileen Dillane – Martin J. Power – Eoin Devereux – Amanda Haynes (eds.): *Songs of Social Protest. International Perspectives*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 260, 266.

⁶⁸ Inike Tesiana Putri – Silis Triyono: “We Shall Overcome”. A Humanity Song by Roger Waters: Critical Discourse Analysis, *Humaniora* 30: 2 (2018), 119–127, doi.org/10.2216/jh.v29i3.32775, 119–127.

⁶⁹ Dooley: *Black and Green*, 68.

analyzed the significance of transnational acts of solidarity in the civil rights activism of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey between 1968 and 1972. Building on the research carried out on the history of the song *We Shall Overcome*, this paper also drew attention to the fact that due to the broad and universal appeal of the song, it fostered solidarity amongst singers from all walks of life and from all over the world.⁷⁰ As Smith highlighted, the song has been heard

...in a myriad of contexts, from the civil rights movement that took to the streets of Derry in Northern Ireland in 1968, to its performance on that movement's Bloody Sunday, on January 30, 1972, when it echoed through the ranks of marchers protesting against internment who had their path blocked by British soldiers; to the anti-apartheid struggles focused on the Soweto township of South Africa (1976); the massacres of students at Tianamen Square *[sic]* (1989); protests against China's repatriation of North Korean refugees (2008); protests against bombings in Beirut (2015); and protests against the shootings at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina (2015). It [...] features widely as an iconic referent for a non-violent, but not to be defeated, struggle against injustice.⁷¹

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⁷⁰ Geary – Sheehan: "We Shall Overcome", 112.

⁷¹ Smith: Chapter 24, 393.

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