

Cause for Concern: Copycat Gender Identity Based Book Protests in Public Libraries in Ireland

Daisy Houghton

University of Galway

Frank Houghton

Technological University of Shannon

ABSTRACT: This commentary briefly explores the rise of book bans in the US before giving an overview of similar protests emerging in Irish libraries. From being a very traditional and largely Catholic confessional State Ireland has been propelled into hyper-modernity over the last 50 years. The review briefly examines religious tensions in the Republic of Ireland and outlines ongoing conservatism, despite liberal social policies. The commentary concludes with a call for greater action and international solidarity to promote both inclusion and intellectual freedom.

Keywords: Ireland, LGBTQ+, Protest, Censorship



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Research by the Reading Agency Charity found that ‘reading significantly decreases feelings of loneliness.’ (Garland and Maciejewska, 2018) From early youth, children in the West are encouraged to seek out knowledge in all the familiar places including schools, museums, and libraries. For many libraries represent a place of solace and sanctuary. In a more material sense, libraries are often temperature controlled, dry buildings that any member of the community may enter, unquestioned and unmolested. These sanctuaries also offer many people, young and old, access to an enormous range of books. Contained within these books are enough personal experiences, and intellectual accounts to assure them, that, whatever their personal experiences may be, they are not alone.

In the USA, these banks of information and experience face a dire and growing threat. Book banning and a growing force determined to protest, remove, and destroy literary works they deem profane, illicit, or immoral, are gaining traction. Both the American Library Association (ALA) and PEN: America have worked to track the tide of book bannings sweeping the US and to take action against it. In its 2022 report, the ALA noted that more than 2,500 different titles were objected to, a sizeable increase from the 2019 number of just 566. (Italie, 2023) The ALA also noted that ‘the vast majority of complaints come from conservatives’ and were ‘directed at works with LGBTIQ+ or racial themes.’ However, conservative, often hard-right, Christian, activist groups have also taken the fight directly to individual librarians, especially those who are brave enough to openly speak out against censorship. PBS reported that ‘librarians around the country have told of being harassed and threatened with violence or legal action,’ (Italie, 2023) while some library board members in Louisiana are being flanked by armed deputies at board meetings for their safety. (Chavez and Cuevas, 2023)

It should be noted that protest groups such as the so-called “Mom’s For Liberty” organisation often object to high profile, popular books in order to gain media attention. Some of their recent targets include *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson, and a number of titles by bestselling author Sarah J. Maas such as *A Court of Mist and Fury*. (Rahman, 2022) The greater media attention these book bannings, and attempted book bannings get, and the more outrage they evoke online, the farther their extreme message is sent. Slowly but surely this regressive movement has snowballed into a genuine threat to both librarians and the diverse communities whom they serve.

Unfortunately, the flood of book bannings and protests has burst America’s borders and continues to sweep across Europe. In the past year in Ireland, for instance, there have been several highly reported demonstrations and protests across the country, likely emboldened by the tandem movement in the United States. For example, at a library in Cork city, the second most populous city in the Republic of Ireland, a small group of conservative protesters held a protest over the availability of LGBTQ+ material in the central Cork City Library. Several planned protests apparently resulted in the closure of the library for the entire day. (Sheehy, 2023)

A serious incident also occurred in the neighbouring County Kerry when a “drag-
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storytime” event intended to celebrate pride week was interrupted by a group of five protesters who entered the main library in the County town of Tralee ‘shouting and roaring their disapproval of the LGBTQ event.’ This display also left library staff visibly ‘shaken and upset.’ (Lucey, 2023)

Figure 1: FORSA march in support of library staff



However, FÓRSA, the second largest union in the country, which represents workers in the Civil Service, Education, Health & Welfare, Local Government & Local Services, and Services & Enterprises sectors, including librarians and library workers, chose to respond to these events with decisive action. Over 400 people marched through Cork City in solidarity with public library workers in a rally organised by FÓRSA (English, 2023). FÓRSA’s head of Local Authorities also called for local government to provide ‘improved protections for library staff against the growing threat of harassment and intimidation by anti-LGBTQ+ protestors.’ (English, 2023)

While many Irish people may be proud of this union’s strong response, the views of these small groups of protestors are more common in Ireland than some would like to believe. Religious and social conservatism have been an aspect of Irish culture and society for much of its history. At the height of Ireland’s struggle for independence against the considerable force of British Imperial control, many members of the independence movement ascribed a sense of Irish national identity to its Catholicism, perhaps to underline the religious differences and heterogeneity between the largely

Protestant England and Roman Catholic Ireland. Upon independence, the fledgling Irish State sought to promote inclusion and equality. For example, the first president of Ireland, and a great influence on Ireland's cultural and linguistic foundations as a Free State was the Protestant son of an Anglican clergyman, Douglas Hyde.

In the decades that followed the Irish war of independence and the short civil war that followed, Ireland sank deeper into the religious conservatism of its past as well as a severe economic depression. In 1937, the new Irish Constitution was signed by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Eamon De Valera. This foundational document both enshrined the Catholic Church as having a 'special relationship' with the State, and set back the status of women in the Republic for almost a century to come.

Libraries have long been a site of contention in many countries and in this Ireland is no different. For example, the religious and social divide among Irish people can perhaps best be seen in the case of the librarian, Letitia Dunbar-Harrison. Dunbar-Harrison was recommended for the role of county librarian for County Mayo by the Local Appointments Commission, however the Library Committee of Mayo County Council opposed her selection. The ostensible reason given was because she did not have the level of Irish language competency required for the position, though in reality it was felt that she could not hold the position of County Librarian in a predominantly Catholic county as a Protestant graduate of Trinity College Dublin. One opponent to her appointment stated that "Trinity culture is not the culture of the Gael [native Irish]; rather it is the poison gas to the kindly Celtic people'. (Gillespie, 2018) This debate reached national levels, and almost toppled the sitting government as high-level politicians and religious advocates of all sides disagreed on Dunbar-Harrison's appointment.

In the last 100 years, the Republic of Ireland has undergone major social and political upheaval. The Irish government and legislature, for many years, legislated in line with a Catholic moral view, banning abortion, contraception, as well as censoring many texts which detailed sexual exploits of their characters or mentioned homosexuality. Historically, many Irish people felt a very strong connection to the Roman Catholic Church. As recently as 1979, the then Pope, John Paul II, made the first ever Papal visit to Ireland and over 2.5 million people out of a population of 3.4 million attended events across Ireland in his honour. Since that time, Ireland has undergone another profound evolution. In 1973 Ireland joined the European Union, which has facilitated rapid economic development. In turn the Irish population has had a steady per capita income increase and more members of the population attended second and third level education institutions until Ireland became one the most educated countries in the world per capita with 58% of 25-35 year olds holding tertiary degrees as of 2021. (Associated Press, 2023) With this widespread economic and educational growth, Ireland has entered a period of hyper development. The Irish mindset has broadened considerably in the last half-century, and this is reflected in public policy. In the last three decades, Ireland has legalised contraception, abortion and gay marriage, and is now a very far cry from the "Confessional State" it was dubbed in the 1930's when its constitution was first written. What is notable about Ireland is not its developing modernity, but the short time in which it has moved from being a regulated and religiously conservative State to "hyper-modernity".

The tide of anti-LGBT sentiment is evident in both Ireland and the USA. Although the US has undoubtedly had a considerable impact on the culture of the English-speaking world and beyond, Ireland and the US have a particularly close relationship and shared history. Irish émigrés are considered some of the founders of the USA's modern culture and many Americans trace their ancestry to the island of Ireland. It is unfortunate this close connection is also evident in some of the less desirable developments that are unfolding in the US. Libraries should undoubtedly be sanctuaries, safe and welcoming places for all members of the community to enter, regardless of their personal beliefs or identity. However, this is under threat. While this tide of book banning and anti-LGBT protests began in the US, it has since expanded to include Ireland. This type of copycat protests will continue unless they are met with solidarity by librarians, communities and unions. Librarians need to work together at local, national and international level to defend "the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources" (ALA, 2021). Given the growing international dimension of these protests, a more international response may be appropriate. One potential avenue for coordinated action may be the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which has for example an established history of celebrating Banned Books Week.

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