



Gender and History

Ireland, 1852–1922

Edited by **Jyoti Atwal**, **Ciara Breathnach**
and **Sarah-Anne Buckley**

GENDER AND HISTORY

This book provides an overview of Irish gender history from the end of the Great Famine in 1852 until the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. It builds on the work that scholars of women's history pioneered and brings together internationally regarded experts to offer a synthesis of the current historiography and existing debates within the field. The authors place emphasis on highlighting new and exciting sources, methodologies, and suggested areas for future research. They address a variety of critical themes such as the family, reproduction and sexuality, the medical and prison systems, masculinities and femininities, institutions, charity, the missions, migration, 'elite women', and the involvement of women in the Irish nationalist/revolutionary period. Envisioned to be both thematic and chronological, the book provides insight into the comparative, transnational, and connected histories of Ireland, India, and the British empire.

An important contribution to the study of Irish gender history, the volume offers opportunities for students and researchers to learn from the methods and historiography of Irish studies. It will be useful for scholars and teachers of history, gender studies, colonialism, post-colonialism, European history, Irish history, Irish studies, and political history.

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PREFACE

Women in Ireland

Jane Ohlmeyer

From the seventeenth century until the mid-twentieth century service in and resistance to the British empire is what brought Ireland and India together. Ireland was Britain's oldest colony; India, the largest. Since independence, the two nations, while always remaining on very good terms, have gone their separate ways. Today few Indians have heard of Ireland and it is only when Ireland features in Bollywood blockbusters (as it did in *Ek Tha Tiger*) or when the Irish cricket team, playing that most imperial of sports, beat Pakistan and England in the 2011 World Cup, that we are reminded of our shared colonial pasts.

Education is one area where meaningful links have persisted. From the early decades of the twenty-first century universities in both countries have collaborated on a variety of research projects, co-taught, and facilitated visiting exchange programmes of students and staff. This collection of chapters is an excellent example of these collaborations and is closely linked to a module on 'Women in Ireland: Reforms, Movements and Revolutions (1840–1930)' offered by Jyoti Atwal in the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Many of the contributors to this volume, myself included, have had the privilege of visiting JNU and lecturing there and of welcoming colleagues from JNU to Ireland. Courses like this introduce a new generation of Indian graduate students to the history of Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This volume which has so much to say about the relationship between, on the one hand, gender and, on the other, power, culture, institutions, the family, religion, sexuality, and class provides a welcome addition to a growing body of literature on Irish women's history. Hopefully these chapters – bristling with ideas for fresh research – will also inspire a new generation of historians in India and Ireland. Online publication of primary materials, especially the Censuses of 1901 and 1911, the records of the Folklore Commission and of the Bureau of Military History, and

the archives being reconstituted as part of the Beyond 2022 project, will also prove transformative by allowing free access to scholars around the globe.

In fact, educational links with India have a long history. The Irish system of elementary education served as a model for India. In the 1830s the British government overhauled primary education in Ireland and established a centrally controlled national school system with an approved series of textbooks, which were used throughout the Empire. Irish missions, both Catholic and Protestant, in India also dated from the nineteenth century. Particularly important were the Christian Brothers and the Loreto Sisters, who were the first European women missionaries to reach Calcutta in 1841. Over the years they established a large number of vocational institutions, colleges, and schools, which became the most sought-after and educated generations of Indian leaders. The first official count in the 1960s suggested that 580 Irish religious, 400 of whom were women, were based in India. Today only a handful of Irish nuns remain but their commitment to education, especially of the poor, is widely recognised.

In addition to nuns, Ireland provided a disproportionate number of soldiers and for much of the nineteenth century Irishmen comprised roughly half of the British army in India. The rank-and-file troops were usually impoverished Catholics, known for their bravery, endurance and good humour along with their racism and drunken brawling. It was no coincidence that the hero of Rudyard Kipling's last and most influential imperial novel, *Kim* (1901), is an orphaned, wild boy, Kim, the son of an Irish housemaid, Annie, and Sergeant Kimball O'Hara, who died an opium addict. Interestingly, Rabindranath Tagore picked up on this theme in *Gora* (1910), which is about an Irish orphan reared as an Indian. Yet we know very little about the history of Irish orphans in India or of the lives of ordinary Irish women – the Annie O'Haras – living there, never mind the relationships that Irish men had with Indian women and the stories of their children.

Better known is the contribution to women's health made by Harriet, marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, and the women who promoted the cause of Home Rule in India: Margaret Noble, who entered orders as Sister Nivedita; the socialist and theosophist Annie Besant, who founded the All India Home Rule League; and Margaret Cousins, a friend of W. B. Yeats and later Tagore and the subject of an insightful chapter in this volume. Their achievements as activists, philosophers, and suffragettes were remarkable and they each made significant contributions towards furthering the cause of Indian independence. Equally, India contributed to the cause of Irish independence. The Irish feminist and ardent nationalist Maud Gonne drew inspiration from the work and speeches of Dadabhai Naoroji, who was originally from Bombay and had played a key role in founding the Indian National Congress, before moving to London where he became the first Asian MP. Gonne spent much of her time in Paris, where she was a kindred spirit to Madam Bhikhajji Cama, who had previously served as private secretary to Naoroji. Originally from Bombay, Cama set up and edited nationalist journals in Paris and Berlin from where she promoted the cause of Indian independence.

Reciprocity of ideas and mobility of people between Ireland and India has a rich history, something that these chapters illustrate. They also remind us of the importance of supporting shared educational programmes, developing innovative curriculums, and funding research collaborations and exchanges between universities in Ireland and India.

Jane Ohlmeyer
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When Jyoti Atwal gained support from her colleagues at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to offer a module entitled *Women in Ireland: Reforms, Movements and Revolutions (1840–1930)* in 2016, resources were a major concern. With great support from the Embassy of Ireland, and the Department of Foreign Affairs, New Delhi, Atwal was enabled to initiate an Irish history library and to support a Visiting Professor series at JNU. Ciara Breathnach was the first Embassy of Ireland-funded Visiting Professor in 2017. On that visit, ideas for this book began life as Atwal and Breathnach sat at a dining room table in New Delhi. Timely support was gained from the University of Limerick and Trinity College Dublin as well as the National University of Ireland Galway for the new module. Sarah-Anne Buckley supported the course with study materials/resources and inputs, and hosted Atwal for a Moore Fellowship at NUIG.

To support teaching and learning together we envisioned a volume that would encourage South Asian students to study Irish, transnational and comparative history. Furthermore we wished to increase staff and student mobility. This volume draws on years of collaboration between the editors and the contributors; we gained momentum in early 2020 in extraordinary times. Student needs were at the core of this project and we were delighted to partner with Routledge India who assured us of fundamental matters of affordability, Dr Shashank Shekhar and Anvitaa Bajaj were both enthusiastic at the prospects of a multi-format volume. Open Access (OA) publishing is expensive and funding instruments for such exercises are few and far between. In that regard, Ronán Whelan of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is deserving of particular mention as he immediately saw the value of this work. We are very grateful to Minister Catherine Martin and the office of the Decade of Centenaries for providing the funding for Open Access. A word of special thanks goes to the wonderful Professor Jane

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Ohlmeyer, who, unhesitatingly, agreed to write a preface when this project was in its infancy.

When edited volumes emerge reviewers often opine about what is not as opposed to what is in the table of contents. To those reviewers we say, we approached several scholars and some, with full work schedules, declined the invitation while others found it too difficult to complete the work with library and archives closed for most of 2020. In the introduction we champion the work of our contributors who generously gave of their time when the demands of online teaching increased workloads exponentially and childcare and other caring arrangements fell apart. In incredibly challenging circumstances they managed to get these chapters together, a mile buíochas ó chroí dóibh, dhanyavaad/shukria, heartfelt thanks to them all.

The Editors.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

Ciara Breathnach and Sarah-Anne Buckley

When gender was put forward as a ‘useful category of historical analysis’ by Joan Scott in a pivotal chapter published in 1986, Irish historiography was still dominated by grand narrative political histories and biographies of elite men.¹ Scott’s title was initially posed as a question but the journal’s editors requested that she drop the question mark, as they clearly misunderstood the continuum she aimed to disrupt. To Scott, gender was not only a useful category; it also helped women’s history to earn legitimacy within an often-hostile academy. Irish women’s history had begun to gain traction from the late 1970s thanks to the work of pioneers like Margaret MacCurtain, Mary Cullen, Rosemary Cullen-Owens and Arlen Press, but gained further positive momentum with the foundation of the Women’s History Association of Ireland in 1989. Masculinity studies emerged in a limited way in later years and, to this day, is underdeveloped but is resurgent with the past decade. Heteronormativity, the positioning of the family in the Irish Constitution and the overt masculine nature of Irish nationalism, coupled with the conservatism of Catholic social teaching, has had a very deep impact on how history was written from 1922 until the late 1970s. In fact, women were actively written out, save those who were approved symbols of pure Irish and chaste forms of femininity like Saint Bridget, religious life, married motherhood and noble widowhood.² Much of the work of Irish women’s history was to write women back into the historical narrative so they might rightly reclaim the spaces they occupied in revolution, politics, and domestic spheres, as fighters, thinkers, confidantes and breadwinners. As Butler and Weed remind us, ‘gender as a category never works alone’.³ National histories actively excluded, diminished and dismissed the role of women in Irish revolution, economy, politics, society and culture. Scholars of Irish women’s history have been engaged in decades of retrieval work so working-class and rural women were recovered just as well as those who were elite, pious, and literate. Irish women’s history had come a very long way when Scott published her reflective piece in

2 Introduction

2010 revisiting her 1986 chapter. A large body of research, including monographs, articles and influential edited volumes, had emerged and scholars could publish in women's history with less fear of being excluded from the academic job market.⁴ Many of these works are cited throughout this volume and demonstrate the richness of the field.⁵ Gender history and women's history now hold a prominent space in the academy, but it is not one that is guaranteed and it needs dedicated support to ensure it flourishes.

Book Structure and Post-Famine Ireland 1852–1922

The primary rationale for this volume is to introduce South Asian graduate students to some of the main themes in Irish gender history from the end of the Great Famine in 1852 to the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. It draws together experts from early career to established scholars to offer a synthesis of their existing works and to engage in contemporary debates, and it builds on the work that scholars of women's history pioneered.⁶ With the aim of providing opportunities and ideas for comparative, transnational or connected histories of Ireland, India and the British empire, this book is organised both thematically and chronologically. In overarching terms, it addresses the following critical themes – power, culture, politics, socio-economic circumstances, institutions, the family, religion, education and class – from gendered perspectives. Contributors were asked to provide an overview of the existing historiography in their thematic areas, to outline sources and methodologies and to suggest areas for future research. We asked them to draw attention where possible to freely available and open access primary sources – for example, the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements, the Dictionary of Irish Biography which was made available on Open Access on March 17, 2021, and the records of the National Folklore Collection (available under the CC BY-NC 4.0 licence) to mention but a few.⁷ Some chapters explicitly discuss these sources in the body of the text and others cite them in the notes. Each can be read as standalone chapters, and where relevant they are in dialogue with one another. To facilitate comparison and connected themes on gender histories, the volume has been divided into four sections: Culture, Family and Society; Health, Welfare and Institutionalisation; Sex and Sexuality; Politics and Revolution. An introductory volume such as this cannot cover all aspects of the lived and gendered experience of ordinary lives, but each of the chapters point to future research directions. While the topic of work is addressed in a small number of chapters, it remains an under-developed area, as does the history of ethnic minority groups like the Mincéir/ Traveller community. Race is addressed to an extent in some of the chapters, but is a neglected area of study. While we welcome the growth in social history in recent years, and publications such as the *Cambridge Social History of Ireland*, some gaps in this volume are reflective of the field as a whole.

Ireland has been described by scholars of the early modern period as England's 'first colony' or as a 'colonial laboratory'.⁸ The Four Nations project that began in 1801 was bookended by incomplete legislation and agreements, firstly, the Act of

Union passed in 1800, it was followed by the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, which initiated partition and the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in December 1921 gave effect to Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) Act, 1922.⁹ In the decades that followed the implementation of the Act of Union in 1801 the ravages of the loss of political autonomy and economic sovereignty reduced Ireland to the status of poor relation in the imperial experiment. Throughout the Union matters of religion dominated all things. As Alvin Jackson explains, Ireland's constitutional positioning within empire was weak because Catholics were excluded from the corridors of power until Emancipation in 1829.¹⁰ Ireland remained industrially underdeveloped and the largely agrarian economy was unable to withstand the shocks associated with bad harvests and consequent crop failures. The most marked expression of economic ruin was Dublin's loss of its positioning as the second city, even prior to *laissez-faire* economics in the 1830s it was overtaken by Belfast with respect to industrial importance.¹¹ Demographically, Ireland had a serious imbalance, the nation's resources and their ownership were in the hands of an elite largely non-resident Anglo-Irish minority. Rampant subdivision of uneconomic agricultural holdings led to unsustainable population pressures. It is little wonder that when the Great Famine 1845–1852 occurred that it accelerated the numbers embarking on permanent emigration pathways and it caused enormous excess mortality.¹²

We begin the volume by considering how culture, family and society changed in the post-Famine era. Focusing on population shifts, Rachel Murphy's chapter provides a broad overview of the direct impacts of the Great Famine on family and household formation. The European fertility transition, characterised by a late age of first marriage, took on a different hue in Ireland. While marriage age was later, fertility was high, especially among Roman Catholics and emigration continued to be an important household survival strategy. By the early 1870s as Enda Delaney reminds us, one-third of those born in Ireland lived elsewhere and by 1900 the number of Irish born living in Ireland achieved parity with those living permanently elsewhere.¹³ The Great Famine accelerated the pre-existing trends of outward migration, and Patrick Fitzgerald offers an authoritative overview of how gender impacted the dynamic. For those who stayed, all aspects of social life were very much dictated by social class, which was inextricably linked to confessional matters. Maeve O'Riordan's chapter, which places an emphasis on the lives of upper-class women, provides an overview of the positioning of elite families in Ireland.

Few opportunities for social mobility presented in Ireland, but during this time-frame, several concessions were granted to the Roman Catholic Hierarchy; the first was in 1869 with the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. Soon after William Gladstone, Liberal prime minister, offered support for the idea of Home Rule and, prompted in part by agrarian unrest and the Land War (1878–1882), a series of land acts offered opportunities for tenants to become owner-occupiers.¹⁴ But to unionists, Home Rule meant 'Rome Rule', in reference to the inextricable links between nationalism and the increasing influence of the Vatican in shaping

4 Introduction

the ideologies of the Irish Roman Catholic Hierarchy.¹⁵ Sarah Roddy's chapter situates the work of female religious in education and shows how the soft power of the Catholic Hierarchy expanded through their work. With a colonial curriculum firmly in place in Ireland from the 1831 Education Act all schooling was conducted through the English language. Coupled with the devastating consequences of excess Famine mortality and permanent emigration that continued well into the twentieth century, the Irish language was in serious decline. Cultural revivalists actively worked towards what Douglas Hyde termed 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish Nation', and thus the Gaelic League was established following on from the success of the Gaelic Athletic Association, which was established in 1884 to combat the popularity of the English kicking and passing games of rugby and Association football. The so-called Gaelic revival raised consciousness of Irish identity and cultural loss. Nicholas Wolf's insightful discussion examines the Irish language in the context of nationalist agendas. It demonstrates how language revival in the late nineteenth century did much to rescue it from extinction, but also provided a foundation for a new body of modern Irish literature.

Section Two directs attention towards the various institutions established in what was to become known as the 'era of confinement'. It begins with Breathnach's chapter on the centrality of the poor law to local governance and the provision of public health. Other systems are explored in chapters by Oonagh Walsh on District Lunatic Asylums and Sarah-Anne Buckley on the range of institutions that were established to manage children and parents whose families often fell outside of the bounds of social norms. Laurence M. Geary's chapter presents a case study of qualified and unqualified midwifery and, while it directs attention to professionalisation and paid women's work, it also pays attention to the realms occupied by traditional practitioners. Andrew Sneddon's chapter on magical healing and folklore complements these chapters by examining life outside institutions, the vernacular and traditions that endured despite efforts to implement healthcare and welfare systems. He uses a combination of newspapers, court records and the National Folklore Collection to offer a framework of analysis on the subtlety of differences between Irish Catholic and Protestant sensibilities.

In terms of gender, this period witnessed increasing economic, social, cultural, and legal frameworks which endorsed the public/private divide. However, this was greatly influenced by social class and regionality, with the majority of working-class wives, mothers and widows supplementing the family income through cleaning, mending, dressmaking, washing and taking in boarders. In rural Ireland, women worked both on the farm and in the home. Marriage did not guarantee security and safety by any means, and, overall, the prevalence of infanticide, abduction, domestic violence, sexual violence, divorce, bigamy and desertion all attest to the abusive practices that marriage and family arrangements permitted in the nineteenth century. By considering how the law, courts, prisons and reform agencies were used to mark the boundaries of all aspects of Irish social life Section Three focuses on how sexed bodies navigated social space and how that movement was policed, managed and marshalled. Leanne McCormick's chapter draws on her experience as

a historian of reproduction to outline the ways in which female morality was managed in Dublin and Belfast cities. Elaine Farrell's account of women's incarceration provides a fascinating overview of how their experience differed to that of Irish men. Aidan Beatty's chapter on masculinities provides a very useful synthesis of the state of the art in the field and points to important progress that has occurred in the past decade. He reminds us that while the field of masculinity studies needs to further itself using different methodologies and by incorporating new frameworks like the history of emotions, it should not be at the expense of subaltern subjects. Lawless and Breathnach conclude this section with a chapter that traces the historiography of Irish queer studies and attitudes towards homosexuality and lesbianism arising from their survey of Irish newspapers.

Activism came in several guises and when it suited the desired end, Unionists and Nationalists combined efforts. The final section begins with a series of four chapters on first-wave feminist activism in Ireland. John Walsh's chapter outlines the way in which women challenged their exclusion from higher education and charts advances made in the late nineteenth century towards equality in the academy. This was a highly sectarian matter and was a reflection of what was happening in the political sphere where Home Rulers and Ulster Unionists progressed their agendas and sought concessions separately. The looseness of the original legislation permitted latitudes and Urquhart's contribution explains how Ulster Unionist women used their associational culture to become a formidable force in the campaign to maintain the Act of Union. The Irish had strong representation in Westminster throughout the nineteenth century and the Irish Parliamentary Party pursued the matter of constitutional politics to achieve Home Rule. Three Home Rule bills (1886, 1893 and 1912) came before the houses of parliament but, following the 1911 Reform Act, a two-year limitation was placed on the previously unlimited veto of the upper house.¹⁶ Were it not for the outbreak of World War 1 Ireland would have been granted limited self-governing powers in 1914, which would, of course, have resonated throughout the declining British empire.¹⁷ Both Tiernan and Ward examine the ways in which women put their confessional and class differences aside in the campaign for Irish freedom from 1872 until 1922. In marked contrast with their English counterparts, Irish Suffragists deftly navigated sectarian matters and were invested in constitutional politics to achieve universal suffrage through Home Rule. All offer masterful overviews of their respective areas of expertise on the struggle for equality in higher education, universal suffrage, the rise of women's politics and the work of women on both sides of the nationalist/unionist political divide.

Feminist activists like Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Margaret Cousins and Countess Markievicz changed their *modus operandi* once it became clear that Home Rule was not going to materialise and the militant era of the Irish revolutionary period began. The volume concludes with two chapters by Jyoti Atwal and Eunan O'Halpin, who both take Indo-Irish comparative approaches to provide exemplars of transnational research. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act gave licence to the creation of a six-county state in the north-eastern province of Ulster and that was compounded in January 1922 when the rushed and ill-conceived Anglo-Irish

Treaty, gave effect to a devolved government in Dublin and dominion status. It was this legislative weakness that de Valera exploited in the 1940s, when he used the Statute of Westminster to unravel the 26 counties of Éire/Ireland from British control. Ireland was declared a republic in 1949, two years after the bloody partition of India.¹⁸

A confluence of events occurring between 1900 and 1947 gave rise to an intensification of Indo-Irish relations. Atwal explores the anti-colonial dimensions of the geographies of Western feminism through the experience of an Irish suffragist – Margaret Cousins (1878–1954). She argues that Cousins’ experience of Irish feminism shaped her political position in India and she was at ease with both suffragist and Gandhian anti-colonial methods – which consisted of constitutionalism, passive resistance and hunger striking. O’Halpin examines the more militant examples of Indo-Irish solidarity and commonalities in the respective independence movements.

In 2010, Scott reiterated that ‘no history of women is complete without a history of “women.” “Gender” was a call to disrupt the powerful pull of biology by opening every aspect of sexed identity to interrogation.’¹⁹ We are in full agreement that the work of Irish women’s history is far from complete but recognise the importance of locating that work in the wider context of gender history to enrich both discourses and to progress its expansion into LGBTQI+ ethnic and minority studies, and intersectional feminism. To progress these respective fields of study, it behoves scholars of Ireland to adopt global, transnational and comparative history. Indeed collaborative work with scholars of other post-colonial countries could bear even greater fruit. Right across the Anglophone world and throughout the British empire the Irish mobilised race and language in terms of soft and hard power.²⁰ The East India Company recruited heavily in Ireland, during the Raj Irish men occupied the rank and file of the British armed forces and were instrumental in quashing the 1857 Indian Mutiny. While some Irish were brutal enforcers of British Imperialism – for example, during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 – others acted in solidarity with their Indian brethren in quests for independence – for example the Connaught Rangers mutiny in 1920. These contradictions reflect Ireland’s complicated and often liminal positioning within the British empire. The Irish were as much agents as subjects of the British imperial project, and historians of Ireland have as much to reconcile as any other nation in the current campaign to decolonise curricula and repatriate looted artefacts. It is a challenge that must be addressed and we hope that this volume will prompt South Asian scholars to address and enrich the discourse. With the advantage of linguistic skills and with similar systems and institutions established in India, as had been previously tested in the Irish ‘laboratory’, there are ample opportunities for further studies.

Notes

- 1 Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–1075.
- 2 Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2002). Condren provides a feminist rereading of St Brigit, women and power, prior to this most accounts of the patron saint were hagiographical.

- 3 Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed, eds., *Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott's Critical Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.
- 4 Maryann Valiulis, ed., *Gender and Power in Irish History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008); Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, eds., *The Irish Women's History Reader* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003); Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland: 1800–1918. A Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995); Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy, eds., *Women, Power and Consciousness in the 19th Century Ireland* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995); Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy, *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997).
- 5 We also wish to draw attention to the 'Bibliography of Women's History' which was compiled by Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley and Alice Mulhearn and is available at <https://womenshistoryassociation.com/the-bibliography-of-irish-womens-history/>.
- 6 Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds., *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2019); Jennifer Redmond, Mary McAuliffe, Sandra McAvoyn and Sonja Tiernan, eds., *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2015).
- 7 <https://www.ria.ie/research-projects/dictionary-irish-biography/about>; <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/>; <https://www.ucd.ie/folklore/en/>. All accessed August 23, 2021.
- 8 Jane H. Ohlmeyer, "A Laboratory for Empire? Early Modern Ireland and English Imperialism," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26–60.
- 9 Union with Ireland Act, 1800, 39 & 40 Geo. 3, c. 67; Government of Ireland Act, 1920, 10 & 11 Geo. 5, c. 67. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Geo3/39-40/67> and <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/10-11/67/contents/enacted>. Both accessed August 29, 2021.
- 10 Alvin Jackson, "Ireland, Empire and Union, 1601–1960," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123–153.
- 11 David Dickson, *Dublin: The Making of a Capital City* (London: Profile Books, 2014); Mary E. Daly, *Dublin, the Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History, 1806–1914* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1984).
- 12 For an overview of different themes in the history of nineteenth-century Ireland see James Kelly, ed., *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Vol. 3 1730–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Thomas Bartlett, ed., *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Vol. 4 1880 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Mary Daly and Eugenio Biagini, eds., *The Cambridge Social History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 13 Enda Delaney, "Our Island Story? Towards a Transnational History of late Modern Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 37, no. 148 (2011): 83–105 at 86.
- 14 For consistency, Home Rule is capitalised for both the Irish and Indian movements throughout the volume.
- 15 Jane G. V. McGaughey, *Ulster's Men: Protestant Unionist Masculinities and Militarization in the North of Ireland, 1912–1923* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).
- 16 Alvin Jackson, *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707–2007* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 17 Government of Ireland Act 1914 (4 & 5 Geo. 5 c. 90).
- 18 Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Sucheta Mahajan, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998).
- 19 Joan W. Scott, "Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?" *Diogenes* 57, no. 1 (2010): 7–14 at 12.
- 20 Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Height of Irishmen and Englishmen in the 1770s: Some Evidence from the East India Company Army Records," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 4 (1989): 83–92.



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SECTION 1

CULTURE, FAMILY AND SOCIETY



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1

GENDER AND THE IRISH FAMILY, 1852–1922

Rachel Murphy

Introduction

Post-Famine Irish family constructs were complex and hinged to a great degree on social class and household means. The term ‘family’ is hard to define since it may be used to describe a range of relationships, from related co-residents, to dispersed relatives, to a wider kin group. The concept of ‘family’ is temporally, culturally and socially informed, so it is important to understand what this signified in Ireland during the period of study, being cognisant that this might be quite different from Irish families in other eras, as well as non-Irish families in this or any other period.

The ‘normative family’ in Ireland 1850–1922 was founded in marriage and consisted of either a nuclear family (a heterosexual couple with one or more children) or the ‘stem’ family, a form of extended family in which three generations (grandparents, children and grandchildren) co-habited. Though such units were viewed as the moral and cultural ideal, the reality was that Irish families encompassed a much broader range of typologies.

The blended family, a family consisting of a couple with children from previous relationships, was a common feature of Irish society, despite low numbers of divorces and separations. Life expectancy rates in the 1870s lay at around fifty for both men and women, so it was not unusual for young children to experience the death of at least one parent, and remarriage was common.¹ Single-parent families existed for a range of reasons: children born outside of marriage, women deserted by their husbands, and widowed parents choosing not to remarry. During this period, an increasing number of people remained unmarried and marriage rates fell.² Prior to the Famine (1845–52), 10 per cent of men and 12 per cent of women were single, compared with 24 per cent and 20 per cent respectively in 1901.³ Some single people lived alone, others with siblings, members of their wider kin-group or

with non-relatives. It is clear, then, that while an ideal family existed conceptually in reality there was no single typology.

The same is true of roles within the family. Academic discourse has drawn on frameworks such as the separate spheres and breadwinner model to analyse familial gender roles. The separate spheres construct places men in the public sphere (work, economics and politics) and women in the private sphere (home, family and domesticity), while the breadwinner model positions men as providers and women as nurturers. These were ideological constructs; the reality was that gender roles were far more complex.⁴ Such gendered family roles could only be achieved by middle- and upper-class families; poorer families were economically reliant on incomes derived from women and, in many cases, children.⁵

During this period familial gender roles were also informed by religious discourse. Most of the Irish population was Christian, with 78 per cent being Roman Catholic in 1861.⁶ Enshrined in Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical was the notion of the ideal Catholic family, governed 'by the authority of the father' who 'should provide food and all necessaries for those whom he has begotten'. Women were 'by nature fitted for home-work' and the mother required to 'preserve her modesty and ... promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family'.⁷ These ideals were not limited to the Catholic church; in a sermon delivered to women in 1856, a Church of Ireland cleric, Rev. John Gregg, noted that 'society does best when each sex performs the duties for which it is especially ordained'.⁸

This chapter examines the Irish family 1852–1922. The first half discusses gendered family roles, the historiography of the Irish family, and future directions for research. The second half of the chapter considers the Irish family from a life course perspective, through the lens of gender.

Historiography

Following the rise of social history in the 1960s, the history of family emerged as a distinct area of study. In *Approaches to the history of the western family 1500–1914* (published in 1980 and updated in 1994), Michael Anderson analysed existing history of family scholarship, identifying four main approaches: demographic, sentiments, household economics and psychohistory (which he discounted).⁹ These approaches are relevant to the Irish context, though the field has developed significantly since Anderson's publication.¹⁰

As in Britain, demographic studies were an initial focus of Irish history of family scholarship, influenced by studies such as Hajnal's Western European Marriage Pattern¹¹ and analysis of family size and structure conducted by scholars from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.¹² Research shows that post-Famine Ireland exhibited high rates of celibacy, late age at marriage, high but declining marital fertility rates and high emigration rates. All these topics have received much attention from economic historians in particular, while gender and migration is the focus of Fitzgerald's chapter in this volume. The stem family was thought by some to prevail in Ireland, particularly in rural areas. This led

to Ireland being viewed as an anomaly in Western European terms, and household structure has been a key preoccupation of historians and sociologists from the 1970s through to the present day.¹³

A natural progression from studies of household structures was scholarship relating to the household economy – the strategies employed by families based on their economic situations. In the post-Famine period, women in the West of Ireland frequently managed the household budget, and cash incomes from poultry work, spinning, weaving, sewing and embroidery were key to the family's economic survival.¹⁴ Studies of seasonal migration show that men, women and children travelled from the western counties of Ireland to Scotland annually to work in as 'tattie-hokers' or potato harvesters.¹⁵ In some cases, entire families left, but frequently women remained at home to reap crops. Likewise, in the industrial city of Belfast, married working-class women employed in textiles were often the breadwinners, their labourer husbands being subject to layoffs and inconsistent work (see also McCormick and Farrell contributions to this volume).¹⁶

During this period there was a trend towards farm consolidation, particularly in eastern areas. Bourke proposes that changes in the rural economy meant that, by the early twentieth century, women's work was increasingly confined to the more labour-intensive home and housewifery.¹⁷ Breathnach points out that in the West of Ireland such changes did not occur until later. Women's earnings, particularly from the sale of eggs, declined while family incomes generally rose meaning that women's earnings represented a smaller proportion of household income. This, combined with the fact that traditional female farm roles, such as poultry and butter production were now handled through co-operatives, meant that the control of family budgets moved to men.¹⁸

Household economics studies such as these contributed to the growing field of women's history, which started to be taught in Irish universities in the 1980s.¹⁹ This mainstreaming of gender studies led to a desire to understand women's experiences, which were often hard to discern. Historians of family, particularly those involved in women's history, strove to understand the family attitudes, behaviours, relationships, and feelings that underpinned the more data-driven demographic and economic studies. Taking what Anderson describes as the 'sentiments' approach, they used ego-documents such as letters, diaries and memoirs to gain an understanding of the women's experiences in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland. Collections of emigrant letters are an example of a source that has provided insights into the relationships between emigrants and their families. As well as aiding historians' understanding of experiences encountered, these can provide insights into more personal feelings. Studies include Fitzgerald's analysis of homesickness, and Moreton's study of female emigrant correspondence.²⁰

Connected to both the sentiments approach and the psychohistory approach that Anderson rejected is the recent 'emotional turn'. The history of emotions recognises that while biological feelings have always been the same, the way in which we express and react to them is socially and culturally informed.²¹ From a history of family perspective, understanding gendered expectations of emotions allows sources to be understood

in new ways. Currently in its infancy in the Irish context, works such as *Happiness in Nineteenth Century Ireland* suggest that the history of emotions will provide new insights into family and gender relationships.²² The history of emotions offers novel paths for research, using known sources in different ways. It is just one new direction that the history of the Irish family is taking, and it is useful to consider future possibilities.

There is a strong track record in women's history which could be complemented by histories of masculinities. As Jennifer Redmond notes, the study of masculinities in Ireland is 'a relatively new but thriving field of inquiry'.²³ Assessing the roles of fathers and sons in the familial context will provide a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and relationships as they apply to both families and broader kin-groups. Family life of the lower gentry classes and middle classes in Ireland also deserves further attention, as does research relating to minority ethnic and religious groups, such as Mincéir (Irish Travellers). While Magdalen asylums and mother and baby homes have received attention in recent years, studies of pre-independence boarding-out (where children were placed with foster families), adoption and familial responses will provide a more complete picture (see Buckley's chapter in this volume). Digital tools and techniques facilitate new approaches to research: collections of ego-documents can be analysed through corpus linguistics, record linkage provides a more complete picture of Irish families in a wider socio-spatial context, and network analysis aids our understanding of the links in and across kin-groups and communities. These techniques provide new insights into the relationship between gender and family in Ireland.

Historians of family often employ one of two frameworks to examine how individuals interact with society. The family lifecycle suggests life follows key stages which progress in a linear fashion: marriage, parenthood, children leaving home, old age, and death. This biological model privileges societal norms such as traditional gender roles and the nuclear family. Many individuals and families do not fit this rigid framework. The life course is a more flexible and encompassing framework, focusing on the myriad roles individuals undertake at different life stages (birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death), though these stages are themselves constructs.

The Irish Family: gender and the life course

Within marriage the birth of a child was usually welcomed in Irish society, but mothers' and babies' lives were at risk in the days following the birth.²⁴ Official statistics suggest that Ireland's infant mortality rate (deaths of children under one year) was low in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but research shows that outcomes were far from uniform. The Irish urban poor experienced high infant mortality, their living environments rendering them susceptible to respiratory and digestive disease. Between 13 and 20 per cent of registered live births in Dublin resulted in infant mortality during this period.²⁵

Unmarried mothers and their children were stigmatised by society.²⁶ The Poor Law Act 1838 made illegitimate children the responsibility of mothers, though

these women had no rights against the father of their child. This gendered notion of parenthood left women vulnerable. Infanticide and concealment occurred on a weekly basis, 62 per cent of cases relating to unmarried mothers (see Elaine Farrell's chapter in this volume).²⁷ During this period the church and state became increasingly concerned about difficult childhoods: those spent in poverty, the workhouse or the prison. As in England, the child was seen either as 'pure and innocent, and thus in need of protection, or as potentially depraved and a threat to society'.²⁸ Research shows that mothers negotiated these systems, employing deliberate strategies to ensure their child's welfare.²⁹ From a legal perspective, until 1873 children were in the custody of their mothers up to the age of seven. Subsequently, this was increased to sixteen years.³⁰ For orphans and abandoned children, industrial schools and boarding out were the most likely childhoods (see Sarah-Anne Buckley's contribution to this volume).

Letters, diaries and official reports can provide insights into the parent–child relationship. The idea that high mortality rates made parents less likely to invest in their children emotionally has been refuted by recent scholarship.³¹ O'Riordan's research into elite motherhood suggests that 'during the earliest stage of their children's lives, a close bond was formed between mother and baby'.³² Hatfield, in her study of middle-class childhood and gender, notes that central to the role of bourgeois mothers was caring for their families, though this increasingly meant employing experts (often male) in the traditionally female fields of medicine, education and childcare, to assist them. She also notes that during this period children wearing clothing suited to their age and gender became a mark of middle-class respectability.³³ Children were also educated in how to behave respectably, and historians of emotions such as Peter Stearns have examined the gendered expectations of childhood emotions.³⁴ Locating the child's voice is a challenge for historians of family: oral histories, memoirs and autobiographies mediate childhood through an adult lens.

The educational opportunities open to children depended on their gender and social class. Daughters of elite families were schooled at home by governesses, while sons attended boarding school, often in England. Protestant families favoured schools such as Eton, while Catholic sons attended Ampleforth, Downside or Stonyhurst. Since 1831, middle- and working-class Irish children had been able to access the National School system. Organised on a denominational basis, it enabled the churches to instill their values on future generations.³⁵ By 1901 84 per cent of females and 79 per cent of males were enrolled in school. Poor and vulnerable children attended industrial schools, which were residential schools established to train them for the workplace. Under the 1892 Irish Education Act school attendance was compulsory for children aged between six and fourteen but did not apply to those in rural areas. By 1901 the attendance rate was 53 per cent.³⁶ While not all children attended school, education was highly valued in Irish society, seen as a preparation for adult life and an opportunity for 'bettering oneself'. Throughout the period, all children learned the 'three Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic); as the century progressed, however, the curriculum became more gendered, incorporating vocational skills such as sewing lessons for girls and agriculture for boys.

Once again, gender and class influenced options available to children as they approached adolescence, the liminal state between childhood and adult life. Though secondary education was dominated by middle- and upper-class adolescents of both genders, university education remained the preserve of elite males until the establishment of the Royal University of Ireland in 1879.³⁷ Most adolescents had to work in one form or another. The minimum age of employment was raised to 11 in 1891, and to 12 in 1901, but many children would have worked on an informal basis. Working mothers often relied on elder daughters to stay at home and raise younger siblings, particularly where the family lived in an urban environment.³⁸ Non-inheriting sons might continue to work on the family farm if additional help was required.

The age at which a child left home was a complex combination of gender, class and household location,³⁹ and the extent to which they had agency is a key question for historians of family. Gendered inheritance traditions often determined which children would stay at home. Primogeniture, where the oldest son inherited the family property, predominated in elite and farming families. In some farming communities, ultimogeniture (youngest son inheritance) prevailed while partible inheritance (where land was divided among all sons) continued into the twentieth century in parts of the West of Ireland.⁴⁰ Children remaining on the family farm were often highly subservient to parental authority since receiving a dowry (daughters) or inheriting the farm (eldest sons) was dependent on maintaining good relations with their parents.⁴¹ No matter what his age, until a farm had been transferred to the son, he would be described as 'boy', signifying his status.⁴² Leaving home was often the only option for non-inheriting sons and daughters; because of this they may have had greater autonomy than their inheriting siblings.⁴³

The boundaries between adolescence and adulthood were often blurred, but Irish landed elites traditionally celebrated the inheriting son reaching the age of majority by holding a coming-of-age ceremony attended by the tenantry and local dignitaries. It was not only a celebration, but a public symbol of masculine hegemony: this son would inherit the estate.⁴⁴ Younger aristocratic sons may have experienced anxiety as they struggled to assert their identities in this patriarchal order.⁴⁵ They were expected to carve out careers in suitable professions such as medicine, the church, the military, or the law. The presentation of elite daughters as debutantes during the London Season similarly delineated the boundary between girlhood and womanhood. Following this they were expected to find a marriage partner. In an urban context, apprenticeships were important in transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Over time apprentices were given more responsibility as they grew in competence and self-sufficiency, and completion of an apprenticeship might be considered a comparable milestone.⁴⁶

For domestic and farm servants the very act of leaving home was a threshold event. Farm servanthood could relieve small farming or labouring families 'of the burden of excess children'. Male children could work as resident or non-resident labourers, being employed by neighbours or relatives, or recruited at hiring fairs.⁴⁷ Most families experienced the emigration of at least one son or daughter, and

Ireland stood out for having a greater proportion of female emigrants than any other European country at this time.⁴⁸ Chain migration was common; even where individuals embarked alone, they frequently gravitated towards relatives or neighbours from the ‘old country’ on arrival. Emigrants were expected to send remittances home to assist with family finances (for more on migration, see Fitzgerald’s contribution to this volume).

Two key concerns for the young adult were work and marriage. Elite women did not work *per se*, but they were expected to manage a household of servants (see O’Riordan’s chapter). Research shows that such women often influenced their husbands’ public lives, and most engaged in philanthropy as did their middle-class counterparts. According to the breadwinner model, bourgeois women were not expected to work and many employed one or more servants. In 1911 30 per cent of working women were servants most of whom worked in one- or two-servant middle-class households.⁴⁹

The largest class of employment for women, domestic service was a respectable career for daughters from both urban working-class and agricultural backgrounds. For many it was an interim position before marriage.⁵⁰ Nursing, too, was a respectable career for females, providing opportunities for progression, while teaching improved the prospects of men and women alike.⁵¹ Young working-class men in Belfast and Dublin followed their fathers into apprenticeships in plastering, brick-laying or stonecutting.⁵² A range of jobs were open to men and women in industry, retail, and institutions, but roles were generally gendered. Clerical work in banks, post offices and businesses, traditionally a male domain, was offered to women for between half and two-thirds of men’s wages.⁵³

Marriage was by no means universal, but an important consideration. Age at marriage rose during this period, but members of poorer families tended to marry earlier than middle- and upper-class families. Companionate marriage (marriage for love, friendship and common interests) was more prevalent, but economic considerations remained important for some families. Landed elite and rural farming families operated under a dowry system. The dowry was expected to match the husband’s status as a landholder. Elite marriages often consolidated existing connections and cousin-marriages occurred among the Anglo-Irish landed classes. In rural communities, family friends often played an important role in finding a match, and matchmakers became more common in the twentieth century.⁵⁴

Following marriage gender difference became most apparent, a wife’s person becoming incorporated into her husband’s under common law. A wife’s personal property (moveable items) became her husband’s, and although real property (land, buildings) and bequests to her ‘sole and separate use’ legally remained hers, she needed his consent to manage or sell it. Neither could she ‘make a contract, sue or be sued without her husband, or leave property by will’.⁵⁵ Women in dual-income households could do nothing to prevent their husbands from taking their earnings. Wealthy families used marriage settlements, where trustees managed assets, to circumvent this situation and they were a means of ensuring that if widowed the wife would receive a jointure (pension).⁵⁶ The Married Women’s Property Acts 1870–82

provided women with more autonomy, permitting them to retain earned or inherited income, and dispose of property acquired by their earnings.⁵⁷

It was expected that the married woman would bear children. Infertility was attributed to the wife, and in some cases a dowry was partially withheld until a child was produced.⁵⁸ Maternal mortality was a risk, with deaths in childbirth lying at 6.18 per 1,000 in 1900 and 4.87 by 1920.⁵⁹ The birth was followed by a lying-in period of around ten days; mothers being particularly at risk of death during the six weeks following delivery. Four to six weeks after childbirth women were churched, a rite based on the Festival of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Until this ceremony had taken place, they were considered unclean and traditionally could not work or enter a house for fear of bringing bad luck. Priests sometimes refused to church unmarried mothers.⁶⁰

Not all marriages were successful. Formal separation was rare, as was parliamentary divorce. Available only to the wealthy elite, just ninety-two parliamentary divorces of Irish citizens occurred between 1857 and 1922. Divorce was highly gendered, with wives requiring two grounds until 1886, and husbands only one.⁶¹ For most couples, marriage only ended on the death of a partner. Due to an increasing age difference between men and women at marriage once a woman had survived the risks of childbirth, she was more likely to be widowed than her husband. Widowhood provided women with full legal capacity and some took over the family business or farm. Widows were entitled to dower, or a third of their husband's estate if they died intestate. Nevertheless, widowhood could push some families into extreme poverty, relying on philanthropy or the workhouse to survive.⁶²

From a demographic perspective, the population of post-Famine Ireland was an ageing population with a high dependency ratio; in 1861 over 9 per cent of the population was aged sixty or more. Gilleard has shown that there was an increase in households headed by the over-sixties, in particular households consisting of older couples and singles. 43 per cent of the population aged fifty-five and over were widowed in 1901, while 18 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women over fifty-five were unmarried. A high proportion of older individuals were in a precarious position and, because an increasing percentage were unmarried or widowed, many were reliant on the workhouse. The Old Age Pension Act of 1908 alleviated this burden somewhat, providing those aged seventy and over with up to 5s. a week, just under 50 per cent of the average labourer's wage in Ireland.⁶³ Ó Gráda notes that for women "the gains were even greater" as the pension more or less matched the pay of domestic outworkers.⁶⁴ By 1910, nearly 98 per cent of the population of Ireland aged 70 or more received the pension.⁶⁵

The final stage in the life course is death. Folk traditions co-existed with church liturgy at this time. The *bean chaointe*, or 'mourning women', played a key role in keening or 'crying for the dead',⁶⁶ but vernacular forms of religious practice, such as this overtly female, unrestrained, emotional response to grief, were exactly the type of tradition that the Catholic Church was trying to dissociate from. Keening continued into the twentieth century in some parts of Ireland, but both Catholic and Protestant churches encouraged more restrained forms of grief, diminishing the

role that women had previously played. Leaving a will ensured that an individual's wishes were carried out after death. Only spinsters, widows and the small number of married women that held property could leave a will, so more wills were created by men.⁶⁷ As well as transferring property, clauses could be included in wills to ensure that widows were appropriately looked after by the family, and that children made acceptable marriage choices. Despite this there were high levels of intestacy in Ireland, linked both to low levels of land ownership and superstitions around death.⁶⁸

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that during the period 1852–1922, family life was highly gendered, particularly among the middle and upper classes. From a young age, girls and boys were expected to behave according to their genders, and these ideals were reinforced through education, which in turn led to specific careers for young men and women. Nowhere was the gender distinction more apparent than in marriage. Here, a woman's identity became subsumed into that of her husband, contrasting with spinsters and widows who maintained their separate legal personalities. Men could divorce more easily than women, who had to prove more grounds than their husbands. Women were ostracised if they were divorced, or unwed mothers. Though the middle-class ideal saw women as managing the domestic sphere while men were the breadwinners, for many families living in Ireland during this period, this simply was not an option, women's incomes being vital to the family economy. However, a number of factors, including the influence of the church, consolidation of farm-holdings, increased mechanisation and the introduction of co-operatives, meant that women's traditional spheres of influence in the family and community narrowed, a trend that would continue in the new state.

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2

GENDER AND MIGRATION

The Irish Experience, 1850–1922

Patrick Fitzgerald

The author retains strong memories, as a boy of eight, of watching both his parents performing in a production of J.B. Keane's 1961 play, *Many Young Men of Twenty*. The lyrics of the powerful chorus, 'many young men of twenty said goodbye', concludes the play and remained in my head for many weeks. The simple idea that *he* went and *she* stayed was far from reflective of any societal reality in the haemorrhage of the 1950s, but it was even less insightful when projected backwards to the extraordinarily sustained exodus of the second half of the nineteenth century. 'Many young women of twenty said goodbye' would have been a more telling refrain, as by the close of the nineteenth century women had moved into a slight majority amongst the emigrant outflow. Nonetheless, as Pauric Travers has observed, the traditional model, where it accounted for female migrants at all, reflected the idea that "women did not choose to emigrate: they chose to accompany their men-folk".¹ Irish emigration, though, exceptional by contemporary European standards and predominant in the Irish psyche, was only one dimension of human migration and it is important to begin by reminding ourselves that only a minuscule minority never migrated at all. The privilege afforded to the transoceanic migrant in Ireland is pervasive, but in this chapter it is intended to consider migration in accordance with a more holistic vision of movement into, within and out of the island.² A similarly holistic perspective will be deployed with regard to gender analysis not least because the relevant literature in Ireland is equally lopsided. The acceleration of research in this field over the past generation has been prodigious but all but a handful of publications focus exclusively on the experience of women. This chapter will therefore consciously seek to at least ponder the affects of masculinity upon the fashioning of male migration. In many respects the issues are not peculiarly Irish, as Moch has observed of Western Europe, gender despite being "the fundamental characteristic influencing migration" remains "the least systematically explored".³

Commencing a review of these themes in 1850, in an Irish context, requires particular comment as the island then was only gradually and partially emerging from the profoundly traumatic crisis of the Great Famine. The demographic consequences of the Famine were unprecedented in nineteenth-century Europe. In the region of one million people perished and another 1.25 million emigrated. Despite the projects of throwing light on the experience of the Great Famine and of writing women into Irish history running in parallel over the past generation, published work on women and famine in Ireland remains underdeveloped. Nonetheless, new sources and methodologies have brought fresh insights. Although it has long been appreciated that the late 1840s was regularly characterised in the lower levels of Irish society by family fracture we are still coming to terms with its negative implications. Even before 1845 we can see how poorer women remained very vulnerable at certain stages of the lifecycle and how illness or incapacity could easily and rapidly lead to subsistence migration which often had a lethal terminus.⁴ Today more than ever, we can legitimately ask when the Famine ended and see the myriad ways in which there were real continuities stretching well into the post-Famine decades in Ireland and its Diaspora. The question of the epigenetic and subsequent public health, both physical and mental, consequences of deprivation and illness of mothers, in particular, in the late 1840s is now raising its profile on the research agenda.⁵

Before turning to explore how the dynamic of gender affected the shaping of the Irish Diaspora let us consider the range of other diasporas in Ireland. Although there were regional variations in Ireland, limited urbanization, industrialization and employment meant the island exercised a very weak magnetism. Indeed, few countries across Europe registered as emphatic net emigration rates as Ireland and yet the generation which preceded the Great War (1914–18) was the first for almost two centuries to experience inward migration from Europe on any appreciable scale. Two ethnic groups stand out, those from Italy and Ashkenazi Jews, fleeing from pogroms in eastern Europe, particularly from Lithuania (Litvaks). Like many contemporary Irish migrants, the mechanism which conditioned their migration trajectory was ‘chain migration’. A significant proportion of Italians and Jews settling in the major cities of Dublin, Belfast and Cork shared fairly localised origins. A high proportion of the former were from the province of Frosinone, south of Rome, and particularly the village of Casalattico, whilst the Lithuanian Jewish refugees disproportionately hailed from the province of Kovno Gubernia and a smaller community therein known as Akmijan.⁶ With both ethnic minorities, males predominated. The 1901 census revealed that 57 per cent of the Russian Jewish community were male, whilst fully 72.5 per cent of the Italians in Ireland at that date were men or boys.⁷ Arguably, both Litvak and Italian women in Ireland, though very disproportionately urban, lived out the bulk of their lives within a private, domestic sphere. The visual caricatures which populated Edwardian Irish illustration revolved around the highly visible ‘Jewman’, pedlar or moneylender, or the Italian plaster worker or ice cream vendor. A perusal of the 1901 census confirms the impression that many married women remained outside the employment market or made an economic contribution in an essentially domestic context. The same source suggests that an

even greater proportion of potentially economically active Jewish women were not in employment outside the household.⁸ This point is emphasised by Ó'Gráda and this may have been one factor helping to explain the lower child mortality figures they exhibited in Joycean Dublin.⁹ There appears to be strong potential for further comparative research exploring gender as a dynamic in Irish and Italian migration, based on Ireland itself, Britain and North America.¹⁰

By some distance the largest proportion of those enumerated in the 1901 census born outside Ireland comprised the tens of thousands who migrated from Britain. Technically, of course, in 1901 these were internal migrants rather than immigrants but the volume was significant. Fitzpatrick has suggested that it roughly equated to no less than a twelfth of the mass west-east migration from Ireland.¹¹ If one adds in those born within the British Diaspora, particularly across the empire, their significance is enhanced further.¹² In a city like Belfast, which had experienced industrialization and was well integrated within an economy that spanned the Irish Sea, British migrants could avail of attractive economic opportunities, often together as married couples. Young British men gained employment and favourable wage rates in sectors like shipbuilding, whilst wives might create a double-income household through work in the numerous mills and factories in the city dubbed 'Linenopolis'.¹³ British accents might have been heard in a range of occupations dominated by a particular gender. The framework of governance and administration, ultimately centred on Dublin Castle, may have been gradually recruiting more Irish Catholics but still offered many posts for young men from Britain.¹⁴ One of the most visible representations of British manhood in Edwardian Ireland was the soldier and sailor. By the later nineteenth century some 26,000 military personnel were garrisoned across the country.¹⁵ This gave rise to one of the more visible and harsher colonial interfaces of the era as British soldiers, in smart uniforms and with disposable income, attracted the attentions of Irish women, many of whom came to populate the red light districts which frequently sprang up around the barracks. Luddy, in particular, has considered how Irish nationalists and suffragists, around the turn of the century, increasingly critiqued these relationships in terms of the exploitation of the noble Gael by the debased Saxon.¹⁶ Liaisons of this kind also served to encourage camp following women to migrate around the Empire.

The historiography of later nineteenth-century Ireland is marked out from its wider European equivalent by an extraordinarily limited literature explicitly addressing internal migration.¹⁷ To some extent, of course, this reflects a social historical reality by which internal migration, particularly rural-urban migration, was less voluminous than it was across Europe. The relentless tide of emigration consistently siphoned off the young rural adults who might otherwise have 'come to town'. By and large retarded industrialization and urbanization meant most potential migrants looked overseas first, often in communication with a brother, sister or neighbour who had pioneered a 'modernizing' pathway out towards the Diaspora. The picture, however, was more nuanced and some urban centres, particularly the railway hubs, were demographic winners.¹⁸

The most striking exception to this trend was Belfast. The same employment growth which attracted British artisans brought young women and men, mainly from a more Protestant hinterland stretching out only about thirty miles from the city. Such migration reached feverish intensity in the 1890s and Belfast Unionists could barely conceal their pride as the city demographically surpassed Dublin in 1901.¹⁹ Derry city reflected the powerful influence of gendered employment patterns upon migration and demography. In short, the take-off of the shirt-making industry after mid-century shaped a distinctive urban population profile. About 80 per cent of jobs in the sector fell to women which inevitably attracted more young females from the rural hinterland, conditioned particularly high male unemployment and fashioned an unusual male predominance aboard the emigrant traffic leaving the city's quays.²⁰ Meanwhile, the capital, Dublin, relatively stagnated as manufacturing jobs were more regularly shed than created. Following a surge into the city during the years of the Great Famine, the pace of inward migration slackened appreciably thereafter. Fluctuations in inward migration could reflect the economic cycle elsewhere, particularly in America. Potential emigrants might postpone departures when American economic recession bit, as in the early 1890s, but they might also choose to redirect, perhaps seeing a period in Dublin as a stepping stone to American city life. Certainly, the inflow to Dublin tended to attract women more than men and the former tended to be drawn from a constricted Leinster hinterland. The soundscape of a later-nineteenth-century street was now unlikely to include many Irish-speaking voices. There remained opportunities for girls from the countryside to gain employment as domestic servants in the middle-class residences of leafy south Dublin avenues. A gender imbalance was also evident at the other end of the age spectrum as poorer elderly women, particularly rural widows, found their way into institutional care concentrated in Dublin city.²¹ The interrogation of such institutional records in the future may shed important light upon the experience of this subset of rural-urban migrants.

Very little academic research has been directed towards migration within the countryside. We know most farming families physically remained static in the three generations after the famine. Whilst one should be cautious about exaggerating the extent of social mobility, it was likely greater than geographical mobility. In the poorest districts, particularly in the west, seasonal agricultural migration continued, sometimes to Britain, sometimes to the more fertile arable zones in Ireland, though agricultural mechanization in the early twentieth century gradually accelerated its decline.²² In counties like Mayo and Donegal daughters were fully and early expected thus to contribute to household survival strategies.²³ For the younger sons of middling farmers one domestic career option was the Royal Irish Constabulary. This career path actively sponsored inter-county migration as the force sought to remove any temptation of the impartial exercise of law and order in 'home' localities by deliberately locating officers outside their native county and discouraging marriage altogether.²⁴ No surprise then to find that the RIC retained the highest proportion of bachelors of any force in the UK. Thus, in Ulster, otherwise not well integrated into an island-wide society, inter-provincial marriages regularly

stemmed from southern RIC officers marrying northern partners.²⁵ Viewed in a wider European frame, we can see that Ireland was unusual in that for most inhabitants making the transition from a rural to an urban 'worlds' migration meant leaving Ireland itself for city life overseas.

Looking at the Irish Diaspora in the three generations after 1850 there are, perhaps, three key points to take stock of. Firstly, the recognition that significant outward migration from Ireland stretched back some two and a half centuries. Even the iconic departure of Ulster's Earls in 1607 had a number of women onboard. The traumatic episode of the mass exodus of the Famine from 1845 added significantly to the momentum established by well-developed Irish communities across the English-speaking world.²⁶ Secondly, the haemorrhage was both huge and utterly relentless. Something like 4.5 million people left in this era and in only one year (1875–76) did the annual departure figure drop below 25,000.²⁷ Finally, unlike the outflow from most other European states (where males predominated), the outflow remained fairly consistently balanced in gender terms. Poor Bridget as well as Paddy found it necessary to emigrate.

It is arguably the final of these three features which serves to most sharply distinguish Irish emigration from the exodus from Europe as a whole in the period. In the mid-nineteenth century 60 per cent of transoceanic emigrants from Northern and Western Europe were male and flows from Southern and Eastern Europe, after 1880, were even more disproportionately male. Only Swedish women emigrated anything like as regularly as the Irish.²⁸ Across these decades the gender balance amongst those leaving Irish ports was roughly even. The numbers of women departing accelerated from the 1830s and took a second spurt after the mid-1870s. By the 1890s Irish women constituted a majority of the emigrant outflow, making up 53.5 per cent of those leaving and most of these were aged between 16 and 24.²⁹ There was some variability geographically, both in Ireland and among the Diaspora. In an industrial city like Belfast, the gender balance was more akin to British cities, where men continued to predominate as emigrants, whilst female emigration remained most prolific in the congested and economically underdeveloped districts of western, rural Ireland. The emigrant flow to the US was more heavily female than that to imperial destinations but women were also coming to make up a majority of those crossing the Irish Sea to Britain after 1890.³⁰

The departing, characteristically left independently, as young adults in their late teens and early twenties, perhaps already with some experience of paid work but still largely unmarried. Reading the minds of such young men and women, who so regularly mulled over their options, is problematic and, as Clear has pointed out we should not assume that all young women were utterly prepossessed by the prospect of matrimony. Nonetheless, we know today that young Irish men and women were becoming less likely to marry at all if they remained at home and that if they did form a match it was likely to happen later in life.

Alternatively, they hoped almost always to better themselves in leaving and if they could simultaneously better those at home through remittances, well and good.³¹ The mental projections they no doubt conjured in their mind's eye of their

relative future prospects, at home or away, were likely coloured by hard reconnaissance, often favourably detailing comparative wage rates, which regularly filled returning letters. Increasing literacy also exposed a wide variety of documents for young women keen to build a picture of a new life available across the Atlantic. Simultaneously daughters no doubt studied well the visible toll taken by a grueling life endured by mothers, aunts and grandmothers on small farms. Although, perhaps, one can exaggerate the unremitting grimness of young women's lives in rural Ireland, it remains difficult not to conclude that most girls who weighed up the prospect of future lives lived out in Old or New Worlds strongly favoured the latter.³² Parents meanwhile, struggling to sustain such small farms, could hardly avoid the cold rationalization that materially the family's best interests were served through the departure overseas of their most able offspring. Between 1848 and 1900 an estimated \$260 million was returned to Ireland from America, much in the form of pre-paid tickets, and some contemporary observers opined that Irish-American women were more generous than the men.³³ Although, there was a broad spectrum of inter-generational emotional attachment, it may be worth noting those reports of parents destroying letters sent home (particularly those lacking remittances). Akenson records that Swedish emigrant correspondence has survived ten times more regularly than the Irish equivalent.³⁴ Balanced against this is the recognition that mothers in Irish-America by the early twentieth century made more return visits and could rely on the extended family there to help out with child-rearing duties.³⁵ Such conclusions spur new research questions. Can private records be explored to reveal more about comparisons between gender relations and identities at home and in the Diaspora? How did the whole issue of gender influence ethnic identity amongst emigrants?

Whilst official sources offer us a view of emigrants from above and outside, historians have increasingly sought to exploit growing archival collections of personal testimony in order to try and reconstruct the actual lived experiences of migration. In Ireland, Schrier began this process in the 1950s and the craft has been subsequently developed by other scholars.³⁶ Of course, all historians utilising letters need to be fully conscious of the extent to which overseas correspondents sought to continue influencing familial circumstances at home, through the use of their pens, not least with regard to the subsequent migration trajectories of siblings. Just as few of the portrait 'likenesses' being returned across the ocean were 'snapped' casually, we must appreciate the extent to which letter writers were furiously projecting in their transnational missals.³⁷ The very fact that letter writers were literate meant that this source fails to represent the still sizeable number of emigrants drawn from the ranks of the poorer classes of the rural west, some of whom, even after the 1880s, spoke mainly, occasionally only, Irish. Harris's analysis suggested that men were three times more likely than women to write home but women correspondents tended to communicate more economically and more regularly and discussed a narrower span of topics, including relationships, emotions and children. Women showed a strong inclination to save and were more likely than men to send remittances.³⁸ It may have been the case that women, more restricted to the domestic sphere, had a

greater propensity to reflect nostalgically.³⁹ However, younger women composing such documents well remembered their receipt such emigrant letters and fashion content which could all too readily be shared broadly. Whilst they may have been happy to share their dutiful commitment to returning dollars they were probably somewhat coy about revealing their more intimate thoughts about their personal, romantic and sex lives. Much no doubt depended upon the correspondent. Mary Brown, writing home to an old chum in Wexford in the late 1850s, confessed her enthusiastic adoption of ‘yankee’ dating habits, in revealing that she sustained half a dozen suitors simultaneously and recommended America as a land of ‘love and liberty’. Young women, particularly in the more fluid world of the American West, might also sense a seductive new sexual power and exploit the perception that they were deemed attractive marriage partners.⁴⁰ Their young male counterparts also embraced the more relaxed regime and the recently arrived Joseph Hewitt celebrated fresh opportunities to indulge in what his new host society termed ‘sparkling’ without prying scrutiny by local elders and betters.⁴¹

Efforts to make both public and private records freely available to researchers in a digitised form began as early as the 1980s. The Irish Emigration Database began collecting a wide variety of documents then and these became available online in 2012.⁴² The archives of the Irish Folklore Commission cast light on the near-irresistible virtual paradise widely popularly perceived to exist on the far side of the Atlantic. Neville charts how the lore came to reflect a destination considered particularly favourable to girls. Young women could gain independence and accrue wealth but should they return, even temporarily, to Ireland their enhanced self-esteem was liable to be critiqued as ‘brashness’. The female returnee, sometimes prevailed upon to come home to offer care for aged parents, was reported obliterating the memory of America altogether.⁴³

Turning to look more closely at the immigrant within the predominant diasporic destination of the United States, we see, of course, diverse experiences but also clearly identifiable shared patterns. For many young Irish women the world of work was also their domestic sphere as domestic service remained the single dominant occupation for them in the new country. For Catholic immigrants there could be open discrimination but most ‘Bridgets’, as they were euphemistically known, exercised discretion when it came to the practice of religion. Ultimately, their capacity to dominate this sector reflected the facts that they were white, almost always English speaking and well-used to children. Some have argued that live in domestics were severely restricted and vulnerable to the sexual advances of masters but any comparison with mill or factory work reveals it to have been much safer. As Lynch-Brennan confirms, such employ offered pros and cons but on the whole the latter prevailed, particularly for the substantial numbers of first-generation Irish before 1890. Steady, generous remuneration with board and provision represented attractive inducements. Opportunities for career and social progression may have been limited but younger women could move on to superior employment with a decent reference, whilst those who ‘stayed the course’ invested much in the education of their children. Maids could observe

the manners of middle-class Americans at close quarters and most exploited their new urban environments to sustain their tight-knit ethnic social networks. Many came to meet a husband at a county ladies organization Thursday evening dance (the traditional 'maid's night out').⁴⁴

Some of those finding positions in American households had either experience or knowledge of the 'big house' in Ireland and a second employment avenue which reflected the capacity for 'carry-over' of Old World knowledge and skills was in the textiles sector. Although women's engagement in textile manufacture, particularly in a domestic context, was declining after the famine, many gained a foothold in the New England cotton mills.⁴⁵ By the 1880s, however, female Irish immigrants were becoming more aspirational, exploiting their education in Ireland's National Schools and their literacy in English, to penetrate more white-collar employment niches. Nolan's study of the increasing number of Irish women becoming teachers charts this upward social mobility and arrival in the ranks of the American lower middle class. As the twentieth century progressed, it was they who demonstrated to fresh migrant groups American middle-class mores.⁴⁶ Steady upward social progression was far from a ubiquitous experience, however, and an underclass of immigrant Irish girls and women persisted in urban North America. They could be defined as deviant in a number of ways and often incarcerated in criminal institutions.⁴⁷

Well before 1850 Irishmen were already strongly associated in the American mind with unskilled, manual labour. Many of the country's most dirty and dangerous jobs were reserved either for African-Americans or for Hibernians. Perhaps the sharpest reminder of the dispensable reputation of the latter was the numbers who served during the Civil War (1861–65), with an estimated 170,000 Irish combatants.⁴⁸ Whilst Irish predominance in the municipal uniforms of police and fire services might be more prominent, post-bellum Irishmen consistently entered the rank and file of the burgeoning US military and it proved an efficient method for a peripheral ethnic group to incrementally 'mainstream'.⁴⁹ The contrast with the experience of both African-Americans and Asian-Americans remained stark. Nonetheless, upward social progression, particularly in the east coast urban heartlands, was distinctly gradual for 'Paddys' long associated with the labour behind infrastructural construction. An iconic 1932 photograph entitled 'lunch atop a skyscraper' showed 11 Irish-American ironworkers snacking on a sky-high girder over downtown Manhattan and served to reinforce the connection.⁵⁰ Their employment profile and culture, allied to an acknowledged prowess in the boxing ring and on the baseball field, projected an image of Irish-American manhood which was assertively 'butch'. Another significant employment niche, that of mining, be it coal in west Pennsylvania or copper in Butte, Montana, reinforced the reputation for mobility and clannishness. For those like the Sweeneys near Ardara, in west Donegal, successive sons followed the pathway to the coal mines of western Pennsylvania.⁵¹ Corkonian Marcus Daly, as Butte's infamous mine boss, notoriously 'looked after' Irishmen seeking work and modelled a brand of muscular, fraternal community leadership which mirrored that operated by 'Boss' Tweed of Tammany

Hall or, in the Catholic church, Archbishop John Hughes.⁵² In the public sphere of their leisure time and associational culture, Irish men noticeably spent time apart from their women folk, frequently in smoke-filled lodge rooms or neighbourhood spirit groceries. Regularly their wives pursued the temperance campaign, which sought to pull the curtain down on this very male domain.⁵³ When the silver screen came to prominence in the inter-war years, it was all too appropriate that James Cagney emerged as the personification of the Irish-American man. Furthermore, the Irish-American story, until relatively recently, was told almost exclusively by Irish-American men.⁵⁴

If the Irish-American story was played out in technicolour, the narrative of the Irish in Britain might be thought of as appearing in monochrome. Our understanding of the latter has advanced considerably and is more nuanced than the somewhat reductionist depiction common a generation ago. The occupational profile of Irish women, described by the authors of a recent synthesis as “the great unknown of Irish diaspora studies”, certainly reflected the unskilled and mobile nature of many female migrants’ experiences.⁵⁵ By the Edwardian period the volume of Irish immigration was slowing and the community ageing. Many migrants remained sojourners, working for a spell before taking cash home or investing in ‘stepwise’ migration across the Atlantic. Women were present amongst the ranks of the *spalpeens* (migrant seasonal agricultural workers) who crossed to Britain for harvest work. Hawking goods, trading in street markets and prostitution tended to accentuate the visibility of impoverished Irish women in urban Britain, whilst Irish domestics were sometimes kept out of sight.⁵⁶ There is currently little evidence of upward social progression for Irish women in Britain, akin to that in America, before 1920. However, such advancement was even more delayed for Irish men. The host society in Britain regularly constructed Irish women as ‘other’ and physical or economic conflict did little to ease the path to integration.⁵⁷

Finally, we might hope that a better integration may be achieved between academic scholarship and the mass enterprise of family history. The latter has generated the largest single body of historical research globally and shrewd exploitation of this may shed much new and valuable light on historic Irish migrants and the role gender played in shaping their experiences.⁵⁸ Inevitably online digital resources have come into their own during the recent global pandemic. More members of the global Irish family than ever before have benefited from digitised records made freely available by the Irish state more than a decade ago. Allowing the descendants of emigrants to explore the household returns from the 1901 and 1911 censuses, at no cost, has proved a poignant, yet practical gift from Ireland to its Diaspora. Both gender and migration studies remain expanding and vibrant sectors of Irish historical enquiry and many connections remain to be fruitfully explored. Research into gender identities and relations in the Diaspora and how these were perceived by members of the host society and other immigrant groups, holds much potential to cast fresh light on major questions such as what it meant to be Irish in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Notes

- 1 Pauric Travers, "Emigration and Gender: The Case of Ireland 1922–60," in *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society*, eds. Mary O'Dowd & Sabine Wichert (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1995), 187.
- 2 This is in line with the approach adopted in Patrick Fitzgerald & Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History, 1607–2007* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 16–62.
- 3 Leslie P. Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 14.
- 4 Dympna McLoughlin, "The Impact of the Great Famine on Subsistence Women," in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, eds. J. Crowley, W.J. Smyth & M. Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), 255–64.
- 5 Oonagh Walsh, "'An Invisible But Inescapable Trauma': Epigenetics and the Great Famine," in *Women and the Great Hunger*, eds. Christine Kinealy, Jason King & Ciaran Reilly (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), 173–84.
- 6 Fitzgerald & Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History*, 183–5; Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 6–26; Ray Rivlin, *Shalom Ireland: A Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), 22–46; Eugenio Biagini, "Minorities," in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, eds. Eugenio Biagini & Mary E. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 442–50; Una Power, *Terra Straniera: The Story of the Italians in Ireland* (Carlow: Nationalist and Leinster Times, 1988).
- 7 <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie> (consulted online 22/6/2020). This fabulous resource is a splendid example of government-resourced digital archives.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 77.
- 10 For the Italian perspective see Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2000).
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- 12 Tadhg Foley & Maureen O'Connor (eds.), *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); an increasingly helpful development is the interpretation of British migrants in Ireland as members of the British Diaspora see for example, Donald M. MacRaild, Tanja Bueltmann & J.C.D. Clark (eds.), *British and Irish Diasporas: Societies, Cultures and Ideologies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).
- 13 John P. Lynch, *An Unlikely Success Story: The Belfast Shipbuilding Industry, 1880–1935* (Belfast: Belfast Society in association with the Ulster Historical Foundation, 2001); Lesley Donaldson, "'The Family Wage' – A Factor in Migration?" in *Belfast: The Emerging City 1850–1914*, ed. Olwen Purdue (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 211–34.
- 14 Lawrence McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle: The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892–1922* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991).
- 15 E.M. Spiers, "Army Organization and Society in the Nineteenth Century," in *A Military History of Ireland*, eds. Thomas Bartlett & Keith Jeffery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 335–57.
- 16 Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 156–93.
- 17 Fitzgerald & Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History* in which a bibliography of over 1,200 items contains only one title which explicitly refers to internal migration.
- 18 Steve Royle, "Industrialization, Urbanization and Urban Society in Post-Famine Ireland, c. 1850–1921," in *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, eds. Brian J. Graham & Lyndsey J. Proudfoot (London: Academic Press, 1993), 258–88; a more nuanced picture of Irish industrialization emerges in Andrew Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

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- 20 Robert Gavin, William P. Kelly & Dolores O’Reilly, *Atlantic Gateway: The Port and City of Londonderry since 1700* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 78–9.
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- 22 Anne O’Dowd, *Spalpeens and Tattie Hokers: History and Folklore of the Irish Migratory Agricultural Workers in Ireland and Britain* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991), 78–80.
- 23 Ciara Breathnach & Sarah-Anne Buckley, “Rural Youth, Seasonal Labor and Family Income: Ireland 1890–1935,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2020), 103–21.
- 24 See contribution by Elaine Farrell in this volume.
- 25 Elizabeth Malcolm, *The Irish Policeman, 1822–1922: A Life* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 64–70; Brian Griffin, “The Irish Police: Love, Sex and Marriage in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Gender Perspectives in 19th Century Ireland*, eds. Margaret Kelleher & James H. Murphy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), 177.
- 26 It is worth emphasising that the vast majority of post-Famine emigrants from Ireland were destined for English-speaking destinations.
- 27 Kevin Kenny, “Irish Emigrations in a Comparative Perspective,” in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, 412; David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration, 1801–1921* (Dundalgen: Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1984).
- 28 Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*, 153; Donald H. Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden and the Great European Migration, 1815–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 238–40.
- 29 Margaret Lynch-Brennan, “Ubiquitous Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930,” in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, eds. J.J. Lee & Marian Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 333; Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1993), 166–7; Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden and the Great European Migration, 1815–1914*, 239.
- 30 Fitzpatrick, “Irish Emigration, 1871–1921,” 612–3; Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer*, 157–87; Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003), 33.
- 31 Caitriona Clear, *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 63–4, 74.
- 32 Contrast the accounts offered by Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 406–8; Clear, *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland*, 63–5, 74–89. Ciara Breathnach (ed.), *Framing the West: Images of Rural Ireland, 1891–1920* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 38–9 leaves the reader in little doubt about the real physical burden imposed upon rural working women. On promotional literature see Sarah Roddy, “‘The Emigrant’s Friend’? Guides for Irish Emigrants by Clergymen c.1830–1882,” in *Visual, Material and Print Culture in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, eds. Ciara Breathnach & Catherine Lawless (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 244–57.
- 33 Gerardine Meaney, Mary O’Dowd & Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounter and Exchange, 1714–1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 99.
- 34 Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden and the Great European Migration, 1815–1914*, 239, 252 endnote 58.
- 35 David Fitzpatrick, *The Americanisation of Ireland: Migration and Settlement, 1841–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 163–79.

- 36 Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration, 1850–1900* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958); David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994); Ruth-Ann Harris, “‘Come You All Courageously’: Irish Women in America Write Home,” in *New Directions in Irish-American History*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 209–26 offers an analysis of gender differences in the correspondence.
- 37 David Fitzpatrick, “‘I Take Up My Pen to Write These Few Lines’: Emigrant Letters,” in *History Ireland*, Winter, 1994, 15–20.
- 38 Harris, “‘Come You All Courageously,’” 209–26.
- 39 David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 121–3.
- 40 Mary Brown letter quoted in *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 408; Ruth-Harris, “‘Come You All Courageously,’” 222.
- 41 Joseph Hewitt letter of 1856 quoted in Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 406.
- 42 <http://www.dippam.ac.uk> (consulted online 11/8/21).
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- 45 Brian C. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821–61* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 90–3.
- 46 Janet Nolan, *Servants of the Poor: Teachers and Mobility in Ireland and Irish America* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 2004); David Fitzpatrick, “‘A Share of the Honeycomb’: Education, Emigration and Irishwomen,” in *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland*, eds. Mary Daly & David Dickson (Dublin: Department of Modern History, Trinity College, 1990), 167–87.
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- 48 Damian Shiels, *The Irish in the American Civil War* (Dublin: The History Press, 2013), 7. All but 20,000 of these served with the Union army.
- 49 Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, 123.
- 50 <https://smithsonianmag.com/history> (consulted online 3/7/2020).
- 51 Breandán MacSuibhne, *The End of Outrage: Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 261.
- 52 David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875–1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 20–1; Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
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3

GENDER AND THE ASCENDANCY

The families who owned, and lost, the island of Ireland, 1852–1922

Maeve O’Riordan

Introduction

Landownership in Ireland was dominated by a small but powerful class of people. In 1870, 741 landlords with estates of more than 5,000 acres owned close to half of the total land of Ireland, and in 1881, 291 individuals with estates over 10,000 acres controlled one-third of the land.¹ They, and their families, were referred to as the Irish Ascendancy (comprised of the titled peerage and the untitled gentry) or the Irish landed class. The houses they lived in were the biggest for miles around, and in Ireland, were referred to as ‘the big house’. These houses provided employment, but they were also symbols of inequality. The author Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), who grew up in the big house of Bowen’s Court near Kildorrery, County Cork, described the big house as like an island, and it was.² The owners of these houses and their families interacted socially only with other members of the ascendancy class, and a few select members of the professions, who were themselves probably members of the ascendancy by birth, or wealthy industrialists who could buy their way into most social circles. Ascendancy families were largely alienated from the wider population through a combination of factors, including a sense of superiority, religion, political outlook, class and identity. They were, therefore, operating under a different social context from similar families in England who were perceived as more ethnically tied to the land which they owned. By 1922, land ownership had been largely transferred to the farming classes.³

Gender in the big house intersected with class. There was the obvious class difference between the upstairs and downstairs residents, the staff and the family, but even within these two distinct categories there was a power structure based on gender, class, marital status and other factors. Visible and invisible power structures were at play in each house and between houses as neighbouring landlord families might have vastly different levels of wealth or prestige based on their titles, or the

longevity of their family holding the estate. This chapter will introduce the reader to the ascendancy class, outline some of the historiographical developments in recent years and point the reader towards some potential avenues for future research.

Who owned Ireland?

The ascendancy families who lived in these houses could be divided into four categories of origin, though through decades, if not centuries, of intermarriage, the difference could only be seen within the direct male line. A minority of these families, such as the Lord Inchiquins who as O'Briens claimed descent from the first high king of Ireland, Brian Ború (941–1014), traced their ancestors back to the Gaelic lords who had ruled Ireland before the Norman invasion. The next 'oldest' families, such as the Catholic Burkes in County Galway, were descended from twelfth-century Norman settlers who had intermarried with Gaelic families. The third, and the largest, portion of landowners were descended from Cromwellian adventurers who were granted the lands of dispossessed landowners during the plantations in the seventeenth century. The newest category of landowner, who became more common after the Famine, had made their fortune in trade or the British empire and then bought an estate and 'big house' to match their new elite status. It was common for wealthier landowners to own several estates in different parts of Ireland, and some owned estates on both sides of the Irish Sea. Landowners who did not live on an estate (particularly if their main residence was in Britain) were referred to as absentee. These were perceived as being more mercenary and less paternalistic than resident landlords.

Historiographical developments

As Ireland's relationship with the big house has evolved, so too has its treatment by historians. Early writings on the big house were often either sympathetic histories written by, and for, members of the class (including memoirs) which offered valuable insights into the world of the big house, but left it divorced from wider socio-political events,⁴ or were focused on the land system and so treated landlords (but very rarely mentioned their wives) as a property-owning bloc obstructing the progress of the rising middle classes.⁵ Understandably, big houses have always held the attention of architectural historians, many of whom also held familial connections to the big house.⁶ More recent work has begun to uncover the gender dimension of architectural and material history.⁷ It was not until the twenty-first century that historians sought to fully understand the role of the big house and its residents in Irish life. The most influential historian of the big house is Terence Dooley, who established the Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates at Maynooth University.⁸ Since the publication of his *Decline of the Big House*, other historians have further developed the historiography of the big house, and its owners.⁹

The gendered experience in the big house is still to be fully explored. Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century studies have made some important strides in understanding marriage and women’s roles within the house.¹⁰ Literary scholars have explored gender in the big house in some depth.¹¹ Diane Urquhart has probably made the greatest contribution for this period through her work on the Ladies Londonderry, and her most recent work on divorce in Ireland. As divorce was so expensive, it was only members of the elite who could access it.¹² Aside from some excellent biographies, the female experience has been less visible within the historiography of the big house. There have been recent strides in this area in terms of social life, education, leisure, servants, marriage, material culture and property.¹³ I have written on women’s experience during the period 1860–1914.¹⁴ As the landed class were so powerful, and so publicly visible during this period, their experiences can also be found in studies of politics, philanthropy, sport and education. Traces of these families are also to be found in histories of the British elite.

New directions: ownership and management

Irish houses were generally smaller than the equivalent houses in England. A ‘typical’ big house was built or extended during the ‘golden age’ of the ascendancy at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These houses, such as Doneraile Court in County Cork, display Georgian architectural features and bow-ends. The design, furnishing and use of such houses, and gardens, are all fertile ground for future research by gender historians. For the task of mapping houses, and understanding their size and scale, the Landed Estates database supported by the Moore Institute at National University of Ireland, Galway is incredibly useful. Unfortunately, it is limited to listing the houses of the provinces of Connacht and Munster.¹⁵ Valuations can be observed for certain dates through Griffith’s Valuation as well as Hussey de Burg and Bateman’s valuations.¹⁶ These also demonstrate the gender breakdown of large landowners. While the majority of estates were held by men and passed to their eldest son, a not insignificant minority were held by women, no gender-based study has yet been carried out on these landowning women (Figure 3.1).

The census records, which are currently available online for 1901 and 1911, permit researchers to analyse residents of these houses. The Household return from A and B provide different information on the residents of the house, their time married, number of children, the birthplaces of those children as well as the number of servants are all listed. The number of available rooms is also a useful indicator, particularly for houses like Castle Bernard in County Cork which were burned during the War of Independence. The census return for this house reflects both the wealth of the couple and also the importance of numerous servants in supporting that prestigious position.¹⁷ Directories and lineages such as those produced by Burke are also useful in tracing marriages, birth dates and rates.¹⁸ Unfortunately, families did not return biographical data on female members with the same diligence as with male members. It is also worth exploring the Dictionary of Irish Biography as, given



FIGURE 3.1 Postcard of Doneraile House ‘There’s gladness in remembering’ – pasted into Lady Castletown’s scrapbook, NLI/MS/3079.

Source: National Library of Ireland. Used with Permission.

their elevated position in society, some sons and daughters of these houses have received biographical treatment. Terence Dooley has also produced two essential research guides for any scholar of the big house.¹⁹

The Irish Big House in a British context

Many members of the ascendancy were part of a supranational elite comprised of the landowners of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales who all looked to London as their cultural and political capital.²⁰ British-based sources on everything from fashion to agricultural practices can therefore be relevant in the Irish context. However, it is always necessary to look in detail at the Irish experience as the inter-relationship between the British and Irish elite was made complex by colonialism. Both were closely linked through marriage, but the Irish landlord suffered some of the characterisation that was meted out to the Irish ‘type’ by the British press. The Irish experience of landownership was also one which existed under a threat of dispossession and violence. Many landlord families were heavily indebted after the Great Famine. The Encumbered Estates Act (1849) allowed families to break the entail and sell all or part of their estate to clear their debts. Over the next decades, a series of Land Acts first controlled rents and then incentivised and eventually directed the sale of land from landlord to tenant.²¹ The Wyndham Land Act of 1903 was particularly influential as landlords were given a bonus by the government on the sale of land while tenants were loaned the value of the land. These Land Acts were introduced in an effort to suppress agrarian violence in Ireland (rent withholding, violence, intimidation, and murder) as the tenant farming class, who had gained significantly in prosperity in the post-Famine era, were eager to own land rather than pay rent to landlords who were custodians of a deeply inequitable land ownership system and often perceived as grasping, wasteful or absentee.

The nature of the relationship between landlords and tenants in Ireland can be traced through newspaper coverage. Kevin McKenna, for example, completed a study on masculine coming-of-age ceremonies and the deteriorating inter-class relationship on the Clonbrock estate in Galway.²² It is essential for the historian to examine newspapers with different political viewpoints and to compare these with personal papers. For example, *Mary Carbery’s West Cork Journal* is one of the few published diaries written by women during this time. In the diary, the widowed Carbery curates a vision of herself as a civilised and civilising British queen among her wild but loyal Irish tenants, writing ‘If Queen Victoria can learn Hindustani then I can learn Irish’.²³ When one compares certain episodes with the local nationalist newspapers, it becomes clear that the local population were not universally in favour of the Carbery family.²⁴ Throughout the period, agrarian violence and disputes were widely covered in British and Irish newspapers; from the land courts of the nineteenth century, records of intimidating notices and murders during the land war, and finally house-burnings and compensation claims as a result of the War of Independence and Civil Wars. During the revolutionary period in Ireland, the big house was a site of war as many were burned down. The most comprehensive, but not exhaustive count to date, has found that at least 275 big houses were burned in the twenty-six counties during the revolutionary period (75) and the civil war (200).²⁵ Letters to British and Irish newspapers, particularly those publications which shared their political outlook, were commonly used by both male and female members of the class to have their voices heard on various topics, and perceived injustices. In recent years, the Irish Revolution has been critically analysed by gender historians, and new light has been shed, for example, on gender-based violence. Further work has still to be completed in this field for the big house and its occupants.

Marriage

The institution of marriage was a foundation stone of ascendancy power in Ireland. Inter-marriage with other landed families could cement a family’s position in the supranational British elite. One of Lord Ardilaun’s best moves in his efforts to be accepted by the peerage in Britain and Ireland was to marry Olivia White, the daughter of the Earl of Bantry.²⁶ Old bloodlines and connections to titles and family give an air of tradition to newer members of the ascendancy who might otherwise be deemed uncultured. As women were the curators of taste and policed some of the invisible rules of etiquette, marrying a woman who was born into this class was an essential step for any socially-ambitious merchant. Likewise, men who already had prestige through a peerage might look to the daughters of merchants to boost the estate resources through a large dowry, this match would in turn allow her to be the mother of a peer. In many cases, it was these women’s dowries which cleared the estate from debts, or brought further land which allowed a second son to also be established as a landlord in his own right.

The marriage day was a means of emphasising the family’s power and performing the gendered expectations of the period. Family members submitted detailed

descriptions of their clothes at events like weddings and balls to the press. For example, at the wedding to the heir of the Inchiquin estate, the bride's dress of white satin, point de Venise lace, with a belt of pearls and her mother's 'dress of rich purple and black shot silk, with bodice of purple velvet, the sleeves handsomely studded with black jet' were described in several publications.²⁷ Political statements, as well as statements about gender, wealth and status, were made through dress. Portraiture and material culture is another area yet to be fully tapped by historians of this period (Figure 3.2).

Marriage was closely linked to property. Any marriage which took place was preceded by a protracted legal process culminating in the signing of a marriage settlement. The marriage settlement not only listed the property which each party was bringing to the union, but also described how that should be distributed after their deaths. The marriage settlement was a very important document for women as it allowed them to circumvent the law (through a system of quarterly payments called a jointure and pin money for her 'sole and separate use') which before the Married Women's Property Act of 1882²⁸ meant that married women lost all control of their property upon marriage. It might also protect them from estates which were haemorrhaging money as it could be stipulated that whatever the debts on the estate, the wife's pin money (annual sum to be spent as she wished) and jointure (essentially the same thing paid during her widowhood, but often a higher sum to allow for the fact that she might have to rent living quarters for herself) should be paid first. Such provision could lead to resentment against women as financial drains. The marriage settlement also contained a stipulation of how much money should be provided for the younger children of the marriage, as it was the norm that the eldest son would inherit the estate. This sum was sometimes divided in detail, stating how much younger sons should get to set them up in a career and the sum daughters should get on marriage, provided that they married with their parents' consent. This sum for younger children was often a direct correlation to the sum brought to the marriage by the mother. On the female line, therefore, families could get progressively poorer as a daughter rarely had a dowry to equal that of her mother or maternal grandmother.

During this period there was a pattern of emphasising love and attraction when discussing prospective marriage partners, and there was a certain disdain for marriages which were deemed purely mercenary. Marriageable people sought a marriage which could provide them with status and financial gain combined with emotional and sexual fulfilment. It was not unusual for couples to continue to share the same bed long after the necessary heir had been provided. By the early twentieth century in Ireland, spacing and restricting numbers of pregnancies was certainly being used by some Irish couples, though Sandra McAvoy adroitly observed that 'given the unreliability of many methods of birth control used at the time [...] it is unlikely that demographic statistics reflect the scale of attempts at family planning'.²⁹ A comprehensive study of fertility patterns within the class has yet to be completed, but early research suggests that by the turn of the century elite couples produced an heir as quickly as possible after marriage but ultimately



FIGURE 3.2 Wedding photograph of Lucius O’Brien of Dromoland Castle, heir to the Inchiquin baronetcy and Ethel Foster, Moor Park, Shropshire, 1896. NLI/MS/45,527.

Source: National Library of Ireland. Used with Permission.

limited their family size.³⁰ After all, the provision of a male heir was one of the primary duties of landed couples. Women might be disappointed if they produced too many daughters without a son.

It is possible to carry out in depth analysis on the emotive responses to marriage and associated family events. Families who lived in the big house often lived in the same house (on the male line) for generations and even centuries. With large houses and plenty of attic space, as well as a (sometimes exaggerated) sense of pride in their family history, there was no need to cull belongings and papers in the same way as those who lived in more modest homes who had to move regularly for work. There is therefore a treasure trove of under-utilised estate collections waiting to be explored by gender historians. For example, the Inchiquin Collection which was passed to the National Library in Dublin for archiving and public access, spans material relating to social and family life, estate management, politics and finance. It even includes deeply personal items like a dried wedding bouquet from 1862, locks of hair and a slice of wedding cake in a silver box from 1896. The descriptive list stretches to 705 pages. Such material is publicly available by appointment, together with the collections of many other houses and families of various sizes and status levels, but digitised estate records are more limited.

Parents and children

Jessica Gerard, writing about the English landed class at this time, argued that early twentieth-century literature was responsible for the way in which we now view nineteenth-century wealthy parents. Such parents, and particularly mothers, owing to the cultural expectation around motherhood, were perceived as distant and even 'bad' because the physical care of their children to hired staff, often spending time away from their children or seeing them only for a portion of the day, and in the case of boys, shipping them off to school at a young age. It is more useful to think of the role of landed wife and mother as a career. There were certain duties demanded of a landlord's wife if she was to uphold the position of the family, and these roles demanded that she was not fettered by her children. The concept of elite motherhood also did not include the more physical aspects of childcare such as cleaning dirty bottoms or bathing children. A wealthy mother's role was to find good servants and to guide the moral and societal development of the child so that they would be ready to take their pre-ordained position in the world. Fathers were expected to be even more distant, and yet, letters between fathers and their children can reveal distinctly tender relationships. Further research is needed before the landed father should be written off as coldly distant (Figure 3.3).³¹

No matter the nature of the relationship between parents and their children, a physical distance was always maintained. Whether this distance was in sleeping arrangements in the earliest days when children were comforted by nursery servants and taught by governesses and tutors in the schoolroom or left at home in the same care while parents went visiting for extended periods. Boys were also sent to school from as young as eight years old, only returning home on their holidays. This distance could impact on the relationships between brothers and sisters, as they were forced to conduct their relationships through letters. Schooling might also add a certain aura of worldliness to boys as they enjoyed an independence at school which was never experienced by their sisters who continued to be educated at home, and therefore continued to be associated with childhood innocence and the domestic space.

Men who were not landlords

Younger sons of the landed gentry still need more attention from historians. They were educated like their elder brothers to hold positions of power in society, but saving their brother's early and childless death, or an incredibly advantageous marriage or maternal inheritance, younger sons would never become landlords. They could be found across all power-holding positions within society and across the empire whether it was as MPs, Barristers, Officers of the Army, government officials, clergymen or as land agents to their relatives or other larger landowners. Young men from the big house were proportionately more likely to serve in the First World War.³² Some were able to supplement their income through inherited wealth which allowed them to partake of expensive hobbies like hunting and horse-racing.



FIGURE 3.3 Ethel, Lady Inchiquin with her husband and eldest son, Donough. n.d. [1897], MS 45,527/1.

Source: National Library of Ireland. Used with Permission.

It is through the exploits of younger sons, eldest sons before they inherited, and social climbers who bought a big house that this class’s relationship with the empire can be most closely analysed. Margot Finn and Kate Smith have explored this relationship for Britain observing that 229 landed estates were purchased by East India Company employees in counties surrounding London in the period 1700–1850.³³ How new landowning men, and men who never owned estates performed their masculinity, especially within an Irish context of declining landlord fortunes is an area to be explored.

Women who were not wives

Adult daughters did not have the same career opportunities or freedom of movement as their brothers. Their best career move was undoubtedly to marry. Women could rarely gain independence until they married, and then only if they had a companionate marriage which allowed them to live more equally with their husband than the law at the time provided for. Married women took precedence over unmarried sisters, who could rarely exert real power within their family. Nonetheless, in wider society, they still held the position conferred to them by their wealth and relationship to the male head of the family, and some women carved

out influential careers, or at least independence through leaving the world of the big house or following non-traditional paths as in the case of the Parnell or Gore-Booth sisters.³⁴ Some unmarried women managed to broker positions of some power for themselves within the big house as they stepped in as surrogate wives and household managers to unmarried or widowed brothers. This position was precarious and often temporary as their brothers remarried and children grew up. A certain number of unmarried women also acted as companions to aging parents, something which was not expected of their brothers.

In rare cases, there was no male heir. Normally, the estate was entailed which meant that it went to the next closest male relative. Occasionally, women inherited estates. These heiresses were highly sought-after brides, and it was unlikely that they would remain unmarried. When women inherited, gendered assumptions about financial management and business acumen meant that it was rare for women to have complete control. Instead, a legal system of trusts, where power was retained by a network of male relatives and connections, was more common. It was dependent on both the wider family, and the woman's own character whether she could exert much or any control over the estate. Widows, particularly those caring for a young heir, could command considerable informal power on the estate and within the wider family.

Servant roles

The big house was a female space; it was generally (and desirably) in the ownership of a man, but it was largely populated by women. Male children were sent away to school as early as eight years old, returning only for holidays as they spent time in English public schools, or occasionally Irish boarding schools, before progressing to university, and possibly later European travel, or in the case of younger sons a career. Fathers, depending on their position, might hold various honorary roles which would frequently or occasionally demand their time away from home. Sometimes a wife and her daughters could spend weeks or months at home without any male relative. Below stairs, the gender balance was even more stark. big houses were primarily run on the labour of women. Smaller houses and less wealthy families might have three or four female servants and no male servants. Male servants were more prestigious, more expensive, and came with a greater tax bill. Census records reveal common trends; such as that the more prestigious positions within the house (those servants who would have close contact with the owning family) were more likely to be English-born and Protestant. It was also assumed that French or German-speaking nurses and governesses would prevent children from speaking with the Irish accents of the locality. Irish servants from the locality were generally only found in smaller houses or in the most menial of roles such as that of scullery maid. Mona Hearn has written the most important book on servant life in Ireland.³⁵ In it, she dispelled the myth propelled by memoirs of those who grew up in such houses that servants often spent a working lifetime in the same house.

A minority of career servants did this, but most servants, particularly those in the lower-paid positions were life-stage servants, working to save enough money to marry or establish themselves.

Conclusion

Within the big house, roles were defined by gender, age, and marital status. Young children spent their time in the nursery while teenage girls were apprenticed to their mother as she managed the house and servants, and hosted dinners and events which in turn enhanced the prestige of the family. Her husband represented the family more publicly through his role as a landlord and through honorary positions like Justice of the Peace. All members of the family expected deference from the wider population and were conscious of their elevated position in society. They displayed this position through their dress, their pastimes, and their wider relationships with other members of the elite. For individual family members, of both sexes, within the big house, the most strongly-felt duty was to the upholding, and advancement, of their family’s position into the next generation. Women of this class were not likely to be found among suffrage activists any more than their brothers were to be found within the Irish Republican movement. Exceptions existed, of course, but class and family solidarity, rather than gender, was their defining identity. Many houses, like Bowen’s Court, have now disappeared from the Irish landscape as a result of revolutionary violence or later neglect and rising maintenance costs, and yet, the impact of these families, and this pattern of landownership has had a long-lasting impact on the Irish landscape. This has been explored more fully by Rachel Murphy in Chapter 1.

Notes

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- 15 <http://www.landedestates.ie/>.
- 16 John Bateman, *The great landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1971); U.H. Hussey de Burgh, *The landowners of Ireland. An alphabetical list of the owners of estates of £500 acres or £500 valuation and upwards in Ireland and the acreage valuation of each county* (Dublin: Hodges, Foster and Figgis, 1878).
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DOING GOOD? IRISH WOMEN, CATHOLICISM AND CHARITY, 1852–1922

Sarah Roddy

Introduction

Charity, philanthropy and voluntary work have long been subjects of interest to gender historians, owing in part to the rich potential of the records of such activity, many of which have a valuable double aspect.¹ Particularly during the nineteenth century and across many parts of the world, charitable and philanthropic work was one of the most viable routes to participation in the public, as distinct from the domestic, sphere for middle- and upper-class women. Indeed, such women were among the charity sector's most prominent supporters and innovators: they funded and fundraised, oversaw and organised relief, and visited and vocalised for the poor.² Meanwhile, the archives of charities and other relief agencies have also left us some of the most complete examples of the experiences of women at the bottom of the economic and social scale. Women, in many societies more susceptible to poverty, formed a large proportion of the beneficiaries of charities' work, whether willingly or unwillingly, and, albeit in heavily mediated form, their voices can often be heard through the records of their often-repeated contact with such organisations. Women were therefore well represented among both purveyors and receivers of charity. Consequently, for archival reasons alone, this is an area of women's history already rich with historiography, in Irish history as elsewhere.³ Nevertheless, as this chapter will argue, the potential for further work remains.

Religion was a motivating force for charitable activity almost everywhere in the period in question. This was certainly the case in Ireland, where, as historians have shown, both the majority Catholic Church and the minority Protestant churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist) were pivotal in initiating, supporting and distributing charity.⁴ This was almost always done along denominational lines, and often involved some intense sectarian competition for the souls and religious affiliation of the recipients of charity. Men and women alike were involved in charitable

work, although, as elsewhere, the roles taken could be divided along gender (as well as class) lines. Wealthy laymen and Catholic priests, for example, often lent their names to committees, vouched for beneficiaries, or took part in fundraising activity, but they were less often personally directing day-to-day charitable work, which became in many respects a “feminised” sphere.⁵ For gender historians, the Irish Catholic case, which is this chapter’s focus, presents peculiar challenges and opportunities, since, as Maria Luddy has well noted, from the mid-nineteenth century lay women were increasingly shut out from one side of the charitable relationship.⁶ In the seventy years covered by this volume, a professional body of female religious – nuns in the vernacular term – arguably increased their influence over Irish Catholic life in general and charitable work in particular, more than any other category of women. Numbers headline this story. Famously, there had been only 122 female religious in Ireland when the first United Kingdom census was taken in 1801, and members of Catholic female religious orders numbered only around 1,500 in the 1851 census. By the 1920s, there were as many as 10,000 nuns across the island’s two jurisdictions.⁷ What is more, many thousands of Irish women served as nuns among the large Irish diaspora around the world and, to a lesser extent in this period, as missionaries in parts of Africa, Asia and South America.⁸ As Luddy has detailed, these women religious shouldered much of the charitable work that tended to be the shared preserve of religious and lay organisations among their Protestant counterparts in Ireland and, indeed, in other parts of the world too.⁹

Thus, nuns are the inevitable focus of this chapter on women and Catholic charity, which will start by mapping their presence in Ireland, the Irish world and beyond, and detailing the range of charitable and voluntary welfare activities with which they involved themselves, as well as touching on the means by which their work was funded. A rich historiography of Irish nuns will be referenced throughout. The second part of the chapter will then discuss some of the key controversial debates of that existing historiography, including the enduring dichotomy between what Caitríona Clear has termed “nice” and “nasty” women’s history in this field,¹⁰ the relationship between Catholic charity and society, the extent to which the experiences of the subjects of Catholic female charity can be captured through the records of convents and attached institutions, and, indeed, enduring issues surrounding access to these records for researchers. Finally, the chapter will briefly suggest some additions to an agenda for future research in the area and provide a list of some useful resources.

Mapping Irish nuns and their charitable work

By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were more than 350 female religious houses in Ireland; at a crude calculation this amounts to one for every 11,000 persons then in the country.¹¹ But, as Caitríona Clear has well noted, these houses and their growing numbers of occupants were somewhat unevenly distributed across the island. The Catholic ecclesiastical provinces of Cashel and Dublin – roughly equivalent to the civil provinces of Munster in the south and Leinster

in the east – had the lion’s share of the 91 female religious houses that had been opened by 1850, and even as a vast programme of expansion was set in train across the island after that date, they retained this advantage. Slightly more than two-thirds of all of Ireland’s convents were still in the southern and eastern provinces by 1900. This meant that the ratio of nuns to lay Catholics in some, mostly urban, areas – notably Dublin – was slightly lower, and in some, mostly poorer rural, areas slightly higher. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the capital city had a remarkable one convent for every 4,226 lay Catholics.¹² Among these convents were some that housed ‘contemplative’ orders, that is, sisters who confined themselves to purely religious activities such as prayer and production of liturgical goods, although “active” orders who engaged in social welfare work outside the convent were always more than 90 per cent of the total.¹³

The distribution of Irish nuns across the rest of the world at this time is necessarily less clear, in part because the sheer scale and diffusion of their spread across multiple jurisdictions in the second half of the century makes counting difficult, and in part because the definition of “Irish” can be elastic in this context. An Irish-born woman who took vows in a French or English convent might not be included when she arguably ought to be, while, for example, an American-born women recruited to an order with an Irish mother house might, though perhaps should not, be included, particularly if, as was likely, she had Irish heritage. Suellen Hoy has estimated that in the United States, of the roughly 40,000 nuns present in 1900 and 75,000 present in 1915 – itself a remarkable rise in such a short time – around 10 per cent were women who travelled from Ireland having been born there.¹⁴ Yet in her study of New York City’s “Irish Catholic nuns”, Maureen Fitzgerald includes both Irish and Irish American women.¹⁵ Similar identity issues played out across the other chief destinations of Irish emigrants in the nineteenth century, although the absence of hard numbers should not obscure the fact that, by any measure, what Colin Barr has called “the great export market of Irish nuns” was significant from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.¹⁶

Ascertaining the numbers of Irish nuns involved in varieties of missionary work beyond these emigrant destinations presents further challenges. For example, Deirdre Raftery suggests that a total of 20,000 Irish nuns may have been active in teaching orders around the world in the century and half up to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, addressing themselves to both emigrant and what they would have termed “pagan”, that is, non-Christian communities. Raftery details, however, that most went to “diaspora” destinations before the twentieth century.¹⁷ There were certainly some early exceptions: the Irish Loreto sisters founded houses in India and Mauritius in the nineteenth century, in the former case largely confining themselves to education of “the children of the colonial and merchant classes” until the 1940s.¹⁸ Meanwhile, countless individual Irish nuns made their way to missions in parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa through involvement with orders outside Ireland, mainly French houses who valued their English-language skills.¹⁹ Nevertheless, while there were, according to Yvonne McKenna, some 15,000 Irish nuns active in missions outside Ireland by the 1960s, for the period up to the

foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, the balance of Irish women religious outside Ireland was decisively weighted towards those working among 'Irish' communities settled in diaspora destinations.

If some quantitative matters thus remain provisional, qualitative evidence of the work undertaken by all of these nuns is much more plentiful and certain. It is first worth noting who among women religious did the work, however. Even beyond the above-noted distinction between "contemplative" and "active" orders, there were divisions within the active orders. As both Clear and Luddy have explained, not every nun was equal. So-called "lay" sisters and "choir" nuns came from very different backgrounds and were subject to very different expectations and treatment within the convent. Lay sisters were of humble social status and were, in essence, the convent's domestic servants. Choir nuns were often of middle- or upper-middle-class background and were primarily responsible for the public contribution of the orders.²⁰ Choir nuns can therefore properly be seen as akin to the kinds of relatively well-off philanthropic women observed elsewhere in the contemporary world: if middle-class and upper-class women in, say, Britain or America since at least the eighteenth century had found that the main outlet open to them in public life was involvement in charitable activities, such women in Ireland had generally to make an additional step of entering religious life before even that avenue was open to them. This suggests there was something particular about the limitations on women's lives in Ireland.

The nuns' work itself can generally be divided into a small range of categories. As Raftery's body of scholarship has well illustrated, female religious were heavily involved in education of – mainly, though not exclusively, poor – children throughout the world from at least early in the nineteenth century onwards, an urge that she argues must be seen as an integral part of their self-defined spiritual mission.²¹ The same might equally be said of female religious involvement in hospitals, which was especially notable from the 1860s in Ireland and saw about a quarter of Irish convents attached to hospitals by 1900,²² although this medical work was not without controversy.²³ Nursing work was also significant in an Irish missionary context, especially with the founding of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in 1937.²⁴ Work in asylums of different kinds was a third major facet of female religious activity. As well as orphanages, industrial schools supposed to reform juvenile offenders, institutions for so-called "fallen women" such as Magdalen asylums, and halfway houses for women leaving state prisons were among the convent-run 'refuges' into which those deemed "deviant" in some degree by contemporary social norms were sent. Somewhat related to this, nuns also routinely attended to poor inmates in state institutions, including prisons and workhouses. Finally, a very small proportion of female religious orders also made explicit attempts to provide employment and encourage economic development in their localities. The training provided to young people in industrial schools and the laundry work women in some asylums were expected to undertake are more sinister manifestations of this tendency; but encouragement of lace-making by Presentation sisters in Youghal and Carmelites in Kenmare, the Mercy Sisters' efforts at starting a weaving factory in Skibbereen,

and, most famously, the Sisters of Charity-run Foxford woollen mills in Co. Mayo also stand as female religious interventions in this area.²⁵ What the vast bulk of all of these types of work – education, health, asylums and industry – had in common was, for the most part, a focus on the poor. Largely done in the name of philanthropy and charity and outside the state apparatus, even if often *in* explicit support of the state and *with* the explicit support of the state, this work constituted, in effect, a shadow welfare state in formation.²⁶

Yet if Maureen Fitzgerald has noted what she playfully calls ‘the immaculate conception of the welfare state’ in the US, by which she means the neglect by historians of nuns’ significant roles in building up what became integral welfare services in that country,²⁷ the opposite may be true in the Irish case. Much is known about the dynamism of female religious in setting up these services and institutions, thanks to the work of many aforementioned historians. However, there could, arguably, be more concentration not only on the historic factors that led the British and then the Irish states to outsource, almost by default, this work to nuns, but also on the relationship between lay Catholics and women religious. This should include, of course, the ongoing effort to rescue the voices of the subjects of nuns’ charitable work from the archive, of which more below. But it should also include a renewed focus on the relationship of better-off lay Catholics to the women religious who educated their children (and indeed even trained all lay Catholic teachers), who nursed them in hospitals, and who hid “deviant” members of society from their view in various residential “refuges”. One way to do this is to look again at how the extensive charitable and welfare work of women religious was funded.

Running a diffuse network of schools, hospitals and asylums dealing with tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people, was, after all, an expensive operation. Some teaching orders were able to charge school fees to better-off families but given the overwhelming focus on work among the poor, most of the nuns’ work was unpaid, voluntary, and nominally gratis as far as the beneficiaries were concerned, even if, of course, many inmates of institutions performed unpaid labour that must have more than covered their keep. The British administration in Ireland did offer some funding, including nominal salary payments to nuns engaged in workhouse nursing,²⁸ and grants in respect of court-ordered child inmates in reformatories, but, as Jacinta Prunty has argued in relation to the institutions run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, this was often deemed insufficient to the overall financial needs of the operation.²⁹ As a result, almost all female religious orders sought private donations to support their work. Such donations came, as was usual in the charity sector in other parts of the world in this period, both in large amounts from assiduously courted high-net-worth individuals, and from a profusion of more anonymous small-sum donors. In some ways, choir nuns themselves were among the large donors, their often considerable dowries being an important source of finance that the convent could call upon to help fund capital expenditure.³⁰ The support of a local Catholic merchant and professional class was, however, centrally important to the foundation and subsequent support of particular houses. As Clear notes, the uneven geography of convents, concentrated in urban areas and more prosperous

farming regions, directly reflected this dependence.³¹ This same class were also the main clients of those asylums that demanded their inmates work unpaid as laundresses. Meanwhile, records of efforts by religious orders to promote fundraising events and initiatives such as bazaars, prize draws, and collections, suggest a wider net was also often cast for donors from lower down the social scale. From all of these interactions, documented in convent archives and elsewhere, sometimes in considerable detail, might be gleaned an important understanding of the place of female religious orders in wider society. Not least, the fact that convents had usually to employ male religious or lay men to do parts of the fundraising work,³² is indicative of the gender dynamics that continued to govern their lives even as many of them were among the more powerful women in the country. Permitted to manage large institutional budgets in private, they were nonetheless not always allowed to solicit publicly and in person for funds.

Debates and controversies

While the above has endeavoured to be a neutral recounting for the newcomer of the broad nature of philanthropic activity by Irish female religious in the period up to 1922, the field has in reality not been without controversies. What the pioneering historian Caitríona Clear identified some years ago as a division between “nice” and “nasty” women’s history can be observed in debates on the representation of nuns in Irish women’s history, and the motivations for nuns’ charitable endeavours, especially their involvement in Magdalen asylums and other institutions dealing with ‘deviant’ women, looms large in the debate. The publication of two very different books in the twenty-first century brought some of these conflicting interpretations to light. Frances Finnegan’s 2001 book *Do penance or perish*, based on analysis of the records of four Magdalen asylums run by the Good Shepherd sisters in Ireland, was the first of these.³³ While Luddy and others rightly noted Finnegan’s sometimes slipshod treatment of evidence, and critiqued her explicit aim to dispense with objectivity in her arguments and characterise the nuns as, in Luddy’s word, “baddies”,³⁴ Clear found much to admire in the book’s determination not to view nuns simply as “co-victims” of a patriarchal society alongside the women they “rescued”.³⁵ While both sets of women, “rescuer” and “rescued”, were obviously subject to gendered societal expectations and their lives shaped and limited by them, the differentials in how class intersected with their oppression were marked, with consequent impact on the degree of agency that they were able to exercise. This is a problem to which historians are increasingly alive, recognising that binary thinking on both sets of women is unhelpful. Painting nuns as either unalloyed villains and oppressors of other women, or as formidable women finding ways to contribute to public life, often in the face of increasing male clerical control, does not allow for much situational nuance. Equally, painting female subjects of religious “rescue” either as unalloyed victims or as astute women often able to use the services offered “for their own ends”,³⁶ as a crude reading of older debates would suggest, is also not very satisfactory. These competing characterisations are giving way to a messier, but

more accurate middle ground that recognises that totalising narratives cannot and should not be made on the basis of particular cases, and that, in reality, the “nice” and the “nasty” aspects of this history often went hand in hand.

Still less satisfactory for most social and gender historians is a reading of nuns’ motivation for philanthropic work that privileges the spiritual and religious explanations offered by the sisters themselves for their actions, as a second, more recent book arguably offers. Jacinta Prunty’s comprehensive, 600-page history of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and their several asylums and industrial schools in Dublin is right to add the corrective that religious faith clearly was a powerful – perhaps the main – motivating force in nuns’ active working lives, and that it therefore suffused the language of the documents and records that they have left behind.³⁷ Women described as “fallen” into “immoral” behaviour, as “wayward lambs” in need of rescue and expressing of “penitence” was language that would, as Prunty intimates, be familiar from any similar institution of the era in any part of the Christian world. But the nuns and their institutions also existed and operated as crucial social and economic actors within a wider society and economy, and this ought not to be neglected or glossed over. For example, the language above was often used in efforts to persuade the public to contribute to the support of Magdalen and other such institutions, which, Prunty suggests, could be a hard sell. Many in the public, she argues, saw Magdalen women as “the least deserving of all charity cases”.³⁸ On what basis this is argued is not clear. It may represent the author taking the routine poor-mouthing that is characteristic of all fundraisers at face value; certainly, Prunty’s book has been criticised in some quarters for over-identifying with her fellow nuns.³⁹ In any case, it certainly misses an opportunity to probe the vexed issue of the relationship between lay society and such religious charitable institutions in any kind of nuanced way. Prunty paints the Good Shepherd Sisters’ efforts to raise money to run their Magdalen asylums as an effort to “change attitudes” among the public, but it is surely worth asking: *why* were “fallen women” supposedly less popular as a cause with lay donors and what had shaped those attitudes to begin with? A more complex interplay between church and society was surely at work here.⁴⁰

Indeed, in a wider sense, the degree of willingness with which financial support was given and the extent of knowledge on the part of donors of what precisely it was given for, as well as other matters discussed in the fundraising transactions between nuns and their donating public, have great explanatory potential, and form part of my own current book project on the financial relationship between the Catholic Church and the laity.⁴¹ Most obviously, these matters could help researchers to address what has become a rather controversial aspect of the histories of Catholic philanthropic institutions: was “everyone” or “society as a whole” responsible for the failings of care and occasionally outright abuse that sometimes took place in them? This was an explanation both implicit and explicit in recent state-commissioned investigations into the conduct of Magdalen asylums and mother and baby homes in the rather different context of twentieth-century Ireland.⁴² But what is for most historians a valid historical point about needing to contextualise such institutions within the times and the societies in which they operated has been

seized upon by some commentators as a way to deflect warranted criticism from the religious orders and indeed from the state. In this light, more fine-grained research on the charitable relationship between “society” and the institutions, for both the period before 1922 and after it, would be helpful for our understanding of nuns, “rescued” women, the institutions in which they all lived and the state and society in which the institutions were located. This is all to say that, for the researcher interested in the history of female charity in Ireland, there remain some fraught and politically relevant issues of which due note needs to be taken.

The voices of the wider Irish public – supportive or unsupportive as they may have been – have perhaps been relatively silent in histories to date owing to an obvious point about the archives of female religious orders and their purpose. They were, ultimately, kept by the nuns primarily as records of their particular order’s and members’ history and activity, with the usually informative but not necessarily detailed “annals” taking pride of place for most congregations. While Luddy, in a valuable piece on the shape of convent archives, has rightly indicated their potential for wider scholarly use, suggesting that they hold ‘the history not only of religious congregations but also of Irish society itself’,⁴³ there are obvious limitations on this. Certainly, if donor voices and perspectives are peripheral to the convent archive’s main purpose, then the voices of the “beneficiaries” of its charity, even in the records of the institutions they ran, are at least as marginalised. This is not an uncommon problem for historians of charity and philanthropy in general, and while some scholars of Irish history have found rare caches of documents that allow recipients of charity to speak unmediated through the historical record,⁴⁴ more often the women resident in institutions, whether run by the state or the church, speak only, if at all, when spoken to over disciplinary matters.⁴⁵ As seems apparent in Finnegan’s history of Good Shepherd asylums, women’s demeanour and background might be noted in the nuns’ registers on their arrival, but thereafter, the inmates’ individuality seemed to come through only in instances of escape or expulsion for “bad conduct”.⁴⁶ Even then, any punishment, let alone the response of the punished, was generally not recorded.⁴⁷ For Luddy, meanwhile, the registers showing the same women entering and leaving the institutions multiple times tell a story of an, albeit contingent, exercising of will in the management of their own precarious lives.⁴⁸ But, in the end, neither the everyday moments of resistance and non-cooperation, nor the apparently savvy use of the refuges by some women tell the complete story.

To the extent that such a complete story is possible, finally, it must be noted that historians and other researchers will struggle to tell it in the continued absence of full access to all relevant archives. Catholic religious orders’ archives are, strictly speaking, private repositories, to which no researcher, regardless of their bona fides, has an automatic right of access. Convent archivists, often voluntary, and usually part-time, are right to note that facilitating research in a context of underfunding, sometimes inadequate storage and reading room set-ups and lack of trained staff can be fiendishly difficult even when the will towards openness is there. Equally, as the former head of special projects at the National Archives of Ireland has noted,

granting access to some researchers and not others, as sometimes occurs in Catholic repositories, creates an imbalance in the historical record.⁴⁹ Rapprochement between researchers and archivists with an equal interest in preserving and interpreting the entwined histories of convents, their various institutions, the state and society at large is an ongoing and welcome process. Proposals to map the presence of Irish women religious and their archives throughout the English-speaking world, moreover, will also add to researchers' ability to place Irish women religious and their philanthropic and welfare work onto a larger canvas.⁵⁰

A brief agenda for further research

In light of the last paragraph, suggesting an agenda for further research on the history of female charity in Ireland, especially that vast amount of it managed and carried out by Catholic nuns, might seem foolish, more so than is even the normally foolish endeavour of historiographical agenda-setting. Nonetheless, for the new researcher interested in gender in Ireland, it is still the case that the imprint left by convents and their myriad charitable enterprises in the nineteenth century is an enduring one, and one whose history has to some extent been mapped but by no means yet fully navigated. What follows by way of conclusion, therefore, is a brief list of topics that may merit more research, and which, while they would benefit hugely from renewed and new research in the archives of female religious orders, could nonetheless be addressed, at least in part, through other avenues too.

The first point to emphasise is that the Catholic Church, monolithic and hegemonic thought it may have seemed in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, was in reality a diffuse set of institutions: every order and every convent was very different and there is therefore potential, within the limits of the number of such entities present in Ireland and the Irish world in the period, for no end to the specific studies of individual orders, convents and institutions that may be required. The challenge for researchers may be to find ways to research them without or with perhaps only limited resort to their own archives. As Gillian O'Brien and Jessie Castle's ongoing work on the architecture of Irish convents attests, however, the still extant spaces and particular materialities of convent buildings themselves have much of value to impart, whether supplemented by traditional archival records or not.⁵¹ How convents and their allied institutions were located and laid out, how women housed within them were policed by these spaces and so on, are all, potentially, ripe for further research. Gender historians interested in the philanthropic relations between fundraisers/overseers, donors and recipients, no less than architecture historians or archaeologists, can avail of such evidence in their analyses. Indeed, time is of the essence on this front, since many such buildings are disappearing from the Irish landscape through either neglect or development.

There is also more potential in exploring, specifically, how gender factored into the discharge of charitable and welfare work in the period in question. In a new context of a burgeoning interest in feminist readings within the ascendant field of humanitarian history,⁵² the Irish convent and its attached philanthropic institutions

present an intriguing set of case studies. One issue that might bear further investigation is the relationship between female and male religious, which could in part be gleaned through what are often more readily accessible Catholic diocesan archives. Mary Peckham Magray's depiction of nuns as powerful women who built much of the Catholic Church's significant infrastructure only to lose autonomy to male clerics in the process across the nineteenth century presents an interesting base from which to work,⁵³ not least since that dilution of female religious power came in parallel to exponential growth in female vocations and welfare work. The under-studied class and power relations among women within female orders in relation to the active work the orders carried out might also bear new analysis if the sources to do so can be accessed. The private papers of bourgeois Ireland, including solicitors' files, wills, family papers, and so on, can sometimes provide a window into how the Catholic Church and nuns in particular reached out to and interacted with lay society and might aid such a study. Finally, the voices and experiences of those, mainly women, who were the subjects of Catholic nuns' philanthropic activity could and should be heard much more loudly through the historical record. This, as alluded to above, is a problem for historians which is much complicated by uneven source survival and quality as well as archival access issues. For periods later than that covered by this volume, oral histories are increasingly plugging the gap, but for the nineteenth century, perhaps rigorous application of sophisticated theories and methods to imperfect sources full of silences is all that can be done; this is a challenge to which gender historians in Ireland have long been rising.⁵⁴

Notes

- 1 A note on terminology: the borders between charity, philanthropy and voluntary work are somewhat fuzzy and the terms have often been used interchangeably. Definitions of philanthropy, especially, have tended to change over time. Robert H. Bremner, *Giving: charity and philanthropy in history* (London: Transaction, 1994), 2. In this chapter, the focus will be firmly on predominantly privately funded and voluntarily carried out work targeted at aiding the poor in some manner, but it is acknowledged that much of this voluntary charity was effectively carried out as a proxy for state welfare.
- 2 Sarah Roddy, Julie-Marie Strange and Bertrand Taithe, *The charity market and humanitarianism in Britain, 1870–1912* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
- 3 Maria Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican women in Dublin: philanthropy, politics and education in the early twentieth century* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2005); FK. Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Shurlee Swain, "Negotiating poverty: women and charity in nineteenth-century Melbourne," *Women's History Review* 16, no. 1 (2007), 99–112; Eve Colpus, *Female philanthropy in the interwar world between self and other* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Xia Shi, *At home in the world: women and charity in Late Qing and early republican China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
- 4 The religious profile suggested by the 1861 census was that 78 per cent of the population was Catholic, 12 per cent was Anglican, 9 per cent was Presbyterian and smaller Protestant sects made up the balance. Sean Connolly, *Religion and society in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1985), 3.
- 5 Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England*, 233.

- 6 Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 21.
- 7 Mary Cullen, "Women, emancipation and politics, 1860–1984," in J.R. Hill, ed., *A new history of Ireland VII: Ireland, 1921–84* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 830. These numbers are indicative only since the censuses, especially the first cited, were likely incomplete.
- 8 Sarah Roddy, "Missionary empires and the worlds they made," in Eugenio Biagini and Mary E. Daly, eds., *The Cambridge social history of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 534–50.
- 9 Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland*, *passim*.
- 10 Caitriona Clear, "Review of Frances Finnegan, *Do penance or perish*," *Women's History Review*, 30 (2001), 847–9.
- 11 Luddy notes 368 convents; the population of Ireland according to the 1901 census was c.4.3 million. Maria Luddy, "Convent archives as sources for Irish history," in Rosemary Raughter, ed., *Religious women and their history: breaking the silence* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 99.
- 12 Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), 36–9.
- 13 Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 110–11.
- 14 Suellen Hoy, "The journey out: the recruitment and emigration of Irish religious women to the United States, 1812–1914," *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 4 (1995), 88.
- 15 Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of compassion: Irish. Catholic nuns and the origins of New York's welfare system, 1830–1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 3.
- 16 Colin Barr, *Ireland's empire The Roman Catholic Church in the English-speaking world, 1829–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 56.
- 17 Deirdre Raftery, "'Je suis d'aucune nation': the recruitment and identity of Irish women religious in the international mission field, c.1840–1940," *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 4 (2013), 513–30.
- 18 Joe Humphreys, *God's entrepreneurs: how Irish missionaries tried to change the world* (Dublin: New Island, 2010), 159.
- 19 Raftery, "The recruitment and identity of Irish women religious," 517.
- 20 Luddy, "Convent archives as sources for Irish history," 104–5; Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 91–9.
- 21 Deirdre Raftery, "The 'mission' of nuns in female education in Ireland, c.1850–1950," *Paedagogica Historica* 48, no. 2 (2012), 299–313.
- 22 Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 107; Margaret Preston, "The good nurse: women philanthropists and the evolution of nursing in nineteenth-century Dublin," *New Hibernia Review* 2, no. 1 (1998), 91–110.
- 23 Ciara Breathnach, "... it would be preposterous to bring a Protestant here': religion, provincial politics and district nurses in Ireland, 1890–1904," in Donncha Sean Lucey and Virginia Crossman, eds., *Healthcare in Ireland and Britain 1850–1970: voluntary, regional and comparative perspectives* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2014), 161–80.
- 24 Ailish Veale, "International and modern ideals in Irish female medical missionary activity, 1937–1962," *Women's History Review* 25, no. 4 (2016), 602–18.
- 25 Janice Helland, "Caprices of fashion': handmade lace in Ireland, 1883–1907," *Textile History* 39, no. 2 (2008), 210; Weaving Industry Ledger (1889), Archive of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy Immaculate Conception, Skibbereen, Co. Cork, Mercy Congregational Archives, C87/4/3; Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 52–3.
- 26 See Breathnach and McCormick's contribution to this volume.
- 27 Fitzgerald, *Habits of compassion*, 193–239.
- 28 Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 49.
- 29 Jacinta Prunty, *The monasteries, Magdalen asylums and reformatory schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland 1853–1973* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017), 198–200.

- 30 This was usually done through investment of the dowry money and drawing down of dividends. See, for example, investment of sums ranging from £200 to £4,000 in railway and other stocks by the Loreto Navan house in the early 1920s. “Money invested” ledger, Loreto Central and Irish Province Archives, NAV/FIN/2/71.
- 31 Clear, *Nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland*, 42.
- 32 Prunty, *Our Lady of Charity in Ireland*, 280–1.
- 33 Frances Finnegan, *Do penance or perish: Magdalen asylums in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 34 Maria Luddy, “Review of Frances Finnegan, *Do penance or perish*,” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005), 557; Leanne McCormick, “Sinister sisters? The portrayal of Ireland’s Magdalen asylums in popular culture,” *Cultural and Social History* 2, no. 3 (2005), 375; Moira Maguire, “Review of Frances Finnegan, *Do penance or perish*,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 1 (2005), 268–70.
- 35 Clear, “Review of Frances Finnegan,” 847–9.
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- 37 Prunty, *Our Lady of Charity in Ireland*, 45.
- 38 Prunty, *Our Lady of Charity in Ireland*, 128.
- 39 Catriona Crowe, “Valuable addition to history of Magdalene laundries uses ‘private’ records,” *Irish Times*, September 2, 2017.
- 40 See Leanne McCormick’s contribution to this volume.
- 41 See Patrick Doyle and Sarah Roddy, “Money, death and agency in Catholic Ireland, 1850–1921,” *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 3 (2021), 799–818 for an initial output from this project.
- 42 *Final report of the Inter-departmental committee set up to establish the facts of state involvement with the Magdalen laundries* [McAleese report] (Dublin, 2013) <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013> (Accessed February 10, 2021); *Final report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes* (Dublin, 2020) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/> (Accessed February 10, 2021).
- 43 Luddy, “Convent archives as sources for Irish history,” 106.
- 44 Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Letters of the Catholic poor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Virginia Crossman, “Writing for relief in late nineteenth-century Dublin: personal applications to the Mansion House Fund in 1880,” *Cultural and Social History* 14, no. 5 (2017), 583–98.
- 45 Elaine Farrell, “‘Having an immoral conversation’ and other prison offences: the punishment of convict women,” in Christina Brophy and Cara Delay, eds., *Women, reform and resistance in Ireland, 1850–1950* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 101–18.
- 46 Finnegan, *Do penance or perish*, 65, 71.
- 47 Finnegan, *Do penance or perish*, 45.
- 48 Luddy, “Abandoned women and bad characters,” 500.
- 49 Crowe, *Ibid.* See also James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen laundries and the nation’s architecture of containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).
- 50 See a summary of the project “Irish Religious Women in the Anglophone World, 1840–1950” at <https://cushwa.nd.edu/news/luminiello-joins-cushwa-center/> (Accessed February 23, 2021).
- 51 Jessie Castle and Gillian O’Brien, “‘I am building a house’: Nano Nagle’s Georgian convents,” *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* 19 (2017), 54–75.
- 52 Dolores Martin-Moruno, Brenda Lynn Edgar and Marie Leyder, “Feminist perspectives on the history of humanitarian relief (1870–1945),” *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 36, no. 1 (2020), 2–18.
- 53 Mary Peckham Magray, *The transforming power of the nuns: women, religion, and cultural change in Ireland, 1750–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

- 54 Key online resources for this chapter include <https://churcharchives.ie>, a directory of religious archives in Ireland including female religious orders and diocesan archives which contain much material related to nuns. Includes contact details for archivists and useful brief descriptions of collections; <http://www.iar.ie> Irish Archives Resource, which includes some catalogues for the Loreto Central and Irish Provinces, and some local council archives with collections for lay individuals, businesses and institutions that frequently contain correspondence from religious figures.

5

GENDER AND THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN POST-FAMINE IRELAND

Nicholas M. Wolf

Introduction

Gendered discourse and linguistic practices marked the serious decline in both monolingual and bilingual Irish speaking in Ireland in the years between the Great Famine and the onset of World War I, a development that was accompanied by the appearance of the first serious organizations dedicated to reversing this shift (most importantly, the Gaelic League, founded 1893).¹ And yet the role of gender in Ireland's dynamic linguistic situation was not always overtly recognized at the time, nor has the topic been a major concern of modern scholarly inquiry, with a few notable exceptions. Few commentators within the language-revival movement that accompanied the Gaelic League's appearance, for example, were as explicit about the gendered roles of Irish language revival as the novelist Mary Butler (1873–1920), who suggested in her publication *Gaelic League Pamphlet No. 6* (ca. 1900) that women of the landowning classes had contributed disproportionately to the decline of Irish:

The women of the family rarely learned Irish. It was not considered necessary for them to do so, as they went less among the people than the men did. The women folk up at the 'Big House' seldom darkened the door of a cottage or brightened the face of its occupant. There is many a long-neglected duty waiting to be done by the ladies of the manor as well as learning their own language.

With crucial childhood years conducted under the care of women, the 'autocrat' of the home according to Butler, the failure of mothers to impart Irish during formative language years had prevented children from acquiring the language.² Although Butler's explicit focus on gender was written from a conservative-nationalist

perspective concerned above all with the failure of middle- and upper-class Irish to espouse the language revival, it is difficult not to conclude given her connection between language survival and mother-child relations that revivalists viewed women of all social classes as essential participants in imparting Irish to new generations. This was all the more evident given the emphasis nationalists placed on primary schools – a site distinguished by its female teachers – as the means of reversing language shift once Independence had been achieved.³

The respective roles of men and women, and, more importantly, the tendency in current historical narratives to occlude the role of women (especially their contributions to the rebirth of Irish-language writing), is thus a vital consideration when studying the history of the Irish language if we are to assess claims like those of Butler critically. There are two useful areas of concern when considering the post-Famine period. First, there is the question of differences in the extent and timing of shift to monolingual English speaking between female and male native speakers of Irish, an issue especially relevant given the importance accorded to oral culture in Irish culture of the period. Modern sociolinguists regularly address the relationship between gender and linguistic behaviour, albeit with mixed intensity and sometimes problematic theoretical underpinnings.⁴ A detailed study of linguistic behavior is unfortunately not possible for historical communities such as Ireland of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, given that it cannot be subjected to modern sociolinguistic observation (i.e., studies using recordings, survey, and linguistic observation to record gender differences in speech). However, a limited exploration is possible using demographic data recorded in the country's censuses, as will be attempted here.⁵ Second, there is the question of differences between men and women in their participation in the language-revival movement, as well as the gendering of that participation against the backdrop of anti-colonial struggle and nationalist discourse. In particular, it is essential to consider the tendency by historical contemporaries to mask the contributions of women – especially as authors – and the failure by modern scholars to challenge that erasure despite the importance of literary production to the Gaelic Revival. The growing attention to recovering those hidden literary histories along with the availability of new digitized corpora of Irish-language writings, most notably the Royal Irish Academy's *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600–1926* (<https://corpas.ria.ie>), help us to rewrite previously accepted accounts of this period.

Gender and Language Shift

Differences in rates of the shift to English based on gender is not a topic often taken up by histories of Irish language shift.⁶ Previous close investigations of the census data, notably Garret FitzGerald's look at language depletion by age-cohort language for the 1851 to 1911 period, for example, do not raise the question of gender difference.⁷ This omission has sometimes been the case for localized investigations as well, such as the study of Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, conducted by Máire Ní Chiosáin using the 1901 and 1911 census returns, though exceptions

such as Bríghid Ní Mhoráin's consideration of gender differences in the nineteenth-century census data for the Iveragh Peninsula, Co. Kerry, are available.⁸ Perhaps the most tantalizing glimpses of how gender might have impacted perceptions of speaking Irish come from microhistories and cultural-analysis based approaches, among them Angela Bourke's history of the infamous domestic murder that took place in rural County Tipperary in 1895. Tracing the marital frictions that played a role in the eventual killing of Bridget Cleary by her husband, Bourke emphasizes the urbane and Anglicized aspirations of Cleary that would have given her a reputation as an unruly woman subject to censure by her more traditional, Irish-speaking husband.⁹ This conclusion regarding the interrelatedness of emerging turn-of-the-century concept of the modern woman and a shift to English speaking, suggesting that young women may have been more active trajectories for shift, is plausible – not least because it accords with the observations of Butler, who sought to disrupt this linkage and while resisting these new forms of femininity.

The predominant source that historians must rely on to recover the gendered demographic history of Irish speakers in the post-Famine era are the decennial censuses conducted by the commissioners of the Irish census in conjunction with the British government. Starting in 1851, the census included a question on ability to speak Irish either exclusively or bilingually with English. Historians agree that these censuses were undercounts because of the stigma attached to speaking Irish and the placement of instructions for the language question in an easily overlooked footnote for the 1851, 1861, and 1871 counts. There is agreement, however, on the overall scope of language shift depicted in the counts. In 1851 the census reported 1.5 million speakers of Irish, at least 23 per cent of a population of 6.5 million; in 1911 enumerators found 582,000 Irish speakers, or at least 13 per cent of a population of 4.4 million. The size of the Irish-speaking community, whether considered as a proportion of the overall country or in absolute numbers, had dropped significantly by – at a minimum – a million people against a backdrop of approximately one million famine-related deaths and a subsequent outmigration of a million or more people.¹⁰

While the overall number of Irish speakers returned by the census must be treated as inaccurate, the gender and age breakdown of the Irish-speaking population described in the summary tables – the only surviving record from the censuses, given the destruction of the original returns – are more reliable. There is no indication, for example, that the nineteenth-century enumerations exhibited collection bias in recording the gender of Irish speakers, as no evidence uncovered so far suggests that census-takers produced different undercounts for Irish-speaking women and men. Focusing on the counts of Irish speakers marked as male versus those recorded as female thus gives us an opportunity to test the question of different rates among men and women in their shift to English.

At first glance, the census returns do not indicate the presence of a strong gender difference marked by women leading a shift, at least from a social rather than cultural perspective. The counts for the 1851–91 period does not consistently indicate a gap between the linguistic circumstances of men and women, and on the

occasions when they do, it is often younger men who reported a weakening in their knowledge of Irish. As Table 5.1 shows, using an analysis of the proportion of the Irish-speaking population under the age of twenty in two-decade intervals, the Irish-speaking population (both monoglots and bilinguals) was becoming increasingly lopsided in favour of older cohorts in roughly equal terms among men and women (compare columns 5 and 8). In the country as a whole, the proportion of the population of all linguistic ability under the age of twenty remained fairly constant at between 40 and 50 per cent. By contrast, the proportion of the Irish-speaking population under age 20 contracted, especially in the provinces of Munster and Connacht. But that age imbalance was roughly equal for men and women, not unlike the broader picture of equal numbers of male and female emigration in post-Famine Ireland. Where it was imbalanced, it was males – especially in Leinster where significant shift had been underway centuries earlier – who were more likely to be missing from the younger cohorts owing to emigration or movement to urban areas, driving down their proportion of the Irish-speaking population.

The alignment of male and female degrees of underrepresentation in the under-20 age cohort persists even when small geographical units are considered. Examining data from the province of Munster, for example, one of two regions (along with Connacht) that experienced the most serious language shift in the post-Famine period, shows that the one- and two-percentage-point differences

TABLE 5.1 Proportion of Irish-Speakers under age 20 by Gender

<i>Year</i>	<i>Province</i>	<i>Proportion under Age 20, Males, Irish Speakers (%)</i>	<i>Proportion under Age 20, Males, General Population (%)</i>	<i>Difference, Males (%)</i>	<i>Proportion under Age 20, Females, Irish Speakers (%)</i>	<i>Proportion under Age 20, Females, General Population (%)</i>	<i>Difference, Females (%)</i>
1851	Munster	37	51	14	33	47	14
1851	Connacht	43	53	10	39	50	11
1851	Ulster	34	50	16	34	46	12
1851	Leinster	10	48	38	10	44	34
1871	Munster	20	47	27	19	45	26
1871	Connacht	31	50	19	29	49	20
1871	Ulster	30	48	18	29	44	15
1871	Leinster	3	43	40	3	40	37
1891	Munster	16	47	31	14	45	31
1891	Connacht	23	49	26	26	48	22
1891	Ulster	27	45	18	26	41	15
1891	Leinster	6	42	36	4	40	36

Source: L. A. Clarkson, et al., *Database of Irish Historical Statistics: Age, 1821–1911* (Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-3574-1>; L. A. Clarkson, et al., *Database of Irish Historical Statistics: Language, 1851–1911* (Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive, 1997), <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-3573-1>.

indicated in Table 5.1 did not mask wide variations at the baronial level. Plotting the gap between male and female underrepresentation for the 1851, 1871, and 1891 census years, using positive values to indicate greater male underrepresentation and negative to indicate female underrepresentation (zero indicates no difference), a near-normal curve is revealed with a mean of 0.011 (see Figure 5.1). In other words, male and female differences in underrepresentation in the under-20 age cohorts exhibited an average difference at the smaller baronial geographical level of only 1.1 per cent; moreover, 73 per cent of baronial figures fell into one standard deviation of this average, leaving a small set of outliers – often barony-bounded cities and baronies where advanced language shift had already taken place – where the gender gap was large. In more of these cases, it was male cohorts who were evidently becoming English monoglots at faster rates.



FIGURE 5.1 Histogram representing difference between male and female Irish Speakers. Source: *Census of Ireland for the Year 1851: Part IV* [2053], H.C. 1856, xxix, 1; *Census of Ireland for the Year 1851: Part VI* [2134], H.C. 1856, xxxi, 1; *Census of Ireland for the Year 1871: Part I, Vol. I* [C. 662], H.C. 1872, lxvii, 1; *Census of Ireland, 1871: Part I, Vol. II* [C.876], H.C. 1873, lxxii, pt. ii, 477; *Census of Ireland, 1871: Part I, Vol. III* [C. 964], H.C. 1874, lxxii, pt. i, 1; *Census of Ireland, 1871. Part I, Vol. IV* [C. 1106], H.C. 1874, lxxiv, pt. ii, 1; *Census of Ireland for the Year 1891: Part I, Vol. I* [C. 6515], H.C. 1890–91, xcv, 1; *Census of Ireland, 1891: Part I, Vol. II* [C. 6567], H.C. 1892, xci, 1; *Census of Ireland, 1891: Part I, Vol. III* [C. 964], H.C. 1892, xcii, 1; *Census of Ireland, 1891: Part I, Vol. IV* [C. 6685], H.C. 1892, xciii, 1.

None of these findings, of course, contradicts the possibility that women were earlier adopters of a shift to English than their male counterparts; the census measured the claimed ability of an individual in one or both languages, not the actual usage of language. Women may very well have been equally or even overrepresented in the ranks of Irish speakers, but at the forefront of choosing to use English. Still, it should be cautioned that the census data may turn out to be evidence of language attitudes and not just language ability, given that one's proclivity to use Irish may have been similar to one's willingness to convey knowledge of it to a census-taker. In that scenario, young men would have been slightly ahead of women in making the shift, especially in regions where shift was in full force.

Female Irish-Language Writers and the Gaelic Revival

The parameters of the shift from Irish to English is one important facet of the history of the Irish language in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growing movement to halt this change and even reverse it, the language-revival movement, is another. Although various Gaelic societies dedicated to publishing Irish-language prose and poetry – ostensibly with a view to preserving the language, but in reality, more as a literary artifact – had appeared over the course of the nineteenth century, it was with the founding of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (SPIL; 1876) that the first significant efforts were made to prevent Irish as spoken language from dying out. This society was later superseded by the Gaelic Union (1880) and eventually the Gaelic League, launched with a more overt interest in the vitality of the spoken language and an explicit interest in growing new literary forms in the language.

Three major concerns of the Gaelic Revival provide good entry points for exploring the gender question: the Irish education system, the forging of nationalism and identity, and Irish-language literature. The first has immediate implications for the gendered features of the revival, since women made up a majority (52 per cent by 1905) of the teachers who staffed the network of National Schools funded by a combination of government grants and local support.¹¹ Revivalists and early planners of the independent state targeted the National Schools as the primary vehicle for language revival given their proximity to the formative childhood years. At the same time, the Christian Brothers schools, all-male secondary institutions taught by male teachers, were actually the most active producers of students who sought results fees for passing intermediate-level exams in the Irish language, a system offered by the state starting in 1878.

Although the founding of the SPIL is often identified as a starting point for linguistic revival, it should be noted that teachers themselves were the first to push for changes to the English-only curriculum envisioned by Irish schools in the years before 1876. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), founded in 1868 and one of the more active arenas for women's labor organizing,¹² first discussed in 1869 the merits of taking action to pressure the National Schools commissioners to allow payments to teachers who taught Irish as a special subject. The INTO, joined

by the SPIL, later participated in efforts to include results–fees payments for Irish as a subject in the new secondary–school system launched by the Powis Commission (1868).¹³ These campaigns found success: by 1878 both of these objectives had been realized. Although these initiatives did not make significant inroads in reversing language shift, they provided a blueprint for later efforts by the Gaelic League to pressure the National Schools system to implement a bilingual programme for Irish-speaking districts in 1904 – itself a step in the direction of experiments in Irish-language-enhanced or even Irish-only education in the post-Independence years.

While male teachers had the greater impact on the secondary system results-based scheme via the Christian Brothers schools, female teachers placed an outsize role in the presence (or absence) of Irish in the National Schools. Students of the Christian Brothers schools dominated the candidates presented for passes in the Irish exam, the test whereby fees for Irish instruction were determined for pupils of teachers in the secondary–school system. In 1888, for example, in a typical season for the exam, 151 of 210 passes in the subject came from students of the Christian Brothers schools.¹⁴ A grammar produced by the order, *Graiméar na Gaedhilge leis na Bráithreachaibh Críostamhla* (1901) [*Irish Grammar by the Christian Brothers*] was widely used as a textbook during the most active years of the language–revival movement and its expansion into the post-Independence school system; a modernized version of this grammar is still in print.¹⁵

Evidence of women’s involvement in revival as educators, meanwhile, can be found in an analysis of the membership of the Gaelic League. The historian Timothy McMahon has found that women, after a slow start in joining League branches in the late nineteenth century, participated in ever-growing numbers after the turn of the century so that in some places they made up a majority of the local membership. Women were more sustained and serious members of the organization, a characteristic that was also said to mark those who served on the on the Gaelic League *coiste gnótha* (executive committee), among them the scholar Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh (1874–1951), the republican Áine Ceannt (1880–1954), and Butler. At the rank-and-file level, the middle class has been found to have been very heavily represented in Gaelic League membership, and within those ranks, schoolteachers made up a significant proportion, again fortifying the link between one of the main professional avenues open to Irish women and language activism. Teacher and author Sinéad Ní Fhlannagáin, later an instructor at the Gaelic League college in Dublin and wife of future Taoiseach Éamon de Valera, is often cited as an example of such a path to language advocacy.¹⁶

Not often discussed, but salient in the context of men and women’s respective participation in the language–revival movement, is the degree to which advocacy for the Irish language itself was gendered. Pronounced change and transformation marked conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity at the turn of the century, manifested in challenges to norms of women’s labor and domesticity, in a focus on athleticism and the body, and contestations of the male dominance of the political sphere through the push for women’s suffrage and parliamentary representation. Anticolonial nationalisms in the various constituents of the British Empire – Ireland

and India among them – also had in common the deployment of discourses defining masculinity so as to combat the perceived effeminization of colonial subjugation. Sikata Banerjee, for example, has identified strong similarities in the writings of the teacher, poet, and Easter 1916 rebel Patrick Pearse (1879–1916) in his advocacy for an Irish nationalism steeped in masculine warrior virtues and the muscular Hindu nationalism envisioned by the monk Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). In both cases, national identity for men was oriented around the strength of the physical body, participation in sport, and anticolonial opposition to effeminacy.¹⁷

The gendering of language revivalism took place more often at the level of discourse rather than practice. Pearse provided some of the most overt connections between masculinity and the Irish language, whose literature and mythology he saw as a means of exploring models for manly virtue (or, as Pearse wrote, ‘beauty, strength, manhood, intellect, and religion’).¹⁸ At times, however, this link between masculinity and Irish speaking was more aspirational than actual. The major vehicle for expression nationalist masculinity, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA; founded 1884), for instance, never developed a sustained appetite for conducting its business in Irish despite its avowed desire to link nationalism with sport and Gaelicism.¹⁹ That omission becomes more pronounced when one turns to the history of the women’s sport of camogie, a contemporary of the GAA-developed, Gaelic-oriented sport of men’s hurling. Far more closely oriented to the Gaelic League, and created by two women active in that organization, Cáit Ní Dhonnchadha (1883–1969) and Máire Ní Chinnéide (1878–1967), the Camogie Association visibly advocated for the use of the Irish language on the pitch and published its rulebook in Irish only.²⁰ Participants thus linked the Irish language with a new sporting, robust, and modern feminism.

Literary production, with its accompanying question of authors’ inclusion in the scholarly canon, is always intertwined with gender ideology. This is no different where the question of the Irish-language revival is concerned. Women writers in the Irish language have in fact been doubly erased from literary history, first through the tendency to emphasize the contributions of the body of English-language writing to world literature, and second through the omission by scholars of Irish female authors in general. And yet the need to recover these authors is vital given the centrality of literary activity to the Gaelic Revival if the history of this period is not to be incompletely understood.

The complexities in recovering the history of women Irish-language authors in the post-Famine years are both historical-cultural and conceptual. As Máirín Nic Eoin has pointed out in her large-scale study of gender ideology in Irish-language writing, the structure of the community of poets who were at the heart of Irish-language composition had solidified in earlier centuries around ideals of a chaste, self-denying, all-masculine worlds borrowed from ecclesiastical models.²¹ The rigid, masculine formality of the medieval and early modern world of Irish poets had dissolved by the nineteenth century, but not sufficiently to break the disproportionate maleness of the heirs to that past, the Irish-language manuscript scribes and composers of prose and poetry (many of them schoolteachers) of the

years leading up to the Great Famine. In this regard, even though examples of women authors in Irish can be found in the manuscripts of the pre-revival period, they are outnumbered by men.²²

But as Nic Eoin and other scholars have noted, part of the problem in recovering women's authorial voice for this time period has been the narrow definition of authorship adopted by scholars. If scribal practice – the copying, trading, and sometimes original composition of Irish-language manuscripts that took place largely in a male-dominated context in the nineteenth century – then authorship defined more broadly to contain adjacent literary genres composed but not written down (most notably, extemporaneous poetry, song form, and the lament, or *caoineadh*) emphatically included female practitioners. Some of these composers, such as the female Cork poet Máire Bhúí Ní Laoghaire (1774–ca.1848), have received modest but notable attention, while others are known mostly by name and glimpses of reputation, such as Máire Ní Éigearthaigh or Máire Ní Leidhín, both of County Cork.²³ In an era when composition of verse, prose, and song in all languages, not only in Irish, moved across porous borders between printed and handwritten texts and oral performance, an adoption of this definition of authorship is essential.²⁴

There is some merit to the argument that this female authorship in Irish was limited in its impact on the later women writers of the Gaelic Revival.²⁵ Whereas the world of nineteenth-century manuscripts and scribal activity had been based primarily around verse and short-form prose (mostly religious), the 1890s and afterward were a period of expansion of the novel and drama in Irish as literary forms. For these genres, there were no notable antecedents on which writers of the Gaelic Revival, men or women, could draw. On the other hand, there was the cultural production of folklore-based forms developed in the Gaelic Revival's creation of the Oireachtas na Gaeilge, an arts competition founded in 1897 by the Gaelic League on the model of the revived national Welsh Eisteddfod founded in 1880. The song and storytelling competitions developed at the annual Oireachtas could certainly draw more directly on nineteenth-century forms, especially the folk collecting conducted by the likes of Douglas Hyde (1860–1949) or Lady Gregory (1852–1932).²⁶ And in other cases, the connection was even more direct. Camogie-founder Ní Dhonnchadha was in fact active in the collecting of oral compositions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, giving her direct access to this literary well.²⁷

As in literary traditions of other languages, the visibility of female Irish-language writers of the revival period suffers from a more mundane problem of scholarly omission. Male authors such as Hyde and Peadar Ó Laoghaire (1839–1920), two pioneers of the new emerging Irish-language writing, have dominated scholarly attention. The completion in recent years by the Royal Irish Academy of the *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600–1926*, however, reveals that there is a mismatch between authors given visibility in the canon of Irish-language revival and the predominance of certain writers at the time. This is clearly the case for periodical literature in Irish, in many ways the most active venue for Irish-language writing at the time. The top seven most-often occurring writers in periodicals in the *Historical Irish Corpus* are presented in Table 5.2. While Ó Laoghaire, along with

TABLE 5.2 Most-Commonly Occurring Authors, Irish-Language Periodicals, 1600–1926

<i>Name</i>	<i>Number of Contributions</i>
Pádraig Ó Séaghdha ('Conan Maol'; 1855–1928)	158
Tadhg Ó Donnchadha ('Torna'; 1874–1949)	125
Peadar Mac Fhionnlaoich ('Cú Uladh'; 1856–1942)	101
Peadar Ó Laoghaire (1839–1920)	60
Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh (1863–99)	51
Seosamh Laoide (1865–1939)	45
Cáit Ní Dhonnchadha (1883–1969)	31

Source: Royal Irish Academy, *Historical Irish Corpus, 1600–1926*, <http://corpas.ria.ie>. Accessed 15 March 2021.

other better-known contributors to the Gaelic League publication *An Claidheamh Soluis* and male Irish-language activists (e.g. Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh) make an appearance, it is notable that the only female, Ní Dhonnchadha, is well-represented in the corpus.

Setting aside Ó Laoghaire and Ó Gramhnaigh, who have been frequently discussed in Anglocentric literary and historical scholarship for years for their contributions to the revival, four of the other five are familiar enough for those focused on Irish-language developments of the turn of the century. Ó Séaghdha, Ó Donnchadha, and Mac Fhionnlaoich, for instance, receive their due in Philip O'Leary's detailed history of the development of Irish-language writing in this period, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921* (1994).²⁸ Laoide's prolific writing is also known. But tellingly, Ní Dhonnchadha does not yet have a biographical entry in Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú's *Beathaisnéis* (now online at <https://ainm.ie>), and although O'Leary mentions her briefly, the longest discussion of her contributions to date is an article by Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh published in 2018.²⁹

Conclusion

A gender-focused analysis of the history of the Irish language in the post-Famine years, a recovery of the contributions of female authors to the development of its literature, and the gendered dimensions of language revival will need continued future study to overcome its neglect by scholars in past decades. Large-scale studies such as those by Máirín Nic Eoin on gender ideology in Irish writing and shorter journal articles on the subject have helped fill the gap,³⁰ but that work will need to be sustained going forward. Preliminary investigations of the census data like the one presented above provide a start but still leave many questions unanswered. Did gender provide a basis for choice of language in the context of the shift to English, or do we treat the evidence of only a small gap between reported levels of bilingualism in men and women in the census as evidence of relative uniform experience? Did this gender gap reappear on more localized levels, or does it figure in the Irish

speakers who were a part of the global Irish diaspora that had emerged in the nineteenth century? Hopefully, further work in this field will find answers.

Ní Ghearbhuigh reports that Ní Dhonnchadha spent the last twenty-five years of her life in a mental-health institution, having been diagnosed as afflicted with dementia when only twenty-nine years old.³¹ This early end to her career makes her productivity as an Irish-language writer in the prewar years all the more admirable and her diminished place in the historical record more glaring. Though she shared with Butler certain aspects of her vision of Irish motherhood and Irish-language revival as bound up with domestic life, her role in enabling a femininity compatible with both sport and language revival belies the complexities of this period. Scholars will do well to focus on these elements when reconstructing the history of the Irish language, providing a picture of the past that is not only restorative where gender is concerned but also nuanced.

Notes

- 1 A good place to start for understanding the history of the Gaelic League is the biography of its founder, Douglas Hyde. See Patrick Maume, “Hyde, Douglas (de hÍde, Dubhghlas),” in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a4185>, accessed March 15, 2021.
- 2 Mary E. L. Butler, *Gaelic League Pamphlets No. 6: Irishwomen and the Home Language*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gaelic League, n.d.), 7, 3, available at the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, at <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/172060>, accessed August 23, 2021. This and all other primary sources in subsequent notes for which a URL has been given can be found accessed freely online either directly or via a registered account.
- 3 J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 132–35.
- 4 For critiques of older linguistic treatments of gender, see Janet M. Bing and Victoria L. Bergvall, “The Question of Questions: Beyond Binary Thinking,” in *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*, ed. Janet M. Bing and Alice F. Freed (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–30.
- 5 The forms for the 1901 and 1911 Irish census are available online at the National Archives of Ireland website. See National Archives of Ireland, *Census of Ireland 1901/1911*, <https://census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed 15 March 2021.
- 6 Aidan Doyle, *A History of the Irish Language: From the Norman Invasion to Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1537–2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 7 Garret FitzGerald, “Estimates for Baronies of Minimum Level of Irish Speaking amongst Successive Decennial Cohorts: 1771–1781 to 1861–1871,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C*, 84, no. 3 (1984, repr. 2004): 117–55; Garret FitzGerald, “Irish-Speaking in the Pre-Famine Period: A Study Based on the 1911 Census Data for People Born before 1851 and Still Alive in 1911,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C*, 103, no. 5 (2003): 191–283.
- 8 Máire Ní Chiosáin, “Language Shift in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 26–27 (2006–2007): 370–84; Brighid Ní Mhoráin, *Thiar sa Mhanistir atá an Ghaolainn Bhreá: Meath na Gaeilge in Uídh Ráthach* (An Daingean: An Sagart, 1997), 152–55.
- 9 Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (New York: Viking, 2000).
- 10 See the contributions by Ciara Breathnach and Paddy Fitzgerald in this volume.

- 11 Sile Chuinneagain, "The Politics of Equality: Catherine Mahon and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 1905–1916," *Women's History Review*, 6, no. 4 (1997): 529.
- 12 Chuinneagain, "Politics," 527–28.
- 13 Nicholas Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island: State, Religion, Community, and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770–1870* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 148.
- 14 Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, "11th Report, for 1889–90," *Annual Reports* (Dublin: 1889), 17–18.
- 15 *Graiméar na Gaedhilge leis na Bráithreachaibh Críostamhla* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Sons, 1901), available on the HathiTrust digital library at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008675975>, accessed 23 August 2021.
- 16 Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 98–103; Mary N. Harris, "Beleaguered but Determined: Irish Women Writers in Irish," *Feminist Review*, 51 (Autumn 1995): 28–29; Riona Nic Congáil, "'Some of You Will Curse Her': Women's Writing during the Irish-Language Revival," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 29 (2009): 203–6; Frances Clarke, "De Valera, Sinéad," and "Ceannt, Áine," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a2475> and <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a1580>, accessed January 31, 2021.
- 17 Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence, and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914–2004* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). For the connection between masculinity and political independence, see Aidan Beatty, "Masculinity and Nationhood in the East Clare By-Election, 1917," *Éire-Ireland*, 51, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2016): 141–64 and the contribution of Jyoti Atwal to this volume.
- 18 P. H. Pearse, *Three Lectures on Gaelic Topics* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1898), 55, available on the HathiTrust digital library at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008956895>, accessed March 15, 2021.
- 19 Cathal Billings, "The First Minutes: An Analysis of the Irish Language within the Official Structures of the Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–1934," *Éire-Ireland*, 48, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 34.
- 20 Riona Nic Congháile, "'Looking on for Centuries from the Sideline': Gaelic Feminism and the Rise of Camogie," *Éire-Ireland*, 48, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 174–75.
- 21 Máirín Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne i dTraidisiún Liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1998), 79.
- 22 Nic Eoin reviews the evidence of female literary activity revealed in Irish-language manuscripts, sometimes just snippets or indirect references, in other cases, as in the example of the religious writings of Máire Ní Riain or the County Waterford scribe Mairéad Ní Chadhlaiigh, more fulsome details are available. Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo Bean*, 257.
- 23 Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo Bean*, 257, 262, 272–74; Triona Ní Shíocháin, *Singing Ideas: Performance, Politics, and Oral Poetry* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 26–124; Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, "Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire: File an 'Rilleadh Cainte'," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 17 (2002): 146–56.
- 24 For an example of this movement of text between oral and print worlds specific to the Irish language in the nineteenth century, see chapter 7 on the history of the Catholic religious work the *Pious Miscellany* in Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland, 1750–1850*, reprint ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 118–31.
- 25 Nic Congháile, "Some of You Will Curse," 207; Harris, "Beleaguered but Determined," 34.
- 26 These artistic forms should not be interpreted as exclusively historically rooted, however. Sean-nós ('old style') singing, for instance, which has come to be very closely connected to the Irish language, has in its current form much more recent roots. See Éamonn Costello, "Oireachtas na Gaeilge and Sean-Nós Song Competition, 1940–2012: Regionalism, Nationalism, and Gaelicness," *Éire-Ireland*, 54, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2019): 160–87.
- 27 Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo Bean*, 257.

- 28 Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), e.g., 234–36, 389–94, 434–36.
- 29 Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, “Cáit Ní Dhonnchadha: Idir Shamhail agus Ghníomhaí na hAthbheochana,” *COMHARTaighde* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.18669/ct.2018.03>.
- 30 For example, Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail, “The Representation of the Feminine: Some Evidence from Irish-Language Sources,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 22 (2007): 133–50.
- 31 Ní Ghearbhuigh, “Cáit Ní Dhonnchadha,” par. 8.

SECTION 2

HEALTH, WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONALISATION



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6

GENDER, MEDICINE AND THE STATE IN IRELAND, 1852–1922

Ciara Breathnach

Introduction

By 1905, Henry Wellcome was extremely wealthy from his patent medicine endeavours and he was populating the eponymous Historical Medical Museum with ethnographic curios and scientific implements from all over the world. Modern or ‘Western’ medicine, itself a contested term but generally agreed to mean clinical or evidence-based practice, had made such an impact globally that Wellcome was moved to collect vestiges of traditional medicine before they were lost to history. He wrote to Robert J. Welch, a professional Belfast photographer who would later achieve international acclaim as the official Harland and Wolff, or Titanic, photographer, in search of visual representations of Irish folk medicine. Welch responded:

In reply to your circular I am not prepared to exhibit as it would be utterly useless to me + I am excessively busy at Irish Scientific work in connection with the Royal Irish Academy ... I can however supply you with a class of photos you cannot get elsewhere ... I can supply Rag and other Votive well, stills at work, healing stones, some very famous ones too. The Tobernavean Hole Stone that cures rickets in children by passing them thro. The Inishmurray Hole-Stone that the women pray at, before childbirth (always). The Aran Hole Stone thro which sick women’s linen is passed.¹

Despite the passage of 54 years since the establishment of a public healthcare system, it was underused by the rural poor in particular and people continued to rely on folk beliefs and unqualified practitioners for primary medical needs. What is most poignant about this correspondence is what it reveals about the strength of belief in folk cures for maternity care and serious medical conditions such as rickets. Indeed

there is plenty of evidence to show that people adopted a combination of traditional and ‘qualified’ medical and nursing expertise throughout this timeframe and well into the twentieth century. Holy wells were also central to healing practices and married elements of religious beliefs and magical healing (discussed in further detail by Sneddon).

In rural Ireland, and in County Sligo where the Tobernavan Hole Stone was located, women in childbirth were at high risk and infancy and childhood were the most dangerous life cycles in urban areas.² Maternal and infant mortality are highly sensitive national wealth and public health indicators, and both mortality rates remained stubbornly high well into the twentieth century. The year Wellcome and Welch had their exchange of letters, childbirth accounted for 639 deaths registered nationally,³ 227 were from puerperal fever, representing 2.2 of every 1,000 live registered births (102,832).⁴ Infants (under 12 months) accounted for 9,792 deaths of the total number of 75,071 registered and a further 15,123 children aged between 1 and 5 years of age died. By way of comparison, old age accounted for 8,641 deaths.⁵

In brief, gastro-intestinal diseases gave rise to the majority of the infant and child deaths which were concentrated in urban areas and were associated with poverty, insanitary tenements, poor water quality and feeding practices. In rural areas, infants fared better but deaths of mothers in childbirth were more prevalent. I have argued elsewhere that maternal mortality was underreported as registrars often opted for underlying or other causes of death and were not obliged to include pregnancy. High maternal mortality in remote areas also points to the absence of, or poor engagement with, what we might term ‘qualified’ maternity care. I posit that trust in local ‘modern’ medical services was often trumped by allegiances to traditional practitioners in rural Ireland, who were more accessible than qualified midwives and doctors. The persistence of folk medicine well into the twentieth century owed much to the way in which public healthcare evolved after the 1851 Medical Charities Act, and, as Sneddon’s chapter argues, it co-existed with scientific-based medicine and crossed religious divides.⁶ This chapter traces the legislation that underpinned the system to outline why by the 1920s people were selective in their engagement with modern medicine and, using the National Folklore Collection records, it concludes by outlining how folk medicine endured during this era of modernisation.

A mixed medical economy and power

In order to understand the mixed medical economy it is first necessary to place the public healthcare system in its wider political and socio-cultural contexts. Ireland occupied a constitutionally ambiguous position in British imperial terms and, as Alvin Jackson argues, the Act of Union enacted in 1801 was ‘incomplete’.⁷ Resources were unequally distributed and the majority of the Irish population was poor. Economically, the country’s backward agricultural system struggled to compete in a Four Nations context and, with the repeal of restrictive tariffs in the post-Napoleonic War era and the introduction of *laissez-faire* economics, even

less so in a global marketplace. These macro-economic forces rendered the poor even more vulnerable to inevitable shocks, occasioned by fluctuating prices or crop failures. Famines, starvation and food shortages occurred periodically throughout the nineteenth century and poverty was both cyclical and pervasive.⁸ Even Dublin City, which had a more diverse economic profile, saw a marked shift from its rapid growth in the late eighteenth century to decline in the first three decades of the nineteenth owing to the loss of sovereignty.⁹ The urban and rural elite fled to the social circles of London and indeed the upper middle classes fled from the city centres to the suburbs and thus the Georgian townhouses built for single family usage became overcrowded tenements containing up to 12 households.¹⁰ The 1901 and 1911 manuscript census returns are remarkable primary sources that are available to search for free online and provide plenty examples of the degree to which Dublin City had been reduced to tenements. Rural Ireland also saw the flight of landowning classes and in their absence subdivision of smallholdings in the West of Ireland proceeded unchecked (see Rachel Murphy's contribution). These uneconomic holdings combined with a reliance on the mono-carbohydrate diet of potatoes to create a range of new vulnerabilities for the already impoverished population. Exponential population growth occurred in the late eighteenth century and while the records are flawed it is estimated that the population was in the region of 8.2 million when the Great Famine occurred in the 1840s.¹¹

Accurate vital registration information arising from census data was and continues to be one of the most effective instruments of public health. But this element of 'biological citizenship', as Nikolas Rose terms it, also formed the basis of taxation and other governmental policies.¹² For the poorer classes, who were not subject to much by way of taxation, this new form of power over personage and bodies revealed many other insecurities, not least the fear of what we would now term 'surveillance'. Among the biopower measures British administration introduced were the decennial censuses conducted from 1821 to 1911 and the introduction of civil registration in 1864.¹³ Denominationalism hindered both efforts. During the reign of Henry VIII, the Church of Ireland became the official state church, but the vast majority of the Irish population rejected the reformed religion and remained Roman Catholic. Despite the imposition of Penal Laws in the seventeenth century, which aimed to decimate Roman Catholicism and other cultural attributes (see Wolf's contribution on the decline of the Irish language), by 1861, 4,505,265 still professed that faith as against 691,872 members of the Established Church. These statistics bolstered the argument of the Liberal prime minister, William Gladstone, to disestablish the Church of Ireland in 1869.¹⁴ I will return shortly to the matter of counting the living and dead, but it is first necessary to establish an outline of how local structures of public healthcare emerged.¹⁵

By 1801 there were few recourses for the poor to receive government aid, and the network of Houses of Industry established in the late eighteenth century was far from comprehensive.¹⁶ With respect to public healthcare provision for the sick poor, the system was dominated by an unsustainable public/private funding model. Dispensaries, much like modern-day general practice settings, relied completely

on voluntary subscriptions, or charitable donations and were unevenly dispersed because, as Laurence M. Geary notes, ‘philanthropy rather than necessity dictated the number and location ... in pre-Famine Ireland’.¹⁷ Following the Act of Union, the dispensary system received some state support under the 1805 Dispensaries Act, which tethered their management to County Infirmaries until 1818.¹⁸ An Act to establish a county infirmary (hospital) system was passed in 1807 but, like its 1765 predecessor, outside of Ulster it had limited success owing to inadequate funding.¹⁹ There was also a network of fever hospitals. Medical healthcare provision for the sick poor was funded primarily through voluntary subscriptions, and even when the government provided funding these amounts had to be matched by locally raised subscriptions. Publicly funded psychiatric hospitals were established from 1817 and, as Oonagh Walsh’s chapter shows, the district lunatic asylums were strategically located to cater for large geographic regions.

It was when impoverished Irish people created social problems as migrants in England, Scotland and Wales, as public health risks and their willingness to work for cheaper wages, that it was decided to establish some form of poor relief in Ireland. A royal commission chaired by Richard Whately was established in 1833 to investigate the matter of Irish poverty. By virtue of the scale, nuance and considered approach, Whately discovered in his three-year inquiry that a spectrum of poverty existed in Ireland and the lines between the poor and destitute frequently blurred. The commission was criticised, as Virginia Crossman notes, for overextending its reach as it was only supposed to consider destitution, or the very bottom tier of Irish society. It offered a series of recommendations to address the matter of financial precariousness, including public works to generate employment and assisted migration schemes. The recommendations were ignored.²⁰ Lord John Russell, then Secretary of State of the Home Office and later Prime Minister, sent English Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls with a more pointed mission, to assess the prospects of establishing the English poor law system in Ireland.²¹ England and Wales had had a poor law in place since the Elizabethan era, and the separate system was established in Scotland in the late sixteenth century.²² In 1834, the English and Welsh system was reformed, adopting the principles of ‘less eligibility’.²³ Christine Kinealy explains that this so-called ‘New Poor Law’ was ‘designed to ensure that dependency on poor relief was less attractive and materially less comfortable than the life of even the poorest independent labourer’.²⁴ Although completely unsuited to the nature of poverty in Ireland, which had a much broader range of problems than the proposed solution could deal with, in 1838 the Irish Poor Law was enacted.²⁵

The Irish system had a Board of Commissioners that created a new network of 130 ‘Unions’, which were based on the existing district electoral divisions. Each union was placed under the control of a ‘partially elected’ board of guardians, which Peter Gray describes as ‘a major innovation to the Irish body politic’.²⁶ Although significant changes occurred with the foundation of the poor law, power brokerage remained in the same hands – mainly the landed gentry (see O’Riordan’s chapter) and mercantile classes. Guardians were empowered to build a workhouse where

‘indoor relief’ was administered, and activities were funded by a rate or tax levied at a local level. Deviating little from the previous pressures on local subscriptions for fundamental public services, the idea was that Irish property owners would pay via rates for Irish poverty. Powers of election were vested in the ratepayers and invariably guardians were drawn from the local elite and voters were ratepayers in good standing. The maximum number of votes per person was 18 and their allocation was aligned to respective levels of rate-payment. This property requirement had inevitable gendered and class-specific consequences: in the first instance it included very few women (as Tiernan’s and Ward’s chapters show); and the majority of men were also excluded from having a voice. Modelled on the ‘New Poor Law’, the system that was introduced had draconian admission criteria and pitted undeserving (able-bodied poor) against the deserving poor (widowed, orphan and infirm). In order to receive any form of relief initially the poor had to be inmates of the workhouse. Men and women were separated on entry and children could be separated indefinitely from their parents. Sarah-Anne Buckley deals with this matter in greater detail in her chapter. There were some grudging aspects to the Irish system that did not pertain in England: there was no right to relief initially and the Extension Act of 1847 included the so-called ‘Gregory Clause’, which required tenants to give up land in excess of a quarter acre to qualify for indoor relief. Although repealed in 1862, it seems to have had a long legacy in terms of engagement with the system in rural areas.²⁷

While several famines and failed harvests causing food shortages and starvation happened throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Great Famine (1845–1852) led to at least one-eighth of the Irish population dying. The poor law system was designed to meet the needs of the destitute, which Nicholls, in his capacity as poor law commissioner, estimated at a population of 80,000. But when the potato crop failed repeatedly in the 1840s the consequences were so devastating that millions were plunged into dire circumstances. During the Famine, the poor law apparatus was used to deal with the fundamental matters of indoor and later outdoor relief and it was quickly overwhelmed. The workhouses were simply not designed to meet the challenges that the resulting economic and social crisis created, and it not could not cope with the volume of resulting destitution. The historiography of the Famine is vast and despite the flawed figures of the early census returns, scholars such as Ó Gráda and Mokyr posit that of the estimated 8.5 million population, approximately one million died and a further two million emigrated (see Fitzgerald’s contribution) during and in its aftermath.²⁸ Geary has argued that apart from dietary-related illnesses, like scurvy, there were fevers that were specific to the Famine; in addition, the unfortunate coincidence of a cholera outbreak in 1849 was another reason for the excess mortality. Typhoid and typhus were also at uncontrolled levels of transmission. Characterised by rash, fever and delirium, typhus led to an inevitable painful death.²⁹ But, it was ‘Famine fever’ that wreaked the greatest devastation, and not just in Ireland. When some 116,000 Irish Famine refugees arrived in Liverpool in 1847, many of them carried these virulent pathogens with them. Darwen et al. contend that because they arrived to a perfect

set of overcrowded, poor and insanitary conditions in Scottish and English cities epidemics were inevitable. With a certain degree of blame and stigmatisation, these disease outbreaks earned the sobriquet 'Irish fever', reinforcing the poor relation status in the Four Nation project.³⁰ In Ireland, a different type of gendered stigmatisation occurred; Margaret Kelleher has argued that the Famine was feminised as a way of reconciling its impact and, as Aidan Beatty's chapter shows, it also became a symbol of national emasculation.³¹

Ireland was ill-equipped to deal with the level of destitution and concomitant disease, so provisions in the 1838 Act were used to establish an inquiry into the existing medical services. Notwithstanding his limited experience of Irish administration and how unpopular he was in Ireland, George Nicholls was given the responsibility. A large part of the survey was to establish the number of entities in receipt of funding from Grand Jury presentments. The survey surmised that a total of 64 dispensaries,³² 101 fever hospitals and 41 county infirmaries were in receipt of funds. His survey provided the basis for the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1851, more commonly known as the Medical Charities Act, which brought the matter of medical relief under the poor law.³³ It consolidated prior acts associated with public healthcare schemes, which included dispensaries and fever hospitals, and placed them under the auspices of the poor law.³⁴ Poor law unions, numbering 163 at that point, were further divided into 723 dispensary districts, which served as the infrastructure for a range of services and public health campaigns. Invariably union hospitals, dispensaries, maternity services, healthcare in the home (public health) and vaccination stations were operated by the same medical officer. Geary states that in reality these officers, who were elected annually by the Guardians, were poorly paid and the real value of the local authority post was in establishing a professional profile for private practice.³⁵ The wealthier classes O'Riordan describes in her contribution to this volume, and indeed the rising Roman Catholic middle classes, would have accessed medicine as private fee-paying patients. When the Local Government Board was established in 1872, it became responsible for the administration of the poor law and replaced the Poor Law Commissioners.³⁶

Civil registration of births, deaths and marriages commenced in England and Wales in 1837.³⁷ Various attempts to introduce a full vital registration system to Scotland failed until 1854.³⁸ In the interim a limited form of civil registration was introduced to Ireland: from 1 April 1845, all non-Catholic Irish marriages were to be registered by the civil authorities.³⁹ The road towards a full system for Ireland was more contentious, but eventually an act for civil registration of births and deaths was passed in 1863 and came into operation on 1 January 1864. Apart from the establishment of a General Register Office in Dublin, overseen by a Registrar General of Births and Deaths, the process was grafted onto the poor law and dispensary doctors were charged with the task of registration births and deaths in their districts.⁴⁰ So sceptical of the mortality returns was Dr Thomas Wrigley Grimshaw, the Registrar General of Ireland from 1879 to 1900, that he began to use burial records to correct the Dublin figures. Elsewhere I have discussed the matter

of poor engagement with civil registration and indeed there is evidence to support the fact that in remote areas life event underreporting lasted until the 1990s. Throughout the nineteenth century the influence of the Roman Catholic Church grew exponentially and its sacramental rites of baptism, marriage and death were more carefully observed than mandatory civil registration. It is for such reasons that Irish population returns must be viewed with a critical eye. Compulsory smallpox vaccination was also ushered in with civil registration in 1864. Deborah Brunton, in her comprehensive study of smallpox vaccination, has argued that there was ‘substantial underreporting of births’ and posits that the Irish claims to eradication in the 1880s are dubious.⁴¹

In broad terms most of the Irish population was poor and Roman Catholic and registered doctors were predominantly both middle-class and male, which must have had a bearing on engagement with the flawed quasi-social welfare system that was mapped on to the dispensaries and union hospitals.⁴² Significant shifts occurred in local administration, with an increasing number of politically nationalist members as the nineteenth century progressed. By then Ultramontanism (beyond the Alps, or strict adherence to the teachings of Rome) was making significant gains in Ireland and the role of the clergy in all aspects of Irish life was becoming more defined in education and medical services (see Roddy’s and John Walsh’s chapters). Fear of proselytism, or the potential for religious conversion to Protestantism, troubled the Irish Roman Catholic bishops greatly and the provision of a free, if untrained, nursing was an effective way of ensuring that the sick poor were not at risk. The Congregation of Mercy was an Irish order established by Catherine MacAuley in Dublin in 1836 and the Sisters of Mercy were permitted to take over some nursing care in the Union hospitals from the 1860s onwards.⁴³ Opinions on their benefit were divided but the gradual shift in power into their hands helped to reconcile the Irish difficulty with resorting to the ‘Union hospital’ for medical care.⁴⁴ In Dublin, the Sisters of Charity ran the North and South Dublin Union Children’s wards, which were regularly criticised in newspapers for high mortality rates. The ‘nursing nuns’ had no formal training and were prohibited from conducting several clinical duties in accordance with edicts of canon law that stretched back to the thirteenth century, for example maternity care, surgical, male and night cases. Nonetheless, they helped to maintain order and cleanliness in Union hospitals. A survey carried out in 1903 showed that 415 nuns were working in the system, many worked for free.⁴⁵

Until the 1898 Local Government Act the management of the dispensaries was overseen by non-medically trained local committees comprising poor law guardians and ratepayers; in other words, the elite of an intensely localised system.⁴⁶ Local relieving officers, who were paid employees with no medical training, decided who received access to care using a ticketing system; treatment at a dispensary was afforded by a black ticket and a red one permitted a home visit from the dispensary doctor.⁴⁷ Doctors could refer people to the union hospital as appropriate. The legacy of ‘less eligibility’ had an impact and engagement with the public health services varied from region to region. In large urban settings, where anonymity was afforded

by sheer numbers, the poor used the dispensary and union hospital services more, but in rural areas it was not uncommon for poor people, especially those living in remote areas to die, without ever having availed of their entitlement to free medical assistance.

Two inquiries were established in the early twentieth century to establish the efficacy of the poor law and its healthcare capacity. The Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform recommended in 1906 that the workhouses be shut down and appropriate accommodation be erected for the sick poor. According to its evidence, in 1905 there were 8 City Infirmaries (4 in Dublin, 2 in Cork and one each in Limerick and Waterford), 34 County Infirmaries, 14 Fever Hospitals, which was a significant reduction from the pre-Famine number of 90, some had been repurposed in the interim to become 'Poor Law hospitals'.⁴⁸ The report noted how the sick poor constituted 14,491 of the total workhouse population of 45,195, 14,380 were aged and infirm, 5,900 were children and there were 2,129 'unmarried mothers'. The remainder was made up of 4,667 able-bodied, 3,165 classified as insane and 463 epileptics.⁴⁹ It was estimated that 8,204 of the patients in the union hospitals and county infirmaries were suffering from tuberculosis (pulmonary is inferred).⁵⁰ Although levels of engagement with public healthcare had improved, in 1909 it was found that unqualified practitioners were thriving in 137 of the 158 unions. In that survey, the findings in Killarney, County Kerry were similar to elsewhere, people delayed seeking 'competent medical advice', used unqualified midwives and chemists prescribed independently of dispensary doctors.⁵¹

Another inquiry reported in 1919 that

there has grown up an enormously complicated system of local health administration, the result is that few persons, apart from the officials directly concerned, understand the system or from what sources advice or assistance in regards to hospital treatment, or to questions pertaining to public health generally, can be obtained.⁵²

It recommended that a separate ministry for health be established for Ireland, that Boards of Guardians be divested of control over union infirmaries and fever hospitals and that these powers be transferred to an envisioned system of Health Boards organised along county or county borough lines.⁵³ Essentially it recognised the necessity of streamlining control and recommended that it be 'freed from association with Poor Law administration'.⁵⁴ Outside of metropolitan areas, memories of the workhouse were often appropriated to the worst attributes of British occupation. By the 1930s, when the following story was collected under the aegis of the Irish Folklore Commission the 'workhouse' came to occupy a specific place in popular memory.

The Workhouse was built in 1841. In the famine years it was full up of people who had no food to eat and other houses were used as workhouses. ... The People who died in the workhouse were buried in *Téampall Bán*. In the year

1920 the workhouse was closed and the poor people were removed to the County Home in Killarney.

The house next to the workhouse was turned into a convent in 1891. The Mercy nuns lived here. Before that this house was occupied by a party of British horse-soldiers called the Scots' Greys. ... In 1922 the workhouse was burned down by the Republicans and at the present time a new hospital is being built.⁵⁵

In this retelling, the history of the Listowel workhouse site is intertwined with Famine memory. Later in the timeline, the Sisters of Mercy, in ousting the occupying Crown forces from an adjacent house, had a cleansing affect and the last vestiges of colonialism were purged by fire set by Irish Republican anti-Treaty forces.⁵⁶

The Great Famine dominated the Irish mindset for generations; to those who were born after the event and therefore could not remember it, it had morphed from living memory to become, what Chris Morash terms, a 'semiotic system of representations' and the workhouse was central to that.⁵⁷ As it became the locus for relief measures, the negative associations between the workhouse, Famine, starvation and disease were never severed and, as Laurence M. Geary has cogently argued, it was 'was unreservedly hated by those it was supposed to relieve'.⁵⁸ Peter Gray makes a similar observation and contends that workhouses were 'irrevocably associated with the horrors of mass mortality during the Great Famine ... associated with the suffering and degradation of their inmates'.⁵⁹ While Olwen Purdue and others have argued that in some instances there was a certain degree of agency in how the poor interacted with the system in the late nineteenth century, there were regional variations. For tenant farmers who aspired to owner occupancy submission to the workhouse not only signalled economic ruin; it was also the epitome of moral failing.⁶⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the architecture of public healthcare provision to show why a mixed medical economy persisted well into the twentieth century. For gendered, class and cultural reasons, the poor law and its associated medical services embodied several disincentives to engagement. As the nineteenth century progressed, a more fluid relationship developed between the 'union' and urban inhabitants who engaged more frequently. They used it to stretch individual and household resources to their maximum yield. The history of Irish engagement with 'qualified' medical care is a complicated one, and it is little wonder that a system grafted to the poor law had limited success. For such reasons, a mixed medical economy combining elements of modern and traditional medicine co-existed throughout this era.

There are many further research avenues that could be fruitfully pursued using freely accessible sources, especially if they adopt gendered, transnational, colonial and postcolonial analytical frameworks. Local authority archives have placed their holdings online, and it is possible to trace regional engagement with 'the Union'

through these records.⁶¹ Traditional medicine and healers featured strongly in the 1937 Irish Folklore Commission School's Collection and this large body of primary sources are freely accessible on dúchas.ie. Further to this a large selection of British Parliamentary Papers and the text of primary legislation are available freely online. The *Oireachtas* (Irish National Parliament) Library has digitised much of its historical holdings.⁶² Where possible here I cited digital object identifiers (DOIs) of secondary readings, many of which are available on open access.

From 1851 until 1920 the management and duties of public healthcare complicated the ways in which people understood medico-legal power. Denominationalism complicated matters even further; Roman Catholicism was often vocally opposed to nationalist activities but, by 1922, both were inextricably linked. This went some way towards encouraging greater engagement with social welfare in the decades that followed in Roman Catholic-run hospitals. When the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor published its report in 1927 it found that widows and their children, orphans, unmarried mothers and their children and deserted children were among the chief occupants of the erstwhile nineteenth-century workhouses.⁶³ That some became sites of 'mother and baby' homes is also telling of the way in which workhouses were reimagined as places of moral rectitude. The Department of Local Government and Public Health established in 1925 was a behemoth with responsibilities that stretched from vital infrastructure to healthcare provision. In practical terms, the Irish Free State could do little to enact the recommendations of the 1927 report because of the lack of funding. A hospital sweepstake was established in the 1930s to assist with funding from voluntary subscriptions. Instead of breaking the bonds between healthcare and charity, it served the regressive function of entrenching them.

Notes

- 1 Wellcome Archive/WA/HMM/CO/Ear/1041: Box 67. Letter from Robert Welch to Henry S. Wellcome, February 15, 1905.
- 2 Ciara Breathnach, "The Triumph of Proximity: The Impact of District Nursing Schemes in 1890s' Rural Ireland," *Nursing History Review* 26, no. 1 (January 2018): 68–82; Ciara Breathnach and Brian Gurrin, "Maternal Mortality, Dublin 1864–1905," *Social History of Medicine* 31, no. 1 (February 2018): 79–105; Ciara Breathnach and Brian Gurrin, "A Tale of Two Cities – Infant Mortality and Cause of Infant Death, Dublin, 1864–1910," *Urban History* 44, no. 4 (2017): 647–677.
- 3 British Parliamentary Papers, Forty-second detailed annual report of the Registrar General for Ireland, containing a general abstract of the numbers of marriages, births, and deaths registered in Ireland during the year 1905 [Cd. 3123], xxii.
- 4 *Ibid.*, xxi, xi.
- 5 *Ibid.*, xiii. In 1905 the primary causes of death were pulmonary tuberculosis and bronchitis which caused 11,882 and 7,462 deaths respectively across all age categories. Heart disease, which was more prevalent in adult age cohorts, caused 8,170 deaths.
- 6 An act to provide for the better distribution, support and management of medical charities in Ireland; and to amend an act of the eleventh year of her majesty, to provide for the execution of the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland (1851), 14 & 15 Vict., c.68.
- 7 Alvin Jackson, "Ireland, the Union, and the Empire, 1800–1960," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 123–153 at 124.

- 8 Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).
- 9 Mary E. Daly, *Dublin, the Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History, 1806–1914* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1984), 2; David Dickson, *Dublin: The Making of a Capital City* (London: Profile Books, 2014).
- 10 See for example <http://census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Dublin/Mountjoy/Summerhill/>. Accessed August 27 2021. House number 11, originally designed for one family, was partitioned into 8 separate rooms.
- 11 Timothy Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 79–89. Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (Boston, MA: George Allen and Urwin, 1983), 30–80.
- 12 Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 139–141.
- 13 An Act for the registration of births and deaths in Ireland (26 & 27 Vict. 11), 1863.
- 14 BPP, Return of Number of Roman Catholics and Number of Members of Established Church in Ireland, 1834 and 1861 [289].
- 15 Irish Church Act 1869 (32 & 33 Vict. c.42).
- 16 Laurence M. Geary, “From Voluntary Hospitals to Voluntary Health Insurance: A History of Irish Healthcare from the Early-Eighteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in *The Irish Healthcare System. An Historical and Comparative Review* (Dublin: Health Insurance Authority, September 2018), 9–27. https://www.hia.ie/sites/default/files/The%20Irish%20Healthcare%20System%20-%20An%20Historical%20and%20Comparative%20Review_0.pdf. Accessed 30 August 2021.
- 17 Laurence M. Geary, *Medicine and Charity in Ireland 1718–1851* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 63.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 54–63.
- 19 County Infirmarys (Ireland) Act 1807, 5 Geo. 3. c.20.
- 20 Niall Ó Ciosáin, “The Poor Inquiry and Irish Society – A Consensus Theory of Truth,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20 (December 2010): 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440110000083>.
- 21 Virginia Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 8–9.
- 22 Rosalind Mitchison, “The Making of the Old Scottish Poor Law,” *Past & Present* 63, no. 1 (May 1974): 58–93. <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/63.1.58>; R. Mitchison, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland: The Experience of Poverty, 1574–1845* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
- 23 An Acte for the Releife of the Poore, 1601, 43 Eliz 1 c 2.
- 24 Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, 38.
- 25 Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power*, 9.
- 26 Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 293.
- 27 An Act to make further Provision for the Relief of the destitute Poor in Ireland 1838, 10 & 11 Vic. c.31. s. 10. An Act to amend the Laws in force for the Relief of the destitute Poor in Ireland, and to continue the Powers of the Commissioners, 1862, 25 & 26 Vic. c.83 s. 2.
- 28 Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda, “What Do People Die of during Famines? The Great Irish Famine in Comparative Perspective,” *European Review of Economic History* 6, no. 3 (December 2002): 339–363. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1361491602000163>, https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/449/3/ogradac_article_pub_037.pdf.
- 29 Laurence M. Geary, “Famine, Fever and Bloody Flux,” in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: RTE/Mercier Press, 1995), 74–85. <https://www.rte.ie/history/the-great-irish-famine/2020/0721/1154625-deadly-disease-how-the-great-famine-led-to-outbreaks-of-illness/>. Accessed 29 December 2020.

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- 32 BPP, Select Committee of House of Lords, on Laws relating to Relief of Destitute Poor, and Operation of Medical Charities in Ireland. Report, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, Index [694 694-II 694-III], xxiv.
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- 34 Geary, *Medicine and Charity*, 209–210.
- 35 Geary, “The Medical Profession,” 189–206.
- 36 Local Government Board (Ireland) Act, 1872, 36 & 37 Vic. C.69.
- 37 An Act for Marriages in England, 1836, 6 & 7 William IV, c.85. An Act for Registering Births, Deaths and Marriages in England, 1836, 6 & 7 William IV, c.85.
- 38 Anne Cameron, “The Establishment of Civil Registration in Scotland,” *The History Journal* 1, no. 2 (2007): 378–379. Civil registration in Scotland commenced on January 1, 1855, with the passage of An Act to provide for the better registration of births, deaths and marriages in Scotland 1854, 17 & 18 Vic., c.80.
- 39 An Act for Marriages in Ireland; and for registering such Marriages, 1844, 7 & 8 Vic. C.81, s.52.
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- 46 John F. Fleetwood, *The History of Medicine in Ireland* (Dublin: The Skellig Press, 1983), 168.
- 47 Ruth Barrington, *Health, Medicine and Politics in Ireland, 1900–70* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration), 7–8. Barrington also argues that the further duty of Medical Officer of Health created a conflict for doctors and ‘the arrangement did little to improve environmental conditions for public health since the obligations of the MOH often conflicted with the interests of private practice’.
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- 49 *Ibid.*, 16.

- 50 Ibid., 24.
- 51 BPP, Report as to the practice of Medicine and Surgery by unqualified persons in the United Kingdom (Medical Council: Unqualified Practitioners (1910), [Cd. 5422], Vol. XLIII.5, 78.
- 52 Ministry of Health Act, 1919. Report of the Irish Public Health Council on the public health and medical services in Ireland [Cmd. 761], 4.
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- 54 Ibid., 13.
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- 60 Olwen Purdue, “Poverty and Power: The Irish Poor Law in a North Antrim Town, 1861–1921,” *Irish Historical Studies* 37, no. 148 (November 2011): 567–583.
- 61 Huge credit is due to the network of County Archivists, Niamh Brennan (Donegal) and Rene Franklin (Clare) deserve special mention, who have gone to enormous lengths to find funding and had the foresight to make these records available for free online <https://tipperarystudies.ie/poor-law-union-records/>, <https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/countyarchivescollection/poorlawunionboardsoguardians1840-1923/>, https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/archives/poor_law_unions.htm all. Accessed August 28, 2021.
- 62 For a selection of BPP pertaining to Ireland see <https://www.dippam.ac.uk/eppi> for statutes, see <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/>, <https://www.bailii.org/>, for Irish Government sources <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/history-and-buildings/historical-documents/>. All accessed August 26, 2021.
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7

'A FAT, POMPOUS OLD WOMAN, IGNORANT, AND ILLITERATE'¹

Popular Midwifery in Nineteenth-century Ireland

Laurence M. Geary

The midwife or nurse should cultivate habits of perfect accuracy and truth towards the patient, her friends, and the medical attendant. It is quite possible, and often necessary, to refrain from telling the whole truth to the patient, without telling what is untrue. For the sake of her own health, as well as for the efficient discharge of her duties, she should be temperate in eating; of early, active habits, and of constant watchfulness, so long as she is in attendance upon a patient.

Fleetwood Churchill, *A manual for midwives and monthly nurses* (Dublin: Fannin and Co., 3rd edition, 1872), 4

The greatly diminished mortality of women and children, under some of the more dangerous forms of parturition, proves, in the most convincing manner, how largely society has benefited by the transference of this branch of the healing art to male practitioners.

[Fleetwood Churchill], *A manual for midwives and monthly nurses* (Dublin: Fannin and Co., 1856), anonymous review in *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science* 21 (May 1856): 368

Popular and Professional Narratives

Until the eighteenth century in Ireland childbirth was a natural event that took place in the home, and babies were delivered by female midwives in an all-female environment. Obstetric dangers that threatened maternal and neonatal lives were also part of the natural order and expectant mothers of all social classes resigned themselves to the risks, fortified perhaps by prayer and the power of their faith. The traditional midwives who assisted with the birth were unregulated and lacked professional training and qualifications, but many were experienced and skilful, often the beneficiaries of advice and knowledge handed down from one generation

to the next in their own families. This chapter explores the transition in women's work in midwifery from the empirical and unpaid to the professional and salaried during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The writings of William Carleton and William Wilde offer a perspective on midwifery practices in rural Ireland, and on the customs and observances of the Irish peasantry in the period immediately prior to the Great Famine, 1845–1852. Their representations, firmly rooted in reality and experience, capture and convey the importance of traditional midwives in rural communities and the esteem in which they were held. Wilde – medical doctor, census commissioner, folklorist and antiquarian, and bilingual in Irish and English – was an authoritative commentator on Irish social life and mores in the first half of the nineteenth century. Writing in the late 1840s, with the country still in the throes of cataclysmic famine, Wilde observed that the Irish peasantry had greater confidence in the abilities and remedies of a 'knowledgeable woman' than in 'the most refined medical or surgical art', a trust that was engendered by the peasantry's extensive engagement with popular medicine.² The knowledgeable or wise woman genus included the rural midwives on whom the peasantry customarily relied in childbirth.

Carleton's tale 'The Irish midwife' depicts in vivid detail the role and status of these women in pre-Famine peasant society. The text, which is part exposition, part narrative or story, derives from Carleton's own peasant upbringing and experiences in County Tyrone. It was serialised in the *Irish Penny Journal* in late 1840–early 1841 and reissued, with an amended title, in a volume of tales and sketches a few years later.³ Carleton projected the introductory or expository section as an chapter on midwifery, and in it claimed that his subject, the midwife, represented the essence of Irishness: she was the most distinctive and clearly delineated of the many remarkable characters moulded by what he termed 'the spirit and habits of Irish feeling among the peasantry'. Other characters – fiddler, dancing master, match maker, seanchaí (traditional storyteller), keening woman (mourner at a funeral or wake), foster nurse – possessed strong hereditary profiles, but the midwife, 'this great exponent of the national temperament', overshadowed them all, and, Carleton added, the midwife was fully aware of her social position, importance and privileges.⁴

As narrated by Carleton, many of the prevailing superstitions and traditions relating to midwifery were linked to the supernatural, to charms and spells and skills derived from the 'good people' or fairies, the *daoine sí* of Irish tradition. These transcendent beings had bestowed a fount of secret knowledge and extraordinary gifts on the Irish midwife, including the ability to punish cruel or suspicious husbands by transferring the pains of childbirth from the parturient woman to the errant spouse; to dissipate jealousy between husband and wife by means of a charmed and secret herbal decoction; to determine ardour and reciprocity among lovers; and to interpret dreams, omens, auguries and signs pertaining to courtship and the potential outcome of romantic relationships. The Irish midwife's talents were not limited to childbirth and its preliminaries, according to Carleton. As a 'doctress', she was able to cure headache by 'measuring the head', and, by means of a cupping or suction process, to redress a malady known to the peasantry as 'the

spool or bone of the breast being down', which appears to have been a depletory or wasting condition linked to loss of appetite and sleep. These conditions and remedies were not a figment of the storyteller's imagination – there were references to head-measuring, lifting the spool of the breast, and other heterodox practices in Irish sources until at least the beginning of the twentieth century,⁵ demonstrating a continuity of tradition that transcended the calamitous mortality, disruption and dislocation of the Great Famine.

The story element of 'The Irish midwife' is set in and around the realistically imagined village of Ballycomaisy, the location of the midwife's cabin, and incorporates, with the author's customary prolixity, several of the motifs introduced in the expository section, the chapter on midwifery. Carleton states that in his younger days he had personally witnessed some of the practices that feature in his story. Such reportage corroborates Carleton's claim elsewhere that he had endeavoured 'to give a panorama of Irish life among the people', that he had portrayed the peasantry honestly and without reference to creed or party.⁶

William Wilde traversed similar terrain to Carleton in an address to the Dublin Obstetrical Society in March 1849 on the superstitions and popular practices relating to midwifery in Ireland. His approach and material were clearly influenced by Carleton and he referred his professional audience specifically to Carleton's chapter on midwifery.⁷ As ethnographer and folklorist, Wilde shared Carleton's awareness of the peasantry's customs and practices and appreciated the fertility and diversity of the tradition. As a doctor, he subscribed to the medical profession's criticism of the damage that untrained and unregulated midwives could cause to mothers and babies. Wilde informed the members of the Dublin Obstetrical Society that in former times the ignorant interference of rural midwives, particularly in Connacht, had caused 'frightful consequences'. According to Wilde's father, a medical practitioner in County Roscommon, it was the practice of midwives to attempt the forcible extraction of the foetus with the hook of an ounce or steel bar, and in County Galway, when any difficulty or delay occurred in the child's head emerging, the midwife used to cut or lacerate the perineum with a curved knife that had been crudely fashioned from the point of an old reaping hook.⁸

There was similarly disturbing testimony from other parts of the country. Dr J. Morrison, a dispensary doctor with considerable obstetric experience at Newry, County Down, reported that he had encountered 'four bad cases' of laceration of the perineum in 1837, attributing each to the intervention of the attendant midwife. Morrison stated that in tedious cases the midwives' custom was to facilitate the descent of the foetal head – 'to make room for the child', to use the colloquialism – 'by forcibly pulling asunder the labia'.⁹ A quarter of a century earlier, midwives at Culdaff, on the Inishowen peninsula in County Donegal, plied new-born infants with alcohol before suspending them from a finger inserted under the palate, which the local Church of Ireland clergyman condemned as a 'barbarous practice', one that resulted in many fatalities.¹⁰

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Irish medical practitioners were extremely critical of untrained and uncertified midwives, denouncing them

regularly as ignorant, drunken and dangerously incompetent. In the mid-1830s, Denis Phelan, a County Tipperary surgeon-apothecary, claimed that 90 per cent of Irish midwives were 'the most ignorant and drunken wretches in the whole community', a blunt assessment that reflected the attitude of medical practitioners countrywide, and in Britain also. Phelan stated that he had frequently attended poor women in labour whose maltreatment by 'brutal and ignorant midwives' left them with no possibility of recovery.¹¹

In the 1830s, the Poor Inquiry, a parliamentary commission appointed to investigate the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, was similarly critical of midwives and their practices. The commission noted that the general custom among the peasantry was to depend upon untrained country women whose ignorance was often the cause of 'great mischief'.¹² Their assessment was based on information submitted by dispensary doctors from all parts of the country, whose criticisms and denunciations differed only in wording and detail. The Castleisland dispensary district in County Kerry afforded a notable variation. There, an unqualified male midwife was responsible for 'very serious mischief', namely 'laceration of the perineum, rupture of the neck of the bladder, opening of the head of the child, dislocation of jaw, and loss of eyes in children born alive, and still alive'.¹³

Pre-Famine Dispensaries and Midwifery

There were wide variations in dispensary rules regarding doctors' attendance on poor women during childbirth, arising in part from a perception that parturition was a natural process, not a medical procedure. In general, pre-Famine dispensaries did not require their medical officers to attend non-crisis pregnancies. In the mid-1830s, only a handful of institutions – among them Carlingford, County Louth, Doneraile and Mitchelstown, County Cork, and Newtownbreda, County Down – regarded care of the poor in childbirth as part of the dispensary doctor's normal duties and provided a general midwifery service. In other dispensaries, the doctor generally attended when labour became difficult or protracted, and often received additional payment for doing so, although some dispensary boards of governors prohibited intervention even in critical cases. The by-laws of the fever hospital and dispensary at Naas, County Kildare, for example, stated bluntly that 'lying-in women are not entitled to the services of the medical attendant in any stage of parturition, or under any circumstances, however complicated or dangerous'.¹⁴

Dispensary medical officers who were obliged either by rule or custom to attend the poor when complications developed in childbirth often complained that they were not consulted in time. They ascribed the delay 'to the ignorance of the midwives', which resulted in a failure to detect the alarming condition of the women they attended, or else the midwives were too jealous of the medical practitioner to involve him in their cases.¹⁵ Dr William S. Little, dispensary doctor at Headford, County Galway regarded midwifery attendance as a professional embarrassment, claiming that he was only called to the most extreme cases, usually following the interference of 'utterly ignorant and incapable' country midwives.¹⁶

Medical and social commentators like Wilde, Little and others may have been correct in attributing injuries and fatalities to untrained midwives, their criticism and disapproval reflecting the bias of expensively educated medical professionals against irregular and empirical practitioners who were, after all, their competitors for patients and income. However, the deficiencies in the professional obstetric service meant that these untutored women – and occasionally men – were often the peasantry's primary or only recourse. Despite their trenchant criticisms of country midwives, many doctors neglected the poor in pregnancy. They condemned the interventions of the unregulated but were not prepared to attend the poor themselves unless they were paid. Some expressed their distaste for obstetric practice, acknowledging that it was an area of the profession they did not wish to pursue, a choice that may have reflected a sensitivity towards women, or a fancy that there was an element of indecency or immorality involved in any such association. Some medical practitioners had no midwifery training or qualifications and even less practical experience than the women they criticised. As indicated by the epigraphs to this chapter, a mid-nineteenth-century exclusively male medical profession displayed and shared a gender bias, a patronising and supercilious attitude towards female midwives and women generally.¹⁷

Hostility to non-professionally trained midwives, while widespread among Irish dispensary doctors, was not universal. Several, in the 1830s – in counties Galway, Louth, Cork, Armagh, Down, and Kildare, for example – recognised the social role of country midwives, conceding that some at least had acquired considerable skill through experience, and that accidents rarely occurred in the cases of natural labour they attended. A dispensary doctor, at Inniscarra, County Cork, acknowledged them fulsomely, although his was very much a minority voice: 'It is very gratifying to be enabled to state that the midwives of the district may be depended upon and that they are generally pretty well acquainted with the business they undertake.'¹⁸

Some dispensaries employed midwives who had been trained and certified by the Dublin Lying-in Hospital which Bartholomew Mosse had established in 1745, and which evolved into the Rotunda Hospital (Hereinafter Rotunda). These professionally trained females were remunerated from dispensary funds, usually in the form of a payment for each case attended. The governors of Hillsborough dispensary in County Down, for example, paid their midwife two shillings and sixpence for each of the 93 cases she supervised in a three-year period in the early 1830s. Her colleague at Warrenpoint and Rostrevor dispensary in the same county, who had been trained at the expense of a local benefactor, received double that fee for each case of natural labour, while the dispensary medical officer presided over all the difficult cases and received seven shillings and six pence for each one. The midwife attached to Rathdrum dispensary in County Wicklow received five shillings for each of her cases. The city of Derry dispensary governors paid their midwife four shillings for each of the 150 cases she attended in 1833 and provided her with accommodation and heating. Ironically, she was self-taught; the dispensary had previously employed two trained and licensed midwives but, according to the

governors, they had 'turned out ill', a reminder that certification was and is not always a guarantee either of competency or professionalism.¹⁹

Some licensed midwives practised privately in the pre-Famine period, at Tuam, County Galway and Dingle, County Kerry for instance, while there were two in Roscommon whose charges were said to be so reasonable that the poor availed very extensively of their services.²⁰ A public subscription provided the remuneration for the midwife in the Enniskerry dispensary district in County Wicklow.²¹ Voluntary subscriptions maintained lying-in facilities in some of the larger urban centres, and it was customary for local accoucheurs or male midwives, generally the juniors, to attend gratuitously. However, this was not always a satisfactory arrangement as private patients were given precedence and medical assistance could not always be procured for charity cases when complications arose. Despite the financial assistance afforded by charitable and well-disposed individuals, licensed midwives were very much in the minority in pre-Famine Ireland. In the mid-1830s, the time the Poor Inquiry was conducted, one well-placed analyst estimated that no more than 5 per cent of all practising Irish midwives were professionally instructed and certified.²²

As ever, there was a need and a demand for assistance in terminating unwanted pregnancies. At a time when women were rigorously excluded from the medical profession, irregular female practitioners, sometimes referred to as 'she-quacks' by their detractors, were almost exclusively consulted in such cases. Procured abortion was commonplace in Continental Europe and featured in pre-Famine Ireland also. Women lost caste in the event of pre- or extra-marital pregnancy and in such cases, according to William Wilde, induced abortion was the more acceptable option, both morally and socially. He claimed that those who found themselves pregnant and unwed, to avoid popular contumely, resorted frequently to irregular practitioners of their own gender, whose remedies embraced mystic ceremonies, pagan rites, and the administration of drastic purgatives and herbs that stimulated menstruation.²³

Midwifery Regulation

Obstetric knowledge, teaching and practice evolved and expanded during the eighteenth century. In Ireland, as part of this process, institutional training and licensing of midwives emerged in the second half of the century, first at the Rotunda Hospital in 1774 and subsequently at several lying-in hospitals and at the country's medical schools and licensing bodies, notably the colleges of physicians and surgeons, and the University of Dublin.²⁴

The broad objectives of the Rotunda when it opened in 1745 were to relieve suffering and to advance medical knowledge. In a petition to the Irish parliament appealing for funds, and to the king soliciting royal favour and a charter, Bartholomew Mosse, the hospital's founder, and his backers contended that 'many poor and distressed women great with child' were thrown on to their own resources because of 'the sickness, death, absence, neglect or extreme poverty of their husbands'. Many of these women died in childbirth, or their new-born infants succumbed because of a deficiency in skilled care

and attention or because of an insufficiency of food, clothing and shelter, conditions and circumstances that applied particularly to the wives and widows of the country's soldiers and sailors. In addition to relieving the distressed and indigent, the hospital's supporters hoped that the bestowal of the king's favour on the institution would reduce the incidence of infanticide, and the abandonment of new-born babies in Dublin. Additionally, a chartered lying-in hospital would facilitate Mosse's ambition to provide midwifery training at the institution, an initiative that would address the shortage of qualified midwives in rural Ireland, redress the deleterious consequences arising from the ignorance of those currently engaged in the practice, and, by preserving infant lives, increase the country's population,²⁵ which, in a military and mercantile age, was essential for survival and growth.

In 1785, a decade after the commencement of midwifery instruction at the Rotunda, now chartered, the Irish parliament enacted that county grand juries could raise £30 in taxation at intervals of five years to send a female pupil for midwifery training and certification at the hospital. Eligibility to apply was limited to married women aged between thirty and forty with children of their own. On completion of their training, these midwives were discouraged from residing in towns where county infirmaries were located,²⁶ a constraint whose purpose and significance are not discernible at this remove.

Part of the application process at the Rotunda was the submission of testimonials or references in support of a candidature. In 1827, Elizabeth Walsh, who had nursed at the Meath Hospital and County of Dublin Infirmary for the previous four years, sought admission as a midwifery pupil at the Rotunda, and appended testimonials from the County Dublin grand jury, the governors of the Meath Hospital and its medical staff supporting her application. The grand jury endorsed her as 'a fit and proper person', the governors for her sobriety and honesty, and the medical staff because of her conduct during her four years as a nurse at the hospital.²⁷

Table 7.1 shows the number of midwifery registrants at the Rotunda between 1787 and 1820. The males were mainly medical students, the females exclusively pupil midwives. There were 347 female registrants in this thirty-three-year period, an average of 10.5 per year. There is no information on the number who completed their training, but, given the cost and the participants' character profile as suggested by Walsh above, the likelihood is that the majority did so.

Other lying-in hospitals in Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland followed the Rotunda's pedagogic example, including the Coombe Lying-in Hospital in Dublin's south side,

TABLE 7.1 Midwifery Registrants at the Rotunda Hospital, 1787–1820

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
1787–96	66	11	77
1797–1806	60	117	177
1807–16	250	93	343
1817–20	470	126	596

Source: Mary A. Kelly, "The development of midwifery at the Rotunda 1745–1795", in *Masters, midwives and ladies-in-waiting*, 77–117, at 79.

which opened in 1829 with thirty beds for the relief of indigent women in child-birth,²⁸ but the county grand jury funding that applied to the Rotunda was not available to these institutions.²⁹ In the course of the nineteenth century, Dublin's lying-in hospitals attracted midwifery pupils and medical students in ever-increasing numbers from Ireland, Britain and other parts of the empire, and the city acquired considerable renown as a centre of obstetric and gynaecological teaching.

Towards the end of the century, Dr Lombe Atthill, a vastly experienced obstetrician and teacher and a former Master of the Rotunda among other professional accomplishments, claimed that Irish midwives were mainly drawn from the class of upper servants, adding that females from the higher social strata, 'ladies' as he called them, found midwifery disagreeable and vexatious and accordingly were not attracted to it. In the early 1890s, he informed a parliamentary select committee on the registration of midwives that Ireland was 'fairly well off for midwives', most of whom were 'efficient and well-conducted' and acted in the combined capacity of midwife and nurse-tender, sometimes called a monthly nurse, a woman who tended or cared for mother and baby for up to a month after the birth. Atthill stated that many Irish midwives were employed in the public dispensary service and supplemented their small salaries by private practice. A prerequisite of any such appointment was the submission of the certificate awarded on completion of training, together with testimonials from medical practitioners attesting to the applicant's skill and moral probity. Rural Ireland was too poor and too sparsely inhabited to support a midwife independently of a public salary, he noted, though urban midwives were able to survive solely on their private practice.³⁰

The numbers of trained and certified midwives multiplied in the post-Famine decades. They were increasingly employed by dispensary committees, as Atthill intimated, and their gratuitous services to the poor challenged the hegemony, customs and practices of traditional midwives in rural Ireland. In this respect, the much-maligned Irish poor law medical service was a major agent of change, of modernisation, increasing the number of properly trained and qualified midwives in its employment from 7 in 1851 to 729 in 1911, and 809 in 1920.

TABLE 7.2 The Organisation of the Dispensary Service under the Medical Charities Act, 1851

	<i>Poor Law Unions</i>	<i>Dispensary Districts</i>	<i>Doctors</i>	<i>Midwives</i>
Leinster	40	208	230	3
Ulster	44	215	222	4
Connacht	29	95	103	0
Munster	50	205	221	0
Ireland	163	723	776	7

Source: The figures in Tables 7.2 and 7.3 were compiled from the annual reports of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, under the Medical Charities Act, 14 & 15 Vic., C. 68, 1852–1871, and annual reports of the Local Government Board for Ireland, under the Local Government Board (Ireland) Act, 35 & 36 Vic., C. 109, 1872–1920.

TABLE 7.3 Changes in the Organisation of the Dispensary Service, 1851–1911

<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Poor Law Unions</i>	<i>Dispensary Districts</i>	<i>Doctors</i>	<i>Midwives</i>
1851	163	723	776	7
1861	163	718	777	55
1871	163	718	801	177
1881	163	721	808	268
1891	160	721	810	341
1901	159	747	811	508
1911	158	741	810	729
1920				809

Under the 1851 Medical Charities Act, dispensary doctors were required to possess a licence to practise medicine, a qualification in surgery, and certification of ‘a competent knowledge of midwifery’.³¹ The regulations governing dispensary districts did not refer to the management of midwifery cases by the medical officers, nor to midwives or their employment, possibly because so few were attached to dispensaries when the legislation was enacted.³² The Poor Law Commission, the body responsible for implementing the Act, was aware of the tendency among country women to engage a friend, relative or local empirical practitioner when giving birth rather than the dispensary doctor, and was conscious also of the consequences that might arise from complications in the pregnancy. On 2 August 1861, a decade after the enactment of the medical charities legislation, the Poor Law Commission issued a directive clarifying the respective roles of dispensary doctors and midwives, and their relationship. It was the doctor’s duty to examine any woman in labour who possessed a dispensary relief ticket, and to take charge if he discovered any difficulty or danger. If the case was one of natural labour, he instructed the midwife in writing to attend for the duration, but if problems arose, she was duty-bound to call in the medical officer, and he assumed responsibility for managing the pregnancy until the patient recovered or the case terminated.³³

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Local Government Board for Ireland, which succeeded the Poor Law Commission, decreed that applicants for dispensary midwifery appointments had to be at least twenty-five years of age and in possession of a midwifery certificate from a recognised lying-in hospital. The latter requirement could be dispensed with in the case of any individual currently serving, or who had previously served, as a dispensary or workhouse midwife – ‘having been qualified for such office at such previous time’, according to the board’s rationale – and this derogation applied to any future appointment also. The Local Government Board’s revised regulations obliged each dispensary midwife

- to reside ‘in a convenient place’, within easy access of the medical officer
- to execute all lawful orders and directions of the medical officer applicable to her office
- to attend ‘duly and punctually’ all midwifery cases in the dispensary district for which medical relief tickets had been issued, and to continue her attendance on each patient until her services were no longer required

- to inform the medical officer of the result of all cases in which he had not been consulted
- to keep a register of all cases attended and to submit it monthly for inspection by the board of guardians

The midwife was prohibited, on pain of dismissal, from accepting a fee for her services from any patient in the dispensary district who had obtained a medical relief visiting ticket or who was entitled to medical relief under the 1851 Medical Charities Act. As before, the midwife was subordinate to the dispensary doctor. She was responsible for unproblematic cases of natural labour, the doctor for managing to termination all difficult or dangerous pregnancies.³⁴

Despite the various obstetric advances that were made during the nineteenth century, unqualified and unregulated midwives continued to practise and flourish. On 21 December 1896, a Belfast dispensary doctor informed an inquest into an infant's death that large numbers of unqualified midwives practised in Ireland, and that many deceased children who were registered as stillborn were alive at birth but had died shortly afterwards owing to want of proper care and medical attention. The coroner concluded that Belfast was overrun with midwives who were ignorant of the very rudiments of the profession they presumed to practise. The jury found that the infant died from asphyxia, and if a doctor had been present the infant's life in all probability would have been saved.³⁵

The problem was not confined to Belfast or to the nineteenth century. In 1908, a parliamentary inquiry into unqualified medical and surgical practice in the United Kingdom revealed that uncertified midwives, now generally and pejoratively classified as 'handy women' – a term rarely if ever used in Irish sources until around the turn of the twentieth century, coinciding with, and possibly popularised by, debates surrounding the introduction and passage of midwifery legislation for England and Wales in 1902 – plied their trade in at least 33 of Ireland's 158 poor law unions, and doctors' complaints, criticisms and denunciations of the untrained resonated with those of their predecessors in the pre-Famine decades. The medical officer attached to Clogheen union in County Tipperary reflected the views of his early twentieth-century colleagues when he asserted that unqualified midwives constituted 'a grave public danger' and their attendance on the poor should be prohibited 'under the severest penalties'.³⁶

Irvine Loudon has noted the dramatic decline in maternal mortality in the lying-in hospitals of various countries from the late 1870s–early 1880s onwards and attributed this development to the introduction of antiseptic and later aseptic practices. 'There is no doubt', he claimed, 'that the introduction of Listerian antisepsis and its later combination with asepsis was the most important development that had ever occurred in obstetric practice.'³⁷ Untrained and unregulated midwives, the inheritors and representatives of tradition, were the antithesis of such obstetric developments and progressiveness, of modernity. They were perceived and criticised as ignorant of the importance of hygiene, neglectful of aseptic precautions, and as such primarily responsible for puerperal mortality from sepsis.

The Midwives Act, 1902 was largely devised to address the continuing problem of unregulated and unhygienic midwifery practice and its association with maternal

and infant mortality, but the legislation applied only to England and Wales.³⁸ One of the objections to extending the statute to Ireland was its perceived interference with the midwifery fees of dispensary doctors.³⁹ Eventually, pressure from the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and other training institutions resulted in the Midwives (Ireland) Act, 1918, which, along the lines of its 1902 English predecessor, established the Central Midwives Board to maintain a roll of midwives and to regulate their training, examination, registration and practice.⁴⁰

The legislation prohibited women from describing themselves as midwives unless certified under the Act and made it an offence for unregistered midwives to attend women in childbirth 'habitually and for gain' except under the direction of a medical practitioner. Midwives who were trained and licensed were eligible for certification, but so too were practising midwives who had little or no formal training. These were the so-called 'bona fides', women who could satisfy the Central Midwives Board that when the Act was passed they had been in bona fide practice as a midwife for at least one year and were of good character.⁴¹

The admissibility of unqualified and unlicensed midwives, in effect the handy women who were the subject of almost universal professional criticism, to state registration and, by extension, toleration resulted in criticism of the Act, similar to that directed at the 1902 legislation in England and Wales. Certification did not guarantee either competency or integrity, but a midwife was subject to supervision once enrolled and it was hoped that this process would lead to the gradual phasing out of certified but untrained (bona fide) midwives. It did, but the process proved to be a protracted one. In 1919, a year after the legislation was enacted, the Local Government Board reported that large numbers of the poor were employing handy women rather than qualified midwives, even in dispensary districts where the latter were available gratuitously to the poor.⁴² At the close of 1922, the Irish Nurses' and Midwives' Union commented that the 1918 Act was ineffective, and that hundreds of handy women represented a constant threat to the lives of women and children. The Union claimed that there was no discouragement of handy women: insurance societies accepted their signatures for maternity benefit purposes; doctors nationwide and medical students at the various maternity teaching hospitals availed of their services, and, the Union warned, unless the law was enforced and handy women prosecuted, the latter would continue 'to spread ill-health, disease and death through the country'. The Union noted that expectant mothers engaged handy women because they were 'lucky', and cheap, but it queried the authorities' toleration of the risk these women posed to 'the lives and health of Ireland's future citizens through superstition, ignorance or false economy'.⁴³

Conclusion

Handy women, that is midwives with little or no formal training, unqualified professionally and unregulated, proved remarkably resilient. The numbers of licensed midwives employed within the dispensary service continued to increase in the

second half of the nineteenth century and in the opening decades of the twentieth and were available free of charge to the eligible poor, but their deployment was uneven. There were gaps in the system, dispensary districts where there was no public midwifery provision, and the size and extent of the other districts ensured that a solitary midwife could not possibly meet the demands that were made on her services. Deficiencies in the public midwifery service created a vacuum for uncertified midwives and perpetuated the unsanitary environment in which puerperal fever flourished.⁴⁴ But even where regular midwives were accessible and available without charge to the poor, pregnant women often preferred their unqualified rivals, the handy women, who were plentiful and affordable, as the Irish Nurses' and Midwives' Union and others noted.⁴⁵ Maybe, as one County Waterford resident suggested in the *Irish Times* in February 1922, normal healthy women with uncomplicated pregnancies found the descendants of Carleton's Rose Moan, the village handy woman, more empathetic, more in tune with their needs, customs and practices than their state-sanctioned counterparts. She reminded readers of the *Irish Times* that the handy woman washed and dressed the new-born baby morning and evening for a month, tended to her charges several times a day, acted as substitute mother to the other children in the household, and often remained overnight when the husband was absent from home. In effect, the writer observed, the handy woman provided services to the poor similar to those afforded to the wealthier classes by the well-paid monthly nurse, which prompted the disturbing conclusion that the village handy woman was both 'a solid comfort' and 'a terrible danger'.⁴⁶

Much of the information in this chapter was derived from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Irish and British medical journals, a cornucopia of medical and social history and unique reference works that have been underutilised by historians (See Wellcome open collection <https://www.jstor.org/site/artstor/open-wellcome-collection/>). British Parliamentary Papers and primary legislation, which are freely available online and referenced by Ciara Breathnach in her chapter, provided much of the remaining information. The tables presented in the chapter capture continuing medical and midwifery professionalisation in post-Famine Ireland, and suggest possibilities for further research at local, regional and national level, the need to put flesh on the skeleton framework.

Notes

- 1 Lombe Atthill, "Recollections of a long professional life – 1844 to 1904", *British Medical Journal* 1 (1910): 27.
- 2 William R. Wilde, "The history of the rise and progress of medicine in Ireland", *London Medical Gazette* 6 (1848): 478–9; Idem, "A short account of the superstitions and popular practices relating to midwifery, and some of the diseases of women and children, in Ireland", *Monthly Journal of Medical Science* 3, no. 35 (May 1849): 711–26.
- 3 William Carleton, "The Irish midwife", *Irish Penny Journal* 1, nos. 26, 27, 40 (1840–1): 202–4, 209–13, 313–6, at 202–4 (available through JSTOR); reissued as "Rose Moan, the Irish midwife", in William Carleton, *Tales and sketches, illustrating the character, usages, traditions, sports and pastimes of the Irish peasantry* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845), 113–53.
- 4 Carleton, *Tales and sketches*, 113–24.

- 5 *Report as to the practice of medicine and surgery by unqualified persons in the United Kingdom*, HC 1910 [Cd 5422], xliii, the final section, 65–88, is entitled “Memorandum on unqualified practice in Ireland”, 68, 70, 71.
- 6 William Carleton, *Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry* (Dublin: William Curry, 1843), xxiv.
- 7 Wilde, “A short account of the superstitions and popular practices relating to midwifery”, 721.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 724–6.
- 9 J. Morrison, “Report of the Newry dispensary and fever hospital for the year 1837”, *Dublin Journal of Medical Science* 13 (1838): 263. Morrison attended 154 women in labour in 1842, *Dublin Medical Press* 1 (March 1843): 136–7.
- 10 William Shaw Mason, *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland, drawn up from the communications of the clergy* (Dublin: J. Cumming, 3 vols, 1814–19), 2, 157–8.
- 11 Denis Phelan, *A statistical inquiry into the present state of the medical charities of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges & Smith, 1835), 310.
- 12 *Poor inquiry (Ireland). Royal Commission on Condition of Poorer Classes in Ireland, first report, Appendix B, medical relief, dispensaries, fever hospitals, lunatic asylums*, HC 1835 (369), xxxii, part 2, 28.
- 13 *Ibid.*, part 1, 42, 44, 106, 108, 113, 122, 180.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 62, 66, 127–8, 249, 251, 255, 272, 307.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 46; William P. Borrett, “Report on the medical institutions of Ireland”, *London Medical Gazette* 18 (1836): 256.
- 16 *Dublin Medical Press*, October 18, 1843, 245; February 25, 1846, 118–20.
- 17 *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix B*, part 1, pp. 46, 49; Borrett, “Report on the medical institutions of Ireland”, 256.
- 18 *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Appendix B*, part 1, pp. 12, 24, 25, 30, 66, 68, 139, 168, 210, 216, 227, 230, 233, 237, 272.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 62, 66, 102–3, 127–8, 246, 9, 251, 255, 259; *Dublin Medical Press*, February 2, 1848, 68–9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 30, 184–5, 342.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 22 Phelan, *A statistical inquiry into the present state of the medical charities of Ireland*, 310–12.
- 23 Wilde, “A short account of the superstitions and practices relating to midwifery”, 713–14. For a reference in Irish folklore to the use of herbal concoctions to effect abortion or miscarriage, see Ciara Breathnach, “Handywomen and birthing in rural Ireland, 1851–1955”, *Gender & History* 28, no. 1 (April 2016): 34–55 at 53, n. 51.
- 24 Irvine Loudon, *Death in childbirth. An international study of maternal care and maternal mortality 1800–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 166–71; Philomena Gorey, “Managing midwifery in Dublin. Practice and practitioners, 1700–1800”, in *Gender and medicine in Ireland, 1700–1950*, eds. Margaret H. Preston and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 123–37.
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- 26 An act for the completing and effectually lighting and watching of Rutland Square, and for the better support and maintenance of the hospital for the relief of poor lying-in women in the city of Dublin, and for other purposes therein mentioned, 25 George 111, c. 43 (clause 11).
- 27 National Archives Ireland, Official Papers/1827/754/5, "Testimonials in favour of Elizabeth Walsh".
- 28 John Ringland, *Annals of midwifery in Ireland* (Dublin: John Falconer, 1870), 26–7.
- 29 Phelan, *A statistical inquiry into the present state of the medical charities of Ireland*, 310–11.
- 30 *Report of the Select Committee on Midwives' Registration; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix, and index*, HC1892 (253) xiv, 56–8. See also *Lancet* 2 (1893), 653–4, 896–7, Lombe Atthill to the editor.
- 31 An act to provide for the better distribution, support and management of medical charities in Ireland; and to amend an act of the eleventh year of her majesty, to provide for the execution of the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, 1851, 14 & 15 Vic., c. 68.
- 32 *Medical Charities Ireland. First annual report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for Relief of the Poor in Ireland, under the Medical Charities Act, 14 & 15 Vic., c. 68*, Appendix A, no. 28. HC 1852–53 [Cd 1609] 1.325.
- 33 *Annual report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for Relief of the Poor in Ireland, including the fifteenth report under the 10 & 11 Vic. C. 90, and the tenth report under the 14 & 15 Vic., c. 68, with appendices*, HC 1862 [Cd 2966] xxiv.535., 17–18.
- 34 *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, being the twenty-seventh report under the Local Government Board (Ireland) Act, 35 & 36 Vic., c. 69*, HC 1899 [Cd 9480] xxxix.1., 708–9.
- 35 *Lancet* 1 (1897): 141–2. For an inquest on a Co. Armagh woman who died of post-partum haemorrhage, see *Lancet* 2 (1911): 1099–1100, "The 'handy woman' again".
- 36 *Report as to the practice of medicine and surgery by unqualified persons in the United Kingdom*, HC 1910 [Cd 5422] xliii, 70–2.
- 37 Loudon, *Death in childbirth*, 203–5.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 217–18.
- 39 *British Medical Journal* 2 (1916), 275–6, L. Kidd, Enniskillen, to the editor.
- 40 Anne McMahon, "Regulating midwives: the role of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland", in *Care to remember. Nursing and midwifery in Ireland*, ed. Gerard M. Fealy (Cork: Mercier Press, 2005), 158–71; Joseph Robins, *Nursing and midwifery in Ireland in the twentieth century. Fifty years of An Bord Altranais (The Nursing Board), 1950–2000* (Dublin: An Bord Altranais, 2000), 15–16.
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- 42 Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, for the year ended 31st March 1919, HC 1920 [Cd 578] xxi.1, 30.
- 43 *Irish Times*, December 23, 1922, T. Nunan and M. Thompson to the editor.
- 44 *British Medical Journal* 2 (1916): 275–6, L. Kidd, Enniskillen, to the editor.
- 45 *Report of the Select Committee on Midwives' Registration*, 56.
- 46 *Irish Times*, February 16, 1922, 'Sister' to the editor.

8

GENDER, FOLKLORE AND MAGICAL HEALING IN IRELAND, 1852–1922

Andrew Sneddon

This chapter explores magical healing¹ in later-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland. It challenges existing historiography that contends that magical beliefs and practices were increasingly rejected after the Great Famine of the 1840s as a consequence of urbanisation, emigration, the strengthening of the official Church, a decline of the Irish language, and technological, economic, and educational change. These linguistic, social and cultural shifts ensured that even the strongest adherents, the rural, Roman Catholic poor, began to increasingly shun this older, moral magical universe. This was a universe that had been populated with an interventionist God and Satan, demons, angels, witches, and supernatural entities such as fairies.² Feeding into this narrative of decline of belief in the supernatural in Ireland was a similar picture painted of diminished belief in witchcraft, ghosts, fairies, banshees, and the curative power of Holy Wells among Irish diaspora communities in England and North America in the later nineteenth century. In this reading, traditional culture did not survive migration due to clerical hostility and because the urban landscapes that Irish people inhabited in their new countries held no place for supernatural beliefs that were place-specific and intimately related to surviving and negotiating the harsh environment of rural Ireland.³

It has been long acknowledged that in the later nineteenth century the poet William Butler Yeats and his contemporaries 'were drawn to the study of the occult and the supernatural, with its own nationalising angle: he discovered Theosophy and Eastern Mysticism, as well as fairy-lore, in 1880s Dublin'.⁴ Indeed, the Victorian age in Britain and Ireland witnessed an upsurge in interest among women and men, especially the middle class, in magic and the occult, from astrology, mesmerism, and ceremonial or ritual magic to spiritual mediumship and spiritualism.⁵ More importantly, recent research has corrected the old picture of a disenchanting, post-Famine Ireland by demonstrating that many Irish people continued to believe in fairies, ghosts, death messengers and omens. They also believed in and practised, or at least

were thought by their contemporaries to practice, beneficial and harmful magic, including divination, fortune telling, and supernatural cursing. These beliefs were strongest among the rural poor and crossed denominational lines from Roman Catholic to Protestant.⁶ Historians have demonstrated that magical belief and practice in Victorian Britain and Ireland was not incompatible with the urbanisation, secularisation, and rationality often associated with modernity, but was adaptive and transformative and enabled people of varied socio-economic backgrounds, in the countryside and in cities, to negotiate the uncertainties and challenges and of modern life.⁷

In common with Scotland, England and America,⁸ belief in witchcraft in Ireland (the use of magical or occult means to steal agricultural produce or harm or kill animals and humans) retained cultural currency among the poor up until at least the early twentieth century. This was long after witchcraft had ceased to be a crime in Ireland. In 1821, the Westminster parliament repealed the 1586 Irish Witchcraft Act, which made harming by magical means a felony punishable by a year in prison and four appearances in the pillory on market-day. For a second offence, or a first offence that involved a murder, the sentence was death by hanging. A consequence of a continued belief in witchcraft in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, however, was that men and women were accused of witchcraft by their neighbours. Suspected witches, along with the people that accused of them of witchcraft, were both male and female. The establishment in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century of a government-controlled, national police force and the extension of lower courts of petty sessions made it easier for complaints involving witchcraft or popular magic to be made by the poor and to be investigated and acted upon. Consequently, suspected witches were more able to charge their verbal or physical attackers with slander or assault and have them dealt with by the authorities. Victims of witchcraft, on the other hand, charged suspected witches with theft if they believed they had stolen milk or butter using magic, or with slander or assault if the suspected witch had responded to their accusation with violent words or actions. Witch beliefs crossed the religious divide between Catholic and Protestant but were strongest among poorer people who worked the land or looked after livestock. Nevertheless, they can be detected in this period in urban areas and among those of a higher social class.⁹ Recent research has shown that Irish people emigrating to America or relocating to England took their belief in ghosts and witches with them, and rather than dissipating in their new environment they changed and adapted to them.¹⁰

Another vital aspect of Irish magical culture was magical healing. Magical healers should not be conflated or confused with miraculous or faith or healers who channelled God's power to heal the sick by touching them or by 'the laying on of hands'.¹¹ Magical healing in Ireland was dispensed primarily by charmers and cunning-folk who cured ailments, diseases and illnesses attributable to both supernatural and natural causes, in either cattle or humans, using a mixture of oral and written charms, rituals, herbs, and magical objects.¹² Charmers worked free of charge and often specialised in curing one ailment or naturally occurring complaint or illness.

Cunning-folk were paid for a range of magical services with money or goods, and, although they occasionally healed natural occurring illness, they specialised in the diagnosing, detecting and countering of witch and fairy attack. This distinction drawn between cunning-folk and charmers, on the basis of specialisation and commercialisation, was first established in studies of magical healers in Scotland, England and Wales.¹³ Before exploring the activities of these, specialist magical healers, it is necessary to pause to consider amateur magical healing in the context of wider heterodox magical practice.

Remedies, rituals, and charms were used all over Ireland in the nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century by ordinary people, for a range of complaints and illness in animals and humans, without the intercession of specialist magical healers.¹⁴ This herbal and magical knowledge was culturally transmitted through oral tradition and local female networks.¹⁵ Given that some of the charms and rituals used by amateurs were the same as those used by charmers and cunning-folk, it could be that they learned how to perform these operations by watching a specialist at work. A chief source of historical knowledge of magical healing, employed by non-specialists and specialists alike, is folklore, of which Ireland has inherited an unusually rich collection. In the nineteenth century, folklore was published by largely Protestant, Anglo-Irish landowning elites and collected from rural, smallholders and tenant farmers. It focused on customs and what they termed 'superstitious' supernatural beliefs and practises, including fairy lore. Established in 1935, the Irish Folklore Commission employed full-time, part-time and volunteer field collectors to gather folklore and local traditions, including these relating to traditional medicine and healing. These collections were archived in 1971 in the Department of Folklore, University College, Dublin, which became the National Folklore Collection (NFC) in 2005. They are increasingly accessible through digitation projects, most notably the records of the Schools Folklore Scheme (SFS), which ran from 1937 to 1938. This scheme charged primary schoolchildren, attending around 5,000 primary schools in the Irish Free State, with collecting local folklore under the watchful eyes of their teachers. In 1955, in Northern Ireland, the journal *Ulster Folklife* was published and folklore began to be recorded by employed collectors and through the issue of questionnaires. These collections are now housed in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum near Belfast.¹⁶ The methodological issues inherent in using Irish folklore as a historical source have been well documented, but it nevertheless provides a crucial understanding of under-documented aspects of lives of the poor, especially those of women, including their magical beliefs and use of traditional or heterodox medicine.¹⁷

Simple, well-known, amateur remedies for everyday illness and complaints were legion in Ireland, and incorporated vegetables and herbs as well as modern, manufactured products. Brown paper saturated with vinegar was applied to the head to cure headaches, garlic was ingested to treat asthma or measles, and boiled burdock (a common medicinal plant) used as a 'blood purifier'.¹⁸ Meanwhile, magical healing rituals, such as walking blindfolded 'three times round a pigsty', were used to cure mumps (a contagious viral infection affecting children),¹⁹ while riding

‘a donkey’ was employed as a ‘charm for curing ... whooping cough’ (a bacterial infection of the breathing tubes and lungs).²⁰ In twentieth-century Co. Sligo, whooping cough, referred to there as ‘chin cough’, was cured by drinking donkey’s milk.²¹ Children in various parts of Ireland were also passed three times under donkeys to cure this infection.²² More macabre amateur charms were also employed. In later-nineteenth-century rural Ireland, north and south, teeth were removed from corpses as a charm to prevent toothache.²³ Irish antiquarian Thomas Johnson Westropp discovered, in his folklore survey of Connacht in the west of Ireland in 1922, that ‘toothache can be charmed by rubbing the gums with a dead man’s finger’.²⁴ Although a tool of the trade of specialist magical healers, some rural people also owned prehistoric arrowheads (also known as ‘elf-shot’ or ‘fairy darts’ as they were believed to have been fired by fairies) which they immersed in water and gave to ill livestock and humans to drink.²⁵ People often tried to cure bewitched cattle themselves before going to the trouble or expense of consulting a specialist. They employed a variety of methods to do so, including muttering simple incantations near the afflicted animal, feeding them plants and herbs known to have healing properties, drawing magical symbols around milk churns, and tying branches of the Rowan or Mountain Ash tree (in folklore bestowed with magical properties) or red rags to their tail or horns.²⁶

Specialist magical healers, cunning-folk and charmers, along with other unregistered, traditional or folk medical practitioners such as bonesetters, handywomen, and chemists, formed a part of a diverse, mixed medical economy for the poor, especially in rural areas, as Breathnach’s contribution demonstrates. Heterodox magical practitioners shared the same diagnostic, curative and cultural space as the public health system and qualified medical practitioners, and often formed part of a blended approach to disease and illness, either used in conjunction with one another or consecutively.²⁷ However, for many of the rural poorer class in the later nineteenth century, traditional medicine remained the recourse of choice; a choice not necessarily dictated by the limitations of provision of free, professional medical care but by socioeconomics, culture and politics.²⁸ Along with witchcraft and ghosts, magical healing also made the successful crossing to America with Irish migrants. A case study of an Irish magical cure for scrofula or the King’s Evil (a bacterial infection of the lymph nodes known today as Tuberculous Cervical Lymphadenitis) reported in the *New York Times* in 1858 has been recently used to discuss the importance of Irish magical healing, charms and charming in the United States in the later nineteenth century. Hospital admission records from this period have also shown that Irish immigrants in New York City often only sought hospital care and the advice of physicians when traditional healing strategies failed.²⁹ Irish immigrants to the United States also resorted to cunning-folk when witchcraft was suspected. In 1876, Julia Welsh, who had emigrated to New Jersey from Co. Mayo in 1866, was prosecuted for an assault on Mary Meehan whom she suspected of bewitching her daughter. In an attempt to cure the child she heeded the advice of a cunning woman, Mrs Collins, and employed the stock, Irish counter-charm of burning a piece of Meehan’s clothing; an action which placed her on the wrong side of the law.³⁰

Magical healing in post-Famine Ireland, and indeed abroad in diaspora communities, thus formed part of a complex, changing and enduring magical culture, and was employed both with and instead of scientific medicine. But who were charmers and cunning-folk, and what exactly did they do? Before answering these questions, it is best to discuss the types of primary sources, apart from folklore, that historians use to explore modern magical beliefs and practices, which are by definition secretive and mysterious and thus often hidden from the historical gaze. Historians have increasingly turned to newspapers to study popular magic and witchcraft in its wider social context at both national and local level.³¹ This effort is aided by an increase in court reporting and the rise of the provincial newspaper in Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century. In Ireland, the rise in court reporting was facilitated by an increase in numbers of crimes to report on in an era of expansion of policing and the court system. Once identified in newspapers, criminal cases involving magic and witchcraft can be followed up in the often-patchy (in terms of temporal and geographical coverage) official records (court, coroner, census, and prison records) to provide a fuller picture of the case and the people involved.³² Objects of magical culture are increasingly used by historians and archaeologists to further our understanding of how magic was practised in the past. These objects provide particular insight into apotropaic magic, used either as all embracing protection against evil, or more specifically to thwart attacks by fairies or witches. Material culture also illuminates the ways in which counter-magic was used to undo the effects of bewitchment or fairy 'shot', 'stroke', 'blast' or abduction.³³

Charmers were both Roman Catholic and Protestant, men and women, and although found mostly in rural areas they were also present in towns and cities. They were drawn from the same social class as their clients and combined unpaid healing with other work or employment. They were often well-known and respected in their area, but it nevertheless took local knowledge to link a specific to a charmer to a particular ailment or complaint. Their methods and practices varied from district to district and place to place but again some generalisations can be offered. Charmers often specialised in a 'charm' or 'cure' for a particular ailment or illness. In humans, they treated minor ailments and complaints and occasionally more serious illness, including: burns and scalds, ringworm, sprains, back pain, warts, toothache, oral thrush, bleeding, whooping cough, erysipelas (a bacterial infection of the skin), and heart complaints. There are also a few examples of charms being used in the mid-nineteenth century to cure cholera or prevent its contraction. Charmers were thought to inherit their charms from other practitioners, sometimes on their deathbed, and the charm was often passed in sequence from male to female and vice versa. Their charms often comprised a ritual, the use of an object such as a plaster or a piece of bread, and a rhyme or prayer. The fact that their charm was essentially magical, which might have caused embarrassment to Christian practitioners or their clients, was obscured by this patina of Christianity; by referring to the Trinity, repeating portions of the Lord's prayer, or by saying a Hail Mary. Charms could also be written down to be worn close to the body as a curative or protective talisman. When they were inherited, charms came with instructions on how they

were to be used. Recipients were often warned by the person passing them on that the efficacy of the charms depended upon their not charging for them and keeping their healing method a secret.³⁴

Some charmers were born with an innate power to heal certain ailments, particularly the seventh son of a seventh son. In early twentieth-century Co. Cavan, charmers of this type were believed to cure scrofula by their touch, and if born post-humously (after their father's death) they were able to cure oral thrush in children by breathing on them three times.³⁵ It was reported by folklorist Joseph Meehan in 1906 that in rural Co. Leitrim, elderly Lackey Gallagher specialised in 'the cure of the ringworm' and that his curative powers were the result of being 'the seventh son of a seventh son'.³⁶ In Co. Monaghan, a collector for the SFS reported that 'the seventh son of a family has a cure for warts and rickets', and that 'a child who was born after his father's death has a cure for a child's dirty mouth [oral thrush]'.³⁷ Although many charmers specialised in treating either humans or animals, some treated both. In Co. Clare, in 1912, a blacksmith, Denis Curtis, was said to cure cows who had swallowed raw potatoes along with liver complaints in humans. He treated human patients by placing them 'on their backs on his anvil' and pretending to 'strike them with a sledge hammer ... on three occasions'.³⁸ The number three is not only a significant motif in this case but more generally in Irish, English and Welsh charming between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Written and oral charms often stated that the ritual, rhyme or prayer had to be performed three times, or contained references to three Angels or three people, or ended with three 'Amens'. The number three held Christian significance as it referred to the Holy Trinity, as well as number of key events and people in the New Testament, but also held ancient mythological and pre-Christian magical significance.³⁹

Due to the legal and journalistic developments described above, some magical healers were prosecuted in the lower courts by dissatisfied clients seeking redress and recompense.⁴⁰ At Galway Petty Sessions in 1905, the alleged crime of a small tenant farmer, Edward Halloran, of 'selling charms and taking money for doing so' were deemed serious enough, given the tragic circumstances surrounding the case, to warrant a trial at the higher criminal court of the Quarter Sessions. After diagnosing John Concannon's illness as a liver complaint, Halloran put a 'charm on ... [a] cake and the butter' and gave it to him to eat. The cure proved ineffectual and feeling he would never be cured, his brother Thomas told the officiating magistrate, he 'drowned himself'. Halloran 'admitted giving the charms, but said he did not know it was any harm, and that he took no money for it'.⁴¹ Coroner reports given at inquests also throw light on charming. In these reports, charmers were often treated as misguided but essentially inculpable dabblers who stood in the way of poorer patient's receipt of proper medical care. In January 1897, William McIlhattan, dealer and magical healer, attended Belfast Recorder's Court for an Inquest into the death of John James Stewart. The infant died after McIlhattan had muttered an incantation and passed him three times under a donkey to cure his whooping cough. A verdict of death by bronchitis was returned and McIlhattan was absolved of any blame, and it was noted that he had provided his charm free

of charge.⁴² In Co. Down in April 1910, a young woman named Greenfield died from blood poisoning after being treated for erysipelas over a number of years by ‘a man’ who had a ‘cure’. A local physician, Dr McWilliam, was contacted a few days before her death by her father, a labourer. The father later informed the inquest that after this consultation he ‘continued the use of the “cure” in preference to the [physician’s] medicine, and refused to allow the District Nurse to bathe the girl’. Dr McWilliam stated ‘he believed that by the use of this “charm”, which did neither good nor harm, valuable time was lost: and that if proper medical treatment had been used the girl’s life might have been saved’.⁴³

Cunning-folk operated in both Catholic and Protestant communities throughout Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries much as they had done in the previous two centuries. Variants of cunning-folk have been found all over Europe and America in the early modern and modern period under different names and often displaying regional variation in their practices and methodologies. These seemingly diverse practitioners can be linked together by the fact they provided a range of magical services, took money or payment in kind, and often specialised in countering and curing the effects of harmful magic or supernatural attack.⁴⁴ Ronald Hutton has suggested that to adequately reflect both the diversity and shared characteristics of these practitioners, who are to be found all over the world, the nomenclature ‘service magician’ should be used instead of ‘cunning-folk’, ‘witch doctor’, or ‘medicine man’ or ‘medicine women’, which are too culturally specific to, respectively, England, Africa, and North America.⁴⁵ This is a compelling argument but the terms ‘cunning-folk’ or ‘cunning man’ or ‘cunning women’ have been used in this chapter to retain continuity with earlier research on Irish magical practitioners. What complicates matters further, however, is that Irish cunning-folk were known by a number of names, which often reflected subtle differences in their main magical specialism: in English they are known as wise men or wise women, fairy or elf doctors, fairy men or fairy women, and cow doctors; in Irish, they are referred to as *doctú’ in’ na sí’ofraí’* (fairy doctors), *mna’ feasa* (wise women) *bean feasa* (wise woman), or *lea’ sí’* or (fairy healers).⁴⁶

By definition, Irish cunning-folk were commercial practitioners who were paid for their services with cash or with goods. Male and female, they came in two principal guises: the settled practitioner, who served local clients as well as those coming from further afield; and the travelling specialist, whose living was often more precarious and were thus more likely to defraud or steal from clients. Settled practitioners tended to be more prosperous than their itinerant counterparts, and gained respect and power in their communities that would otherwise not have been open to them. Clients of Irish cunning-folk, in common with those of charmers, were usually but not exclusively drawn from the ranks of the rural poor. Irish cunning-folk in the late nineteenth century offered one or more of the following range of services: they told fortunes using simple methods such as cards or palms; found lost or stolen goods (including cattle); healed natural, minor ailments in cattle and humans; and, most importantly, diagnosed, protected against, and cured illness believed to have been caused by fairies, witches, and the ‘evil eye’ (an innate, magical power located

in the eyes that can be used intentionally or can work unintentionally). Belief in fairies was strongest (as it had been for centuries) in rural, Roman Catholic communities but can be detected in counties in Ulster where Protestants predominated. It was, however, in Catholic communities that cunning-folk were called upon to return children, occasionally adults, that had been abducted by fairies and replaced with sickly ‘changelings’. Cunning-folk who performed dangerous ceremonies that involved ‘changelings’ being made to drink noxious draughts, being exposed to the elements, or burned, occasionally found themselves on the wrong end of a criminal prosecution or inquest verdict. In an case, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, legal action was increasingly taken against wandering cunning-folk, charged either with theft or obtaining money under false pretences. These charges were levied by disgruntled clients and by local police.⁴⁷

The most prominent of Irish cunning-women in the nineteenth century were Mary Butters, Moll Anthony (Mary Lesson) and Biddy Early. Presbyterian Mary Butters told fortunes and cured bewitched cattle in early nineteenth-century Co. Antrim. She became infamous when she was tried (and later acquitted) in 1808 for the murder of three clients who had succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning by a counter-spell she had concocted to cure a bewitched cow. Moll Anthony died in Co. Kildare in 1878 having enjoyed a long career telling fortunes, curing minor ailments, and by returning or healing animals or humans attacked or abducted by fairies. In Feakle, Co. Clare, Early told fortunes and found lost or stolen cattle and goods by looking into a mirror, and treated minor ailments using incantation, herbs, and a strange liquid contained in a black bottle. She also countered the spells of witches who stole milk or butter, and cured ‘fairy-stricken’ children and adults afflicted by the ‘evil eye’. All three women were paid in goods or money for their services, and local folklore suggest that Anthony and Early derived their magical powers from the fairies.⁴⁸

Lesser-known cunning-folk can be found in newspaper court and coroners’ reports. In 1856, in Kilmoganny, Co. Kilkenny, labourer Patrick Kearns, convinced that his bedridden nine year-old son was ‘being gradually carried off by the fairies’, consulted ‘fairy-man’ Thomas Donovan. Donovan confirmed the child had been ‘blast[ed]’ by fairies and immediately dragged the boy out of bed and into the front yard into the elements to cure him; an action which an inquest later heard had led to his death.⁴⁹ Mary Doheny, a 40-year-old Roman Catholic from Co. Tipperary made a living by providing love potions to unmarried women, providing herbal cures for sick children, and diagnosing and curing bewitched cattle. Doheny finally fell foul of the law in 1864 and was brought before Carrick-on-Suir Petty Sessions for defrauding sub-Constable Joseph Reeves of a substantial amount of money and goods. She had taken these ‘gifts’ for foretelling Reeves’ future and for ‘raising the spirit’ of his dead son, whom he had lost a few years previously. The case was upheld in the petty sessions and referred to Clonmel Quarter Sessions, where in October 1864 a jury found Doheny guilty and the judge sentenced her to 12 months’ imprisonment with hard labour.⁵⁰ In Tipperary in May 1902, cattle drover and part-time cunning-man William Murphy was found guilty at Clogheen

petty sessions of theft and trespass. The complaint was brought by his neighbour, tenant farmer John Russel, who was convinced that Murphy came onto his land to bewitch his cattle.⁵¹

Folklore enriches the picture of cunning-folk gained from court reports in contemporary newspapers. Folklorist Nathaniel Colgan noted that in the Aran Islands in May 1892 there was an old woman who used incantations, herbs and the power of the 'evil eye' to cure clients by transferring disease from her paying clients onto random, unsuspecting members of the public.⁵² In 1893, Leland L. Duncan related a story popular at that time in the parish of Fenagh, Co. Leitrim, about a family who had successfully used a travelling cunning-man to counter the spells of a witch who had stolen butter from their cows. The family were obviously lucky as the man was reputed to have used the same type of counter-spell that Mary Butters had used to kill three people in 1807.⁵³ In the 1930s, in Killruran, Co. Clare, Michael Peppard, collecting for the SFS, reported that only 'Bid[d]y Early or an Bean Feasa' could return the ability to churn butter from milk once stolen by a witch.⁵⁴

This chapter has argued that a rich magical culture is discernible in post-Famine Ireland up until at least Partition in 1922, in both Protestant and Catholic communities, north and south, and was strongest among the rural poor. At the centre of this magical mental world was magical healing, which is often overlooked in historical treatments of the period. Magical healers were both men and women who often came from the same social class as their clients. Magical healing was often used in tandem with, but more likely instead of, the public health system and qualified medical practitioners. Historical categorisation imposes perhaps too neatly on what was often a messy past, but magical healers can be separated into three broad categories: well-informed amateurs; charmers; and cunning-folk or service magicians. Well-known 'home' remedies, charms and rituals were used by amateurs to cure or prevent common complaints, illness and disease. These were often used before recourse was made to a specialist magical healer and they were transmitted culturally via oral tradition and networks of local knowledge. Charming was provided free of charge by men and women either born with an innate gift to heal a specific ailment, or who had inherited a charm to do so. Charmers treated a whole manner of naturally occurring illness, especially those affecting the skin. Members of the medical profession were understandably angry when treatable conditions developed into untreatable ones due to delayed medical intervention. Cunning-folk were paid in goods or with money, and while they performed a range of magical services, from the provision of love magic to divination, they often specialised in diagnosing and curing the effects of fairy and witchcraft attack in humans and animals. The commercial aspect of their practice left them open to prosecution for fraud when they either failed to deliver the promised outcome to clients or the client or their family member died. Some of their number were also suspected of inheriting their gift from the fairies.

There is still much research to be done on magical healing in Ireland in this period. For example, a dedicated, large-scale project is needed to establish the precise gender balance, geographical spread, and denominational make-up of cunning-folk

and charmers. More use needs to be made of folklore, especially sources in Irish, in particular the main manuscript collection of the NFC. The imagery and iconography of Irish cunning-folk should also be explored in detail.

Notes

- 1 Magic is defined broadly as the use of occult or supernatural methods involving ritual, incantation, plants or objects to manipulate or alter the physical world.
- 2 For research that posits a post-Famine decline of magic in Ireland: Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, “The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland,” in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. Peter Narváez (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 199–214; Sean J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland, 1780–1845* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1982, repr. 2001), 112–29; Timothy G. McMahon, “Religion and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *History Compass* 5, no. 3 (2007), 855.
- 3 Lynn Hollen Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 179–96.
- 4 Roy F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and His Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 131–2.
- 5 Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in late Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 2004); Antonio Melechi, *Servants of the Supernatural: The Night Side of the Victorian Mind* (London: Arrow Books, repr. 2009); Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).
- 6 Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), chapters 5–7; John Fulton, “Clerics, Conjurors and Courtrooms: Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Ireland” (PhD diss., Ulster University, 2016); Jodie Shevlin, “The Supernatural in Catholic Ireland in the Long Nineteenth-Century: 1821–1921” (PhD diss., Ulster University, 2020); Christina S. Brophy, “What Nobody Does Now’: Imaginative Resistance of Rural Labouring Women,” in *Women, Reform and Resistance in Ireland, 1850–1950*, ed. Christina S. Brophy and Cara Delay (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 185–210.
- 7 See: Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England 1780–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999); Thomas Waters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019). For modernity and magic: Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006), 692–716.
- 8 See, Lianne Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment: Scotland, 1670–1740* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2016); Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture, 1736–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Owen Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Owen Davies, *America Bewitched: The Story of Witchcraft after Salem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 9 See: Andrew Sneddon and John Fulton, “Witchcraft, the Press and Crime in Ireland, 1822–1922,” *Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019), 741–64; Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*, chapters 5–6; Andrew Sneddon, “Witchcraft Belief, Representation and Memory in Modern Ireland,” *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 3 (2019), 255–7.
- 10 Davies, *America Bewitched*, 37–9, 77; Waters, *Cursed Britain*, 103.
- 11 For divine healing in Ireland: Anthony D. Buckley, “Unofficial Healing in Ulster,” *Ulster Folklife* 26 (1980), 26–9, and Laurence M. Geary, “Prince Hohenlohe, Signor Pastorini and Miraculous Healing in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” in *Medicine, Disease and State in Ireland, 1650–1940*, ed. Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm (Cork: Cork University Press, 1991), 40–58.

- 12 Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*, chapter 7.
- 13 Owen Davies, "Healing Charms in Use in England and Wales 1700–1950," *Folklore* 107, no. 1–2 (1996), 19–32; Owen Davies, "Charmers and Charming in England and Wales from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries," *Folklore* 109, no. 1–2 (1998), 41–52; Owen Davies, "A Comparative Perspective on Scottish Cunning-folk and Charmers," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 185–205.
- 14 Meredith B. Linn, "Irish Immigrant Healing Magic in Nineteenth-Century New York City," *Historical Archaeology* 48, no. 3 (2014), 151; Bryan H. Jones, "Irish Folklore from Cavan, Meath, Kerry, and Limerick," *Folklore* 19, no. 3 (1908), 315; Marion Dowd, "Bewitched by an Elf Dart: Fairy Archaeology, Folk Magic and Traditional Medicine in Ireland," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28, no. 3 (2018), 458–60.
- 15 Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*, 134.
- 16 For overviews of the history of folklore collection in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland: Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000, repr. 2004), chapters 2, 4; and, Ciara Breathnach, "Handywomen and Birthing in Rural Ireland, 1851–1955," *Gender & History* 28, no. 1 (2016), 34–9, 43–5; For digitised collections from the NFC, see <https://www.duchas.ie/en> [last accessed 21/2/2021].
- 17 Breathnach, "Handywomen," 34–6, 45–7; Clodagh Tait, "Worry Work: The Supernatural Labours of Living and Dead Mothers in Irish Folklore," *Past & Present* 246, Issue Supplement 15 (2020), 218; Ciaran McDonough, "Folk Belief and Landscape in Connacht: Accounts from the Ordnance Survey Letters," *Folk Life* 57, no. 1 (2019), 56–69; Mary E. Daly, "'The State Papers of a Forgotten and Neglected People': The National Folklore Collection and the Writing of Irish History," *Béaloideas* 78 (2010), 61–79.
- 18 Jeanne Cooper Foster, *Ulster Folklore* (Belfast: H.R. Carter, 1951), 60–1; Simon Woods-Panzaru et al., "An Examination of Antibacterial and Antifungal Properties of Constituents Described in Traditional Ulster Cures and Remedies," *Ulster Medical Journal* 78, no. 1 (2009), 15.
- 19 Jones, "Irish Folklore," 315.
- 20 Folklore Collector's Books (i), Ballycarry, Co. Antrim, Women's Institute, May 1958, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, v-12-2, 26.
- 21 NFC Schools' Collection, Volume 0187, 066, <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701763/4700739/4715334> [last accessed 21/2/2021].
- 22 NFC Schools' Collection, Co. Offaly, Volume 0813, 359, <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044626/5027028/5145433> [last accessed 21/2/2021]; Foster, *Ulster Folklore*, 59.
- 23 Sir William V. Wood to Sam Henry, 8 October 1938, Coleraine Museum, Sam Henry Collection; Linn, "Healing Magic," 153.
- 24 Thomas Johnson Westropp, "A Study of Folklore on the Coast of Connacht in Ireland," *Folklore* 33, no. 4 (1922), 391.
- 25 Dowd, "Bewitched," 458–60.
- 26 Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*, 134; Westropp, "Folklore on the Coast of Connacht," 395.
- 27 Catherine Cox, "Access and Engagement: The Medical Dispensary Service in Post-famine Ireland," in *Cultures of Care in Irish Medical History, 1750–1970*, ed. Catherine Cox and Maria Luddy (London: Palgrave 2010), 57–78; Catherine Cox, "The Medical Marketplace and Medical Tradition in Nineteenth Century Ireland," in *Folk Healing and Health Care Practices in Britain and Ireland: Stethoscopes, Wands and Crystals*, ed. Ronnie Moore and Stuart McClean (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 55–79; Ronan Foley, "Indigenous Narratives of Health: (Re)Placing Folk-Medicine within Irish Health Histories," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 18 (2015), 5–18.
- 28 Breathnach, "Handywomen," 36–7.
- 29 Linn, "Healing Magic," 144, 150–1.

- 30 Davies, *America Bewitched*, 104–5.
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9

GENDER AND INSANITY IN IRELAND, 1800–1923

Oonagh Walsh

For as long as we have had human societies, we have had mental illness. Across the globe, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, race, or class, every community has not merely experience of individuals whose mental states changed their relationship with others, but also beliefs and therapeutic approaches to cope with their behaviour. Mental illness is part of the human condition, yet most societies have viewed it as a problem to be cured, and, if incurable, to be contained. In pre-Christian Ireland, there were an abundance of beliefs surrounding the insane, and early Irish law recognised their potentially vulnerable state, offering protections against exploitation and abuse.¹ A rich folk culture surrounded the mentally ill, with various sites, rituals, and objects associated with supposed causes and cures. It was believed, for example, that insanity could be caused by a Druid throwing an enchanted ‘madman’s wisp’ in a person’s face, or that differing stages of the moon caused people to lose their senses. Certain parts of the country, especially those associated with pagan wells and springs, were believed to offer cures to individuals in the grip of insanity. In Co. Kerry, there is a beautiful valley known as *Gleann na nGealt*, directly translated as Glannagalt or Valley of the Mad, which has a well called *Tobar na nGealt*.² Believed to exert an irresistible attraction to the insane, the well waters allegedly have the power to cure madness, and it has proved a place of pilgrimage for distraught sufferers and their families for several centuries. Although folk attitudes towards the insane were often inflected with fear, there were also some positive connotations. The insane were believed to possess insights beyond that of ordinary men and women, and to have the ability to see visions and supernatural manifestations inaccessible to ordinary humans. They were also credited with superhuman strength, and extraordinary feats of speed and stamina. Sadly, this belief often resulted in the maltreatment of the mentally ill, who, when in great mental distress and fear, often violently resisted efforts to restrain or pacify

them, confirming a conviction that they were dangerous individuals who required great force to control. Even after a medicalised system of care was introduced in Ireland, these earlier attitudes persisted in the country, with excessive brutality meted out to people who were believed to be impervious to pain or cold as a consequence of their insanity. In Britain, until a system of public institutions for the care of the mentally ill developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religious orders (especially monastic orders) had offered voluntary aid to the insane. In Ireland, the situation was quite different. As the country became increasingly devout in the post-Famine years, the Catholic church moved into many areas of medical care in Ireland. Orders of nursing nuns staffed the workhouses and hospitals throughout Ireland, concerning themselves with the care of women and children in particular, but did not seek to assume responsibility for the asylums.³ Although the church made no effort to enter the asylums, it did assume a dominant role in the care of the intellectually disabled. These individuals were deemed worthy of care as they were believed to be part of a divine plan to allow the devout to demonstrate grace and mercy, by caring for the helpless.⁴ The expression ‘touched’, used in Ireland to denote a person with an intellectual disability, comes from the phrase ‘touched by the hand of God’: unlike the insane, these were individuals under Divine protection.

The District Asylums

The District Asylum system developed from the report of the ‘Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland’ of 1817, which resulted in the ‘Irish Lunatic Asylums for the Poor’ Act. The Select Committee had gathered evidence from the managers of institutions, including the House of Industry and existing asylums such as the Richmond and St Patrick’s Asylums in Dublin, and the asylum in Limerick. The Select Committee reported on staggering levels of neglect and outright cruelty in relation to insane institutionalised inmates, as well as those cared for at home or wandering the country, dependent on casual charity for survival. The facilities at Limerick were described as

... such as we would not appropriate for our dog-kennels ... without any mode of heating or of ventilating, and exposed during the whole of the winter to the extremities of the weather. ... In one of those rooms [designated for the treatment of physical illness] I found four-and-twenty individuals lying, some old, some infirm, one or two dying, some insane, and in the centre of the room was left a corpse of one who had died a few hours before. Another instance was still stronger: in the adjoining room I found a woman with the corpse of her child, left upon her knees for two days; it was almost in a state of putridity. ... [I]n this establishment, with governors ex officio, and with all the parade of inspection and control, there was not to be found one attendant who would perform the common duties of humanity.⁵

As part of the British government's drive towards centralised government, and taking an increased responsibility (however reluctantly) for the health of its citizens, a national system of asylums for the care of the pauper insane was established. Michel Foucault has written imaginatively of the 'Great Confinement' which took place across Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, as governments embarked on a modernising agenda that included educational, infrastructural, and medical provision for their populations.⁶ Foucault asserts that the development of asylums in the western world reflected an intolerance of difference or deviance, and a desire to assert state control over individuals whose behaviour threatened the body politic: in his analysis, asylums were less an effort to assist the ill, and more an agenda to incarcerate and isolate them.⁷ The medical profession – growing in strength and professional status in the nineteenth century in particular – argued, however, that only within specialised institutions, with expert staff, could people be restored as productive members of society, and rescued from their distressing states of madness. The first of the District Asylums were rapidly constructed in the 1820s, at Armagh (1825), Belfast (1829), Derry (1829), and a new asylum at Limerick (1827); by 1835, an additional five institutions opened at Carlow (1832), Ballinasloe (Co. Galway, 1833: officially titled the Connaught District Lunatic Asylum, or CDLA), Maryborough (Co. Laois, 1833), Waterford (1834), and Clonmel (Co. Tipperary, 1835). This extraordinary expansion was criticised by many, who felt that this was a gross over-provision for the small number of lunatics in Ireland. In the case of the asylum at Ballinasloe, which opened with the capacity to house 150 patients, it was reported in the local press that there were not 150 lunatics in the whole country, and few in the entire province of Connaught.⁸ This proved an unfortunate assessment, as the Ballinasloe asylum, in common with every other district asylum in the country, rapidly filled to capacity and began a system of continual expansion of buildings that continued throughout the nineteenth century. The case of Ballinasloe was fairly typical of the country as a whole. Opening with beds for 150 patients in 1833, it accommodated 300 by 1853, and over a thousand in 1896.⁹

One of the key drivers of this enormous increase in lunatic asylum inmates was the legislation that governed admissions in Ireland. Patients in Irish asylums were accepted under two systems. The first was by direct application to the institution, a process normally undertaken by a close relative of the afflicted person. The other was under legislation known as the Dangerous Lunatics Act (DLA), passed in 1838.¹⁰ This Act, intended to be used only for emergency admissions, became in fact the default method of committal for Irish lunatics, and had a tremendous and damaging effect on the Irish asylum system. Described by Brendan Kelly as 'ill conceived, poorly implemented, and grossly unjust', the Act managed to achieve several negative impacts simultaneously.¹¹ It made a direct association between criminality and insanity that was unique to Ireland (England, Scotland and Wales were exempt from the operation of the Act, as they were governed by their own, regionally specific, legislation¹²); forced the mentally ill into wholly inappropriate custody in gaols before their removal to an asylum; offered extraordinary powers

to ordinary people to make malicious accusations of insanity against others; prioritised public safety concerns over the health of the accused; resulted immediately in gross overcrowding of Irish asylums (no person presented to an asylum under the Act could be refused admission); and gave Justices of the Peace with no medical expertise the authority to assess an individual's state of mental health. It is an extraordinary piece of legislation, which was to shape the delivery of Irish mental health services throughout the nineteenth century.

The implementation of the Act greatly increased the stress placed upon individuals with mental illness. When an accusation of 'dangerous insanity' was made against a person (and the accusation could be made by anyone, without corroborating witnesses), they were arrested, and brought before two justices of the peace. These men had no specific training in the recognition of mental illness, but nonetheless were required to judge whether the individual before them was in fact a dangerous lunatic. If they agreed with the charge, the person was taken to the local gaol (as they were now officially deemed dangerous), and from there to the district asylum closest to their normal place of residence.¹³ Some unfortunate lunatics languished in gaols for months before their transfer, often treated harshly by the criminals they lodged with, who disliked and feared the mentally ill. Upon presentation at the asylum (under armed constabulary escort), they were initially evaluated by the asylum physician, but regardless of his professional opinion with regard to the person's state of mental health, the patient had to be admitted, as the asylum was legally compelled to admit anyone brought under the DLA. Originally intended as a means of ensuring public safety by swiftly removing dangerous lunatics from the community, and to be used in emergencies, it in fact became the default means of admission to Irish District Asylums, leading inevitably to overcrowding and the exploitation of vulnerable persons.

It is appropriate that many of the ancient myths in Ireland that surround mental health focused upon males: as the nineteenth century progressed, and Irish asylums filled to capacity and beyond, it was male patients who not only constituted the majority of inmates but who preoccupied the asylum inspectors, government advisers, as well as the asylum medical and nursing staff. As each asylum opened, they received a rush of patients who had previously been accommodated in gaols, houses of industry, and workhouses, and whose managers saw in the asylum an opportunity to rid themselves of long-term inmates.¹⁴ When the asylums established themselves and admissions settled into regular rhythms, the impact of gender as a precipitating factor began to emerge. The impact of the DLA was clear from the earliest years of its operation, and became increasingly obvious in the post-Famine years.

After the depredations of the Famine, Ireland was a fundamentally different society. With changes to marriage patterns and systems of inheritance, an increasing social conservatism, and large-scale outward migration, it was an environment in which gender roles were more sharply defined, and expectations for young men and women without resources limited (these themes are all thoroughly examined in this volume in chapters by Murphy, Breathnach, Farrell and Fitzgerald). In a period in which power was increasingly visible, and the population had become

accustomed to state-provided systems such as the poor law, dispensaries, and county and municipal judicial and political administration, men and women were steadily categorised in terms of perceived strengths and weaknesses from a biological perspective. In this context, the power offered by the DLA to rapidly commit individuals if deemed dangerous had a significant impact upon male admissions. Men were regarded as being inherently more prone to violence than women, and less able to control their brutal impulses. When in the grip of insanity, these propensities were exacerbated. This meant that they were charged with dangerous insanity in great numbers than women, and were also committed to the asylum more often on a first attack. Women patients to the CDLA, for example, were more likely to be committed on their third attack of mental illness – they were cared for at home rather than in the institution – while men were most likely to be sent to the asylum as soon as they exhibited dangerous or violent behaviour.¹⁵ There were practical reasons for this pattern: a violent man was more difficult to control than a woman, and the case notes record the often-valiant efforts made by families, with the help of neighbours, to prevent a violently disturbed person from harming themselves or others.¹⁶ But it is also the case that an often-unsubstantiated fear of the greater potential for male violence ensured that the DLA was triggered swiftly in the case of male patients, and considerably more slowly for women.

The respective spheres which men and women occupied in nineteenth-century Ireland also played a significant role on speed and frequency of admissions, as well as the evidence upon which they were sent to the asylum. An examination of the committal warrants to the CDLA in the 1870s shows that single women were in the majority of cases admitted on the evidence of a female relative, and in most cases their mothers.¹⁷ Single women, if they did not have paid employment as domestic servants or agricultural labourers, lived and worked (in the majority of cases without pay) on family farms, occupying a largely domestic sphere. When they started to exhibit symptoms of insanity, it was their nearest female relatives – mothers and sisters – who were the first to notice, and who were most likely to suffer injury in attempting to control their ill relation, and also to be in a position to provide the most accurate testimony. Men, occupying the broader sphere of paid work on non-family farms, as casual employees on public works, and in allied employment through which they enjoyed in general a wider physical space, were more likely to come into conflict with strangers, or at least non-family members. They were therefore much more likely to be regarded as potential public dangers and nuisances, and be arrested and sent directly to the Magistrates for assessment, than were women. Habitual male drunkards who became belligerent in communal spaces such as fairs and marts were often accused of ‘offering violence’ to strangers, and were rapidly processed into the asylums. In the post-Famine years, the drinking of alcohol by women was regarded as a significant indicator of immorality, and only the most ‘degraded’ females would drink alcohol in public. This had something of a protective effect against their admission to asylums by strangers, while the opposite was true for men.

When examining the role of the DLA in gendered admissions, it is important to interrogate the meaning of the term ‘violence’, and to consider the object of a disturbed individual’s violent attention. The key criteria for admission under the Act was that an individual has been ‘discovered and apprehended ... under circumstances denoting a derangement of mind, and a purpose of committing an indictable crime’. This remarkably broad definition was most often applied to the threat or execution of a violent act, and a close examination of additional evidence offers interesting insights into the gendered admissions process. Despite the fact that the DLA accounted for the overwhelming majority of admissions to Irish asylums in the nineteenth century, the actual levels of violence, especially that offered to strangers (a key public order aspect of the DLA), were extremely low. In only 16 per cent of admissions under the DLA in 1872–73 to the Connaught Asylum were non-family members attacked, suggesting that the threat represented by the mentally ill to the public at large was low. This pattern is consistent with twenty-first-century figures. Despite a belief on the part of one-third of the UK population that ‘people with a mental health issue are likely to be violent’, it is in fact the mentally ill who are far more often the object of violence.¹⁸ In nineteenth-century Ireland, a disturbed individual was far more likely to turn their violence upon themselves, and this was especially true for women. In the 1872–73 cohort, 82 per cent of the patients admitted as suicidal under the DLA were female, and those of both sexes admitted as a ‘danger to self and others’, 71 per cent were women. Women therefore represented a low threat to public safety, and the use of the DLA to admit them is a sadly poignant misrepresentation of the danger that they actually posed. Moreover, in many cases of actual assault by women, it would seem that the violence was often a secondary consequence of suicide attempts. In two 1872 cases, for example, a woman who was arrested because she ‘did violently attack and bite, and otherwise assault’ her husband, in fact did so because he was preventing her from attempting to kill herself.¹⁹ Similarly, a young woman who ‘assaulted [her father] and others in a most violent manner’ attacked them because she was being prevented from seizing a knife to stab herself with.²⁰ These are tragic cases, regardless of the ultimate objective, but it indicates that the DLA’s concern to regulate public order by removing dangerous lunatics from society was badly misdirected.

Criminal Insanity

Although violence, and violent intent, was a major precipitating factor in admissions to the District Asylums, the system was intended for the care and treatment of curable pauper lunatics. It therefore accommodated patients suffering from a wide range of illnesses, manifesting in a variety of ways, and included patients who did not exhibit violent or dangerous tendencies. By mid-century, it had become clear that a specialist institution that specifically articulated the connection between deliberate criminality and insanity was needed. In 1850, the Criminal Lunatic Asylum (CLA) was opened in Dundrum, Dublin for the treatment of ‘insane persons charged with offences in Ireland’.²¹ This broad definition theoretically applied

to a majority of patients admitted to the regional District Asylums, but in practice the CLA admitted those charged with the most serious of offences – in the majority of cases murder – and offered the potential for rehabilitation. To be eligible for admission, a patient had committed an act of extreme violence, but were deemed insane, and therefore not responsible for their actions. A threat of violence sent a person to the District Asylum, but the successful completion of that threat led to Dundrum. But even while murder or extreme assault linked the men and women in the CLA, there were significant gender differences in terms of the objects of their violence. In 1855–57, 60 men and 12 women were admitted because they had committed murder.²² In addition, 19 women were committed for the crime of infanticide (the deliberate destruction of an infant under 12 months). The attitude towards the women was remarkably sympathetic, especially in those cases of infanticide committed by unmarried mothers. There was a recognition of the inordinate stress that they were under, and the difficulty of coping with a pregnancy that was, in the majority of cases, concealed.

Great commiseration is no doubt, due to many who come within this category; for we can fully imagine how shame and anguish must weigh on an unfortunate and betrayed female, with enfeebled system, what strong temptations induce her to evade the censure of the world in the destruction of the evidence of her guilt, by a crime that outrages her most powerful instinct, maternal love of her offspring.²³

The concern of the asylum inspectors to understand and support women who had killed their children seems remarkably enlightened, and it was an attitude shared with asylum authorities in England.²⁴ The Irish inspectors urged the judiciary to treat women who killed their children, especially new-born babies, ‘with the utmost leniency’.²⁵ Although murder in this period automatically carried a potential death sentence, infanticide was regarded as a crime of an entirely different order. In 1864, the Home Office had recommended that in cases of the murder of an infant under 12 months of age by its mother, the death sentence should automatically be commuted.²⁶ Women who were admitted to Irish asylums having been judged insane at the time of the infanticide were normally discharged within a year of their committal, especially if a diagnosis of puerperal mania had been made.²⁷ However, the relative compassion and insight that this tendency suggests is not wholly positive. It was in its own way a confirmation of the presumptions regarding the imperatives of biology and madness: the act of killing one’s own child was so abhorrent, and so at odds with a woman’s primary function as a mother, that a woman who committed infanticide must undoubtedly be insane. The result was a much higher level of discharge of women than of men committed to the criminal asylum. There was a general acceptance that the women were suffering from a highly specific, temporary form of madness, and were not inherently violent. Although there was a concern regarding whether they might kill again following a subsequent delivery, and a good deal of

discussion about whether they should be detained until they passed childbearing years, they were discharged relatively rapidly, often within a year of committal. Men who had murdered were, on the other hand, detained indefinitely, with those who were eventually discharged often agreeing to emigrate as a condition of their release. In 1854, two recovered male patients were recommended for release because they were both 'under the certainty of emigration', and a further four were to be recommended in the following year, three of whom intended to emigrate to Australia.²⁸ Without this commitment to leave the country permanently (and the recommendation for discharge was made only partly on this promise), recovered male patients were sent to gaol to complete the remainder of their sentence, or if they were still deemed to be insane, even if largely recovered, they were transferred to their local District Asylum. Contrary to popular belief (which still remarkably persists today), a plea of insanity did not allow the guilty to escape penal detention. In 1872, two criminals from Castlebar, Co. Mayo attempted to feign insanity in the belief that if they were transferred to the asylum and then 'recovered' they would be released. On being told by the Resident Medical Superintendent (RMS) that that 'they were not insane, and that they would have to finish the full term of their imprisonment after leaving the asylum', they quickly dropped the pretence and resigned themselves to gaol.²⁹

Within the District Asylums biology also played an important role in determining treatments. While men and women suffering from melancholia (depression), mania (bipolar disorder), or general paralysis of the insane (tertiary syphilis) were often categorised and treated in similar ways, illnesses associated specifically with reproduction resulted in a distinct therapeutic approach. Women who were admitted suffering from puerperal mania (post-partum depression), or who were judged insane as a result of childbirth, received uniquely favourable treatment once admitted. In the early stages of their stay, they were not expected to work at the usual female occupations in the institution – able-bodied female patients were normally expected to undertake tasks such as laundry work, sewing and weaving, helping with infirm patients, and cleaning the asylum – but the puerperal maniacs were encouraged to rest, and devote their time to physical recovery as much as mental.³⁰ This is a remarkable application of pragmatic medical practice in nineteenth-century Ireland. In the post-Famine years, Irish family size was much larger than the European average (a pattern that persisted well into the middle of the twentieth century) with an average completed family size of 6 children, and families with up to 14 children not uncommon.³¹ This meant that many women experienced a relentless cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, from marriage to menopause. The constant strain exacted a drastic toll, and resulted in chronic physical and mental ill health. The reception of these women in the asylums tended to follow a pattern. Many entered the institutions in great distress, exhibiting the kind of behaviour – delusions, hallucinations, erratic behaviour – that saw other patients placed under close observation in the expectation of violence. But when it became clear that they had broken down as a result of reproduction-related stresses, they were afforded a uniquely supportive therapeutic regime. Recognising that in fact

many of these patients were malnourished and exhausted from childbirth, they were allowed to rest and recuperate, and discharged only when they had recovered physically. Thus, they were prescribed bed rest, and put on the 'hospital diet' in order to build up their strength.³² The normal asylum diet was somewhat monotonous (although more nutritious than that enjoyed by the general population), but the hospital diet offered meat, vegetables, wine, and spirits, all intended to restore the women to physical health. Although the symptoms that caused the admission of this group were mental, the asylum authorities implicitly recognised that what they needed was a period of physical recovery, and a removal, however temporary, from the demands of motherhood. It is significant that a key criterion for discharge for these women was a confirmation that they were 'fatter': this recognises that many were not mentally ill in the manner of other patients, but had been driven to breakdowns through physical debility.³³ Puerperal maniacs, and women patients admitted for childbirth-related treatments, held a particular value for the asylum authorities. The annual institutional reports included statistics regarding the number of patients discharged each year as 'cured', and it was a matter of professional pride to show a high cure and recovery rate. Indeed, asylum managers and RMSs routinely bemoaned the fact that they had to deal with incurable admissions foisted upon them by the workhouses and goals, and who, by the nature of their conditions, constantly depressed their cure rates. The puerperal maniacs were a cohort that had an exceptionally high recovery and cure rate, with most women being discharged within months. They were therefore valued patients from a professional perspective, and an example of how Irish asylums adapted to local circumstances, treating the women for circumstances that were, strictly speaking, not the responsibility of the mental health system.

There were other, gender-specific, diagnoses and conditions in the Irish asylums that should have been treated in other institutions. One that almost exclusively effected men was general paralysis of the insane (GPI), or tertiary syphilis, representing approximately 20 per cent of admissions to British asylums in the nineteenth century.³⁴ The Irish figure varied from approximately 3–5 per cent in the CDLA, to 15 per cent in the Dublin asylums, where a greater number of ex-soldiers lived: GPI was most common amongst ex-servicemen. The disease had three distinct phases, with visible lesions on the sufferer's body in the first stage, followed by an asymptomatic stage that could be extraordinarily lengthy (up to 40 years in some cases) but during which the patient was actively infectious, and ending with profound physical debility, and, in most cases, a mental state that suggested dementia. Those suffering from GPI were incurable, and required nursing care to the end of their lives. They were not appropriate admissions for the asylums, as they were incurable, and the asylum managers and physicians argued that they should be treated in the workhouses. However, as the course of the terminal disease 'ended in loss of control over mind and body, often accompanied by grandiose delusions of wealth and power', the workhouse managers vigorously rejected these patients, arguing that they could not be asked to house these delusional and morally dubious persons.³⁵ The DLA was used extensively by the workhouse authorities to have these patients

removed to the local asylums, leading to an ever-increasing population of terminally ill asylum inmates who occupied beds that were intended for acutely ill patients.

Doctors and Nurses

The District Asylums were organised hierarchically, with the RMS at the apex, supported by his medical juniors, who in turn instructed the nursing staff to carry out prescribed treatments. The institution was under the care of a manager (not medically qualified) and the larger asylums had a veritable army of staff who kept the records, maintained the buildings and gardens, and marshalled the able-bodied, long-stay pacific patients into work parties. Staff supervised the groups of male patients who worked on the farms, and the teams of female patients who filled a multitude of roles in the laundry, kitchen, and throughout the asylum, engaged in the constant labour of polishing, dusting, and cleaning an institution that housed an ever-changing asylum population of several hundred individuals. They were tremendously complex institutions, and the level of organisation needed to feed, clothe, and secure the patient and staff population was considerable. All of this intensive labour need had some positive implications from a gender perspective. The asylums offered a unique opportunity to Irish women: in the nineteenth century, employment possibilities for women were few in comparison with industrial Britain, and wages in Ireland in all unskilled occupations were lower. When the asylums opened, they embarked upon recruitment campaigns to attract nurses who would attend to the patients' mental and physical needs, and also undertake the domestic work associated with a large patient body. However, the hopes of the CDLA management that dedicated and intelligent women would support the rehabilitative objectives of the institution were quickly dashed. In 1847, the manager noted:

They [the nurses] are in general of an inferior class, and not sufficiently intelligent for their situations, particularly the females. No suitable persons offer, nor can be heard of about the country, with recommendations when vacancies occur. I minutely examined several, whom I found, with some few exceptions, very ignorant, and badly calculated to contribute to that system of moral management, upon which the value of the asylum depends.³⁶

The difficulty in recruitment stemmed partly from the stigma associated with the asylum, and the nature of the work in dealing with an often-unpredictable patient body. Until Florence Nightingale initiated formal nursing training in Britain in the 1860s, nurses were regarded with some suspicion, and their necessary involvement in the physical care of patients made it a career that was frowned upon by an increasingly conservative society. It was also a relatively low-status occupation in the earlier nineteenth century, with the title 'nurse' a largely honorific one. Many women designated nurses in workhouses were themselves inmates who assisted in the care of their elderly and infirm fellows, and there was a persistent belief that such women were morally suspect. They were undoubtedly women with few other resources, and although

the work they undertook was regarded as unskilled and demeaning, it did at least offer a basic bed and board provision in exchange for their labour. As the century advanced, and the asylums were drawn firmly into the professional medical system, formal training and qualifications led to substantial rises in salaries for asylum nurses, and a consequent increase in status. The introduction of a national education system in nineteenth-century Ireland had seen a sharp rise in literacy levels, spurred on by large-scale emigration that demanded literacy and numeracy to improve employment prospects in host countries.³⁷ While middle-class women flocked to the general nursing ranks, regarding the asylums with a degree of suspicion owing to the ‘taint’ of insanity, it was the less economically advantaged women who staffed the district asylums. The system therefore supported the professionalization of a cohort who had traditionally struggled to secure paid, permanent employment, and offered a unique path to economic stability and independence in rural Ireland. The District Asylums were heralded as confirmation of a new regard for the mentally ill, and of a more enlightened, modern Ireland, but they had an equally significant impact upon the staff who worked there, and the communities that surrounded them.

The District Asylums offer rich pathways to engage with nineteenth-century Irish history, as they offer insights into the lived complexities of gender, poverty, religion and health. There remains much to research in Irish mental health, with transnational and comparative histories offering an especially rich field for exploration. Although few psychiatric hospital archives are available online, there is a wealth of accessible material, including Commissions on Inquiry into Insanity in all four elements of the United Kingdom, as well as commentary on western society’s apparent descent into insanity in the pages of the *Lancet* and other medical journals.³⁸ On a broader stage, there is exciting potential for comparative work on race, ethnicity, and insanity, using imperial presumptions regarding the mental stability and capacity of the Irish and the Indians as a means of understanding how asylums developed in each country. Mental health and wellbeing is an increasing priority for governments worldwide in the twenty-first century, but it is only through understanding how historic systems developed that we can ensure the delivery of the best possible standards of care in the present.

Notes

- 1 Brendan Kelly, *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016), 15–18.
- 2 See <https://www.logainm.ie/en/24603> accessed 30 August, 2021.
- 3 A Catholic priest was appointed to each asylum to attend to the patients’ spiritual needs, and most institutions permitted the building of a Catholic church on the asylum grounds, so that those patients could attend Mass.
- 4 Oonagh Walsh, “A Person of the Second Order: The Plight of the Intellectually Disabled in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” in *Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, eds. Laurence M. Geary and Oonagh Walsh (Dublin: Four Courts, 2014), 169–170.
- 5 Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland, *Report from the Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland with Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Committee and an Appendix*, VIII.33 (London: House of Commons, 1817), 14–15.

- 6 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (London: Routledge Classics, 2019) [1961].
- 7 In fact, the greatest growth in asylums in Britain and Ireland in particular occurs in the nineteenth century.
- 8 *The Connaught Journal*, February 1, 1833.
- 9 *Connaught Journal*, September 25, 1833; *Fifth Annual Report on the District, Criminal, and Private Lunatic Asylums in Ireland* (hereafter *Annual Report*) (1853) and *Forty-Eighth Annual Report* (1896) respectively.
- 10 An Act to make more effectual Provision for the Prevention of Offences by insane Persons in Ireland 1838, Vic., Cap. xxvii.
- 11 Kelly, *Hearing Voices*, 49.
- 12 David Wright, "The Certification of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales," *History of Psychiatry* 10 (September 1998), 267–290.
- 13 The District Asylums were funded partly by a direct grant from government, and partly by local taxation. It was therefore important to ensure that patients were sent to their local institution, so that the cost of their care was appropriately charged to their home county.
- 14 These patients were actually ineligible for admission to the asylums, as they were incurable. The District Asylums were for the care of 'curable, pauper lunatics' only.
- 15 National Archives of Ireland, Committal warrants to the CDLA, 1860–70.
- 16 For cases where non-family neighbours offered assistance in caring for disturbed people prior to their admissions see Oonagh Walsh, "Gender and Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," in *Sex and Seclusion, Class and Custody: Perspectives on Gender and Class in the History of British and Irish Psychiatry*, eds. J. Andrews and A. Digby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 69–93.
- 17 In 1871, mothers provided the sworn testimony regarding the lunatic behaviour of their daughters in 57 per cent of cases of unmarried daughters, and sisters acted in a further 14 per cent of cases. Single women were therefore committed by their closest female relatives in 71 per cent of cases.
- 18 This is particularly striking when considering the tragedy of suicide. An estimated 85 per cent of people who commit suicide are experiencing mental illness at the time of death. See Mental Health First Aid England (MHFA), 'Mental Health Statistics,' 15/10/2020. <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation/mental-health-statistics/> accessed March 12, 2021.
- 19 NAI/CDLA/Warrant no. 47, admitted 22 May, 1872.
- 20 NAI/CDLA/Warrant no. 8, admitted 14 January, 1872.
- 21 Lunatic Asylums (Ireland) Act 1850, 8 and 9 Vict. c. 107, Sect. 9.
- 22 Calculated from the returns in the *Seventh and Eighth Reports on the District and Lunatic Asylums in Ireland* (1855 & 1856).
- 23 BPP, *Seventh Report on the District, Criminal and Private Lunatic Asylums in Ireland* (1855), XVI.137, 18.
- 24 Pauline Prior, "Psychiatry and the Fate of Women Who Killed Infants and Young Children, 1850–1900," in *Cultures of Care in Irish Medical History, 1750–1970*, eds. C. Cox and Maria Luddy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 92–112 at 102. For a full discussion of women and infanticide in Britain in this period, see Hilary Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- 25 *Seventh Report* (1855), 18.
- 26 This direction was extended to Ireland in the same year.
- 27 The modern diagnosis is post-natal depression.
- 28 *Sixth general report on the district, criminal, and private lunatic asylums in Ireland: with appendices*, XLI.353 (1854), 16.
- 29 *The twenty-first report on the district, criminal, and private lunatic asylums in Ireland; with appendices* C.647 (1872), 30.
- 30 NNAI/CDLA, "Rough Board of Governors Minute Book," 12 April, 1879.

- 31 Paul Brennan, “The Family in Ireland,” *Etudes Irlandaises* (2004), Vol 29, No. 1, 95–102 at 100.
- 32 *The twenty-first report on the district, criminal, and private lunatic asylums*, 124, 158.
- 33 This is not to say that these women were not mentally ill: they were in that they had suffered breakdowns and were enduring significant mental distress. They were however much more likely to recover, and not suffer a subsequent episode than other patients.
- 34 See Gayle Davis, *The Cruel Madness of Love: Sex, Syphilis, and Psychiatry in Scotland, 1880-1930* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) for a discussion of GPI in the psychiatric service.
- 35 Kelley Swain, “‘Extraordinarily Arduous and Fraught with Danger’: Syphilis, Salvarsan, and General Paresis of the Insane,” *The Lancet* 5 (September 2018), 702.
- 36 BPP, Report on the district, local, and private lunatic asylums in Ireland, 1846: with appendices 820, 37.
- 37 John Coolahan, *Irish Education: History and Structure* (Dublin: Institute for Public Administration, 1981).
- 38 Fiona Fitzsimons, “Kindred Lines: Lunatic Asylum Records,” *History Ireland* 25, no. 1 (January/February 2017), 31; Reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy, 1845–90 (London).

10

INSTITUTIONALISATION AND GENDER

From the Foundling Hospitals to the Mother and Baby Institutions

Sarah-Anne Buckley

Over the past twenty years, there have been dozens of commissions, inquiries, and investigations across the western world into historical child abuse in the twentieth century. From state and church-run institutions, to sporting organisations, youth organisations and charities, the experiences of survivors have slowly come to the fore. Abuse and neglect of women and children has been a particular feature, as has the role of religious bodies, and the patriarchal and class-based societies in which this abuse occurred.¹ Since the 1980s, a significant body of research on the history of institutionalisation has emerged initially from research on the history of philanthropy and poverty, and, more recently, has placed emphasis on the punitive nature of institutions and, at least in regard to the twentieth century, with a focus on the lived experiences of survivors/victims.² In the nineteenth century, orphanages, 'ragged schools', industrial schools and reformatories were set up to cater for orphaned and deserted children, and, later, for neglected children.³ The speed with which institutions were established can be attributed as much to religious concerns as to social need, as Catholic orders established orphanages and schools to counteract what they saw as the proselytising fervour of Protestant-run institutions (see Roddy's contribution). The state was also an increasingly active presence. With a particular focus on the gendered nature of crime and moral concerns, Magdalene asylums, prisons, inebriate reformatory and 'lunatic asylums' were all established to address social issues focused on the adult population.⁴

Examining the topic of institutionalisation through the lens of gender reveals much about the experience of women and children, but also the treatment of poverty and the role of the State and religious bodies in developing what James Smith has termed an 'architecture of containment' in the twentieth century. Following a life cycle approach to childhood and youth, this chapter will address a number of different 'types' of institutions that emerged in Ireland from the eighteenth century to deal especially with poor women and their children. It will begin with a discussion

of the first foundling hospital in Ireland, to demonstrate contemporary attitudes to ‘illegitimate’ children and single mothers. Building on Breathnach’s chapter on healthcare provision under the dispensaries, it will then address the experience of the system for children, before discussing institutions catering for children and younger people, specifically Ireland’s industrial and reformatory schools. The final section will briefly address Ireland’s Magdalene asylums and inebriate reformatories, and adds to the points raised by McCormick and Farrell’s contributions. The chapter will conclude with an outline of the foundation of Ireland’s ‘Mother and Baby Homes’.

From Gender to Youth – ‘Age’ as a Category of Analysis

In 2014, Harry Hendrick argued, in the first edited volume on Irish childhood, for the inclusion of ‘age’ as a category of analysis in studies of childhood and youth.⁵ Most scholars agree the beginnings of the history of childhood internationally are associated with Philippe Ariès’ 1960 study, translated into English as *Centuries of Childhood*. Following this, Lloyd de Mause, Edward Shorter and Laurence Stone all argued there had, over time, been major changes to the attitude and treatment of children. In 1983, Linda Pollock provided a major critique of existing theories, challenging Ariès’ contention ‘that in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist’.⁶ She also pointed out that many British historians did not agree with Stone’s characterisation of the parent–child relationship in the seventeenth century. In 2001, the Society for the History of Childhood and Youth (SHCY) was formed, acknowledging the huge growth internationally in the area.⁷ In the Irish context, the history of childhood and youth has been late to develop but is now a growing field.⁸

The treatment of child welfare and particularly children in institutions have been especially fruitful, with one of the first accounts being published in 1980, Joseph Robins’ *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900*. In this text, Robins argued that by the early eighteenth century, the abandonment of children, particularly those deemed ‘illegitimate’, was a matter of visible public concern which led to the foundation of Ireland’s first foundling hospital. From 1703, the City of Dublin Workhouse began to receive children aged between five and sixteen years to educate them in the Protestant faith and to apprentice them to Protestant masters. While discussions demonstrated some concern for the infants, very little concern for the women was expressed and for the most part, the institution was used as a way to ‘treat’ the issue and protect the sensibilities of the elite. In 1725 the institution was reorganised as the Dublin Foundling Hospital and Workhouse, and in 1730 it began admitting children of all ages, with infants usually delegated to the care of wet-nurses in the community. On the direction of Archbishop Boulter, Protestant Primate of Ireland, a ‘revolving basket was placed on the gate of the hospital into which unwanted children could be put anonymously by day or by night’.⁹

During the first seven years of the hospital’s existence 4,025 children were received, 3,235 of which died. Even given the high infant mortality rate at the

time, a mortality of almost 83% is indicative of gross neglect and overcrowding. In 1747, a foundling hospital was opened in Cork City, and another opened in Galway in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ The conditions were appalling in all three institutions, but particularly the Dublin one, where wet-nurses had as many as four or five infants each to feed. Robbins described how ‘the infants died in great numbers and their bodies were allowed to accumulate in a large coffin under a stairs before being buried’.¹¹ The fact that the majority were ‘illegitimate’ infants, is an indication of the pressure single women were placed under by ‘bastardy’ laws to entry marriage without ‘issue’. It also provides us with an impression of contemporary attitudes to children who threatened the institution of marriage (see Murphy’s contribution) and set a definite template for how single or impoverished mothers were treated in future decades.¹² While conditions improved slightly in later years, like the smaller Cork and Galway institutions, the Dublin institution was characterised by corrupt administration, poor diet, disease, infestation, and cruelty until its closure in the 1840s. Near the end of its operation, an inquiry by the Commissioners of Irish Education revealed not only that the governors had failed in their efforts, but also that of the 52,000 infants received during the period 1796 to 1826, 32,000 had died either as infants in the institution or after being sent ‘to the country’. Another 9,600 others, who could not be accounted for, were also thought to have died.¹³ In many ways, the institution set a precedent for infant institutional care of orphaned, abandoned and ‘illegitimate’ children that was endured. The rate of institutional infant mortality remained high throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century – and feature in the concerns expressed about the poor law system as will now be addressed.

Childhood under the Poor Law

As Breathnach’s chapter outlines, the Poor Law was established in 1838, and despite the protests of some philanthropists, the majority of children in the care of the poor law were kept in workhouses. As the system was designed to ‘reform as well as relieve’, the desire to mould workhouse children into valuable citizens proved deeply entrenched, and it may explain the reluctance of poor law guardians to opt for alternative measures like outdoor relief. On admission, parents and children were also separated at the age of two years, and since most parents did not apply for formal visitation children grew up with little parental contact. As well as the splitting up of family members, gender was a particular feature, with men and women being segregated. Most children in Ireland were not boarded out (or fostered) from of the institutions but kept in the workhouse, and most were also sent to schools or to work as early as possible – breaking all familial attachments. Boarding out (fostering) will be discussed later in the chapter. Given the conditions and structures of the workhouse, it is not difficult to establish why many philanthropists focused on the need to develop other option for children, but as fear of proselytism ran deep, many of the debates show more concern with religion, gender and social class than the actual physical welfare of the children involved. As Anna Clark argues, Irish

nationalists, the Catholic Church and philanthropic women also ‘used the issue of poor infant children as leverage in their confrontation with the British state’ – so very few had the welfare of the children involved in mind.¹⁴

In the first quarter of 1844, the total number of children in workhouses was 22,585, which represented about half the total workhouse population. By 1850 this had grown to an estimated 120,000.¹⁵ Although an improvement on the founding hospitals, the care afforded children within the workhouse still left much to be desired. Looking at diet, children were usually allowed three meals a day – of milk and oatmeal, potatoes, or bread – which compared favourably to the two permitted to adults. Yet mortality rates were high, especially in the larger urban unions and at times of particular pressure such as during the Great Famine. Children were supposed to attend school for a minimum of three hours per day but this generally amounted to little more than mass supervision in cold and dirty surroundings. Like adults, children were expected to engage in labour, most of it assigned based on gender, and in some workhouses, they were trained in trades or in agricultural or domestic work or hired out as farm labourers. In many instances, children spent their days without any occupation and, as a result, unruly or violent behaviour and absconding was frequent. For single women who had children and entered the institution, there was little understanding of the need for childcare and assistance to work outside of the workhouse. Therefore, many chose to place their children with a local woman for a small fee (known as a nurse) or to leave them alone in the workhouse. Until the mid-twentieth century, the successor to the workhouses, the county homes, remained one of the few options for unmarried pregnant women, particularly those who had experienced a previous pregnancy.

While institutionalisation would remain the primary option for authorities in the nineteenth century, the boarding out system (later known as fostering) which allowed poor law guardians to board out children that would otherwise be placed in the workhouse, was introduced under the *Irish Poor Law Amendment Act* (1862). The act gave boards of guardians the power to place orphan and deserted children up to the age of five years ‘out to nurse’,¹⁶ with the proviso that guardians could extend this to children aged up to eight years with the consent of the commissioners if they deemed it advantageous to the child’s health. This was later extended to ten years and then, in 1898, to fifteen years. In 1906, *The Vice-Regal Inquiry into the Irish Poor Law* expressed the belief that boarding out was the best means of caring for children who could not be raised by their family. This was echoed and ignored for the most part in the 1927 *Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor*. The system was re-affirmed in 1924 under the *County Boards of Health (Assistance) Order and the Public Assistance Act* (1939), and from 1922 until 1947, responsibility for the system fell to the Department of Local Government and Public Health, a sprawling entity with far too many responsibilities.¹⁷

What we certainly know was that the system was both haphazard and had a strong regional variation. For example, annual returns demonstrate that the total number of children boarded out in 1900 stood at 2,223, of whom 849 had been boarded out by Boards of Guardians in Leinster, compared to just 99 in Connacht.¹⁸ In 1873, the

Annual Report of the Local Government Board observed that the introduction of boarding out resulted from ‘the necessity which existed for remedying the mortality incidental to infant children reared without mothers in workhouses’.¹⁹ The question of orphaned, deserted or children born to single mothers was to the fore of debates. Despite clear guidance from the Poor Law Commission, the response was far from uniform. Generally, and in contrast to the situation in Scotland, most poor law children in Ireland (and in England) remained in some form of institutional care throughout the nineteenth century.²⁰ One of the reasons for the guardians’ reluctance to authorise boarding out was the fear that pursuing an interventionist approach to poverty alleviation would encourage parents to be irresponsible in having children and abandoning them. The system also did not allow for the boarding out of ‘illegitimate’ children without special dispensation. Conflicting views on the upper age limit to which children should be cared prompted disagreement and reflected the inherent debate over the merits of industrial over domestic care.²¹ Two issues were especially critical to the success of boarding-out – the choice of foster parent and the quality/frequency of inspections. An examination of both issues reveals the problems with the system. The majority of foster parents were identified by the members of boarding-out committees, philanthropists, and other interested persons. Occasionally, advertisements were placed in the local newspapers seeking ‘adoptive’ parents. In 1877, the Local Government Board for Ireland issued a list of conditions that prospective foster parents had to satisfy in order to ensure the wellbeing of children. The stipulated criteria embraced moral character, religion, health, housing and economic status. In respect of the latter, one stipulation directed that ‘no child shall be permitted to continue with any foster-parent who ... shall keep any pig, cow, donkey, or other such animal in the dwelling house.’²² Poor law guardians invariably sought references or testimonials signed by a local clergyman, magistrate or medical officer attesting to the good conduct and respectability of the foster parents. Inspectors, or relieving officers, were required to oversee and monitor the supervision and wellbeing of children in foster homes, provide regular reports to the Local Government Board on the workings of the system and make recommendations in particular cases. Despite these good intentions, as with the selection of foster parents, inspections were haphazard and varied from union to union. When carried out regularly, inspection results were generally very favourable. In 1873, the inspector for the Galway region noted: ‘children are in good hands and well cared for. I inspected them on Saturday last, and found them well housed, comfortably clothed and presenting a clean and healthy appearance’; he also observed positively ‘some degree of kinship’ between the children and family.²³ By contrast, Dr. Roughan of the Sligo district wrote that one house in the Collooney region was ‘a damp hovel, with filthy surroundings. It consisted of one apartment, containing 2 beds, each occupied by four persons. A cow, a calf and a pig occupy or share a portion of it.’²⁴

How many children were boarded out? In their 1870 report on the administration of poor relief in Ireland, the Commissioners calculated that 1,207 children were in fosterage. This was a significant increase on the 689 children in that position the previous year, and it was attributed to ‘the extension of the age to which this

class of children may be relieved out of the workhouse' and 'to the further adoption of the system by Boards of Guardians'.²⁵ Nevertheless, when set aside the 15,000 children residing in workhouses at the time, it is striking just how deep-rooted the institutional approach to pauper relief was. At an average of £6 per child per year, boarding out was half the price of residential care, but local authorities preferred the institutional approach; what they lost in financial terms they recouped in human resources and energy as it was easier to send children into workhouses (and later industrial schools) than to engage in the task of seeking and vetting applications and pursuing inspections. The problem was that it was not in the best interests of the child, but one inspector, Marie Dickie, pointed out in 1910 that 'philanthropy [was] not so widespread as to provide an open door for one orphan after another from the local workhouse'.²⁶

For those who were neither boarded out nor reared in the workhouse, a number were 'placed at nurse' and the question of who cared for illegitimate children is at the heart of any examination of so-called 'nurse children'. Without nurses, single mothers who lacked the support of family and friends would have found it difficult to keep themselves and their infants out of the workhouse. Few private charities extended their help to unmarried mothers before 1920, and the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834 prohibited guardians from giving outdoor relief to unmarried mothers. When they could find work, usually in domestic service, single mothers either paid nurses to board and care for their children or gave a lump sum payment (known as a 'premium') to women who thereby 'adopted' their babies. This afforded unmarried mothers a way to cope financially and offered other poor women an opportunity to profit from it. However, illegitimate infants at nurse were usually deprived of breast milk because their mothers had to work, and they were therefore more susceptible than breast-fed babies to illness and the digestive complications that accompanied artificial feeding. They often suffered the most severe neglect, and this continued well into the twentieth century.

Industrial Schools and Reformatories

Harry Hendrick argues that the establishment of reformatory and industrial schools in the mid-nineteenth century was representative of a more comprehensive process that had been developing since the end of the eighteenth century in which the criminal justice code was being 'reordered'.²⁷ The justifications Hendrick points to are similar to those that have been put forward with regard to the industrial schools and reformatories in Ireland in the twentieth century. Justifications such as poorly-trained staff, voluntary staff (or, in the Irish context, individuals ordained as priests and nuns, not always as teachers), under-funded schools and 'unruly' children ignore the enormity of the situation and the culpability of many different influential forces. Hendrick also argues that in Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century, industrial schools and reformatories represented a system of control of the working class, as well as a means of managing poverty and destitution in working-class, urban families and rural labouring families. Legislation to establish

reformatories for young offenders aged between twelve and sixteen was passed in 1858 and further legislation established industrial schools in 1868. Under the Industrial Schools (Ireland) Act, 1868, children under fourteen could be committed to an industrial school if they were encountered begging, or if they were without a home or proper guardianship, destitute, or 'frequent[ing] the company of reputed thieves'.²⁸ Children under twelve convicted of a misdemeanour could also be sentenced to detention in an industrial school. The great majority of children were committed for begging and from the outset industrial schools were more associated with poor, destitute or abandoned, rather than 'criminal' children. As a result, they gradually replaced the workhouse in this capacity.

In keeping with developments on Continental Europe, both were built and managed through voluntary effort with the state certifying and inspecting the institutions and, together with local authorities, providing capitation grants. Both were segregated according to religion and gender, and were required to provide moral and literary education as well as occupational training. Religion was central to the debates on the setting up of reformatories for young offenders in 1858. The Catholic hierarchy demanded that all boys and girls be sent to schools of their own denomination. Moreover, this was not an exclusively Catholic attitude; during the debates on the formation of industrial schools, Ulster Protestants expressed equivalent fears that working-class Protestant children might be ill-treated or stigmatised if they were ever placed in Catholic industrial schools.

By 1875 there were fifty industrial schools, and the highest number was reached in 1898, when there were a total of seventy-one schools of which sixty-one (fifty-six schools for Catholics and five for Protestants) were in what would later become the twenty-six counties of Saorstát Éireann. At its height in 1898, the population in the industrial schools was 7,998, compared with 6,000 in the same year in the workhouse.²⁹ That the number of children in industrial schools had outnumbered those in the workhouse is significant, and demonstrates the schools did have an effect on the placement of children in the workhouse. In 1924 the industrial school system came under the control of the Minister for Education. At this time the 1908 Children Act was the principal legislation covering the commitment of children to schools. As noted, the act was a landmark in the history of child protection, and in Ireland many of its clauses remained in force until the Child Care Act of 1991. Under the 1908 Act, the Minister for Education had the following functions: the certification of schools; the withdrawal of certificates from schools; approval of school rules; approval of alterations to buildings etc.; the conditional or unconditional discharge of a children from detention; discharge from supervision; the transfer of a child to another industrial school; the amount of government contribution to schools (subject to the Department of Finance); remission of payments ordered to be paid by parents and the making of various orders and regulations. With regard to the grounds for committal, the 1908 Act (and later the 1926 School Attendance Act and 1929 Children Act) covered numerous situations – from children under fourteen years found begging, destitute, orphaned, without a parent or guardian, in the company of a reputed thief, etc., to the clause that stated 'a

daughter, whether legitimate or illegitimate of a parent who has been convicted of an offence under the Criminal Law Amendment Acts 1885 to 1935'.³⁰ In general, there were very few instances, if the case were argued, in which a child could not be sent to an industrial school.

All the institutions addressed to date had two primary concerns – the need to ‘reform and relieve’ and fears of proselytising. This was also the case with the Magdalene asylums (addressed by McCormick) and the inebriate reformatories. From 1900 to 1920, three Inebriate Reformatories opened in Ireland, the most prominent being Ennis State Inebriate Reformatory. While the reformatories were a failure in many ways, they represented a particularly gendered approach to parenthood. Mothers were usually investigated for child neglect and if cases concerned alcohol they were sent in disproportionate numbers to the inebriates for an average of three years. In fact, an investigation of offences against children in the courts from 1880 to 1950 suggests several interesting observations about the treatment of mothers and fathers. Before 1922, mothers were significantly overrepresented in both convictions for offences against children and transfers to the State Inebriate Reformatory in Ennis. There are a number of reasons for this overrepresentation. Mothers were viewed by voluntary agencies and the State as responsible for the upkeep of the home and of the children in it; therefore when neglect was investigated in the manner it was in the nineteenth century, mothers were the target. Also, men were usually better positioned to pay fines, so in cases where fathers were prosecuted, they could often avoid prison sentences. Judges were also less inclined to send the primary breadwinner to prison in this period. While a mother’s work in the home could be done by an older daughter, or by paying a nurse or local woman, or relying on extended family, without a wage family would have to rely on poor relief. Mothers – in this case the ‘neglectful’ or ‘drunk’ mother – were a key focus of child protection agencies and the State, and as Ireland entered its first years of independence, focus shifted firmly to unmarried mothers and ‘illegitimate’ children with the setting up of Ireland’s mother and baby homes from 1921.

Conclusion

In May 1921, William Cosgrave, the first Taoiseach in the Irish Free State, told the Dáil:

People reared in workhouses ... are no great acquisition to the community, and they have no ideas whatsoever of civic responsibilities. As a rule, their highest aim is to live at the expense of the ratepayer. Consequently, it would be a decided gain if they all decide to emigrate.³¹

Cosgrave’s sentiments were not unusual, and the proposed ending of the poor law system was met with much support. One of the institutions that followed the closure and remain open throughout the twentieth century, were fourteen so-called ‘mother and baby homes’, the most infamous being the Tuam Mother and Baby Home (or

Children's Home).³² While outside of the scope of this chapter, the homes are a fitting bookend to the question of gender and institutionalisation. They represented the explicit stigmatising of pregnant unmarried women, and the incredibly high infant mortality rates showed a complete lack of concern for the children born in the institutions. Religion, legitimacy and financial concerns were still to the fore – and contemporary attitudes to all show many similarities with the discussion of Dublin's Foundling Hospital. Along with the 'County Homes' and a myriad of smaller institutions, institutionalisation and a disregard for those utilising institutions would remain a feature of Irish society until the late twentieth century. For historians and students, a key feature of future research must include comparative, transnational, and critical approaches to how institutions operated in different settings, and how gender, class, ethnicity, race and religion were factors in the placement and need for many of these institutions. Without these perspectives, we continue to run the risk of exceptionalism, the sectarianism that characterised the development of Irish institutions holds much in common with the experience of other colonial and postcolonial nations, where gender and class equally played critical roles.

Notes

- 1 See Age of Inquiry, <https://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/research/ageofinquiry/index.html>.
- 2 For example, see Joseph Robins, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1980); Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jane Barnes, *Irish Industrial Schools, 1868–1908: Origins and Development* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989).
- 3 See Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Caroline Skehill, *History of the Present of Child Protection and Welfare Social Work in Ireland* (London: Edwin Mellon Press, 2004).
- 4 Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance Or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Katherine O'Donnell, Claire McGettrick, James M. Smith, Maeve O'Rourke and Mari Steed, *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell (eds.), *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners and Penitents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).
- 5 Harry Hendrick, "Age as a Category of Analysis in the History of Childhood," in Maria Luddy and James Smith (eds.), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014).
- 6 Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 7 See <https://www.shcy.org/>. The website includes many freely accessible resources, including some relating to Irish history. In June 2021, the SHCY Biennial Conference was held in Ireland, run by the National University of Ireland Galway for the first time.
- 8 For an overview of the literature see Sarah-Anne Buckley and Susannah Riordan, "Childhood in Ireland, 1740–present," in Mary Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Ireland*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth: Irish Special Edition* (2016); "History of Irish Childhood Bibliography," <https://irishchildhood.wordpress.com/>; Mary Hatfield, *Growing Up in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: A Cultural History of Middle-Class Childhood and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mary Hatfield, Jutta Kruse and Riona Nic Congail (eds.), *Historical Perspectives on Parenthood and Childhood in Ireland* (Dublin: Arlen House, 2018).

- 9 Robins, *The Lost Children*, 15.
- 10 John Cunningham, *'A Town Tormented by the Sea': Galway, 1790–1914* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2004), 63.
- 11 Robins, *The Lost Children*, 20.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 14 Anna Clark, "Orphans and the Poor Law: Rage against the Machine," in V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds.), *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 97–111.
- 15 Virginia Crossman, "Cribbed, Contained and Confined? The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850–1920," in *Children, Childhood and Irish Society* 44, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2009): 37–61.
- 16 See Sarah-Anne Buckley, "'Found in a Dying Condition': Nurse Children in Ireland, 1872–1952," in Elaine Farrell (ed.), *"She Said She Was in a Family Way": Pregnancy and Infancy in Modern Ireland* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2012), 117–133.
- 17 A separate Ministry and Department of Health was established in 1947.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 See Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*.
- 20 Crossman states 'the slow take-up of boarding out was a consequence of the misgivings of local guardians, not the poor law commissioners': "Cribbed, confined and contained?," 50; H. J. MacDonald, "Boarding-Out and the Scottish Poor Law, 1845–1914," *The Scottish Historical Review*, 75 (1996): 197–220.
- 21 See Caroline Skehill, "The Origins of Child Welfare under the Poor Law and the Emergence of the Institutional Versus Family Care Debate," in V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds.), *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 115–126.
- 22 *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1877* [C1761], 44.
- 23 *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1873* [C794], 61–62.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 25 *Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, 1870* [C156], 13.
- 26 *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1910* (C5319), 24.
- 27 Hendrick argues

The incarceration of children and young adolescents in the certified schools from the mid-Victorian years onwards is often presented as a programme of humanitarian reform, struggling against poorly trained staff, mean-minded officials and inadequate funding, and occasionally marred by the brutality of individuals. This comfortable and reassuring myth bears little resemblance to the true situation.

Hendrick, *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate* (London: Polity Press, 2003), 121.

- 28 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 29 See Barnes, *Irish Industrial Schools*, 69.
- 30 1908 Children's Act.
- 31 Quoted by Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000, London: Profile Books*, 2004, 186.
- 32 For a discussion of the foundation of the institution see Sarah-Anne Buckley and John Cunningham, "Remembering and Forgetting: The Tuam Mother and Baby Home and the Irish Revolution," in *Women and the Irish Revolution: Feminism, Activism and Violence* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2020), 198–215.



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SECTION 3

SEX AND SEXUALITY



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11

CRIME, PUNISHMENT AND GENDER

Elaine Farrell

Introduction

On February 14, 1874, local County Antrim newspaper, the *Ballymena Advertiser*, reported a criminal case under the title 'Selling a drop without a permit'. The article described that local woman Mary Ann Hanna of Crumkill, near Kells, was charged with selling spirits to five women in January of that year despite not having a legal licence to do so. The women were found drinking in the house together. Hanna, who was described as an 'old woman', pleaded guilty and the five women, each married to local farmers, appeared in court to testify. Mr Montgomery, the magistrate at Hanna's trial, chastised her for 'demoralizing these women and affording them facilities for wasting their husbands' property, a common trick'. He fined her 15s. (shillings) and costs or a fortnight in prison. Later a request was made for the magistrates to 'either forgive the offence or mitigate the fine' and it was reduced to 5s.¹

Although the newspaper report of this case is very brief, under 200 words, it offers a glimpse of lived realities in nineteenth-century Ireland, and of gender and class attitudes. We learn that Mary Ann Hanna's survival strategy in the face of poverty was to sell alcohol without a license. The fine of 15s., which equated to the cost of two weeks in prison, offers an insight into attitudes towards imprisonment as a punishment. The fact that this fine was later reduced because of Hanna's poverty, advanced age, and her previous good behaviour, alerts us to the factors that lawmen took into consideration. The report also offers an insight into gendered attitudes. The middle-class magistrate was referred to in the newspaper by his title and surname, unlike Hanna, indicating respect for his class status and a desire to denote his position. Judges and magistrates were always men of property in nineteenth-century Ireland. Montgomery's attitudes are also evident in his actions. He clearly considered that women's indulgence in alcohol was immoral and wasteful,

and assumed that the five women who had bought the alcohol had used their husbands' money, rather than their own. And he judged that Hanna had somehow tricked these women into purchasing the alcohol. His was a polarised view of nineteenth-century Irish women as either good or bad: Mary Ann Hanna was presented as a bad woman, a wily temptress, who had plied five vulnerable, innocent, naïve women with alcohol, thereby ignoring the women's own agency in the situation.

As evidenced in this case study example, records relating to crime and punishment are a rich and varied source for a study of the Irish social, political and cultural landscape from the 1850s up to independence in 1921. The value of Irish criminal records lies in their detail. High levels of bureaucracy in courts and penal institutions resulted in vast amounts of paperwork. Arrests required police reports, criminal trials produced verdict statements and judges' reports of court proceedings, and punishments like transportation, imprisonment and execution led to the production of individual convict files. Given public fascination with crime and criminals, newspaper reports about specific cases (often digitised and searchable by keyword) were written at various junctures. Brian Griffin's *Sources for the study of crime in Ireland* offers an excellent overview of the range of crime-related sources available for exploration by historians and which can be used to locate women, men and children as victims, perpetrators and witnesses of criminal activity.²

Historical sources relating to crime and punishment lend themselves well to explorations from national, transnational, and local perspectives, as well as to surveys of specific crimes and microhistories.³ Witness statements from the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries document in writing testimonies delivered orally in court, a rich source that does not survive in many other geographical contexts. Through witness testimonies and sworn statements from suspects we hear from Irish people in their own words. These were typically 'ordinary' Irish inhabitants who might not have left any other first-hand records, like diaries or letters, behind. These words are therefore incredibly valuable to the social historian. In explaining the circumstances of the crime, witnesses also inadvertently described their lives, their working or living conditions, or their family arrangements. Prisoner petitions for clemency provide further criminal 'voices', a valuable source for social historians given that many criminal records were written about rather than by suspects.⁴ Such records provide a wealth of detail on the circumstances of the crime, the lives of suspects, victims and witnesses, and others involved formally or informally in the judicial process, and also on local attitudes and everyday lived realities. This chapter will outline areas of research in the history of crime and punishment in Ireland, particularly relating to women, and will point to useful sources, including some that have been digitised or transcribed.

Crimes

Across this period the crimes for which women were considered deviant or criminal ranged from drunkenness to murder. Annual reports, available online via a ProQuest subscription as House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, offer a

snapshot of crimes committed in a single year. The number of girls and women convicted of criminal activity was always less than boys and men across the period. To take 1865 as an example, the *Judicial Statistics of Ireland* show that 4,936 males (73.5 per cent) and 1,782 females (26.5 per cent) were arrested for breaking the law. Of these, the most common offence committed by males was offences against the person, while females were more commonly arrested for offences against property without violence. Figure 11.1 illustrates further gender differences. The 'other' category included offences like keeping a disorderly house, indecent exposure, suicide, perjury and riot.⁵

Poverty certainly motivated offences as individuals or families struggled to make ends meet. Research by Virginia Crossman, Ciaran McCabe and Olwen Purdue indicates the value of a gendered approach in pointing to women's survival strategies in urban and rural localities.⁶ James Kelly, and Frank Neal and Donald MacRaid have examined child stripping, stealing clothing worn by children typically to be reused or sold to pawn shops or second-hand dealers. The authors identify this as a crime predominantly committed by women.⁷ Historians have identified gender differences in goods stolen, suggesting that women commonly pilfered clothing and household items but were significantly outnumbered by men in the theft of livestock, tools, agricultural and industrial materials, and crops.⁸ A study of the police gazette, the *Hue and Cry*, confirms these views. In a sample of 4,083 adverts from the 1850s to the 1890s, 254 men (79.1 per cent) and 67 women (20.9 per cent) stole clothing, or fabric or bedding. In comparison, 411 men (90.7 per cent) and 42 women (9.3 per cent) were suspected of having stolen money, jewellery or guns and 407 men (96.9 per cent) and 13 women (3.1 per cent) were suspected of stealing animals.⁹

In their examination of marriage, which extends the historical lens from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, Luddy and O'Dowd argue that a focus on

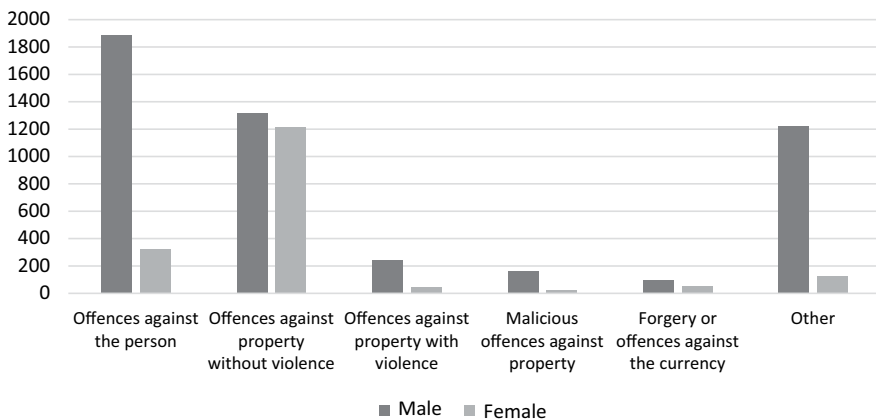


FIGURE 11.1 Offences by gender, 1865.

Source: Judicial Statistics of Ireland, 1865.

spousal violence ‘provides us with a sense of the commonalities that characterised unhappy marital unions’.¹⁰ The authors employ examples, largely gleaned from newspapers, to explore how women used the courts against abusive husbands and how victims could be supported and protected by neighbours or relatives. They observe that after the 1890s judges were more likely to convict and to give harsher sentences than previously.¹¹ Diane Urquhart has utilised divorce cases in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to uncover evidence of domestic abuse. She reminds us, however, that the ‘number of divorces, of course, provides no indication of demand for the procedure or gives a true indication of the extent of domestic violence. Ireland’s history of divorce is the history of a minority’.¹² Work by Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Elizabeth Steiner-Scott also points to abusive relationships behind closed doors.¹³ Angela Bourke’s examination of Bridget Cleary’s murder at the hands of her husband and family members demonstrates the wealth of material for microhistories.¹⁴

Crimes against the person or property were also politically motivated. Historians have examined agrarian offences and the activities of secret societies.¹⁵ More research is needed to determine women’s roles in such activity and the extent to which involvement in such crimes were displays of masculinity. In the early decades of the twentieth century, suffragists across the island of Ireland were politically motivated to damage property to demonstrate dissatisfaction with disenfranchisement. This theme is explored in more detail by Sonja Tiernan and Margaret Ward in this volume.

Alcohol was frequently considered a motivating factor for cases of domestic abuse, as well as street brawls and public disorder. Drunken and disorderly misbehaviour was commonly reported in the pages of Irish local newspapers and could be punished, as in the case of Mary Ann Hanna that opened this chapter, by a fine or prison term. The frequent appearance of the same individuals in court on such charges points to problems with drinking and alcoholism during this period. Temperance societies and hotels sought to encourage abstinence and towards the end of the nineteenth century, inebriate homes also developed to provide treatment.¹⁶ While prostitution was not a crime at this time, soliciting was illegal. Sex-workers were also often charged with alcohol-related or public disorder offences. Maria Luddy’s detailed examination of prostitution offers an insight into sex workers’ relationships with the police, philanthropists, the workhouse, and staff at other institutions, as well as experiences for women involved in prostitution.¹⁷ The introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864 (with amendments in 1866 and 1869) in Cobh, Cork and the Curragh camp in County Kildare indicates assumptions that sexually transmitted diseases were spread by sex-workers rather than their clients. The Acts allowed ‘a plain-clothed morals police to stop and arrest women they thought were prostitutes and force them to undergo a genital examination to see whether or not they were infected with venereal disease’.¹⁸

Gendered expectations shaped attitudes to alcohol and women’s indulgence was typically considered more harshly than drinking by men. In 1895, Mary Jane Greer was questioned about her father’s abuse of her mother, Ellen Jane. She noted that

on January 25, her father returned drunk to their home on Argyle Street in Belfast that she shared with her parents and siblings. Mary Jane recalled how she 'saw her father "dunch" her mother with his knee in [her] stomach when in bed.' Her mother, 'cried that he would not kick her next Friday night, and got up and sat at the fire'. Mary Jane acknowledged that her father 'was in the habit of assaulting her mother, mostly on Friday nights, when he got his pay, and came home under the influence of liquor'.¹⁹ A few hours later, Mary Jane's father ejected her, her mother (who was pregnant) and siblings from the house. The family, shivering in the snow and poorly clad, sought accommodation from a neighbour a few hours later. Ellen Jane was taken to hospital on Monday night, where her foetus was determined to be dead. She died a few hours later, thought to be from kidney failure in consequence of exposure to the cold. At the coroner's court, Mary Jane was questioned about her mother's behaviour. The questions posed, 'Was your mother a sober woman?', 'Did you ever see her the worse of liquor?', 'Did she give your father any provocation the night he gave her what you call a "dunch"?' demonstrate an assumption that women's indulgence in alcohol could provoke violence. Testimony from a neighbour confirmed Mary Jane's responses that her mother did not drink.²⁰ While women seem to have been more commonly victims of violent abuse than men, Carolyn Conley's detailed research makes clear that women were also sometimes the perpetrators in violent confrontations.²¹

Social attitudes influenced some offences. The stigma attached to pregnancy and childbirth outside marriage in post-Famine Ireland motivated crimes such as abandonment, abortion, infant murder and concealment of birth.²² Since paternity could not be proven at this time fathers could avoid paying child support. Some unmarried women thus made choices to commit these crimes rather than face discrimination by society and rejection by their families and friends for giving birth outside marriage. Between 1850 and 1900, twenty-nine women were found guilty of infant murder in Ireland, although at least 4,645 cases of infanticide, attempted infant murder and concealment of birth were suspected.²³ Convictions for concealment of birth, whereby a woman hid the fact that she had given birth to a baby who was subsequently found dead, were more common across the period and resulted in a lighter penalty of two years in prison with hard labour.

In his assessment of post-Famine marriage and celibacy in 1985, David Fitzpatrick argued that the 'Irish seldom landed their sexual frustrations upon each other'.²⁴ In the intervening years, however, important research has been published that indicates relatively high numbers of sexual crimes in schools and homes in Ireland.²⁵

And what of those tasked to impose law and order? The legal system was dominated by men but Elizabeth Malcolm has shed some light on domestic life in her study of the Irish police force from 1822 to 1922.²⁶ Given that marriage was only permissible after a constable had been in post for seven successful years (or five in the case of the Dublin Metropolitan Police), women could have a lengthy wait to marry a policeman.²⁷ Since policemen were not allowed to serve in the areas where their wives were from, these women sacrificed living in their hometowns on marriage.²⁸ Griffin has demonstrated the wealth of insight that can be gleaned

from records relating to police applications for permission to marry, the dismissal of men who married without permission, and chastisement for misbehaviour, which included domestic abuse and visits to brothels.²⁹ Recent scholarship has utilised a gender approach to the Irish criminal justice system, examining ideas of masculinity in the police force.³⁰

Punishment

Prior to the implementation of a system of long-term imprisonment in Ireland, the *transportation* of criminals overseas was a way for the home country to impose punishment but also to rid itself of potential repeat offenders. Rena Lohan observes that the origin of transportation is ‘obscure’ but ‘When, in the eighteenth century, the death penalty came to be regarded as too severe for certain capital offences, transportation to North America, in the absence of an adequate alternative, became popular as a mitigation of such sentences.’³¹ Around 50,000 individuals were transported to America up to the closure of the ports with the War of Independence in 1776.³² A decade later, legislation permitted the transportation of Irish convicts to New South Wales, Australia.³³ The vast lands of Australia were thought to require labour and people and thus transportation seemed to suit both home and host countries. The first convict ship to leave Ireland was *The Queen*, which arrived in New South Wales on November 26, 1791, carrying 133 men, twenty-two women and four children travelling with convicted parents.³⁴ Another convict colony was established in Van Diemen’s Land (renamed Tasmania) in 1803. In 1850, Western Australia provided an outlet for some convicts, the most famous of which were a group of Irish Fenians who left Ireland in 1867 aboard the *Hougoumont*.³⁵ In all around 162,000 convicts were transported from Ireland or Britain, about 28 per cent (45,000) of whom were Irish.³⁶ Most convicts were male but around 9,000 were female.³⁷ Concerns about disorder and illness on board and mixing of sexes and ages led to improvement to diets, conditions, and treatment. After 1836, matrons were brought on board the ships to look after female convicts and more attention was paid to schooling, religious education, and the learning of work skills. Leisure activities such as dancing and singing were also sometimes encouraged.³⁸ Despite improvements, transportation for the convict must have been traumatic given that they were taken away from everyone and everything that they had known. But no doubt some saw it as an opportunity to escape Ireland particularly during the difficult years of the Great Famine in the 1840s.

Lohan observes that ‘the researcher is assured of an abundance of material’ on the history of transportation.³⁹ Some regional museums and archives have digitised material relating to transportees from their localities.⁴⁰ The Irish–Australian Transportation Database created for the Australian bicentenary and hosted by the National Archives of Ireland documents names, ages, regions, crimes, trial dates and sentences of those transported.⁴¹ Among listed offenders is Sarah Bennett, who was tried on January 8, 1848 in Queen’s County (now County Laois) for larceny and sentenced to seven years. The Female Convicts Research Centre (FCRC) Female Convicts in Van Diemen’s Land Database is an online community project that contains transcribed and

cross-referenced information on convicts.⁴² Bennett also features in this database. She left Dublin aboard the *Kinmear* on June 16, 1848 and arrived in Hobart, Van Diemen's Land on October 7. We do not know how she experienced the journey but she was medically treated for atrophica (debilium) and was on the doctor's sick list for about a month. We learn from the Australian records that her crime was stealing a goose. Bennett had previously been convicted of assault, for which she got one month in prison, trespass, for which she was incarcerated for three months, and stealing a turkey, for which she was imprisoned for six months. She worked as a farm servant in Ireland, had four sisters, and was married to Patrick Price, who had migrated to America by the time of her crime. Although no mugshots survive from the period, detailed physical descriptions give some insight into appearance. Bennett was 5 feet 6½ inches. She had a sallow complexion, an oval face and brown and grey hair. Her brown eyebrows framed her grey, deep-set eyes. Her nose, which was described as being very small, 'inclines to the left'. She had also lost one front tooth. The records are not without their issues, and some contradictions are apparent.⁴³ While the Australian record lists Bennett as sixty-five years of age on arrival in 1848, the Irish register lists her as thirty-five. A later record from 1874 identifies her as seventy years of age, suggesting that her real age was closer to the Irish record.

The records from Australia also give insight into experiences after transportation. Bennett was given six months' hard labour in the Launceston Female Factory for falsely representing herself to be a free woman rather than a convict in March 1850. In May 1852, she was sentenced to eighteen months' hard labour for assaulting a Mary Gorman. She received a ticket-of-leave in July 1854, meaning that she was no longer a convict unless she misbehaved. She applied to marry a free man, James Daley, in October 1854, although this marriage does not seem to have taken place. In January 1855, she was certified as a free woman and later that year married George Williams.⁴⁴ Sources on former convicts often cease at that point, as they are absorbed into wider society. Bennett, however, appeared in Hobart's general hospital on November 15, 1874 with a fracture of the skull. Newspaper reports in the Female Convicts in VDL database reveal the circumstances of the injury. Bennett, who was being treated in hospital, explained:

This morning, when I was in bed, my husband took the iron bar off the grate and hit me on the head with it. He was out of his mind when he did it. We had no dispute that morning, or no words. He hit me several times with this bar on the head, shoulders, and arms. I strove to prevent him, but could not. ... I gave him no provocation whatever for what he did. He had not been drinking; he was not in the habit of drinking. He had not slept with me that night, but he did sleep at home. When he struck me the first time I strove to get up, but he dragged me out on to the floor, and then he struck me again whilst I was on the floor.⁴⁵

The neighbour, Thomas Lewis, would later admit that he had on several occasions in the past had to protect Bennett from her abusive husband.⁴⁶ Sarah Bennett died

later that day and was buried four days later on November 19, 1874 at Cornealian Bay Cemetery.⁴⁷ Williams was found guilty of her murder and sentenced to death.⁴⁸

In the eighteenth century, inmates sentenced to *imprisonment* 'were largely at the mercy of the sheriffs, gaolers, turnkeys and others employed in them'.⁴⁹ Tim Carey has observed in his study of Mountjoy Prison that: 'In many ways life inside prison was not too dissimilar to life outside – if you were wealthy you could rent the best rooms and buy the best food, if you were poor and starving you remained poor and starving.'⁵⁰ Fears that men, women and children were encountering bad influences behind bars and were leaving prison more criminal and sexually immoral than on admission led to changes. British and Irish reformers like Mary Carpenter, Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, Elizabeth Fry and John Howard influenced changes across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the separation of sexes, and adult and youth offenders, and the introduction of religious instruction and schooling in prison (including reading, writing and arithmetic). Imprisonment began to be perceived as a means of punishment as well as an opportunity for reformation. Women's experiences of imprisonment were shaped by their sex; in addition to 'civilising' female inmates behind bars, it was hoped that after release from prison, women would instil the importance of education and religion, cleanliness and hygiene, and a sense of duty to work in their own families. This was assumed to benefit wider society, since 'On the mothers of a nation the character and habits of the future generations of the people depend.'⁵¹

The study of imprisonment, including experiences for incarcerated women, has flourished in recent years, in no small part because of the rich records available.⁵² Biographies, particularly of politically active women, have also focused on their incarceration as demonstrated by Tiernan and Ward in this volume. Institutional registers, individual inmate files, and transportation lists facilitate both qualitative and quantitative research of imprisonment. In the prison files of those who were convicted and incarcerated, particularly records of those incarcerated in the convict prison after the 1880s, researchers can also sometimes happen upon mugshot photographs, which, along with crime scene photographs, offer visual clues to the past. These images remind us that numbers counted in annual statistics of crime and punishment were not fictional characters. While gender had a significant impact on the type of punishment given, the punishment of children and juvenile offenders became increasingly a consideration as the nineteenth century progressed and led to the establishment of sex-specific reformatories, industrial schools and a borstal as preventative and punitive institutions for poor, orphaned, criminal or deviant children or juveniles.⁵³ These institutions are explored in more detail in this volume by Sarah-Anne Buckley.

Some crimes at specific times resulted in *execution* in Ireland. James Kelly has noted that executions in the early eighteenth century may have been regarded as somewhat acceptable but the mid-eighteenth century saw clear evidence of public dissatisfaction with execution as a penal punishment.⁵⁴ This seems to have resulted in relatively fewer executions per population in Ireland compared to Britain. Between 1844 and 1852, 226 individuals were sentenced to death. Of these, 88

were actually executed, 81 of which were for murder.⁵⁵ The execution of women was rarer, although it continued into the twentieth century.⁵⁶ Executions in Ireland were public until the 1868 Capital Punishment Act moved hangings inside the prison walls. The tolling of a bell and a black flag hoisted on the prison ensured that those in the locality were aware that an execution had taken place.

Given the scale of transportation and the propensity of the Irish to migrate across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish girls and women have also featured as victims and perpetrators in studies of criminality overseas.⁵⁷ Ongoing projects on Irish women's criminality and deviance overseas will shed light on regional and transnational similarities and differences.⁵⁸

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, gender shaped attitudes to women suspected or convicted of criminal activity. Gender could result in harsher treatment for women than men, especially as shown in cases involving alcohol. But gender also resulted in leniency towards women, particularly in relating to execution. As shown in the case of Mary Ann Hanna that opened this chapter, the sex of an offender was a key consideration in their punishment (particularly as the nineteenth century progressed) whether it was a fine, transportation, imprisonment or execution. While much has been published in these areas in recent years, gaps in the scholarship remain. We know little about how gender informed white-collar crime or workplace-related offences, criminal gangs and networks in urban areas, and crimes for which girls and boys were incarcerated. As shown here, there is a wealth of primary sources, many available online, to further explore women's roles as victims and perpetrators of criminal activity in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland.

Notes

- 1 *Ballymena Advertiser*, February 14, 1874. I am grateful to Ruth Thorpe who first alerted me to this report.
- 2 Brian Griffin, *Sources for the Study of Crime in Ireland, 1801–1921* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).
- 3 See, for example, the *Bad Bridget Podcast* available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.
- 4 See W.E. Vaughan, *Murder Trials in Ireland, 1836–1914* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 310–11.
- 5 *Judicial Statistics 1865, Ireland* [3705], HC 1866, lxviii, 762.
- 6 Virginia Crossman, "Viewing Women, Family and Sexuality through the Prism of the Irish Poor Laws," *Women's History Review*, 15, no. 4 (2006): 541–50; Ciaran McCabe, *Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018); Ciaran McCabe, "Charwomen and Dublin's Secondary Labour Force in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries," *Social History*, 45, no. 2 (2020): 193–217; Olwen Purdue, "Surviving the Industrial City: The Female Poor and the Workhouse in Late Nineteenth-Century Belfast," *Urban History*, 44, no. 1 (2017): 69–90.
- 7 James Kelly, "'Horrid' and 'Infamous' Practices: The Kidnapping and Stripping of Children, c.1730–c.1840," *Irish Historical Studies*, 42, no. 162 (2018): 265–92; Donald MacRaild and Frank Neal, "Child Stripping in the Victorian City," *Urban History*, 39, no. 3 (2012): 431–52.

- 8 Shani D’Cruze and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 34; Gregory Durston, *Victims and Viragos: Metropolitan Women, Crime and the Eighteenth-Century Justice System* (Suffolk: Arima Publishing, 2007), 124–5.
- 9 *Hue and Cry, 1859–1893* (National Library of Ireland). See Elaine Farrell and Eliza McKee, “Captured in the Clothing: Ireland, 1850s–1890s,” *DRESS: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* (2022), pre-print DOI 10.1080/03612112.2022.2039484. For a discussion of livestock theft, see Nicholas Woodward, “Transportation Convictions during the Great Irish Famine,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 37 (2006): 59–87.
- 10 Maria Luddy and Mary O’Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland, 1660–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 314.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 328.
- 12 Diane Urquhart, “Irish Divorce and Domestic Violence, 1857–1922,” *Women’s History Review*, 22, no. 5 (2013): 830.
- 13 Lindsey Earner-Byrne, “‘Behind Closed Doors’: Society, Law and Familial Violence in Ireland,” in *Law and the family in Ireland, 1800–1950*, ed. Niamh Howlin and Kevin Costello (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 142–59; Elizabeth Steiner-Scott, “‘To Bounce a Boot Off Her Now and Then ...’: Domestic Violence in Post-Famine Ireland,” in *Women in Irish history: Essays in Honour of Margaret MacCurtain*, ed. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O’Dowd (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997), 25–43.
- 14 Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Vintage, 1999).
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12

WOMEN, SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION, 1850–1922

Leanne McCormick

Introduction

Dympna McLoughlin has stated that by the 1880s in Ireland there were ‘universal classless notions of women’s innate nature and appropriate feminine behaviour’ with the ‘triumph of respectability ... and a diminishing tolerance for any type of sexual diversity’.¹ The post-Famine period saw growing attempts to control and regulate female behaviour, with a particular focus on those women who were considered to have gone against societal norms or whose behaviour was considered deviant or criminal. The ideal woman across the class and religious divides was a wife and mother who cared for her family and was sexually pure, innocent and vulnerable. The double sexual standard meant that if women fell or deviated from this elevated standard, they faced a loss of respectability and societal shame something which did not impact on men who were considered naturally lustful and for whom sexual promiscuity was not condemned but often regarded as an integral part of masculinity.² This attention fell more heavily on working-class women who were more vulnerable to being arrested for prostitution-related offences or being placed in institutions to have their behaviour ‘reformed’. The gendered nature of these attitudes is revealed in the lack of any similarly institutions to ‘reform’ men.

For many women who had crossed the boundaries of acceptable sexual norms, in particular unmarried mothers and prostitutes the workhouse was one of the few places that offered accommodation.³ Workhouses were established under the Poor Law (Ireland) Act of 1838 and were the main source of welfare in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland, particularly for women who because of their behaviour found themselves ostracised from families. Becoming pregnant outside of marriage carried with it considerable stigma and shame right through to the late twentieth century. It could cause a loss of reputation for not only the woman concerned but also her family. If a marriage could not take place quickly to cover the

shame involved women were vulnerable to being excluded from the family home and ended up in the workhouses across the island.⁴

The large number of single mothers within the workhouses generated considerable concern from the poor law guardians, who managed them. They viewed the presence of unmarried mothers in the workhouse as 'immoral and their children a drain on the rates', a view which continued into the twentieth century.⁵ The Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland in 1906 held the 'definite opinion' that the workhouse was an unfit place for the mothers of illegitimate children.⁶ It was particularly concerned with the mixing of unmarried mothers with one child, and those who had two or more illegitimate children. This, it was believed, would cause girls to 'lose a sense of shame and become more degraded'.⁷ Added to this was the argument that unmarried mothers with more than one child were mentally deficient, being labelled as 'imbeciles' and 'hopeless cases'.⁸ The 1906 Commission did recognise the stigma attached to illegitimacy across the island concluding that

when a girl falls from virtue she is rarely able, in Ireland to return to her home, owing to the sentiment of aversion from immorality which is too strong in most parts of the country to permit her to face that feeling and to return with her baby to her relatives, even if they would receive her.⁹

They recommended that girls 'on occasion of their first lapse' should be sent to special institutions, operated either by philanthropic or religious organisations or Boards of Guardians, to try and ensure that the life of the 'girl would not be wrecked owing to her fall'.¹⁰ Such an institution was the Belfast Maternity Home, Malone Place, which from 1904 received first-time unmarried mothers and then helped them find employment and foster homes for their children. The 1906 Commission also praised a scheme in Limerick where first-time mothers were separated from the general population and under the care of the Sister of Mercy in the workhouse hospital.¹¹ For those 'more depraved' cases, which included single mothers with more than one child and prostitutes, they recommended the institutions of the Catholic Good Shepherd Sisters in Limerick, Cork, Waterford and Belfast, whose work will be discussed below.

It is evident then that options for unmarried mothers were limited, and the poor law did offer a 'safety net' of sorts for them, even if concerns were raised that this limited support may have actually encouraged illegitimacy.¹² There were only a small number of institutions like the Belfast Maternity Home, Malone Place who worked specifically with unmarried mothers in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³ It was in the years after 1922 that institutions catering for the unmarried mother and her children, were established on both sides of the border.¹⁴ Revealing how little attitudes changed towards the unmarried mother and the belief that she should be contained and reformed continued well into the twentieth century.

For other women the options when finding themselves pregnant and unmarried may have been more drastic, with research on infanticide revealing the plight of

many unmarried mothers and the consequences which were often associated with the shame of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.¹⁵ In other situations, abortion was an option for ending an unwanted pregnancy. Attempts to end a pregnancy have a long history in Irish folklore.¹⁶ Women have traditionally engaged in an escalation of behaviour from initial attempts to regulate menstruation to the termination of a pregnancy. Hot baths, physical exercise and drinking alcohol were all common across the period, as was ingesting a variety of substances if these attempts failed.¹⁷ From the late nineteenth century Irish newspapers carried advertisements for a variety of patent medicines, including Beechams Pills and Widow Welch's Female pills which were advertised as female products and claimed to remove 'obstructions' or 'irregularities'. They were described as 'the best medicine for female complaints'.¹⁸ That all classes were being appealed to is evident in the adverts in the *Irish Society and Social Review* (a publication aimed at the middle and upper 'society' class) for the exotic-sounding 'Thomasso's "Magic" Female Pills' described as 'the acknowledged leading remedy. Correct all irregularities. Remove obstructions from any cause.'¹⁹ Alongside this advertisement is another for 'Madame Frain's Magic Mixture' which was 'for women only' and was described as 'powerful and efficacious in all difficult cases, not injurious to the most delicate'. These patent medicines were, in effect, abortifacients. The claim that Thomasso's "Magic" Female Pills were not made from pennyroyal or bitter apple 'but from drugs far more efficacious' illustrates this as pennyroyal and bitter apple were traditional herbal abortifacients.²⁰ It is impossible to know if these substances had any effect on regulating menstruation/ending a pregnancy, other substances which may have been more efficacious such as ergot and quinine were also used widely. These were associated with childbirth; ergot, for example was used to stimulate and contract the womb to encourage the afterbirth and demonstrate a level of medical knowledge amongst some women.²¹

It is impossible to know the numbers of women who engaged in attempts to control their pregnancies through the use of abortifacients or contraceptives, but it is evident there was knowledge of these methods across the island.²² Ó Gráda and Duffy have shown there was greater engagement with family planning than had previously been thought in the urban middle class and that there was evidence of couples engaged in 'spacing' the births of their children even in rural parts of Ireland in the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³ Anne Daly has documented the 'extensive advertisements' for contraceptives and abortifacients in the nineteenth-century popular press in Ireland.²⁴ Irish medical professionals stayed away from giving contraceptive advice or discussing the issue in medical journals and condemned the 'quacks' who were monopolising the fertility control market. In 1865, the *Dublin Medical Press* went so far as to list the names of publications it accused of 'being stained with obscenities'.²⁵ Such concerns about the advertising of contraceptive devices were repeated by those opposed to birth control in independent Ireland after 1922.²⁶

For other women an unwanted pregnancy may have led to emigration from Ireland as an attempt to escape the shame attached to their condition and may have provided them wider options in terms of having an abortion, having a baby

adopted and avoiding having to enter an institution. Research on the experiences of women leaving Ireland for Britain after 1922 is considerable, though we know less about the experiences of pregnant women leaving before this.²⁷ Work on women emigrating to North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has, however, revealed many women who migrated while pregnant and often alone.²⁸

In addition to unmarried mothers, women engaged in prostitution also generated concern in the nineteenth century as those who had crossed the boundaries of sexual purity by having sex outside of marriage. Prostitution became viewed as a 'social evil' and anxieties about its effect on marriage, the family and ultimately society were felt across Britain and Ireland leading to attempts to both regulate prostitution and reform prostitutes from their lives of sin.²⁹ To this end, a range of institutions were established and run by lay and religious groups across Ireland and Britain as well as Europe, Australia and North America.³⁰ The name 'Magdalene Laundry' has become an umbrella term for these institutions and what sets Ireland, north and south, apart from other countries, is the continued operation of these institutions by Catholic religious orders into the final decades of the twentieth century.³¹

A few scholars have been able to access records relating to these institutions for the nineteenth century, but the records of the twentieth century have remained inaccessible to most researchers.³² An exception to this being Jacinta Prunty, who was able to work on the archives of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge who ran High Park and Seán MacDermott Street (formerly Gloucester Street) Magdalene Laundries in Dublin, the two largest in Ireland.³³ However, while this is a valuable contribution to knowledge, as Catriona Crowe has suggested, the fact that Prunty is also a Holy Faith sister makes her a 'partisan narrator' and the fact that the records are closed to other researchers does prevent inspection and interrogation by others.³⁴ Thus, while academic research on the Magdalen Laundries has focused largely on the twentieth century and on institutions in post-partition Ireland, scholars have utilised alternative methodologies drawing on oral histories and material culture to situate these institutions with a wider 'architecture of containment'.³⁵

There has been less written on the role of the institutions in Northern Ireland;³⁶ however, the publication of the *Report into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990*, which I co-authored, adds to the burgeoning field.³⁷ In 2013 the *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* was published which considered the history of the institutions in the Republic of Ireland and the extent of state involvement in their operation.³⁸ Like Prunty's study, these reports had privileged access to records relating to the institutions that are not in the public domain. That these records remain closed to researchers and may not be held in appropriate archival conditions are concerns, and it is hoped that these records will be made accessible in the future.

Women who were engaged in prostitution were also targeted by the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) which were passed by Parliament in the 1860s and in Ireland were implemented in Cork, Cobh (Queenstown) and the Curragh Camp.³⁹ The

acts were passed with the intention of curbing the spread of venereal disease in the British Army and Navy. They applied to areas around garrison towns and dockyards and allowed for policemen to detain women believed to be prostitutes and have them forcibly examined to determine if they had a venereal disease. If they were infected, they were detained for up to nine months by 1869, often in a so-called Lock Hospital.⁴⁰ The gendered nature of the Acts is evident in the fact that there were no equivalent checks to be carried out on men. The links between Magdalene Laundries and the CDAs are seen in Cork where the Good Shepherd Magdalene Asylum was established as a direct result of the Acts.⁴¹ The Reverend Reed, who had been Chaplain to the Lock Hospital in Cork, explained to the Select Committee on Contagious Diseases Acts in 1881 that there had been a Magdalene Asylum run by the Sisters of Charity in Cork but with the implementation of the CDAs the bishops asked the Good Shepherd Sisters to come and open a new institution, which they did in 1872.⁴² Reverend Reed reported that in 1881 there were 80 women in the Sisters of Charity institution and 150–160 in the Good Shepherd Asylum.⁴³ He estimated that of the 693 women who entered the Lock Hospital under the CDAs, between 1872 and 1881 he considered about 40 per cent of women to have been ‘reclaimed’. Some of these women went to the workhouse rather than to a Magdalene institution as they had, what Reverend Reed described, as ‘petty and trifling’ objections about going to a Magdalene Asylum. For some women the workhouse may have been more preferable and less restrictive than the religious regime of the Magdalene institutions.⁴⁴ For Reed, though, some of his ‘best cases’ were those women who had been brought to the Magdalene institutions and had died in them; he saw these as ‘edifying deaths’ and that by dying in the institution their souls were ‘safely secured’ with God.⁴⁵

From 1869 there was a growing campaign against the Acts with some Irish women, including Isabella Tod and Anna Haslam, becoming actively involved in the campaign for repeal.⁴⁶ Tod served on the executive committee of the Ladies National Association and the General Council of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.⁴⁷ The numbers involved in the Irish branches of the repeal organisations were relatively small and estimated at around fifty women; this may have been due to the fact that these organisations were discussing openly issues relating to sexual behaviour and immorality which may have discouraged some women from joining.⁴⁸ That discussion of the CDAs publicly was viewed as questionable is revealed in a letter to the editor of the *Northern Whig* (a Belfast newspaper) from Isabella Tod in July 1882 and the comment from the editor below it. The letter referred to the fact that she had never written anything about the CDAs in a newspaper before ‘although everyone in Belfast is well aware of my views’. She was angered by the criticism of women who had signed a petition against the CDA, stating that some people thought that ‘to expose a foul evil and fight against it is a worse thing than the existence and growth of the evil itself’.⁴⁹ Under the letter the editor added a note that said the letter had only been published ‘out of respect for our correspondent’ and went on to say that ‘the delicate question to which it refers has never been discussed in our columns, and in our opinion

would be better avoided'.⁵⁰ Against the face of these attitudes it is evident that for women, like Tod, who were involved in campaigning their actions were courageous and arguably much more than would have been expected from women of their class and sex.⁵¹ The formal repeal of the acts in 1886 was due in no small part to the actions of these women who tirelessly campaigned against what they saw as a dangerous precedent in law concerning the bodies of women.

Continued concerns about sexual behaviour following the repeal of the CDAs saw the establishment of social purity groups across Britain and Ireland in the final decades of the nineteenth century.⁵² These were organisations which were concerned about the double standard of sexual morality which allowed men to behave as they pleased, but punished women for anything less than chastity.⁵³ There was a particular concern with the growth of urban areas and the vulnerability of young women and children from predators within them. These fears also centred around a moral panic of a 'white slave trade' where it was believed young women were being abducted from the streets and forced into a life of prostitution. While the realities of an actual white slave trade are questionable it did arouse public concern and encouraged the need for tighter controls on the behaviour and movements of young women. Added to the fears connected with cities were anxieties about increased immigration, both domestically and internationally, and the vulnerability for young women.⁵⁴

The influence of the vigilance movements in Britain led to the establishment of the Dublin White Cross Association in 1885, which by 1891 was said to have over 500 members.⁵⁵ The organisation was associated with the Church of Ireland and was a male-only society with the aims of maintaining male purity and also of treating women 'with respect and to endeavour to protect them from wrong and degradation'.⁵⁶ The organisation had a vigilance committee which worked in conjunction with the police in trying to close brothels and 'hoped to attain a great measure of success in reducing the extent of the evil' of prostitution.⁵⁷ Their work of closing brothels, however, appears simply to have led to them to move to more disreputable areas of the city.⁵⁸

No similar vigilance associations opened in Belfast, although there were discussions about the need for such organisations.⁵⁹ The 'vigilance' type of work that did take place focused not on closing brothels, but on rescue work such as that of the Belfast Midnight Mission, patrolling the streets looking for women who could be persuaded to enter their rescue home.⁶⁰ A variety of other organisations, such as the Girls Friendly Society and the Girls' Help Society, were also involved in 'vigilance work' which focused not on those engaged or suspected of being engaged in prostitution but the working girl who was without friends in the city and was in danger of being laid astray.⁶¹ In the early decades of the twentieth century, fears about the 'white slave trade' continued and these anxieties about the vulnerability of young women were compounded with the onset of the First World War.⁶²

The presence of large numbers of soldiers generated concerns about the behaviour of young women on the streets and their involvement with the troops across Britain and Ireland. Women Patrols were set up in over 100 places by October 1915

in response to ‘khaki fever’, the idea that young women were ‘so attracted to men in military uniform that they behaved in immodest and even dangerous ways’.⁶³ Khaki fever was not, it is argued, found in Ireland to the same degree as in England.⁶⁴ The *Irish Citizen*, the newspaper of the Irish Women’s Franchise League, stated that Ireland was not ‘so directly under the influence of the militarist wave as in England’ with no ‘such scenes of pernicious “enthusiasm” for the troops on the part of the girls as was seen in England’.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, patrols were set up in Belfast and Dublin in 1915 under the authority of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) and a group of ‘anti-prostitutions vigilantes’ operated in Cork between 1917 and 1918.⁶⁶ There existed some differences between the Dublin and Belfast Patrols, with the Belfast branch having more of a rescue and reform agenda than the more preventative stance of the Dublin Patrols.⁶⁷ Regardless of the reality of anxieties about loosened morals due to the impact of war, rescue homes and homes for unmarried mothers such as the Salvation Army Home in Belfast saw an increase of admissions during the war years from women who, it was recorded, had been, ‘seduced under the promise of marriage’ often by a man who had subsequently gone to war.⁶⁸ While it is impossible to know if these men deliberately stopped contact or were killed or injured, the image presented was a long-standing one of the innocent woman who was ‘wronged or seduced’, reinforcing an idea of female passive sexuality and an abandoned and betrayed woman.⁶⁹ This image had a long tradition, as did the stigma and shame that were attached to unmarried mothers, while the putative fathers involved largely escaped condemnation.

As can be seen, knowledge about sexual experiences in Ireland between 1850 and 1922 has been shaped by what was considered deviant and criminal. We know less about the consensual sexual experiences, and this is an area which is ripe for further research.⁷⁰ Given that there is more available archive material from the middle and upper classes, there has been some work on experiences of courtship and marriage among these classes.⁷¹ Maria Luddy and Mary O’Dowd have also written on marriage, courtship and sex within marriage.⁷² Their work highlights the varieties of courtship and marriage relationships in Ireland, and the changing experiences over time. It also illustrates how an analysis of the sources, such as court records or newspapers, that discuss behaviour considered deviant or criminal can reveal much about what was considered ‘normal’. A re-reading of these sources and others will tell the wider story of sexual experiences, this includes those of same-sex or queer relationships of which our knowledge, particularly of female same-sex relationships, is limited. We know more about male same-sex relationships that were criminalised and female same-sex/queer relationships do not appear in the written archive in the same way. While we do know more about those women like Eva Gore-Booth who did leave written archives, even then as Sonja Tiernan has argued there has been a tendency by some to ‘deny her lesbian sexuality’ an example of how ‘homosexuals are written out of history’.⁷³ Similarly, Marie Mulholland, writing about Kathleen Lynn, has argued that in the ‘struggle for recognition of women’s contribution to history’ historians have ‘chosen to subdue or sacrifice the sexual life or inclinations of their subjects’.⁷⁴ There has, however, been progress made in revisiting the lives of

queer women involved in the Irish revolutionary period and this continued work will expand and develop understandings of the complexity of female relationships.⁷⁵

The period 1850–1922 saw women become increasingly encouraged to be good wives and mothers and firmly fixed as both moral guardians and those believed to pose the greatest threat to moral decline. This extended across the religious divide, the language of how women should behave, and the image of the ideal woman was shared by Protestants and Catholics alike. There was a united intolerance of female sexual behaviour outside of marriage and those who transgressed were vulnerable to ostracization from their families and communities. Unmarried mothers, and women engaged in prostitution, were particular targets of concern, with limited options open to them other than the workhouse or a Magdalene institution. Working-class women were most vulnerable to the attentions of a newly emerging middle class keen to rescue and reform in their likeness. Money and social standing could also handle situations like an unwanted pregnancy quietly and privately. The partitioning of the island saw the situation for women on both sides of the border continue to be restricted and limited, with continued stigma and shame attached to unmarried mothers and limits to bodily autonomy couched in the language of religion and moral purity.

Notes

- 1 Dympna McLoughlin, “Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Ireland,” *Irish Journal of Psychology* 15, nos. 1 & 2 (1994), 266.
- 2 For more on this see Aidan Beatty’s contribution to this volume.
- 3 Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 168.
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- 9 *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, 1906*, 42.
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- 11 *Ibid.*, 43.
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- 16 Anne O'Connor, "Abortion: Myths and Realities from the Irish Folk Tradition," *The Abortion Papers: Ireland* ed. Ailbhe Smyth (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992), 57–65.
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- 19 *Irish Society and Social Review*, October 7, 1893.
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- 67 Pašeta, “‘Waging War on the Streets,’” 63; Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, 174.
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13

THE EMERGENCE OF IRISH MASCULINITY STUDIES

Aidan Beatty

Introduction

David Roediger's 1991 work *The Wages of Whiteness* has acquired a seminal status in the field of Critical Whiteness Studies.¹ At the outset of this study, Roediger argued that studies of "race" which solely focus on the Black experience are marked by a fundamental ambiguity: on the one hand, there are obvious reasons – both political and academic – why recovering the historical experiences of African Americans is a necessary project. But on the other hand, academic analyses that treat "race" as synonymous with Blackness, end up tacitly accepting that white people do not have a racial identity. "Race" is simply something that "others" have, whilst white people are merely people, the default setting of humanity. Gender Studies (and its first cousin, Women's Studies) has often faced a correlative predicament. In Irish history, as in all other national historiographies, there are tangible reasons why the recovery of female voices, and the returning of female actors to the centre of our narratives, are necessary. But this should not lead us to ignore that "gender" is as much a masculine phenomenon as a feminine one; "masculinity", as a lived experience, and "manliness" as the perfected cultural ideal which men are expected to attain, are indispensable categories of analysis for gender history.² "Gender", by these lights, is a dialectical thing, the synthesis of the feminine thesis and the masculine antithesis, as well as the contradictions and tensions that exist in the interstices between the feminine and the masculine.

While historians such as Maria Luddy, Margaret Ward, Mary McAuliffe and Louise Ryan have made ground-breaking contributions to the history of "gender" in Ireland, their work has generally focused on the historical experiences of women, with "masculinity" for a long time remaining understudied. A number of important studies of Irish gender history, though, have begun to address this lacuna. Elaine Sisson's monograph on St. Enda's School traces Patrick Pearse's conceptions

of Irish boyhood to their modernist and colonial origins.³ Joseph Valente's *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture* excavates anxieties about Irish male weaknesses in the context of what Valente calls Ireland's bifurcated 'metrocolonial' status, simultaneously a colonized space in the British empire as well as a white European nation.⁴ Patrick McDevitt's work, while principally concentrating on sport and nationalism, also focuses on the relevant imperial contexts in which masculinist sporting ideologies were formed.⁵ Following in the footsteps of Mrinalini Sinha's pioneering work on colonial masculinity,⁶ Sikata Banerjee's *Muscular Nationalism* likewise situates Irish nationalist masculinities on the borderlands of Empire; her book is a comparative case study of the gender politics of Irish nationalism and Bengali Indian nationalism, and indeed her comparison allows for fine-grained analyses of Irish nationalism's knotty relationship with colonialism.⁷ (Though moving away from Bengal into research on other regions and languages of British India would complicate Banerjee's analyses.) My own published work in this area has been written with the same emphasis on race and empire.⁸

Banerjee's work, as its subtitle indicates, traces nationalist thinking up to the Citizenship Referendum of 2004, which implicitly defined Irishness within the confines of whiteness. Yet, within the first tranche of Irish masculinity studies, this focus on events after the 1920s is unusual. Indeed, it is possible to already sketch out a number of unifying traits in this subfield. The focus tends to be on the high culture of nationalism; Valente studies Yeats and Joyce, as well as Parnell, while the other historians just listed focus on such canonical texts and moments as the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884 or Pearse's *The Murder Machine* (1913), which claimed that the Irish were an essentially castrated nation. Temporally, the years from 1916 to 1922 are privileged, partly because these are the most privileged dates in modern Irish historiography, partly because "The State" was (and is) a male prerogative and so the founding of the Irish State(s) was an inherently masculinist moment (see Margaret Ward and Sonja Tiernan's contributions). These works also have a strong tendency towards comparative analyses, whether the focus is on the larger history of British imperialism and Edwardian anxieties of decline, or the Irish-Indian focus of *Muscular Nationalism* and the Irish-Zionist analogy explored in *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism*. Jane McGaughey's study of Ulster Unionist masculinity appears to be something of an outlier here; underneath its focus on Unionism, though, questions of identity and imperialism recur throughout and the timeframe still orbits 1916, albeit with its attentions turned toward the Somme rather than the GPO.⁹ For further work on this period, the Contemporary Documents collection at the Bureau of Military History and the Ephemera Collections at the National Library of Ireland both provide a wealth of archival material, visual material especially (see Figure 13.1).

More recent interventions into Irish masculinity studies have expanded on this extant body of literature, whilst also addressing some of its gaps. Conor Heffernan's work – in his doctoral dissertation, a host of journal articles and a monograph – has moved from high politics to everyday life, investigating the history of physical culture and body-building in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland.¹⁰



FIGURE 13.1 *Which?* de Valera Poster, 1917, Bureau of Military History, Contemporary Documents, 176/1/3.

Source: Bureau of Military History, Military Archives, Dublin, Ireland.

With a similar focus on muscular male bodies, Tim Ellis' chapter on 'de Valera's gains' highlights how the 'low' culture of body-building and the 'high' culture of political representation in the 1920s and '30s were mutually constitutive.¹¹ Also at the intersection of high politics and quotidian experiences, both Charlotte Aslesen and Rebecca Mytton have interrogated the emotional experiences of male nationalists between the Rising and the Civil War.¹² Conor Heffernan has also explored the emotionality of masculinity in an chapter in *Gender and History* that continues his push for a history of quotidian masculinities.¹³ Seán Donnelly's research analyses the wider ambit of political masculinity in the years after 1922.¹⁴ Kenneth Shonk has also made an important intervention here, investigating the dialectics of male and female archetypes in the visual culture of Fianna Fáil.¹⁵

Integrating masculinity studies with the established field of Irish women's history, Linda Connolly has shown how sexual violence was a recurring phenomenon within the male-dominated nationalism of the War of Independence.¹⁶ Gabrielle Machnik-Kékesi's work offers a further exploration of this, with due attention given to the reciprocal relationship between a nationalist ideology defined by and for men, and a violent hostility to women's involvement in that decidedly male space.¹⁷ Moving away from 1916 and its complicated aftermath a number of other researchers have begun to thread together the social and cultural history of modern Irish masculinities. Reminiscent of George Chauncey's landmark social history of

pre-Stonewall New York, Averill Earls' *Queering Dublin* uncovers a previously hidden history of male–male sex (and the ways in which it was policed) in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ In one sense, Earls is studying the social realities of a number of cultural trends also explored by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston and Eibhear Walshe.¹⁹ Similarly straddling cultural studies and social realities, Loïc Wright has, via the study of drinking culture in middle-brow fiction, reconstructed the homo-social spaces of pubs and their role in constructing hegemonic masculinities at their most quotidian level.²⁰ “Producing Priestliness”, Joseph Nugent’s unpublished dissertation, looks at another major institution of everyday life in modern Ireland and its role in producing a set of normative ideals of “correct” male behaviour.²¹

The edited collection *Ireland and Masculinities in History*, published in 2019, provides a succinct coda for Irish masculinity studies, as well as a number of signposts for future work. Contributions from Pamela Kane – focusing on Protestant Unionist masculinities during the Ulster Crisis – and Mary Hatfield – examining masculinity, boyhood and play in the first half of the twentieth century – have an obvious resonance with extant research. Chapters by Clíona Ó Gallchoir and Declan Kavanagh explore high culture in the eighteenth century. Kevin McKenna’s chapter looks at tenant and landlord social “rituals” and how they can be understood via a masculine lens. Dara Purvis and Ed Madden both dismantle normative masculine standards of marriage and fatherhood across the twentieth century.²²

In 2009, in his near-encyclopedic history of sexualities in twentieth-century Ireland, Diarmaid Ferriter asserted that ‘the history of Irish masculinity has yet to be written’.²³ This might have been true at the time; it is now clearly the case that major inroads have been made. The remainder of this chapter, indicating where new work could potentially be carried out, will attempt to sketch out a particular narrative of modern Irish history, using “masculinity” as a key category of analysis in which “gender”, following Joan Scott’s conceptualisations, has both fluid definitions and yet is invariably bound up with questions of power and authority.²⁴

In one of the earliest – and most theoretically sophisticated – interventions into Irish masculinity studies, Sarah McKibben used the study of post-Plantation bardic poetry to show how the incursion of English culture and an English political order were both understood as masculinist phenomena; colonialism, the rapid collapse of Gaelic elites and changes in the structure of property ownership were all apprehended as male humiliation in the face of an English enemy previously dismissed as effeminate.²⁵ McKibben’s source material is almost exclusively in Irish, and yet her argument, almost by default, looks out to the rest of the Atlantic World, where encounters with other native and indigenous peoples and various acts of English conquest were regularly perceived in gendered terms. In Lockean terms, the “productive” male farmers of the Virginia Territory (and later, of the United States more generally) asserted that they had a superior right to the “empty” lands of the New World, claimed to be going to waste under the lazy and effeminate Native Americans. Honor Sachs has shown how, in this colonial context, white American masculinity came to be bound up with a specific conception of capitalist land-ownership, in which only “productive” agriculture on land bequeathed through

primogeniture was allowed to be esteemed as properly masculine activities.²⁶ Those outside of this propertied and racialized ontology – classified as, at best, inferior men, at worst seen as effeminate or “queer” – invariably experienced their landlessness as humiliation or as weakness. There are obvious parallels here to McKibben’s findings. But just as the high-cultural studies of the 1912–23 period are now being complemented by newer studies of everyday masculinities, so also there is a need to add to McKibben’s work with studies of the quotidian masculine experiences in the early modern period. John Tosh’s examination of the lived experiences of domestic bourgeois masculinity in Victorian England provides an illustrative example of what such work could look like.²⁷

Anne Kane’s historical sociology of agrarian political rituals – while focused tightly on the Land War of 1879–82 – goes some way to producing this kind of Irish social history of masculinity (though it is not itself a history of masculinity, *per se*). Kane begins her book by saying that ‘In the spring of 1879, the Irish people began the process of redeeming their land, their country, and themselves from British domination’.²⁸ That terms like “domination” regularly have a masculine core should be clear by now! And Kane argues that it was during the intense rural agitation of the Land War (1878–1882) that many of the central agrarian tropes of Irish nationalism – which would remain prevalent well into the twentieth century, if not even later – were fashioned: anti-landlordism, an affinity for owning land over renting it, and the ideal of the ‘Strong Farmer’ (private property owners with large farms of 50 acres or more). With more than a hint of de Valera, Kane places the Strong Farmer ideal within a broader nationalist vision: a ‘rural society of small independent family-sized farms, which provided a modest livelihood of “frugal comfort” free from want and privation and preserved the family as the essential unit of production.’²⁹ Kane hints at the masculinist notions nestled within all this: the Irish Strong Farmer was a man who was rooted in his soil; he was independent, self-reliant, productive and able to provide for his wife and family as an owner-occupier. The Strong Farmer could avoid the emasculating indignity of paying rent for another man’s land. Not dissimilarly, “masculinity” as a theme and as a category of analysis is implicit in Peter Hession’s recently completed doctoral dissertation, which focuses on issues of hygiene, social engineering and the creation of a modern Irish subjectivity and sense of personal sovereignty and self-control.³⁰ Mary Hatfield’s monograph on the history of Victorian Irish childhood also raises important questions about how “rational” Irish men could be made, with a particular emphasis on child-rearing and middle-class education.³¹

Margaret Kelleher has studied the ways in which the Irish Famine (as well as other famines) has been grasped as a uniquely “feminine” turn of events; she focuses on the prevalence of female memoirs, the blame that is ascribed to “Mother Nature” or the ubiquity of often-faceless female/mother figures in public memorials.³² A study of the male experience of the Famine (whether it was understood as a cataclysmic humiliation or an erasure of male breadwinning authority) would be a useful corollary. While a sizeable literature³³ exists on agrarian “outrages” and associated secret societies across the nineteenth century, much could be done on the specifically

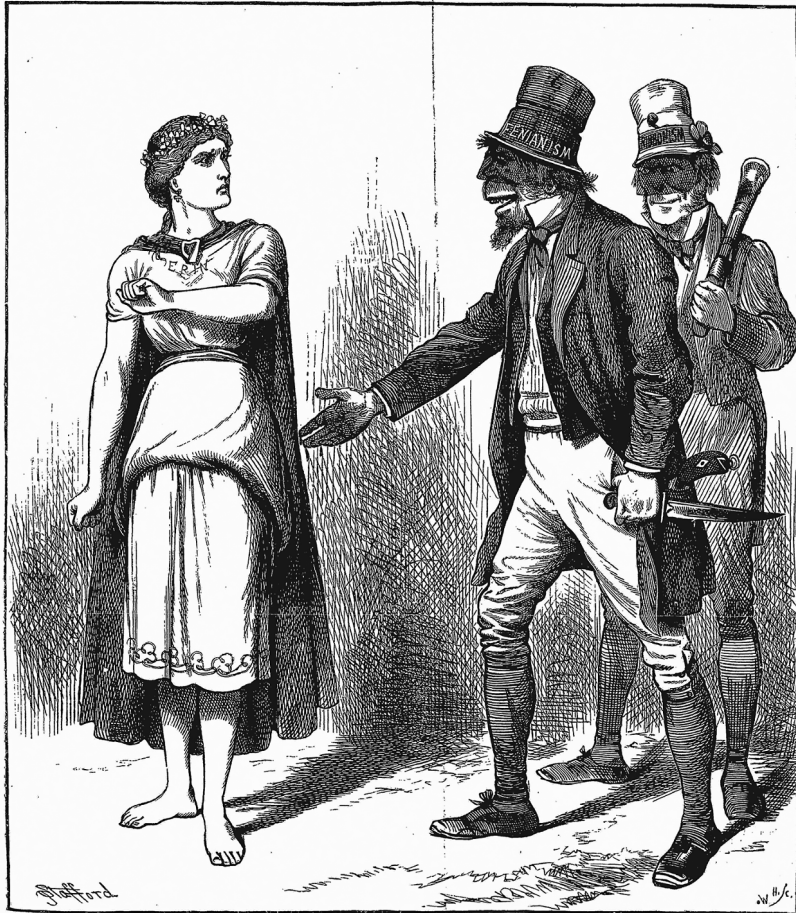
gendered nature of the homosocial (if often frustratingly nebulous) organisations generally responsible for this unrest; the White Boys, the Molly Maguires, the Ribbonmen. In Mac Suibhne's recent microhistorical study of a particular moment of agrarian violence, he notes that already before the Famine, and more intensely in its aftermath, new notions of time and discipline, manners and obedience were all being transformed by an increasingly interventionist Church and State.³⁴ This is the context in which the "Devotional Revolution" first identified by Emmet Larkin was carried out.³⁵ Paul Cullen, appointed Cardinal in 1850, sought to modernize and centralize the Church, with a major emphasis on enforcing priestly celibacy, austere Ultramontane morality and Catholic education. Manliness was always implicit in this rationalizing project, even if Larkin (a relatively old-fashioned empiricist) does not engage with that in any forthright manner. Likewise, Fr. Mathew's Temperance Movement, which took its first pledges in 1838, was underpinned by a set of gendered assumptions about Irish male behaviour; sobriety and a full self-control that in turn pointed to a proper degree of sovereignty over the self and over the nation. As a later generation of Temperance activists would proclaim: 'Ireland Sober is Ireland Free'.³⁶ An anxious desire to disprove one of the most common negative stereotypes about the Irish "race" – their supposed drunkenness – was clearly at work here. There is a substantial body of literature on anti-Irish racist stereotypes and the ways in which the Irish assimilated into whiteness.³⁷ Katie Barclay recently wrote about how Irish men could negotiate these stereotypes in their encounters with the legal system,³⁸ though "masculinity" usually percolates under the surface in the literature on anti-Irish racism, remaining only vaguely apprehended. The (in)famous caricatures that appeared in publications such as *Punch* were clearly gendered: horrific male figures denoting Irish savageness and backwardness, but also often accompanied by a mythical and female *Erin*, who hangs her head in shame or recoils in disgust when confronted with these embarrassing specimens of Irish manhood (see Figure 13.2). Perhaps less studied, though, is the absence of any "real" female figures in these caricatures.³⁹ There is thus an unanswered question as to why Victorian British anti-Irish iconography was so strongly focused on the male figure of "Paddy" while contemporary American nativism was often also equally harsh in its stereotyped images of "Bridget", a generally clumsy and uncouth woman.⁴⁰ It would also be profitable to examine if the "Fighting Irish" imagery that appeared on both sides of the Atlantic – straddling a macho self-image with a negative perception that Irish men were dangerously violent and in need of self-control – could be placed in a broader imperial history of "martial races".⁴¹

With a particular emphasis on the legal system, Katie Barclay has laid a major foundation for the history of masculinity in early-nineteenth-century Ireland. Barclay's work also draws from, and makes a major contribution to, the history of emotions.⁴² But in general, the history of masculinity in Ireland's long nineteenth century remains understudied. An obvious starting point would be to replicate the already published histories of nationalist masculinity in the early twentieth century. There is often a blatantly masculinist rhetoric in contemporary nationalist publications, many of which are digitized and available online, such as Young Ireland's

FUNNY FOLKS

THE COMIC COMPANION TO THE NEWSPAPER.

"OUR TRUE INTEREST IS ALL FOR YOUR DELIGHT."—Shakespeare.



THE "FRIENDS" OF ERIN.

ERIN. Not Friends, but Fiends, that in the patriot's name
 Compass perdition. Plotters in the night:
 Weaving the treacherous web for innocent feet,
 Or flashing, in the light, the assassin's knife

To dye with blood the Olive-branch—with blood
 Of those who bear it—messengers of Peace!
 Out on such friends!

—See the Poem, fifth page.

FIGURE 13.2 The "Friends" of Erin, *Funny Folks*, 20 May 1882.

Nation. (Even the organisation's name here is suggestive of an active and muscularly youthful masculine leadership and an engaged and progressive modernity that would liberate and improve the nation, common in multiple other national contexts – Disraeli's Young England, the Young Ottomans of the *Tanzimat*-era, the more narrowly nationalistic Young Turks after 1908 and their counterparts, the Young Arabs, Gandhi's *Young India* newspaper, or the Zionist *HaShomer HaTzair* [The Young Guard].) The United Irishman Rising of 1798 is practically untouched by historians of masculinity – perhaps other than in the work of Catriona Kennedy⁴³ – but could also lend itself to a comparative-minded study of Republican notions of masculinity from Ireland to France to the Thirteen Colonies (where Jeffersonian images of white male property holders were always to the fore) and even Haiti. Indeed, it is worth wondering how Wolfe Tone's recourse to 'the Men of No Property' could and should be fully understood in an Atlantic context where abolition and slavery were continuously remaking the normative definitions of both political sovereignty and of white male property ownership. Away from high politics, the massive holdings of the Irish Folklore Commission (often ignored by historians), much of which are being digitized, provide a useful source for a panoply of popular attitudes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and could productively be used by historians of masculinity.⁴⁴

The period from 1912–23 remains *the most* studied period, both in Irish masculinities and perhaps in modern Irish history-writing more generally. But taking Jason Knirck's notion of the 'Afterimage of the Revolution', that the defining traits of advanced nationalism continued to play a determining role in Irish politics well into the 1920s, so also it would be worth exploring the ways in which nationalism's masculinist assumptions continued to surface in groups like the Gaelic League or the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).⁴⁵ Literature on the latter tend to mix popular history with serious academic analysis; the activities of the former, after 1922, are almost totally unstudied. Spin-off groups like *Glún na Buaidhe* [The Generation of Victory] represent an even larger aporia. During the Cultural Revival and the period immediately prior to the Easter Rising, nationalists like Patrick Pearse saw the learning of the Irish language as a means of regaining a lost, pre-anglicisation vision of politically independent masculinity.⁴⁶ The very name of *Glún na Buaidhe* points to an ideology of muscular masculinity and national rebirth, suggesting that this Pearsean focus on language revival as masculine revival lasted well into the twentieth century. A masculinity studies reading of canonical works of Irish nationalism, from the Blasket biographies to more subversive texts like Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht* and Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (all now available in English translations) would be valuable contributions.

Whilst never explicitly elucidating this, Brian Hanley has suggested that the post-Civil War Irish Republican Army became a vehicle for social discontent, attracting those that a sympathetic observer might call "subaltern" or that an opponent would dismiss as a "lumpenproletariat".⁴⁷ A certain kind of performative working-class macho identity would come to define republicanism, surfacing in both its print culture (much of which is digitally available through the extensive resources of the

Irish Republican Movement Collection at Indiana University-Purdue University Indiana⁴⁸) and in its everyday activities; there are rich veins worth investigating here and both Sean Brady and Fidelma Ashe have provided programmatic chapters for how studies of Northern Irish masculinity, both during the Troubles and since, could proceed whilst also showing the potential impact on an area of study still dominated by “hard” empirical political science research.⁴⁹ There are already some examples of what this might look like: Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost’s linguistic research on Republican prison culture shows how a gendered conception of male power was expressed through the use of the Irish language.⁵⁰ An awareness of gender politics also hangs in the background of Eva Zeilstra’s comparative study of hunger strikes.⁵¹

The historiography on Northern Ireland, even more so perhaps than the history of the Free State/Éire/Republic, is defined by a positivist and hyper-empiricist methodology; in such a context, gender history and the history of masculinity have not sunk deep roots. In turn, the recent history of Northern Ireland has cast a long shadow over the practice of Irish history-writing, with “revisionists”, claiming academic seriousness and objectivity, squaring off against republicans, dismissed as romantics or, at worst, apologists for terrorism.⁵² As the historiography of modern Ireland leapfrogs past this, masculinity studies (with an obvious ability to understand “Ireland” as a colonial entity coupled with a capability of deconstructing nationalist myths) will have a strong and important role to play. At the very least, masculinity studies could turn its gaze on revisionists themselves and their claims to be objective, rational and serious in the face of irrational and hysterical republicans – all very obviously gendered claims!

In a short piece written for an Ireland-themed issue of the American *Jacobin* magazine, Sarah-Anne Buckley argued that the Magdalene Laundries functioned as an Irish variant of a carceral state, a system for brutally controlling women and the poor.⁵³ As studies of the 1950s and ’60s come more and more to the fore, and as religious archival sources hopefully become more readily available,⁵⁴ work in this register, recognizing the role of a masculinist state in creating an “architecture of containment”⁵⁵ is only to be welcomed. Irish youth culture and the rituals and scripts according to which masculinity and femininity are performed is another potential avenue, particularly in the context of the 1950s and ’60s and the country’s opening up to the outside world.⁵⁶ (Eleanor O’Leary’s 2018 study of Irish youth culture, while not itself a history of gender, is thankfully still alert to questions of masculinity and femininity.⁵⁷) Likewise, as the history of the Celtic Tiger years is written, the key role played by a specific kind of feckless Irish male capitalist should also be recognized.⁵⁸ And, of course, the basic fact that Irish politics still remains a male-dominated arena is always worth mentioning, exploring and explaining.⁵⁹

Writing about a very different context than modern Ireland, the religious studies scholar Mathew Kuefler has made the snappy observation that “The problem with men’s history is that there’s too much of it.”⁶⁰ Kuefler’s work points to one of the major contributions that masculinity studies can make to history-writing: a way to recast our gaze and change history from being the uncritical study of the actions of the rich, powerful and male, to a deconstructing of those men’s power and prestige.

But Kuefler's piquant one-liner also directly gestures towards one of the potential pitfalls of masculinity studies; the danger that it can easily slip into a smuggling of "men" back into the centre of historiographical attention.

To return to David Roediger's insight about the value of critical studies of white racial identity, the purpose of studying Irish masculinity is to expand and complicate the literature on Irish gender history, to recognise the dialectical nature of gender as a category of analysis and as a lived reality. Gender history and women's history emerged out of the New Left politics and second-wave feminism of the 1960s. If gender history is just one of the several attempts to expand the focus of history so as to include the voices and political interests of various subaltern subjects – women, people of colour, the working classes, sexual minorities – masculinity studies only finds its fullest purpose as an adjunct to that project, not as any kind of alternative to it.

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- 8 Aidan Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism, 1884–1938* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); "Masculinity and Nationhood in the East Clare By-Election, 1917," *Éire-Ireland* 51, Nos. 3 & 4 (2016): 141–164.
- 9 Jane McGaughey, *Ulster's Men: Protestant Unionist Masculinities and Militarization in the North of Ireland, 1912–1923* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012).
- 10 Conor Heffernan, "Strength Peddlers: Eddie O'Callaghan and the Selling of Irish Strength," *Sport in History* 38, No. 1 (2018): 23–49; "The Irish Sandow School: Physical Culture Competitions in *fin-de-siècle* Ireland," *Irish Studies Review* 27, No. 3 (2019): 402–421; "Truly Muscular Gaels? W.N. Kerr, Physical Culture and Irish Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century," *Sport in History* (2019): 1–24; "Physical Culture and Irish Modernity, 1893–1918," *Leisure/Loisir* (2019); "Soldiers, Sokol, and Symbolism," *Éire-Ireland* 54, Nos. 3 & 4 (2019): 159–184; "Physical Culture, the Royal Irish Constabulary and Police Masculinities in Ireland, 1900–14," *Irish Historical Studies* 43, No. 164 (November 2019): 237–251; "Marching Forwards or Backwards? Physical Education and the Army in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland," *Sport in Society* (2020): 1280–1298; *The History of Physical Culture in Ireland* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
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- 12 Charlotte Aslesen, "Gendering the Emotionality of a Revolution: Male Revolutionaries Emotional Expression after the Establishment of the Southern Irish State" (Master's Thesis, Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo, 2020); Rebecca Mytton, "Revolutionary Masculinities in the IRA, 1916–1923" (PhD Dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2020). See also: Sophia Emily, "Wherever Green Is Worn: An t-Óglách and Irish Masculinity, 1919–1923" (Master's Thesis, University of Calgary, 2021).
- 13 Conor Heffernan, "Hearts and Muscles: Emotional Communities and Physical Culture Magazines in 1900s Ireland," *Gender and History* 33, No. 1 (2021): 129–148.
- 14 Seán Donnelly, "'Conservative-Minded Revolutionaries'? Treatyite Political Thought and the Intellectual Formation of the Irish Free State, 1891–1932" (PhD Dissertation, Teesside University, 2019). See also, Seán Donnelly, "Republicanism and Civic Virtue in Treatyite Political Thought, 1921–3," *The Historical Journal* 63, No. 5 (2020): 1257–1280.
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- 30 Peter Hession, "Social Authority and the Urban Environment in Nineteenth Century Cork" (PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2018).
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- 45 The GAA has an extensive archive at their headquarters in Croke Park in Dublin; no comparable archive exists for the Gaelic League, though their published works are accessible via the National Library of Ireland. The Stephen Barrett Papers at the National University of Ireland–Galway has a massive amount of Gaelic League pamphlets and ephemera. The Gaelic League's bilingual newspapers are digitized and available online for the years from 1899 to 1931. Conradh na Gaeilge, accessed August 7, 2021, <https://cnag.ie/en/membership/139-2016-commemorations/814-an-claidheamh-soluis-online.html>.

- 46 See, Beatty, *Masculinity and Power*, ch.4.
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14

HOMOSEXUALITY AND LESBIANISM IN IRISH NEWSPAPERS, 1861–1922

Catherine Lawless and Ciara Breathnach

Introduction

To write a history of those whose sexualities fell outside the bounds of the legal, the acceptable, or even the recognizable poses enormous challenges, even more so when the terms such as ‘sexuality’ hardly existed in the period. Indeed, the terms homosexual and heterosexual were coined in 1868 to denote sexual deviancy, that is, sexual acts which had erotic aims deprived of any procreative function.¹ How can we know about the sexual practices of the ‘ordinary individual’, who leaves no written record of everyday sexuality, whether of licit, procreative and marital intercourse, or of the illicit. To look at, for instance, court records of sodomy, one reproduces the language of deviance and disempowers the original subject yet again. To use medical records, one reinforces the psychiatric and medical discourses of ‘moral degeneracy’ or ‘moral illness’, and the queer subject becomes, yet again, a patient. Yet these problems can and are overcome with sensitive use of the court or medical material. What of the majority of individuals who never came to the attention of court or doctor, whose lives and loves were unrecorded, and often un-lived fully, due to the fear of disclosure or the interiorisation of society’s disdain?

David Halperin has pointed out the need to approach the past as other when looking at sexuality before the twentieth century in a way that ‘foregrounds historical differences’ yet recognises ‘the irreducible cultural and historical specificities of the present’.² Writing the histories of pre-twentieth-century sexualities has analogies with writing the history of women. In order to write the history of women they had to be differentiated from men as a group, or a class. The danger was quickly perceived that a history of great men was merely being supplemented with a history of great women. Gender history, in setting out the study of relations between men and women, at different times and in different places, allowed for a richer picture of human behaviours and codes, but still has to deal with the survival

of sources, whether textual or material, that can inform about the lives of the non-elite. Jeffrey Weeks has demonstratively shown that attitudes towards homosexuality are always linked to wider discourses on sexuality, the family, sex and gender roles.³ Homosexuality is also linked, according to Weeks, traditionally with prostitution, as deviant sexuality, out of the heterosexual reproductive space.⁴ Both the Labouchere amendment and the 1898 Vagrancy Act, which affected homosexual men, were conceived originally and principally to fight prostitution.⁵ The period under review is, famously, the one in which the homosexual is born, according to Foucault, from medical, legal and confessional discourses.⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown how the definitions of homosexuality in the nineteenth century, culminating in 1900, are central to understanding the construction of twentieth-century Western sexual identities.⁷

Until Ferriter's broad survey of the history of Irish sexuality in 2009 historians of Ireland took a very conservative approach, and gendered normativities were just accepted.⁸ Literary scholars had been far more adventurous for several decades at that point and have exploited literary works and personal papers to produce a more substantial body of work. Interpretations of fictional characters have led Joycean scholars to demonstrate how key some events in the early twentieth century were to the development of Stephen Dedalus, the main protagonist in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.⁹ Tina O'Toole's work on the New Woman is also an exemplar.¹⁰ Personal documents such as letters and diaries can reveal something of intimate lives, but such sources are fraught with difficulties of interpretation. For example, Dr Kathleen Lynn, the Irish revolutionary, lived together with Madeleine French-Mullan for 33 years, but Ó hÓgartaigh describes the relationship in terms of a close friendship. Her caution is rooted in the fact that neither explicitly stated that they had a physical relationship. They clearly had a loving relationship, which has led Marie Mulholland to conclude that they were lesbians.¹¹ Their relationship, or what records we have of it, remind us of the difficulties inherent in 'romantic friendships', 'Boston marriages', and the language of love and affection found in letters and personal diaries noted by Lilian Faderman, who explores the problems of identifying lesbianism with genital sexuality, without, however, discounting that such sexuality has always existed.¹² She cites the example of the celebrated Ladies of Llangollen, Irish aristocratic women Lady Eleanor Butler (1739–1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755–1831), who dressed as men and entertained the great and good of the day, who seem to have been treated as eccentrics, but who were suspected of 'sapphism' by Hester Thrale, friend of Dr Johnson.¹³

Prior to Sonja Tiernan's pioneering and refreshing work on Eva Gore-Booth, a prolific writer and queer Irish suffragist who was instrumental in the English women's labour rights movement, lesbianism was not just quietly elided; it was flatly rejected as a possibility.¹⁴ Mary McAuliffe's work on revolutionary figure Margaret Skinnider has also addressed her lesbianism and her lifelong relationship with Nora O'Keeffe. Brian Lacey wrote a broad survey of homosexuality in Ireland, but more detailed work is yet to be done, while acknowledging the difficulties of source material.¹⁵ Averill Earls' recent articles on homosexuality and its criminalisation goes some way towards reconciling this.¹⁶

The dearth in source materials for the period under review merits mention. The fire in the Public Records Office in 1922 caused complete devastation of state papers, including court and prison records, and Irish collections of ego-documents, personal papers and diaries tend to be part of overarching political or estate papers (see O’Riordan’s contribution). Another problem is the negotiation of silence: how do we mine collections for the ‘love that dare not speak its name’? We might also remind ourselves that this was an era when masculinist Irish national identity was being formed and entrenched, which increased risk of discovery for the non-conforming who were pushed to the fringes of Irish society (see Beatty’s contribution to this volume). In this chapter we focus on newspaper coverage of court cases involving so-called unnatural crimes to identify ways in which non-conforming behaviours were perceived.

Weeks noted how both press coverage and works of sexology could, if used with caution, allow perspectives on homosexual subcultures and the nascent avowal of an identity, and pointed towards the promise of private archives such as the papers of homosexual rights campaigner Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) in Sheffield Public Library and letters to sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis (1853–1939), which often formed the basis of his published case histories.¹⁷ Some sense of commonality and community may have been possible through the very visibility of ‘inverted’ lives. Paul Lejeune has noted how, although fragmented and framed by the physicians and psychiatrists operating within diagnostic and legal frameworks, some voices can be retrieved from the case histories and autobiographical confidences found in the works of Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886), Laughton (*Perversion et perversité sexuelle*, 1896) and, closer to Ireland, Havelock Ellis (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 1896).¹⁸ He noted that three-quarters of the correspondents of Havelock Ellis considered that their lives were as moral as those of ‘normal’ people.¹⁹

Medievalist Judith Bennett’s ‘lesbian-like’ also provides a useful formulation in which to place women whose lives depended neither sexually, emotionally nor financially on men, and the example that she provides of a sixteenth-century unmarried townswoman running a business, but whose emotional and sexual life remains unknown to us, offers the possibility of situating celibate lives in a queer space, outside the heteronormativity of marital life and reproduction of labour.²⁰ That it was framed in criminal law means that male homosexuality has an archival body to draw upon whereas the history of lesbianism is much harder to access. Adrienne Rich argued that heterosexuality had been imposed on women by patriarchy and formulated the idea of ‘lesbian continuum’ as a subject, rather than the lesbian: a range of ‘woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman’.²¹ Building on Rich’s work, Martha Vicinus found that ‘The lesbian is an accepted subject for scrutiny – she exists, but how are we to define her history, who do we include and when did it begin?’²² Vicinus does not suggest a return to Rich’s lesbian continuum, which, she argued, erased the specificity of the lesbian, but instead called for a continuum of ‘women’s sexual experiences that *also* contains an irreducible sense of the dangerous difference implicit in homosexuality’. Donna Penn suggested that

‘queer’ was more useful, and that queering history could shed a light on the invention of homosexuality.²³ While lesbianism may be elusive to the historian of Ireland then homosexuality is less so, and we continue this chapter by turning to newspaper coverage to tease out general attitudes towards it. We recognize, however, the difficulties inherent in using the press as a source, it both formed and reflected public opinion – or, at least, a hegemonic opinion. We use the lens of social class to show the ways in which Irish newspapers, especially those of a Nationalist viewpoint, framed and othered a range of LGBTQI+ behaviours as either foreign or associated with the crumbling Anglo-Irish aristocracy or imperial power brokers.²⁴ We conclude the chapter with suggestions for future research agendas.

Newspaper coverage of ‘unnatural crimes’

Our review can begin in 1861, the year in which the Offences Against the Person Act removed the death sentence for sodomy but retained it as a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. At the end of that year, the *Dundalk Democrat* published an account of the ‘Drumming Out’ of two privates of the 14th Hussars, stationed in Dundalk. The men had been court-martialled and convicted ‘of an unnatural crime’. The newspaper pointed out that both men ‘we are told, were Englishmen’.²⁵ Otherwise, the newspapers seemed to confine themselves to reporting verdicts of assizes for sodomy or ‘unnatural crimes’, but rarely gave any details. Few cases of sodomy came before the assizes and fewer still were reported in the newspapers. Michael Costelloe was brought before the Connaught Winter Assizes in 1890 on a sodomy charge.²⁶ In that year 16 men and boys were indicted for cases of sodomy and bestiality, 12 were committed for trial, and only one was convicted; it is unfortunate, but not untypical in the broader sexological literature, that these crimes are coupled.²⁷ Henry Jones was brought before the Munster Winter Assizes in 1889 for an attempt to commit sodomy.²⁸ Patrick Reilly was sentenced to three years’ penal servitude in 1904.²⁹

In contrast with scant coverage of domestic cases, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century the newspapers covered a number of scandals, most of which took place outside Ireland, wherein same-sex relations or gender transgressions played a dominant role. Homosexuality or gender non-conforming behaviour was thus easily covered as ‘over there’, part of a corrupt governing class, decadent in behaviour and lifestyle. An analysis of press coverage of the cases of Boulton and Park (1870–1872), the Dublin Castle scandals (1884), the Oscar Wilde trial (1895), the Prussian court scandals (1907–1909) reveals, through shifting language, the trajectory of (almost entirely negative) attitudes towards male homosexuality in particular. Female sexuality is notoriously more difficult to identify, but the press interest in Ireland can be discerned from the coverage of Sandor/Sarolta Vey (1889, 1890), the Maud Allan libel case against Noel Pemberton Billing (1918) and Radclyffe Hall, author of the celebrated *Well of Loneliness* in her libel trial against George Fox Lane in 1920.

The Boulton and Park scandal involved the arrest of Ernest Boulton (1847–1904) and Frederick William Park (d.1881) in June 1870 in London, while dressed

as women, for intention to commit a felony. It emerged during the trial that they were known as Stella and Fanny and had taken part in a number of private theatrical events throughout the country and that both had convictions for soliciting men in the area around the Burlington Arcade.³⁰ Their association with the son of the Duke of Newcastle, Lord Arthur Pelham Clinton, led to a warrant for his arrest which could not be carried out due to his early death, possibly by suicide. The *Waterford News and Star*, July 1, 1870, was not alone in its distrust of the ‘upper classes’, and in wondering if Lord Arthur was really dead, given the circumstances of the ‘abominable offence’ with which Boulton and Park were charged and the convenience of Lord Arthur’s deposition, made shortly before his death, to his solicitor that he was entirely innocent.

The language in the Irish press echoed that of the British press and oscillated between light-hearted amusement, with the defendants being identified as ‘foolish young men’ (*Irish Examiner*, May 4, 1870), ‘silly youths’ (*Dundalk Democrat*, June 18, 1870), to the ‘most abominable crime’ of the *Leinster Express* (June 4, 1870) and the ‘shudderingly repulsive’ travesty of the *Nenagh Guardian* (May 21, 1870). The *Nation* thundered against the immorality reported by the London papers (ignoring their Irish counterparts) as being ‘worse than the Rinderpest’, and called for such publications to be kept out of Ireland for the material and ‘moral good of the country’ (May 28, 1870). Disquiet over the erosion of gender roles inherent in cross-dressing was apparent in both the *Nenagh Guardian* (May 21, 1870) and the *Leinster Express*, which noted it as a well-known phenomenon in London theatre circles, leading to suspicious glances being directed at any ‘effeminate looking man and every woman with a slightly masculine aspect’ (May 14, 1870).

In 1884 the nationalist newspaper, *United Ireland*, accused a network of officials in Dublin castle of being part of a homosexual network. Although the accusations had their motivation in politics, the reporting by the press indicated not only the traditional condemnation for such crimes, but also a homosexual subculture, not surprising in a garrison town.³¹ H.G. Cocks has demonstrated how the *United Ireland* coverage marked a watershed in press coverage of sodomy, moving from a narrowly legalistic language to the ‘new journalism’ of the 1880s, the paper printed insinuation and scandal, not merely the accusations and outcome of a trial.³² In the paper, Home Rule MP Tim Healy (1855–1931) accused Inspector James Ellis French of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and Gustavus Cornwall, Secretary of the General Post Office, of sodomy. Both were very senior ranking officials of the British administration and the Irish Nationalist press relished the opportunity to discredit them. Both men immediately sued, but only Cornwall pressed the suit, with French, probably aware of evidence against him, withdrawing his charges. Cornwall lost his libel action and was then tried for criminal offences. The trial revealed at least three male brothels in the city, and a well-established network which crossed class boundaries.³³

Sergeant O’Brien opened the case for the plaintiff, Cornwall, according to *The Nation* (July 5, 1884), ‘to vindicate his character from as false and as foul a libel as ever brought sorrow to the mind of man [...] of crime so loathsome that it had

been said it should not be named against Christian men'. When the verdict against Cornwall was announced, the *Dundalk Democrat* (July 12, 1884) reported on the joy of the country, regardless of their politics and goes on to use the familiar trope of disease and contagion, urging that the "rats" that infest Dublin Castle [...] who, if they are allowed to continue in the perpetration of such infernal crimes, would soon become a plague, before even which the cholera would be a mercy to this country?' It urged support for a fund for the editor of the newspaper, William O'Brien (1852–1928), to 'stem a tide of corruption, which, if unchecked, would make this country an island of demons instead of an Island of Saints'.³⁴

The difficulty in convicting those involved in both the Boulton and Park and the Dublin Castle scandals helped pave the way for the Labouchere amendment and the conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895.³⁵ As shown by Averill Earls, the Nationalist press coverage of the Oscar Wilde scandal was sketchier and more sympathetic. An example from the *Belfast Newsletter* is symptomatic, and reported that he in the

plenitude of his imagination, has never written a play so startling and poetic in its incidents as the melancholy drama, in which he is at the present moment enacting, perforce, the leading part. Misfortune seems to have followed and tripped up men of genius in all ages [...] It is not an exaggeration to say that Oscar's worst enemies must have felt some pity for him [...].

The *Evening Herald* also expressed some sympathy for Wilde when reporting on the petition for his release being circulated in France and allegedly signed by authors such as Zola.

[...] it is certainly pitiable to reflect that we are slowly murdering one of the most brilliant authors of his time by keeping him prison [...] It has turned a young and brilliant man of letters into an old and broken and spiritless wreck. Is it really necessary to enforce his punishment to the bitter end?

(November 30, 1895)

Similarly, the *Dundalk Democrat*, in its review of the dead year, while listing it among the 'black crimes' still allowed 'Pity for the fall of a great man mingled in the public mind with horror at his crime' (December 28, 1895).

Another queer trial covered by Irish newspapers was that which took place in Germany between a Prussian soldier, Count Kuno von Moltke, and a German journalist, Maximilien Harden. The case is particularly interesting due to the appearance as a witness of the German sexologist and pioneer of homosexual rights, Dr Magnus Hirschfeld (1835–1935), who, according to the *Evening Herald* (October 26, 1907), was a 'authority on the particular form of moral obliquity alleged in this case'. Like so many others, the case was that of libel. Harden had suggested in his newspaper *Zukunft* that there was an inner circle at the Prussian court, centred on the diplomat Prince Philip von Eulenburg (1847–1921), which favoured spiritualism and 'unnatural practices' and restricted access to the Kaiser.³⁶ The case

was keenly followed by the Irish press, with the *Sunday Independent* even providing a line drawing of von Moltke (*Sunday Independent*, October 27, 1907). The *Belfast Newsletter* (October 24, 1907) reported that Harden claimed not to have asserted offences against von Moltke, but that he had ‘abnormal instincts’.

‘Lesbian-like’

Evidence for lesbian lives is notoriously hard to rescue and interpret, and, as it was not a crime, newspaper coverage was limited and even more euphemistic than in the case of male homosexuality. But some attitudes and fears expressed about ‘manly women’ and gender transgression can be gleaned. For example, in the *Evening Herald*, reporting on Havelock Ellis’ book *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Sexual Characters*, where it noted that Ellis had assured ‘the essential and ineradicable femininity of woman – and the impossibility of her natural pace in creation and society being in the least degree changed, as is sometimes feared, by the “manly wimmin”’ (*Evening Herald*, May 24, 1891).

The Irish press reported on the case of Sándor Vay (recorded as Vey in the newspapers) (1859–1918), a Hungarian who, after having led a life as a journalist and having had many affairs with women, was revealed to have been born a woman and brought up as male, while their brother was brought up as female. The *Ballinrobe Chronicle* (November 16, 1889) recounted the story, the sex of Sándor coming to light only after their father-in-law suspected them of swindling large sums of money. The case was reported in the language of sensation and curiosity, although with a touch of xenophobia: ‘From Pesch, where eccentricities of that sort are hardly a rarity, she disappeared about a year ago.’ The *Irish Times* reported (November 1, 1890) in a similar tone, and quoted the sexologist Professor Krafft-Ebing who gave a physical description of Vey, noting that ‘although her years of dissipation have cut deep lines in her face, she is still handsome, and looks like a boy of twenty-one’.³⁷ The numerous relationships with women entertained by Vay and their marriage aroused no more than intrigue in the Irish press and the case was reported as an exotic curiosity, without any discernible anxiety.

More overt references to lesbianism in the popular press occur towards the end of the period covered here on Maud Allan (1873–1956) and Marguerite Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943).³⁸ Maud Allan, the American dancer, brought a libel case against the MP Noel Pemberton Billing (1881–1948), who had written of her private performance of *Salome* in his Vigilante society’s newspaper, in an article headlined ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’, suggesting that she was both a lesbian and a traitor. He further claimed that there were 47,000 German agents in Britain likely to be attracted to the perversions of that performance.³⁹ These agents, according to a witness, included both Asquith and the judge himself. The absurdity of this claim was accepted, to the *Derry Journal’s* disgust, by a British jury who acquitted Pemberton Billing. The paper described Allan as a ‘notorious dancer’ and castigated the judge, Mr Justice Darling, for the outcome of the trial, during which ‘multitudes of Britons’ had ‘listened with straining ears while the tides of filth’ flowed in the court (June 7, 1918). The sensational claims

heard in court were backed up with the evidence of a veteran of such cases, Lord Alfred Douglas, who, as the *Derry Journal*, quoting from the *London News*, reminded its readers, had himself made a translation of Salome.

The *Irish Independent* (June 5, 1918) did not shy away from capitalizing the evidence of ‘eminent surgeon’ Sir Alfred Fripp, that there were ‘PERVERTS IN ALL CLASSES’ and also reported the opinion of psychologist Dr Arthur Cyril Cooke that the play on ‘a healthy audience it could have no effect save disgust, but it would give satisfaction to the depraved, as it suggested unnatural vices’. The *Evening Herald* (June 1, 1918) reported on the evidence of Lord Alfred Douglas, who claimed that ‘Oscar Wilde told him he intended the play of “Salome” to be an exhibition of this perverted fashion and excitement of a young girl’, and that he regretted ever having met Wilde. ‘Witness said normal-minded people would be disgusted with “Salome,” and moral perverts would revel in it. As to individuals who might have some taint the play would be liable to awaken any dormant instinct of the kind’ and that he was trying to undo the harm that had been done. Two days later the same paper reported that a number of critics had labelled the play as “impure, decadent, and degenerate,” and a “melodrama of disease”. The word ‘lesbian’ was reported on June 4, 1918, by the *Irish Independent*, and by the *Evening Herald* of the same date, stating that the ‘unpleasant tragedy’, written by Wilde, a ‘curious, perverted, brilliant creature’ and that evidence brought by Billing to prove ‘this woman to be a practitioner of Lesbian vices, not one witness had suggested they could find in the play from beginning to end A HINT OR SUGGESTION of Lesbian practices’. Deborah Cohler has shown how Billing relied on a formula of othering homosexuality as foreign; indeed, specifically, through the frequent references to sexologists, German. She has also shown that the case was widely discussed, and that, while terms such as clitoris and lesbian were used interchangeably, lacking a discourse of lesbianism to map onto, the trial showed that ‘female homosexuality, twisted and confused as it was in the public mind, had a place in that mind and that it was a place of confusion, fear, and indeterminacy’.⁴⁰

The indeterminacy of the vice and its deviant nature being linked with male homosexuality is seen in the lament of the *Meath Chronicle*, which, probably referring to the 47,000 whom it described as ‘unhappy victims’, noted that, ‘rampant in the land’ was the ‘positive’ as well as the ‘potential’ sodomite, and, castigating ‘political perverts and congenital political knaves’ as well as sodomites, had noted that it was claimed, as much for sodomites as politicians, that ‘they cannot help themselves; that they are made in that fashion, and owe their horrid aberrations to circumstances over which they have no control’. The statement is interesting, as it shows an understanding of homosexuality, based on sexology, as a congenital illness, although it is scathing in its concluding opinion: ‘we cannot accept these transparently insufficient excuses’ (*Meath Chronicle*, August 24, 1918).

The reporting of the 1920 case brought by Marguerita Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943) against Mr St. George Lane Fox Pitt for slander was reported in the more familiar, nuanced and coded terms. Hall had sought membership of the Council of the Society for Psychical Research from Fox Pitt. He had allegedly said that she was accused by Admiral Sir Ernest Troubridge of wrecking his home. *The Irish Times*

reported the case, while also finding space to note that Hall's pet name was 'John' (*The Irish Times*, November 19, 1920), a coding of masculinizing identity. The *Irish Examiner* reported on the claim that Fox Pitt had stated to a witness that Hall was a 'grossly immoral woman', who had 'great influence over Lady Troubridge and had come between her and her husband; and wrecked the Admiral's home...' (*Irish Examiner*, November 19, 1920). Fox Pitt asked the witness: 'When I spoke of immoral did you understand I meant it in some erotic meaning?' The witness said that she did at first, but then understood it to refer to an individual contacted in the séance (A.V.B.) (*Irish Examiner*, November 20, 1920).

The pain and trauma experienced by queer individuals, subject to legal and social sanction, cannot have been helped by reading such accounts, yet at least the press brought confirmation that they were not alone. There was also some coverage which, while in no way open or supportive, offered more sympathy in highly nuanced terms. In 1913, for instance, *The Irish Times* felt able to comment, while reviewing a work by Thurston Hopkins, that

The 'backward glance' gives the true view, and it is possible now to pronounce a saner opinion on Wilde's life and work. His was a distinctly a remarkable genius, perverted in some degrees, misunderstood in others, the object of extravagant praises and extravagant blame.

(September 5, 1913)

The paper expressed even warmer consideration in 1915, considering it perhaps not out of place to consider Wilde's position amongst Irish dramatists such as Goldsmith, Sheridan and Synge, and concluding that

It is not too soon yet for us to judge whether his plays will last a century, or longer, but it is not yet too late for us, as Irishmen, to feel proud that our age produced such plays as these.

(February 13, 1915)

Another positive attitude, albeit subtle, might be glimpsed in the *Weekly Irish Times* piece by C.J. Hamilton, on the 'Ladies of Llangollen': 'It has often been said that there is no real friendship between women, but the life-long friendship between these two ladies, who actually eloped with one another, is a striking proof to the contrary.' Although Hamilton discusses the relationship in terms of friendship, the use of the word 'elope' could not fail to indicate that one was dealing a relationship equivalent to marriage (*Weekly Irish Times*, May 30, 1903).

Conclusions and future research

Press coverage in Ireland of cases involving homosexuality ranged from describing them as 'abominable' and 'unnatural' to 'immoral' and even 'tragic'. The increasing role of sexologists is seen, with Hirschfeld, Krafft-Ebing and Havelock

Ellis all making appearances, albeit brief, in Irish news reports. It cannot tell us about the ordinary lives and aspirations of those reading the newspapers, in particular, those living queer lives. This chapter has provided an overview of what can be mined from Irish newspapers and there are several other cases we could have cited here. It should be noted that a full study of ‘unnatural crimes’ in Irish courts or indeed the prison experience of those convicted for such crimes has yet to emerge. The so-called Castle Scandal revealed the location of three male brothels in the city; these were most certainly known to the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Several gay men lived their lives in plain sight and there was a threshold of tolerance, but a critical question remains: at what point did society offer homosexual men up to the authorities? A prosopographical approach to the study of witness statements in all extant court case records together with historical geography methods could help to reveal much more about the history of queer lives.

Another area deserving of a more critical eye is that of celibacy. Marriage has historically been used as a cornerstone in the management of morality and sexuality. From 1844 civil registration of non-Catholic marriages was introduced and from 1864 Catholic marriages had to be registered. This produced vast quantities of data and demographic historians have used it to measure celibacy in narrow terms as simply ‘not married’.⁴¹ But ‘never married’ does not equate to sexual abstinence nor does it provide any indication of sexual orientation. Marital status is indicative of potential celibacy but is not a given. Demographic historians have been preoccupied with marriage and fertility patterns to the exclusion of other possibilities. Financially independent female households, which Bennett describes as lesbian-like, existed in Ireland, and while the sexual orientation of their occupants may be lost to us, they merit consideration. Civil registration data and the Irish census of 1901 and 1911 are fully searchable and available online and could form the basis of a fascinating study, but would need to be augmented with ego-documents to substantiate a study of queerness. The extent of ‘celibate’ household compositions has yet to receive extensive study, to date a handful of biographies have emerged of those who left ego-documents like Dr Kathleen Lynn and Rosamund Jacob, who remained ‘never married’.⁴² Irish-language sources, as Nicholas Wolf’s contribution has so ably shown, are a veritable treasure trove, and homosexuality found freer expression in poetry and prose. Visual and material culture offers another potentially rich source. We suggest that it behoves scholars to revisit historical sources and to begin queering the history of Ireland like scholars of literature have been doing for several decades. In as much as scholars of Irish women’s history have managed to amass an impressive body of scholarship in a short timeframe, with such a solid foundation in social history to now build on, sexuality studies can now grow apace. It will be a challenge but not an insurmountable one. As with the lives of the poor, of women, of marginalised of all sexes, genders and sexualities, we conclude by agreeing with David Halperin, that ‘some historical experiences may actually be lost to us’.⁴³

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” in *Privilege: A Reader*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 83–98; Alain Giami, “Cent ans d’hétérosexualité,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 128 (1999), 38–45 (38–39).
- 2 David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.
- 3 Jeffrey Weeks, “‘Sins and Diseases’: Some Notes on Homosexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *History Workshop* 1 (1976): 211–219 (211–212).
- 4 Weeks, “Sins and Diseases,” 214.
- 5 Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), 16.
- 6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2.
- 8 Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2010). The resource list for LGBTQI+ history compiled by Patrick McDonagh <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zV871EJLkmQjraTUcPdHFg6At6eVOgkZ/view?ts=6048b87e> is excellent. His forthcoming monograph is much anticipated and will add greatly to the field Patrick McDonagh, *Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973–93* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
- 9 Kevin Dettmar, “Vocation, Vacation, Perversion: Stephan Dedalus and the Homosexual Panic,” *European Joyce Studies* 11, James Joyce and the Fabrication of an Irish Identity (2001), 132–150.
- 10 Tina O’Toole, *The Irish New Woman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 11 Dr Kathleen Lynn’s diaries are held at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland <https://www.rcpi.ie/heritage-centre/1916-2/revolutionary-diary-kathleen-lynn/>. Margaret Ó hÓgar-*taigh*, *Kathleen Lynn: Irishwoman, Patriot, Doctor* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); Marie Mulholland, *The Politics and Relationships of Kathleen Lynn* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2002).
- 12 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women’s Press, 1985).
- 13 Noreen Giffney, “Ponsonby, Sarah (‘Sally’),” *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <https://www.dib.ie/biography/ponsonby-sarah-sally-a7417> accessed August 30, 21.
- 14 Sonja Tiernan, “Challenging Presumptions of Heterosexuality: Eva Gore-Booth, A Biographical Case Study,” *Historical Reflections* 37, no. 2 (2011): 58–71. Tiernan points out the heterosexism and homophobia behind biographers’ rejection of a lesbian relationship between Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper.
- 15 Brian Lacey, *Terrible Queer Creatures: Homosexuality in Irish History* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2008). Largely outside this period, but a useful example of mapping subcultures is Jeffrey Dudgeon’s “Mapping 100 Years of Belfast Gay Life,” *The Vacuum*, no.11 at <https://www.thevacuum.org.uk/issues/issues0120/issue11/is11arthunyea.html>.
- 16 Sonja Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth: An Image of Such Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). Averill Earls, “Unnatural Offenses of English Import: The Political Association of Englishness and Same-Sex Desire in Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Media,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 28, no. 3 (2019): 396–424; Averill Earls, “Solicitor Brown and His Boy: Love, Sex, and Scandal in Twentieth-Century Ireland,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 46, no. 1(2020): 79–94; Margaret McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2020).
- 17 Jeffrey Weeks, “Sins and Diseases,” 211–219 (217–218).
- 18 Philippe Lejeune, “Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIXe siècle,” *Romantisme* 56, Images de soi: autobiographie et autoportrait au XIXème siècle (1987): 79–94.
- 19 Lejeune, “Autobiographie et homosexualité,” 84.

- 20 Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 1–24 (15).
- 21 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 (1980): 631–640.
- 22 Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" *Radical History Review* 60 (1994): 57–75.
- 23 Donna Penn, "Queer: Theorizing Politics and History," *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 24–42.
- 24 Our period ends in 1922, we therefore exclude Roger Casement and Padraig Pearse both executed for their part in the 1916 Easter Rising, as attitudes towards their sexualities were publicly expressed after this date.
- 25 *Dundalk Democrat*, 30 November 1861. The piece was picked up by the *Connaught Telegraph*, December 11, 1861.
- 26 *Sligo Champion*, November 29, 1890.
- 27 Return of Judicial Statistics of Ireland, 1890, C.6511, 64. Costelloe's is the Sligo case identified on 69. His sentence of above 6 and under 10 years is accounted for on page 93.
- 28 *Nenagh Guardian*, November 30, 1889.
- 29 *Western People*, July 16, 1904.
- 30 Matt Cook, "'A New City of Friends': London and Homosexuality in the 1890s," *History Workshop Journal* 56 (2003): 33–58. The case has also been used to argue the presence of trans identities, see Simon Joyce, "Two Women Walk into a Theatre Bathroom: The Fanny and Stella Trials as Trans Narrative," *Victorian Review* 44 (1): 83–98.
- 31 Weeks, *Coming Out*, 18.
- 32 H.G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 136–137.
- 33 For an account of the case, see Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, 135–144.
- 34 See also the *Irish Examiner*, August 1, 1884, quoting MR FW Mahony of Cork urging the Chamber of Commerce to financially support O'Brien, who, like 'St. Patrick of old, he had banished these reptiles from the country.'
- 35 Dettmar, "Vocation, Vacation, Perversion," 138; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, 63.
- 36 On The German scandals, see James D. Steakly, "Iconography of a Scandal: Political Cartoons and the Eulenburg Affair in Wilhelmine Germany," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 233–263.
- 37 Vay would appear as case 166 in the 1906 English language translation of the 12th German edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, translated by Francis Joseph Rebman (New York: Rebman Company, n.d.), 438–440, at <https://archive.org/details/psychopathiasexu00kraffuoft/page/428/mode/1up>.
- 38 The radical journal *Urania*, co-edited by Eva Gore-Booth, Esther Roper and others, critiqued traditional gender classifications and 'queered' contemporary news reports appears just at the end of our period, 1916–1940, with a restricted, but significant circulation. Tiernan, "Challenging Presumptions," 63–64; Karen Steele, "Ireland and Sapphic Journalism between the Wars: A Case Study of *Urania* (1916–1940)," in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939*, ed. Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green and Fiona Hackney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 388–401. We are grateful to Sonja Tiernan for drawing this to our attention.
- 39 On the uses and understandings of terms such as clitoris and lesbian in the trial, see Deborah Cohler, "Sapphism and Sediton: Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (2007), 68–94 (88–90).
- 40 Cohler, "Sapphism and Sediton," 91.
- 41 Timothy Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1950-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 198–199.
- 42 Leeann Lane, *Rosamond Jacob: Third Person Singular* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010).
- 43 Halperin, *How to Do the History of Sexuality*, 20.

SECTION 4

POLITICS AND REVOLUTION



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15

WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND, 1850–1912

John Walsh

Irish higher education in the mid-nineteenth century was designed to accommodate men of the upper and middle classes. The enduring strength of traditionalist Victorian social attitudes, dictating a separate and lesser role for women in society and the explicit relegation of women to the private and domestic setting, remained a formidable barrier to female participation in university education up to the early 1900s.¹ The exclusion of women from university colleges was first challenged by Protestant activists and educators, while the early success of the Protestant women's colleges and creation of the Royal University stimulated a substantial development of similar institutions for Catholic girls. A feminist campaign led by women graduates was crucial in securing the entry of women to the universities on the same basis as men in the early 1900s, not least because the women graduates succeeded in mobilising support on an inter-confessional basis.

Judith Harford's work charts the emergence and academic impact of the women's colleges, as well as their complex and ambivalent role in the debates surrounding women's participation in the early 1900s. Susan Parkes explores the admission of women to Trinity College Dublin and their frequently contested position within TCD over the following century. Greater attention has also been given to Irish women activists through the entries of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and its Ulster counterpart. This chapter sets out to explore the crucial role of women's educational activism in opening university education to female participation and to illustrate the diverse cultural, religious and political influences which shaped different forms of women's activism in this period.

The oldest university in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, founded under an Elizabethan charter in 1592, maintained a monopoly of offices and academic posts for a male Anglican elite until the late 1800s.² While all religious tests for posts and offices outside its Divinity School were abolished by Fawcett's Act in 1873,³

the liberalising influence of Fawcett's legislation did not extend to women, who remained excluded from the university for the rest of the century. Successive British governments from the mid-nineteenth century sought to resolve the religious and political grievances of an increasingly assertive Catholic middle class but struggled to meet Catholic demands without alienating the Protestant Ascendancy which had monopolised political and social power since the early 1700s. Sir Robert Peel's government sought to conciliate the Catholic middle class through educational legislation, leading to the establishment in 1849 of the Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway as state-supported, non-denominational institutions which were prohibited from imposing religious tests and excluded theology.⁴ But the Queen's Colleges were denounced by the Synod of Thurles in 1850 as 'a system of education fraught with grievous and intrinsic dangers'.⁵ Paul Cullen (1803–78), the ultramontane archbishop of Dublin, who sought to enforce papal authority over the Irish Catholic church, mobilised opposition to the 'godless colleges'. Instead, Cullen took the lead in establishing a Catholic University in 1854, initially under the leadership of John Henry Newman, a famous theologian, academic and subsequently Catholic prelate, who was the most notable Anglican convert to Catholicism of his generation. The fledgling university struggled for survival, lacking any statutory endowment or a royal charter to validate its degrees: it attracted a total of only 1177 registered students over a twenty-five-year period between 1854 and 1879.⁶ The divergent ideological projects embodied in the Queen's Colleges and the Catholic university shared common ground in offering academic education for a small minority of upper middle-class men and in their exclusion of women. The 'Irish university question' over the following generation revolved around the commitment of the British political elite to non-denominational university education, the resistance of unionists to innovations that threatened the privileged status of Trinity College and the demand for denominational 'equality' in higher education by the Catholic bishops. This campaign for equality was ultimately about achieving an acceptable religious and cultural milieu for endowed university education to safeguard the faith and morals of young Catholic men.⁷

The first institutions for the higher education of women were established in Belfast and Dublin by Protestant activists, often engaged in various campaigns associated with nineteenth-century liberalism. The Ladies' Collegiate School was founded in Wellington Place, Belfast, in 1859 by Margaret Byers, a teacher and former Presbyterian lay missionary in China.⁸ The school offered an academic curriculum, including modern history, natural science and classical subjects, which went far beyond the limited instruction traditionally offered to girls.⁹ As Harford notes, the Ladies' Collegiate School was 'a radical departure in the education of girls', due to its academic rigour, wide-ranging curriculum and competition in public examinations on a similar footing to men.¹⁰ The school was renamed as Victoria College to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession in 1887 and in its first generation had already established an impressive academic reputation.¹¹ Following the foundation of the Royal University, Victoria College established a department offering 'the ordinary courses of university study in 1881'.¹²

Women's educational activism owed a great deal to the radical dissenting tradition of Ulster and Scottish Presbyterianism. Isabella Tod, a Scottish Presbyterian educator and political activist, became a leading advocate for the education of women at secondary and higher level.¹³ Tod served as secretary of the Belfast Ladies' Institute, established in 1867 as a trail-blazing institution offering 'advanced classes' for middle-class women leading to professional or business expertise.¹⁴ Byers and Tod were liberals who took a leading part in the suffrage and temperance movements (see contributions to this volume by McCormick, Tiernan and Ward), but were most influential in education.¹⁵ They led a delegation to London in 1878 to lobby the Conservative government of Benjamin Disraeli to include girls within new intermediate education legislation.¹⁶ The Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act, 1878 sanctioned state support for denominational intermediate schools through a system of public examinations involving payment by results: schools secured state payments based on the performance of their students in competitive public examinations.¹⁷ Despite the opposition of the Catholic bishops, the delegation succeeded in persuading Lord Cairns, the Belfast-born Lord Chancellor, and James Lowther, the chief secretary, to support their case.¹⁸ Lowther secured the agreement of MPs for an amendment at the committee stage of the Bill on 25 July 1878, 'For applying, as far as conveniently may be, the benefits of this Act to the education of girls.'¹⁹ The explicit inclusion of girls in the legislation was a notable advance for women's participation which offered a precedent for university education.

The movement for women's higher education in Dublin had similar origins in middle class Protestant educational activism. Alexandra College was established in 1866, at the instigation of a Quaker educationalist, Anne Jellicoe.²⁰ Alexandra was the first institution in Ireland to provide university education for women, offering a wide-ranging curriculum encompassing history, mental and moral philosophy, Latin, natural science and mathematics. The college explicitly focused on offering a rigorous academic education to 'women of the middle and upper classes of this country'.²¹ Alexandra, which was influenced by the example of Queen's College, London, was established under the auspices of the Church of Ireland but open to women of all Christian denominations.²² Jellicoe served as lady superintendent of the college until her death in 1880. Yet strict limitations still applied to the place of women educators even within all female educational settings where their leadership was crucial. While Jellicoe enjoyed crucial support from Richard Chevenix Trench, Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, as the *de facto* leader of the college, she worked with an all-male college council from which she herself was excluded.²³

Alexandra developed close connections with Trinity College Dublin and several professors and fellows of TCD taught in the school during the late 1800s, including J.H. Bernard, a future provost and Anglican archbishop of Dublin.²⁴ The college Board agreed in 1869 to introduce examinations leading to a certificate for external women candidates, mainly due to lobbying from Alexandra, but this concession extended only as far as second year and did not allow access to college courses.²⁵ The authorities of Alexandra advocated for affiliation of the college to the University of Dublin during the late 1800s, but no scheme came close to winning

the support of the Board: Trinity's jealously guarded status as the sole constituent college of the University of Dublin militated against formal affiliation of the kind adopted for women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge.²⁶ Although an increasing proportion of junior fellows and non-fellow professors in TCD favoured the admission of women to the university at the time of its tercentenary in 1892, George Salmon, the provost, was firmly opposed and the status quo was upheld by a majority of elderly senior fellows.²⁷ The option of affiliation was a halfway house which never commanded sufficient support within Trinity.

Disraeli's government achieved a pragmatic reconstruction of university education in Ireland by creating a new examining university in 1879, which would confer degrees based on examination performance, but did not require attendance at university lectures or college courses other than medicine.²⁸ The newly constituted Royal University from 1882 encompassed the Queen's Colleges; Magee College, Derry which was founded in 1865 under the auspices of the Presbyterian General Assembly to train young men as Presbyterian ministers and University College Dublin (UCD), the main inheritor of the Catholic university. The Royal University offered 'indirect endowment' to denominational colleges through the allocation of fellowships by the university senate.²⁹ A committee led by Tod lobbied successfully for the inclusion of women within the new university in line with the precedent established by the Intermediate Education Act.³⁰ The government's scheme was the first meaningful step towards female participation in the formal structures of university education.³¹ The Royal University was only the second university in the UK to open its degrees to women, following the example of London University in 1878.³² Yet women were excluded from lectures offered by the male Fellows of the university, creating a new layer of exclusion which required women to secure their own teaching without the support enjoyed by their male counterparts.³³ Despite its limitations, the new institution marked a watershed in facilitating access to university matriculation and qualifications for women.

If the early Protestant colleges were shaped by activists whose agenda encompassed various liberal causes, the burgeoning power of the Catholic church underpinned the creation of Catholic women's colleges. As Harford points out, no 'organised presence' of higher education for Catholic women materialised before the creation of the Royal University, reflecting the ambivalence, if not outright hostility, of the Catholic church towards initiatives that might challenge traditional gender roles and their preference for single-sex education at intermediate level.³⁴ When the bishops restructured the failing Catholic University in 1882–3 to encompass several Catholic colleges and entrusted the administration of UCD to the Jesuits, university education for Catholic women did not feature on their agenda. Yet such a traditionalist stance was not maintained for long, mainly due to the fear of proselytising, as Alexandra offered an attractive route to university qualifications for Catholic girls (see Roddy's contribution to this volume).³⁵

William Walsh, the dynamic archbishop of Dublin (1885–1921), who was the leading ecclesiastical advocate of equality for Catholics in higher education, proved willing to support a network of Catholic women's colleges offered by female

religious orders. Morrissey argues that the archbishop played a central role as de facto patron in fostering the Catholic colleges.³⁶ Harford notes, however, that Walsh responded to lobbying by female religious leaders who appealed to his concern about proselytising as a result of Alexandra's appeal to Catholic girls.³⁷ The prioress of the Dominican convent in Eccles St in Dublin city centre, Mother M. Antonina Hanley, secured Walsh's support to establish the first Catholic women's university department alongside their secondary school in 1885.³⁸ Similarly, the Ursuline order in Cork began to offer university courses from 1890 at St Angela's College and High School, which enjoyed the support of Alphonsus O'Callaghan, the bishop of Cork.³⁹

Walsh co-opted initiatives by female religious orders and was instrumental in the establishment of St Mary's University College in 1893, when the Dominican communities at Eccles St and Sion Hill in the suburb of Blackrock collaborated to establish a college serving as a 'common centre' of Catholic higher education for women.⁴⁰ The decision to relaunch the original Dominican initiative as a university college was an unmistakable signal of ecclesiastical support. Walsh offered financial support to St Mary's College and served as president of the college council which approved its programme of studies.⁴¹ Yet the all-male composition of the council underlined that despite the crucial role of the nuns as leaders and teachers, they were obliged to conform to traditional gender roles in which authority ultimately rested with male prelates.⁴² A similar initiative by the Loreto nuns to establish a university department at Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green did not attract Walsh's support and it was the leadership of members of the Loreto Institute, notably Mother Michael Corcoran, which led to the successful establishment of the college.⁴³

The women's colleges flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, establishing an impressive record of academic achievement. Almost a quarter of the Royal University's 2,173 graduates were women by 1900, ensuring that university education in Ireland was no longer a male preserve.⁴⁴ The majority of successful female candidates were drawn from women's colleges: 55 per cent of female candidates who passed examinations in Arts between 1891 and 1900 were prepared by the women's colleges, while less than 10 per cent of successful women candidates attended the Queen's Colleges or Magee College.⁴⁵ A substantial majority of Catholic female students opted for denominational women's colleges.⁴⁶ The colleges, whether Protestant or Catholic, offered an academic education to women from professional and middle-class backgrounds, facilitating access to university qualifications and opening up access to 'domains of knowledge' which had previously been closed to women.⁴⁷ The success of the women's colleges in presenting students for Royal University examinations testified to the ability of women students to compete effectively with their male counterparts.

Yet despite the success of female graduates, the charter of the Royal University was hardly a manifesto for educational equality. The institutions under its auspices had no obligation to admit women to courses, its senate included no women and membership of the convocation was legally confined to male graduates.⁴⁸ Moreover, none of the prestigious university fellowships were allocated to women, although

the senate permitted women to hold term limited junior fellowships which were created from 1894 to assist with university examinations.⁴⁹ Women were *de facto* excluded due to the original division of the university fellowships on denominational lines to colleges approved by the senate in 1882–4.⁵⁰

The Queen's Colleges admitted women from the 1880s, with Belfast being the first to enrol female students in 1882, followed by Cork in 1885 and Galway in 1888.⁵¹ But while this concession was significant in establishing a precedent for the future, it had little practical impact outside Belfast, not least due to the condemnation of the 'godless Colleges' by the Catholic bishops. Only 10 women out of a strikingly low total of 93 were attending Queen's College, Galway in 1901–2 and female students accounted for only 6 per cent (12) of a student population of 190 in Queen's College, Cork.⁵² The proportion of female students was somewhat greater in Belfast, where women accounted for 11.7 per cent (41) of 349 students in 1901–2.⁵³ Magee College saw a relatively high participation of women, who made up 22 per cent (13) of its students in 1901–2, ironically in a college originally dedicated to the training of young men for the Presbyterian ministry.⁵⁴ The colleges of the Catholic University between 1882 and 1909 were mainly segregated by gender, with the exception of the Catholic University medical school in Cecilia St, Dublin, which agreed to admit women students from 1896.⁵⁵ William Delany S.J., the long-serving president of UCD (1883–8 and 1897–1909), refused to open UCD to women on an equal basis to men. Delany was firmly opposed to co-education, which was inconsistent with a Victorian sense of social propriety that he shared with many contemporaries.⁵⁶ The 'Royal' was an uneasy halfway house, which facilitated the women's colleges but did not offer equal participation in university education.

The Irish Association of Women's Graduates and Candidate Graduates (IAWG) was founded in 1902 to ensure that university education 'shall be open to women equally with men', reflecting the determination of a new generation of women graduates to secure equality of access to higher education. Most of its leaders were graduates of the Royal University who had attended women's colleges.⁵⁷ The IAWG was a feminist, inter-confessional movement which spanned the sectarian divisions of early-twentieth-century Ireland. The association's first president, Alice Oldham (1850–1907), was an Anglican educator and activist, who was a lecturer at Alexandra College and the founding secretary of the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses.⁵⁸ Among the group's leading figures were Catholic graduates of the Royal University, including its founding vice-president, Mary Hayden (1862–1942), who had attended Eccles St. and Alexandra College, and Agnes O'Farrelly (1874–1951), who attended St. Mary's College before becoming a lecturer in Irish at Loreto and Alexandra.⁵⁹ Hayden secured a junior fellowship in history and English by examination in 1895, but was unsuccessful in applying four times for senior fellowship – a notable illustration of the open gender inequalities within the Royal University.⁶⁰ Hayden was deeply engaged in the Gaelic League and active in the women's suffrage movement.⁶¹ O'Farrelly was one of the most prominent Irish-language activists of her generation: a close ally of Douglas Hyde, she became a leading Irish-language educator.⁶²

The feminist movement faced resistance not only from bastions of the Anglo-Irish establishment and representatives of the Catholic lay and clerical elite, but also from the leaders of the women's colleges. A key fissure emerged among women's educational activists on whether women should continue to attend women's colleges, if they were endowed and affiliated to universities or be admitted to university colleges on an equal basis with men.⁶³ Separate collegiate instruction for women emerged as the main bone of contention between the women's colleges and a new generation of feminists in the IAWG. Feminist activists such as Oldham, Hayden and O'Farrelly clashed with leading figures from the women's colleges in their evidence before successive royal commissions in the early 1900s. Among those who made the case for the separate education of female students in affiliated women's colleges were early pioneers of women's education, including Margaret Byers and Henrietta White, principal of Alexandra.⁶⁴

The appointment of the Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland headed by Lord Robertson in 1901 offered an important opportunity to critics of the existing system. The commission noted that the proportion of women taking the university examinations by 1901–2 'has reached a remarkably high total'.⁶⁵ The IAWG made an influential submission arguing for equality of access, including the opening up of lectures, laboratories and professional schools to female students and eligibility for all degrees, privileges and appointments of the university to 'women equally with men'.⁶⁶ The opposite case for separate women's colleges was made by White, Byers and James Macken on behalf of Loreto College.⁶⁷ The commission's report in 1902 was a victory for the IAWG: referencing their submission extensively, the commissioners accepted all of their demands.⁶⁸ But the impact of the commission was inconclusive, not least because the commissioners themselves were divided on the principal recommendations of their report.⁶⁹ The debate between the IAWG and the women's colleges was played out once again before the Fry Commission appointed by a newly elected Liberal government in 1906. Henrietta White made a renewed appeal in favour of the affiliation of women's colleges to the university, while Agnes O'Farrelly and Ethel Hanan, on behalf of the IAWG, argued that affiliation compromised the principle of equal participation in higher education by men and women.⁷⁰ The report of the Fry Commission in 1907 was ambivalent, supporting female participation but leaving open the possibility that it could be achieved through recognition of the women's colleges by an existing university.⁷¹

Yet more significant than the inconclusive outcome of the official enquiries was the decision by the Board of Trinity College to allow the admission of women. McDowell and Webb noted that by 1900 Trinity was increasingly isolated, as the only university in Britain and Ireland which offered neither access to college courses nor the ability to take university degrees within an affiliated college.⁷² The new 'civic universities' in England made no distinction between male and female students, while the major Scottish universities had liberalised their admission requirements to allow for entry of women in the late 1800s.⁷³ Moreover, Trinity's Oxbridge counterparts, which carried greater weight with its academic elite, took a

qualified and incremental approach to allow female participation. Cambridge from 1881 and Oxford from 1884 facilitated access for women to teaching and most examinations taken by men, although neither university allowed women to take university degrees.⁷⁴ Generational turnover in membership of the Board broke the stalemate as six of the senior fellows were removed by death or retirement between 1897 and 1901, to be replaced by advocates of change, including Anthony Traill and J.P. Mahaffy.⁷⁵ Despite Salmon's opposition, the Board agreed by a majority vote in 1902 that women should be admitted to the college and the king's letter to formalise the necessary statutory change was issued in December 1903.⁷⁶ The ground-breaking decision was hedged with multiple practical restrictions on female students, including a famous, long-lasting rule requiring women students to leave campus by 6 p.m., strict dress requirements and exclusion from certain areas of the college.⁷⁷ Trinity's decision undermined traditionalist rationales for exclusion of women from university colleges, but also underlined that admission of women would be combined with a continued assertion of power by male academic elites.

The momentum towards inclusion of women in university education proved too great to be derailed either by the persistence of Victorian attitudes among male academic elites or the campaign for self-preservation by the women's colleges. Despite the inconclusive outcomes of the royal commissions, their deliberations and articulate exposition of their case by the IAWG contributed to an emerging consensus that women should have equal access to university colleges. The wider upsurge in social reform following the election of the Liberal government in 1906 also created a favourable context for reform in higher education. The Irish Universities Act, 1908, which was drafted by Augustine Birrell, the chief secretary, in collaboration with Walsh, was designed to be acceptable to the Catholic bishops.⁷⁸ The legislation provided for the dissolution of the Royal University and creation of two distinct university institutions based in Dublin and Belfast, the federal National University of Ireland (NUI) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB): both were open to women on the same basis as men. The charter of the NUI established that 'Women shall be eligible equally with men to be members of the University or of any authority of the university and to hold any office or enjoy any advantages of the University.'⁷⁹ The government appointed women to the first senate of each university and the legislation provided for one of the four members subsequently nominated by the Crown to be female – the first instance of a legal mandate for equality between men and women in Irish higher education.⁸⁰ Mary Hayden became the sole female member of the NUI senate, as well as the first woman to serve on the governing body of UCD.⁸¹ Margaret Byers was nominated to the senate of QUB, ironically in the light of her opposition to co-educational universities, along with Mary Ann Hutton, an eminent Irish literature scholar.⁸²

While the legislation conceded the principle of female participation, conflict continued over the form that such participation might take, as the Catholic women's colleges embarked on a struggle for recognition of their colleges by the NUI.⁸³ When the women's colleges applied for recognition to offer 'approved courses of study' sanctioned by the university, their application was rejected in December

1909 by the Chancellor, William Walsh, based on legal advice that such recognition could be given only to students pursuing courses in either constituent or recognised colleges.⁸⁴ Loreto College and St. Mary's College then applied to secure the status of recognised colleges under the Irish Universities Act. The IAWG vigorously opposed their applications, warning the senate that it was 'undesirable to recognise any Courses of Lectures for women students for the Arts Degrees of the University other than those delivered in the Lecture Halls of the Colleges named in the Charter...'⁸⁵

The women's colleges enjoyed influential supporters within the senate, including William Delany and Dr John Healy, archbishop of Tuam.⁸⁶ But Walsh stayed aloof, advising the college leaders to submit only a single application for recognition and expressing pessimism about their chances for success.⁸⁷ The archbishop played a crucial part in negotiating an affiliation clause in the Irish Universities Act to facilitate the inclusion of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, as a recognised college within the NUI.⁸⁸ Walsh did not make any similar effort to accommodate the women's colleges, reflecting the limited importance accorded by most bishops to female higher education. The senate referred the applications to the governing body of UCD, which first rejected affiliation for both colleges, but changed course in 1911 to offer partial recognition to Loreto College for a three-year period.⁸⁹ This recommendation drew a sharp rebuke from the IAWG, which reiterated in July 1911 that recognition of non-endowed private institutions would deprive women of the high standard of education in the university colleges.⁹⁰ Moreover, the NUI Board of Studies requested the senate to secure a legal opinion on the status of women's colleges as 'they were unable to understand the exact relations between the proposed College and the secondary instruction admittedly given in the same locality...'.⁹¹ This resolved the dispute, as the opinion of legal counsel was unfavourable and the senate decided on 30 October 1912 to inform the superiors of St Mary's and Loreto that it 'was legally advised that the applications for the recognition of these respective Colleges could not be complied with'.⁹² The decision confirmed the triumph of the IAWG in securing equal access for women to university colleges.

The university settlement achieved formal equality of rights for women in terms of admission to college courses and the removal of formal discrimination in relation to office holding within the institutions. But the universities to which women were admitted after a protracted struggle remained profoundly unequal. Irish university colleges in the early to mid-twentieth century remained small, elite institutions dominated by professional and upper-middle-class men. TCD admitted 47 female students in 1904 and women made up 15 per cent of the student body by 1914.⁹³ Only 67 students in UCD were women in 1910–1, just over 10 per cent of the student body.⁹⁴ Queen's had the most substantial participation of women among its full-time cohort of any Irish university, with 132 female students making up 21 per cent of the student population in 1909–10, reflecting an earlier acceptance of women students than any of its counterparts.⁹⁵

Pařeta comments that in terms of women's participation in UCD, 'the establishment of the NUI finally guaranteed them the full academic and employment equality

for which they had been campaigning for almost 40 years'.⁹⁶ Yet discrimination against women remained firmly entrenched not only in the culture of university institutions, but also in policies and regulations overtly designed to limit the impact of co-education.⁹⁷ The universities settlement facilitated some upward mobility by female academics but was a far cry from employment equality. The Dublin commission, which made the first appointments in the NUI, appointed several exceptionally able women to academic posts. Four women were appointed to the teaching staff of UCD, including Mary Hayden as first lecturer and within two years professor in modern Irish history, Mary Macken as professor of German and Maria Degani as professor in Italian and Spanish.⁹⁸ Agnes O'Farrelly became a long-serving lecturer in the Irish language and ultimately succeeded Hyde as professor of modern Irish poetry. The commissioners achieved a limited advance in female academic participation within the NUI compared to the monopoly of permanent appointments by men within the Royal University. Yet women accounted for less than 7 per cent of senior appointments in UCD by 1916.⁹⁹ A similar pattern prevailed in UCC, where only two of the first 20 professors were women.¹⁰⁰ Trinity was also tentative in appointing female academics and only eight full-time female lecturers were employed in the college by 1939.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the modest advance in academic appointments within the NUI in 1909–11 proved a landmark in women's participation which was not surpassed (or sometimes even equalled) until the late twentieth century.¹⁰²

The universities settlement was a halfway revolution in terms of female participation. The legislation established formal equality of rights for the entry of women to Irish universities while ensuring co-education at college level, both bitterly contested in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰³ Yet established structures of power and privilege remained intact within the reconstituted universities, which militated against equality of opportunity for women as power continued to rest almost exclusively with a male academic elite.¹⁰⁴ Legal equality might have been achieved, but equal treatment in college life remained a distant aspiration for most of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁵ Indeed the consolidation of established inequalities in university education would become a notable (and under-researched) characteristic of the new Irish Free State.

Yet this should not detract from the striking achievement of women's educational activism within a divided society strongly attached to traditional gender roles. The women's colleges secured a distinctive niche in higher education due to the leadership of pioneering activists from different religious contexts but sharing a commitment to educational opportunities for middle-class women. The Janus-faced character of the Royal University, which included female students in its examinations but sanctioned exclusion of women from endowments, offices and many educational settings, created a demand for alternative educational institutions which was met by the women's colleges. The colleges played a crucial part in opening university education to women, not least in providing 'a legitimate, collegial and protected environment' in which young women could experience college life.¹⁰⁶ The early influence of Protestant educational activists in Dublin and Belfast helped to provoke a competitive mobilisation by Catholic religious orders who enjoyed ecclesiastical support.

The feminist campaign for equality of access to university colleges built on the achievement of the women's colleges but also rejected them as perpetuating inequality.¹⁰⁷ The IAWG developed an inter-denominational movement which successfully navigated sectarian divisions, no small achievement in early-twentieth-century Ireland. The women graduates also benefited from a more favourable political and cultural context due to the removal of restrictions on women's participation in higher education in Britain: while a wider upsurge of liberal social reform in the early 1900s facilitated legislative reform in Irish university education, its influence on achieving equality of access for women is less clear and deserves further exploration. Yet it is apparent that the IAWG's campaign for equality of access to university colleges faced significant opposition and was successful due to highly effective advocacy by an inter-confessional, feminist representative organisation which influenced important strands of elite opinion and overcame opposition from upholders of the status quo.

Notes

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- 3 Tomás Irish, *Trinity in War and Revolution 1912–23* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 12.
- 4 House of Commons debates, vol. 80, 9 May 1845, 353–6; Donal A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests and Politicians, Sir Robert Peel's Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1841–46* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1982), 266–93.
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- 17 John Coolahan, "From Royal University to National University," in *The National University of Ireland 1908–2008 Centenary Essays*, ed. Tom Dunne, John Coolahan, Maurice Manning and Gearóid O Tuathaigh (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008), 4.
- 18 Lucy, "Margaret Byers"; Clinton and Lunney, "Tod".
- 19 House of Commons debates, vol. 242, July 25, 1878, 304.
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- 22 *Ibid.*
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- 24 McDowell and Webb, *Trinity College Dublin*, 344.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 344.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 343.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 345–6.
- 28 *Royal Commission, Final Report*, 4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 30 Clinton and Lunney, "Tod".
- 31 House of Commons Debates, vol. 249, August 5, 1879, 187–232.
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- 33 Harford, "Women," 7.
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- 35 *Ibid.*
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- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Harford, "Women," 9.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 41 Morrissey, *Walsh*, 219.
- 42 Harford, *University Education*, 105–6.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 109–10.
- 44 Coolahan, "Royal University to National University," 5.
- 45 *Royal Commission, Final Report*, 18
- 46 Coolahan, "Royal University to National University," 9.
- 47 Harford, "Women," 10–11.
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- 52 *Royal Commission, Final Report*, 12–13.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 11.
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- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Coleman, “O’Farrelly”.
- 63 Harford, “Women,” 16–17.
- 64 Lucy, “Margaret Byers”.
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- 70 *Royal Commission on Trinity College Dublin and the University of Dublin, Appendix to the First Report, Statements and Returns Furnished to the Commissioners in July and August 1906* (Dublin: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1906), 134–6; *Royal Commission on Trinity College Dublin and the University of Dublin*, 129–33; Harford, *University Education*, 148.
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- 81 Ferriter, “Hayden.”
- 82 *Irish Universities Act*, 20; Lucy, “Margaret Byers”; Linde Lunney, “Hutton, Mary Ann,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a9771>. Accessed February 15, 2021.
- 83 Walsh, *Higher Education*, 18.
- 84 Palles to Walsh, December 19, 1909 (Dublin Diocesan Archives: NUI 1/10); NUI Senate Minutes, vol. 1, December 22, 1909, 34.
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- 86 Walsh, *Higher Education*, 19.
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- 88 Walsh to Birrell, June 8, 1908 (DDA: NUI 14).
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- 94 Denis Coffey, *Number of Students 1910–11* (DDA: NUI 2/23).
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- 97 Walsh, *Higher Education*, 120.
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- 101 Parkes, "The First Decade," 84; Parkes, "The 1930s," 135.
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- 106 Harford, *University Education*, 172.
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16

'THE PEERESS AND THE PEASANT'¹

Popular mobilisation and the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, 1911–21

Diane Urquhart

Introduction

From the mid-1880s, the issue of Irish Home Rule politicised successive generations of women who fought both for and against the reworking of Ireland's constitutional relationship with Britain.² Female auxiliaries to both the nationalist and unionist movements subsequently emerged.³ In the genesis of the unionist campaign, mobilising from the mid-1880s to defend Ireland's place in the Act of Union of 1800 which brought the United Kingdom into being, there was a clear sex segregation of political work which mirrored gendered social customs. Women were, for example, excluded from the unionist convention of 1892, a public display of popular unionism in Belfast, on the grounds that a female presence might trivialise the proceedings.⁴ However, Irish feminist pioneer and unionist Isabella Tod displayed characteristic tenacity by organising a mixed-sex 'social gathering' on the day preceding the convention which had a distinctly political agenda.⁵ This took the form of a *conversazione*, a term adopted from Italian, purported to be first used in English by Horace Walpole in 1739. Translating as a conversation, which implies a private exchange, by the nineteenth century *conversazione* was used to describe public assemblies like Tod's event. However, Tod's *conversazione*, like so much female unionist endeavour, was excluded, or at best marginalised, from histories of both unionism and modern Ireland.⁶ Such an exclusionary approach wrongly casts politics as 'a male-defined conceptual framework.'⁷

Given the highly gendered views of women in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, it is unsurprising that as unionism mobilised *en masse*, separate male and female associations were formed. A Ladies' Committee of the Irish Unionist Alliance (IUA) collaborated with Lady Louisa Antrim to collect signatures in the north of Ireland for an anti-Home Rule petition in 1886. This Ladies' Committee also set up a central office in Dublin in the 1890s. Regional female unionist associations emerged

in North Tyrone (1907) and Londonderry (1909), led by the Duchess of Abercorn and Lady Hamilton, respectively. The Tyrone organisation enjoyed considerable success; their first meeting saw over 400 women in attendance.⁸ Determining to begin their work 'quietly' and holding 'small gatherings for "Tea" to discuss and organise work' intimated gentility, underscoring the upper- and middle-class composition of the organisation and the new terrain that this represented for many women who were politicking for the first time.⁹ Female unionists' electioneering work was, however, already well established as from 1886 women canvassers, including Isabella Tod, had been travelling from Ireland to England. Twelve North Tyrone Women's Unionist Association (WUA) speakers and twenty-five political workers were therefore reportedly prepared to work in Darlington and Cornwall in the organisation's inaugural year.¹⁰ Petitioning, an important form of political expression for disenfranchised women, was another female unionist preoccupation; an anti-Home Rule petition with close to 20,000 signatures was conveyed to parliament in a carriage belonging to Tory and unionist stalwart, Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry, in 1893.¹¹ Much of the work conducted by unionist women in the first and second Home Rule crises of 1886 and 1893 provided a template for later female activism. However, the popularisation of unionism evident in the third Home Rule crisis of 1912–14 brought unprecedented numbers of women into a new female unionist organisation, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council (UWUC). Formed in 1911, the UWUC became the largest female political body in Ireland's history. But what caused such an outpouring of support?

The upper-class complexion of the earliest manifestations of female unionist leadership remained throughout and beyond the third Home Rule crisis. The Duchess of Abercorn was the UWUC's first president, but another aristocratic woman's political and social standing gave this new organisation considerable cachet: Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry.¹² Theresa was the leading Tory political hostess and political confidante to unionist leaders Walter Long and Sir Edward Carson as well as Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law. Although not yet president of the UWUC, a role she would assume between 1913 and 1919, Theresa presided over and addressed its inaugural meeting in Belfast in January 1911, where her 'excellent work throughout the United Kingdom on behalf of the Unionist cause' was lauded. This first meeting of the UWUC also stands as an aristocratic show of support for unionism; the Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, the Earl and Countess of Kilmorey as well as the male unionist second-in-command, James Craig, and his wife Cecil were all in attendance.¹³

Unlike earlier female unionist associations, the UWUC was designed as a province-wide organisation but its local women's unionist associations were often led by titled women; West Belfast WUA, for example, was headed by Lady Clanmorris.¹⁴ In addition, the wives of sitting Ulster unionist peers in the House of Lords and of Ulster unionist members of parliament were members of the council and its ruling body, the executive committee, which furthered evidences the class composition of the council's upper echelons. The organisation also reserved the right to co-opt 'distinguished ladies who have rendered, or are likely to render, service to the cause,

being residents in, or natives of, Ulster' onto both its council and executive.¹⁵ The cause of such eminence was not noted but the language deployed, referring to ladies rather than women, again denotes class consciousness. This was also evident in the UWUC's provincial representatives who were appointed in 1911; all but one of the sixteen women was titled. The one exception was Helena Saunderson who, as head of the Association of Loyal Orangewomen and the widow of the former unionist leader Colonel Edward Saunderson, was unquestionably a member of the unionist elite.

This influential leadership lent respectability to the new female unionist organisation. The support of male unionist leaders, often related by kin or marriage to UWUC office-holders, also proffered reassurance that the women's association was complementary to the work of unionism and devoid of radical ambition. This innate conservatism was evident in the UWUC's first constitution; its auxiliary status was clearly defined as it pledged to work by means 'approved after consultation with the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC)', the male policy-making body.¹⁶ The UUC was comprised of representatives of male unionist and loyalist bodies and admitted representatives from the Apprentice Boys of Derry and Unionist Clubs from 1911. This was a self-declared move to make the UUC 'the most democratic forum that Ulster unionism had ever inspired'.¹⁷ Yet this claim cannot be sustained from a gendered perspective; the UUC's constitution did not preclude female representation, but women were excluded until 1918 in consequence of nominated district representatives having to be registered as voters. The practical effect of this disqualification was that the UWUC was the only popular unionist organisation excluded from the UUC's ranks.

The UWUC adopted the model of female unionists' earlier political work, such as updating electoral registers, canvassing and speaking at elections, promoting 'so-called missionary work' in England and Scotland by holding public meetings and circulating literature.¹⁸ Dedicated solely to the cause of maintaining the legislative union of 1800 between Great Britain and Ireland, UWUC workers carried cards specifying that only this issue would be discussed.¹⁹ Whilst this narrowed the political vista of the organisation, it was strategically astute. The 1910s saw not only the issue of female enfranchisement loom large and enter a new bellicose phase with increased suffragette activity but also rising trade unionism and often spiky debates concerning tariff reform. These were controversial issues, with the potential to split the unionist movement; focusing solely on the union limited the potential of internal fissures.²⁰

Far-reaching imperial, constitutional, economic and religious arguments against Home Rule were adopted by the UWUC. The oft-made suggestion that Home Rule would provide the basis for total Irish independence and endanger the integrity of the empire highlighted the political mistrust pertaining between unionists and nationalists; 'Nationalist leaders may preach a subordinate [Home Rule] Parliament on English platforms, but the people in America who finance them, will be content with nothing less than "Ireland a Nation."²¹ Theresa Londonderry's address to the UWUC's first meeting in 1911 therefore starkly declared, 'the

Nationalist Party ... [as] essentially disloyal'.²² The UWUC also portrayed Home Rule as a failed entity, citing the case of Sweden and Norway as examples, and as contrary to 'first-class powers like Germany, and of great colonies like South Africa and Australia, all of which have provided for strength by union'. Their anti-Home Rule economic arguments were similarly manifold, ranging from predicted short-falls in Irish taxation to an Irish state that would 'be bankrupt from the beginning unless the predominant partner [Britain] furnishes lavish assistance'. Moreover, Irish land purchase schemes would be jeopardised and 'the progress and contentment of Ireland, now so remarkable, would be set back a hundred years. Accordingly, the whole country would be reduced to ... "rags and poverty"'.²³ However, the threat posed to civil and religious liberties was often foregrounded to a greater degree.

The UWUC was a pan-Protestant organisation, a construction of necessity to overcome 'a community long fractured by bitter tensions ... between members of different classes and rival religious groups'.²⁴ Adopting 'God our trust' as a motto, UWUC meetings opened with 'Orange Ulster's unofficial anthem', the hymn 'O God, our help in ages past'. Written in 1708 by Isaac Watts and paraphrasing Psalm 90.1, the hymn dwelt on lament whilst evoking credence in God's leadership:

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come, Be Thou our guard while troubles last, And our eternal home[.]²⁵

Much female unionist rhetoric was religiously divined. Secret society muscle and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church were, for example, claimed by the UWUC to fill 'unionist minds with the greatest misgivings as to the safety of our religious liberties under the legislation of a Dublin Parliament ... Under Home Rule Ireland would quickly become as priest-ridden as Quebec'.²⁶ Miss Armstrong, honorary secretary of Lurgan WUA, brilliantly encapsulated the essence of many unionist anxieties; 'If our homes are not sacred from the priest under the existing laws, what can we expect from a priest governed Ireland?' Armstrong's rhetoric was likely inspired by the *Ne Temere* papal decree of 1908 that ruled religiously mixed marriages which were not solemnised by the Catholic Church null and void. For a mixed marriage to be solemnised by a Catholic priest, various conditions, including a vow to raise children in the Catholic faith, were required.²⁷ An UWUC petition opposing the decree, measuring over a mile in length with 104,301 signatories, was presented to parliament in 1912, signifying the strength of feeling that *Ne Temere* engendered.²⁸ The UWUC's honorary secretary, Edith Mercier Clements, also used the much-publicised 1910 McCann case where, in an application of *Ne Temere*, a Catholic spouse deserted his Protestant wife, taking their children from the family home in Belfast as a means to highlight the threat to religious freedoms foreseen in Home Rule;

When it was possible for one of their sex a poor woman, to be bereft of her husband and children, of all that made home and life dear, by the emissaries of a foreign potentiate – if this could happen under British rule, what could be expected under Home Rule?²⁹

Although it is often challenging to determine the exact reasons for political mobilisation, placing anti-Home Rule arguments within a realm pronounced as women's place – the home – was one of the UWUC's most effective tactics for mobilising a disenfranchised demographic. The UWUC infused unionism with domestic gender ideology. Theresa Londonderry thus deigned it a unionist woman's duty to 'begin work at once, to canvass voters, to trace removals [from the electoral register] ... to bring every single voter to the poll during elections, so that every seat in Ulster shall be won for the Union'.³⁰ Mrs W. J. Allen similarly called on unionist women, 'to support their menfolk ... to preserve the Union, which meant everything to them – their civil and religious liberty, their homes, their children'.³¹ This was declared women's work. As Miss Armstrong expressed to Lurgan WUA in 1911, 'Let each woman in Ulster do a woman's part to stem the tide of Home Rule'.³²

With an inbuilt conservative majority, unionists initially found some salve in the House of Lords' ability to defeat Home Rule, as was the case in 1893. The passage of the Parliament Act in August 1911, however, augmented unionist concerns.³³ The UWUC believed the act neutered the upper house, limiting its ability to veto legislation to a two-year delaying power,

established single chamber government with all its fatal consequences ... [was] avowedly enacted by compact with the Irish nationalist Parliamentary Party in order that home rule might be passed into law without having been first submitted as a distinct issue to the Electors.³⁴

This, conjoined with the passage but two-year suspension of the third Home Rule bill in 1912, compounded fears, mobilising many in the unionist cause and heralding a new sense of autonomy which contemporaries dubbed 'Ulsteria'.³⁵

Elite leadership, creating a place for women within unionism and rising fears of Home Rule, proved a heady *mélange* for mobilizing women. The UWUC's first public meeting in 1911 saw two overflow meetings held with hundreds reportedly unable to gain admission and the West Belfast branch of the association enrolled 4,050 members within two to three months of its existence.³⁶ Although led by the upper classes, with UWUC meetings usually held during daytime hours and therefore precluding working women's attendance, St Anne's WUA in Belfast city centre, as well as the West Belfast and Lurgan branches, held evening meetings. North Derry WUA also held lunchtime meetings, a tactic adopted by some Irish suffrage societies, as well as afternoon and evening meetings to try to enrol working women. By the end of 1911 thirty-two women's unionist associations were formed throughout Ulster with an estimated membership of 40,000–50,000; by 1913, figures of between 115,000–200,000 members were cited.³⁷ The desired aim of cross-class membership also seems to have been achieved and, although those with the most time to devote to the organisation were drawn from the higher social classes, 80% of the West Belfast branch was claimed to be comprised of mill workers and shop girls.³⁸ This female political engagement strengthened rather than diminished as the third Home Rule crisis reached its apex.

The drilling and arming of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) from 1912 was the most visible example of unionists' growing sense of conditional loyalty that emerged in the aftermath of the Parliament Act.³⁹ This heightened militarisation was accompanied by increasing trepidation that anti-Home Rule sentiment could cause civil unrest. 28 September 1912 was therefore designated as 'Ulster Day', a general holiday to mobilise the unionist masses to sign the male Solemn League and Covenant and Women's Declaration. Although the pro-unionist press averred that 'it was only natural that ... [women] should desire to have a share in the ceremonies of Ulster Day', women were not automatically included in the plans.⁴⁰ The text of the women's declaration, like that of the covenant, was primarily drafted by Thomas Sinclair, which impinged on female agency. However, the UUC's secretary Richard Dawson Bates affirmed that 'The Women's Unionist Council are, of course, responsible for settling what Declaration they wish to issue, and the men have nothing to say in regard to it beyond offering their help.'⁴¹ It is not clear what, if any, changes the UWUC made to the short text of the declaration, but their auxiliary stance was again apparent in pledging to associate 'with the men of Ulster in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule Bill now before Parliament'.⁴²

Protestant church services were held before processing to sign the declaration and covenant; a visual show of strength more in line with the Orange tradition of parading than constitutional unionism. Only those over the age of sixteen who were Ulster women or domiciled in Ulster were permitted to sign the declaration. Theresa Londonderry was the first to sign the declaration in Belfast, qualifying on the basis of one of the family's ancestral homes being Mount Stewart in Co. Down; although not yet UWUC president, this highlights her *de facto* leadership of the organisation. With 60 venues for collecting signatures to the women's declaration in Belfast alone, the scale of the 'Ulster Day' endeavour was considerable; 228,999 women, with an additional 5055 expatriate Ulster women, and 218,206 men, with a further 19,162 men of Ulster origin, signed the declaration and covenant respectively (see Table 16.1).⁴³

The declaration thus stands as a huge show of women unionists' strength in Ulster; female signatories outnumbered male in sixteen of twenty-nine districts and collectively in four of Ulster's nine counties; Armagh, Londonderry, Down and Antrim.⁴⁷ The most substantial female majority was in Belfast, where 5,000 more female signatories than male were collected. With over 17,000 female signatories in the border counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, areas which had already been posited as possible sites of exclusion from a partitioned northern state, there was widespread consternation that such a move could be entertained.

In 1912, the UWUC issued a printed statement on their objections to Home Rule that unambiguously determined 'We do not want a separate Parliament for Ulster'.⁴⁸ Discussions concerning the exclusion of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan from any special arrangements made for the province in the event of Home Rule also met firm, yet ultimately ineffective, censure from the UWUC's Advisory Committee in 1914. Theresa Londonderry passed a letter to this effect to her friend and confidante, the unionist leader Sir Edward Carson, who subsequently 'begs the

TABLE 16.1 Signatories to the Women's Declaration in Ulster, 1912⁴⁴

County	Female Signatories
East Antrim	12,392*
North Antrim	6,948*
Mid-Antrim	9,625*
South Antrim	12,503*
Mid-Armagh	7,431*
North Armagh	10,489*
South Armagh	2,251
East Cavan	1,899
West Cavan	1,750
East Down	6,311*
North Down	11,407*
West Down	9,464*
South Down	6,660*
North Fermanagh	3,684
South Fermanagh	2,894
North Londonderry	9,327*
South Londonderry	6,558
Londonderry City	5,518*
North Monaghan	4,471*
South Monaghan	387
East Tyrone	5,307
North Tyrone	4,644
South Tyrone	5,316*
Mid-Tyrone	4,341
South Donegal	1,565
North Donegal	2,029*
East Donegal	3,743
West Donegal	480
Belfast	69,425*
Ulster total ⁴⁵	228,797 (official figure; 228,999 ⁴⁶)

* denotes a female majority.

ladies to keep quiet as no settlement will be arrived at unless Ulster is consulted'.⁴⁹ However, as the passage of the suspended third Home Rule bill drew closer in 1914, the likelihood of civil war increased. Thousands of unionist women were trained in first-aid, signaling, ambulance driving and home nursing from 1913 and offers of homes, shelter and clothes for 'poor Protestant children' were received from England and Scotland.⁵⁰ Women were also involved in UVF gun-running; two women in North Antrim, for example, drove guns to Galgorm and Lisnafillon as part of the Larne gun-running operation on 24 April 1914.⁵¹ To Lilian Spender the event was 'almost incredible, and nothing but the most perfect organisation, combined with the most perfect and loyal co-operation ... could have carried it through without a single case of bloodshed'.⁵² This was accompanied by further

disquiet that the much-lauded unity of unionism might be undermined by civil unrest. With marked class considerations, the UWUC's Advisory Committee considered that an appeal might be made 'to factory girls, [and] mill workers ... to preserve peace and order during the crisis'. Ultimately, a more generic letter to the press was published, appealing to 'Unionist sisters to be patient under all provocations ... to trust their leaders, and to strive earnestly to preserve peace and order.'⁵³

There were also divisions in the UWUC's Executive Committee. Carson was informed in mid-1914 that some 'urge that constitutional methods of resisting Home Rule have proved useless, that force alone can decide the issue and that therefore all funds should be applied to the equipment of the U. V. F' The UWUC's electioneering, canvassing and propaganda work in Britain and associated expense was deemed to allow the organisation 'to be made the fool of the English conservative party ... who have no regard for Ulster except as a lever for securing their own return to power'.⁵⁴ The UWUC's campaign work in Britain thus ended on 4 August 1914 to focus on domestic work as 'in the event of trouble from the Nationalists there would be much to be done in the way of arranging for refugees, [and] administration'.⁵⁵ Faced with the prospect of civil war, Theresa Londonderry now advised the women's council to 'be prepared for the worst ... I reaffirm with emphasis at this juncture our determination to stand with our men to the last in the struggle that is before us'. Claiming violence as an anathema to women, she continued:

To us women the very thought of strife, accompanied by bloodshed, is an unspeakable horror. In such times, it is the women who suffer the most ... Ulster has armed herself to fight, we women of Ulster are resolved not to be a hindrance but a help to the men ... we must give them our sympathy, our encouragement, our approval, our admiration[.]⁵⁶

The singular entity of the Conservative and Unionist Party, only in existence from 1912, was clearly under severe strain. Yet, rather than civil war over Home Rule, it was an escalating conflict on an international scale – the First World War – that led to a political truce and a resultant cessation of the Home Rule campaigns on all constitutional sides. The UWUC subsequently focussed on war work but the September 1914 passage and suspension of the third home rule bill and the promise of special treatment for Ulster revived the spectre of partition. In 1916 Theresa Londonderry was advised by Dawson Bates not to hold a UWUC meeting to avoid 'topics as to the inadvisability of accepting the exclusion of the 6 counties. Some of these people cannot see beyond their noses.'⁵⁷ Bates' uncompromising view was countered by many more sympathetic reactions to the proposed exclusion of counties Monaghan, Donegal and Cavan. As Lady Dufferin expressed;

Our women are naturally much upset at the turn things have taken, and are longing to be up and doing ... we all feel heartbroken over the proposed partition of Ulster and are still hoping some better solution of our difficulties may come out of the melting pot.⁵⁸

There was no alternative solution and one of the council's most able workers, the UWUC honorary secretary Edith Mercier Clements acknowledged the challenge that this posed in 1916:

We must diplomatically hold together our warm supporters in the three counties, many of them at present are too sad to want to attend our committees and we must show them that they are more to us than ever before because of their inestimable and incomparable self-sacrifice. You can hardly form any idea of how many women are irreconcilables and never would have consented to anything which meant the breaking of the Covenant[.]⁵⁹

Mercier Clements' closing statement embodied the unionist women's conundrum; they had not been consulted on partition as, still disenfranchised, they were disqualified from the UUC which remained an all-male body. This exclusion of women from unionist decision-making caused some frustration; it is not coincidental that unionist women sought representation on the UUC from 1916 but this was only attained after the passage of the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This act granted the parliamentary vote to women in the United Kingdom who were over the age of thirty and fulfilled property qualifications or were married to a man that did. This was not universal suffrage as the act also enfranchised men over the age of twenty-one, or nineteen if they had either served in the armed forces for four years or as aldermen.⁶⁰ However, the partial enfranchisement of women led their political import to be reconsidered; the UUC's annual report of 1919, for example, freely acknowledged that women were admitted to its ranks due to the extension of the parliamentary franchise.⁶¹ Women were subsequently granted twelve representatives on the over 400-strong UUC, a numerical representation equal to that of the Unionist Clubs but, at 3 per cent of the council's total, this was nominal and far below the 12 per cent that the UWUC had mooted.

Partition was debated at a UWUC meeting in March 1920 where the majority opinion was that 'Ulster should remain intact and abide by the covenant'.⁶² The council, sending delegates to the UUC meeting where partition was agreed, left these women 'free to vote as their consciences direct them'.⁶³ Six-county partition was subsequently sanctioned, causing not only internal denunciation in the UWUC but the resignation of members, especially in the excluded counties. With partition enshrined in the Government of Ireland Act of 1920,⁶⁴ and a new Northern Ireland state in existence from 1921, the UWUC revised its constitution, amending its sole object from maintaining the union to:

Keep alive the feeling of Union with Great Britain, and to promote and assist all such measures ... for the consolidation of the Empire, and good government and improvement of Northern Ireland, and all classes and conditions of the people within its borders.⁶⁵

The body now embraced more social and didactic concerns, pledging ‘to raise the standard of education, morality and industry of all kinds’. The popular unionist retreat from Westminster, evident since 1911, was enduring; UWUC public meetings and literature were now devoted to reforms introduced by the unionist party in the Northern Ireland parliament although propaganda work continued in Britain, America and the colonies.

Changes to women’s political stature can be read through an analysis of the UWUC. Although its revised constitution retained the emphasis that ‘close touch’ should be maintained with the UUC, it was indicative of an emboldened sense of female agency that the provision to work by ‘any other means ... after consultation with’ this body was removed.⁶⁶ As UWUC vice-president, Harriot, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, reflected in the interwar period:

In the old days ... it was very difficult for young women to break through the unwritten laws of custom which kept them to their fancy part and discouraged all initiative ... I myself ... had never seen a committee until I sat upon one as President, – when I did not know, and had to divine its proper procedure, – and I still feel the disadvantage it is not to have had the opportunity of serving under some good and experienced chairwomen. ... Committee meetings are certainly training grounds for patience, temper, tact, judgment and courtesy.

Thus, although the UWUC was a conservative organisation, women now possessed ‘new powers, and opportunities, ... greater knowledge, ... greater liberty of action ... Even man’s prerogative of speech-making is ... no longer left to him alone ... women do now speak for themselves’.⁶⁷ The partition of Ireland, rising sectarian violence and the territorial definition of Northern Ireland at the mercy of the boundary commission until 1925, meant that the insecurity and fear that brought so many women into the unionist domain years and, in some instances, decades before they had the ability to cast votes or stand as candidates in parliamentary elections, remained. At the time of partition, the UWUC could only conclude that ‘Ulster stands alone as never before’.⁶⁸ This provided the impetus for unionist women’s continued activism, and it is a telling indication of unionist mentalities that the UWUC remains in existence today.⁶⁹

Notes

- 1 Ulster Women’s Unionist Council (hereafter UWUC) honorary secretary, Edith Mercier Clements, “The Fight against Home Rule,” *Belfast News-letter*, January 24, 1911.
- 2 The first Irish Home Rule bill, proposing the establishment of an Irish legislature with restricted functions, was introduced to the House of Commons by Liberal prime minister, W. E. Gladstone in April 1886. The bill was defeated in the commons in June 1886.
- 3 In the nationalist campaign, *Inghinidhe na hEireann* (Daughters of Ireland) and *Cumann na mBan* (Women’s Council) were established in 1900 and 1914 respectively.
- 4 Gordon Lucy, *The Great Convention: The Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892* (Lurgan: Colourpoint Books, 1995). The unionist *conversazione* and convention were held in protest against the forthcoming second Irish Home Rule bill, introduced to the House of Commons by Gladstone in January 1893. The bill passed its third reading in the House of Commons but was rejected by the House of Lords in September 1893.

- 5 *Report of the general meeting of 12,000 delegates at the Ulster convention* (Belfast: np, 1892), 104. For biographical information on Isabella Tod see: <https://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8574&searchClicked=clicked&quickadvsearch=yes>. Last accessed February 11, 2021.
- 6 Work on the UWUC includes Nancy Kinghan, *United We Stood: The Story of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, 1911–74* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1975); Diane Urquhart, *Women in Ulster Politics, 1890–1940: A History Not Yet Told* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000) and Diane Urquhart (ed.), *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and Executive Committee, 1911–40* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2001). J. F. Harbinson's *The Ulster Unionist Party, Its Development and Organisation, 1882–1973* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1973) mentions the UWUC, but groups the organisation under the collective heading of 'Minor Affiliated Associations', 61. UWUC records are not digitised but are held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland [hereafter PRONI]. Signatories to the Women's Declaration of 1912 are searchable at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-ulster-covenant. Urquhart's *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and Executive Committee* reproduces edited versions of some of the organisation's records dating from 1911–40.
- 7 Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds), *Women Surviving* (Swords: Poolbeg Press, 1989), 3.
- 8 Minute book of North Tyrone Women's Unionist Association, April 13, 1907 (PRONI, D1098/2/1/1).
- 9 *Ibid.*, April 30 and May 28, 1907 (PRONI, D1098/2/1/1).
- 10 Minute book of North Tyrone Women's Unionist Association, July 30, 1907 (PRONI, D1098/2/1/1).
- 11 Kinghan, *United We Stood*, 8. For biographical information on Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry see, <https://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8791&searchClicked=clicked&quickadvsearch=yes>. Last accessed February 11, 2021.
- 12 Mary Anne, 2nd Duchess of Abercorn was UWUC president from 1911–13. On Theresa Londonderry, see Diane Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry: Women and Political Patronage, 1800–1959* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007 and London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
- 13 "The Fight against Home Rule," *Belfast News-letter*, January 24, 1911. Theresa's spouse, Charles, 6th Marquess of Londonderry also attended the meeting.
- 14 Local women's unionist associations returned one representative to the UWUC for every 300 members, paying a membership fee of three guineas, the equivalent to £82 in contemporary values. Currency converter: 1270–2017 (nationalarchives.gov.uk). Last accessed January 10, 2021).
- 15 Draft constitution of the UWUC, c. 1911 (PRONI, D1098/1/3).
- 16 *Ibid.* The UUC remained an all-male body until 1918. See Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist Party*.
- 17 Alvin Jackson, "Irish Unionism, 1905–21," in Peter Collins (ed.), *Nationalism and Unionism: Conflict in Ireland, 1885–1921* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994), 42.
- 18 Draft constitution of the UWUC, c. 1911 (PRONI, D1098/1/3).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 The UWUC's stance was likely inspired by the Conservative Primrose League's refusal to discuss women's suffrage (see Janet Henderson Robb, *The Primrose League, 1883–1906* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). Theresa Londonderry was a leading figure in the Primrose League organisation.
- 21 "Statement of Ulster's Objections to Home Rule," UWUC Annual Meeting, January 18, 1912 (PRONI, D1231/G/13/1-33).
- 22 "The Fight against Home Rule," *Belfast News-letter*, January 24, 1911.
- 23 "Statement of Ulster's Objections to Home Rule," UWUC Annual Meeting, January 18, 1912 (PRONI, D1231/G/13/1-33).
- 24 David Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy. Irish Protestant Histories since 1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 107.

- 25 https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/O_God_Our_Help_in_Ages_Past/. Last accessed August 12, 2020.
- 26 "Statement of Ulster's Objections to Home Rule," UWUC Annual Meeting, January 18, 1912 (PRONI, D1231/G/13/1-33).
- 27 See Eoin de Bhaldraithe, "Mixed Marriages and Irish Politics: The Effect of Ne Temere," in *Studies* 77, no. 307 (1988): 284-99.
- 28 Kinghan, *United We Stood*, 20.
- 29 "The Fight against Home Rule," *Belfast News-letter*, January 24, 1911.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Minute book of Lurgan WUA, May 5, 1911 (PRONI, D3790/4).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 See P. Norton, "Resisting the Inevitable?: The Parliament Act 1911," in *Parliamentary History* 31, no. 3 (2012): 444-59.
- 34 "Statement of Ulster's Objections to Home Rule," UWUC Annual Meeting, January 18, 1912 (PRONI, D1231/G/13/1-33).
- 35 The term was used, for example, in the suffrage paper, the *Irish Citizen*, October 5, 1912, 159.
- 36 "Home Rule Peril," *Belfast News-letter*, January 12, 1911.
- 37 UWUC Annual Report, 1913 (PRONI, D2688/1/3).
- 38 Roland McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for Union* (Belfast: John Murray, 1922), 38.
- 39 See, Jane G. V. McGaughey, *Ulster's Men. Protestant Unionist Masculinities and Militarization in the North of Ireland, 1912-23* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).
- 40 "Ulster Day," *Belfast News-letter*, September 30, 1912.
- 41 Notes regarding arrangements for signing of the Ulster Covenant by women, September 13, 1912 (PRONI, D1098/2/3). Signatures were also collected for a week after Ulster Day in Unionist headquarters in Belfast's Old Town Hall and 194 women and 209 men thus signed retrospectively (PRONI, D1507/A/37/5).
- 42 PRONI, D1313/1.
- 43 See PRONI, D1327/3/1-96.
- 44 Compiled from the return of signatures to Ulster Solemn League and Covenant (including the Women's Declaration) (PRONI, D1507/A/37/6).
- 45 The discrepancy between the total signatories and the official figure was caused by an additional 194 women signing after Ulster Day.
- 46 Return of signatures to Ulster Solemn League and Covenant (including the Women's Declaration) (PRONI, D1507/A/37/6).
- 47 Estimates of the percentage of non-Catholic women signing averages 72.2 per cent in comparison to 76.7 per cent men (Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy*, 243).
- 48 "Statement of Ulster's Objections to Home Rule," UWUC Annual Meeting, January 18, 1912 (PRONI, D1231/G/13/1-33).
- 49 UWUC Advisory Committee minute book, May 12 and 14, 1914 (PRONI, D2688/1/5).
- 50 Ibid., December 30, 1913, January 27 and March 24, 1914 (PRONI, D2688/1/5).
- 51 List of motor car owners, North Antrim, for Larne gun-running, April 24, 1914 (PRONI, D1238/74).
- 52 Lilian Spender's Belfast and London diary, social and political, April 27, 1914 (PRONI, D1633/2/19).
- 53 UWUC Advisory Committee minute book, February 3, 1914 (PRONI, D2688/1/5).
- 54 Ibid., June 9, 1914 (PRONI, D2688/1/5).
- 55 Ibid., February 3, 1914 (PRONI, D2688/1/5). Key suffragette organisations, such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), also adopted the wartime political truce.
- 56 *Northern Whig*, July 15, 1914.
- 57 Richard Dawson Bates to Theresa, Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, September 19, 1916 (PRONI, D2846/1/8/48).
- 58 Lady Dufferin to Theresa, Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, July 6, 1916 (PRONI, D2846/1/8/38).

- 59 Edith Mercier Clements to Theresa, Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, July 19, 1916 (PRONI, D2846/1/8/43).
- 60 See John Coakley, "The Impact of the 1918 Reform Act in Ireland," in *Parliamentary History* 37, no. 1 (Feb. 2018): 116–32. As a result of the Representation of the People Act, the Irish electorate increased from c.700,000 to c. 2 million in 1918. Universal suffrage was attained in the United Kingdom in 1928. See also the contributions from Margaret Ward and Sonja Tiernan in this volume.
- 61 UUC annual report, 1919 (PRONI, D972/17).
- 62 UWUC minutes, March 9, 1920 (PRONI, D1098/1/3).
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 See, Cormac Moore, "The Government of Ireland Act 1920," in *History Ireland* 28, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2020): 38–41.
- 65 UWUC Revised Constitution, c. 1921 (PRONI D1098/1/3).
- 66 UWUC Draft and Revised Constitution, c. 1911 and c. 1921 respectively (PRONI D1098/1/3). The 1921 UWUC constitution also gave representation to three members from each district lodge of the Association of Loyal Orangewomen in Ireland which was reviving at this time.
- 67 Hariot, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, 'Women's Opportunities at Church Work,' undated [c. 1920–36] (PRONI, D1231/G/13/25). Hariot was UWUC vice-president from 1921–36.
- 68 UWUC annual report in *Ulster Year Book*, 1920 (PRONI, D2688/1/9).
- 69 See Jennifer Todd, "Two Traditions in Unionist Political Culture," in *Irish Political Studies* 2 (1987): 1–26.

17

'A VOICE IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE NATION'

Irish women and nationalism 1872–1922

Margaret Ward

Introduction

While the involvement of women has been a common feature in nationalist movements, what is less acknowledged is that 'feminism and nationalism emerged in the same discursive environment'.¹ That relationship was often, however, a very uneasy one. Coulter, for example, while recognising the contribution of women, 'From India to Egypt to Africa to Ireland, the upsurge of nationalism was accompanied by the emergence of women into the streets in public protest and into public life as organisers, leaders and shock troops',² argues that such aspirations for emancipation lacked any gender dimension. Women's failure to insist that their freedom had to be a specific component of any movement for national freedom is used to explain the continuance of patriarchal rule in the post-independence state. In contrast, this focus on the Irish anti-colonial struggle emphasizes the role played by women who agreed with the militant cry to action: 'Freedom for our nation and the complete removal of all disabilities to our sex will be our battle cry.'³ The digitisation of key archives, including participant testimonies from the Bureau of Military History and the service pension applications of survivors,⁴ has been a vital factor in assisting feminist scholars to engage in what Connolly has called a 'comprehensive gender-based approach', that will 'further complicate and expand' our understanding of Ireland's revolution.⁵ This chapter utilizes that research in highlighting the roles undertaken by women and the challenges they encountered in the different movements formed with the intention of achieving political independence.

Nineteenth-century activism

Revolutionary movements in Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century were conspiratorial, focused on planning for armed rebellion, and exclusively male. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (known also as 'the Fenians') of the 1860s excluded

women from membership, emphasising militarism and secrecy. This created a gendered discourse in which the category of female was portrayed as passive, awaiting rescue by a virile manhood fighting for a national honour which could liberate women also. Ireland was portrayed in a variety of images – as a young Rosaleen or a poor old woman – to be saved by the efforts and sacrifices of men. Women were denied agency in this 'separate spheres' conception of national liberation.⁶

The first formal organisation of women was the Ladies' Land League. A Land League had been established in Ireland in 1879 as a mass movement of farmers and politicians united in a fight for reductions in rent and the prevention of evictions. It was hailed as a 'new departure' in Irish political life in combining the militant tradition with that of parliamentarians and was headed by the Fenian Michael Davitt and the MP Charles Stewart Parnell. As the land agitation gained momentum, the male leadership agreed, reluctantly, to ask women to form a female counterpart, in order to maintain what the men felt would be no more than a 'semblance' of agitation when they were sent to jail. Parnell's sister Anna became organising secretary, presiding over its inaugural meeting on January 31, 1881. The executive came from the middle class, but the membership was primarily wives and daughters of farmers. Given the unique nature of a campaign directed by women, at a time when women had no political and few legal rights, their activities attracted the attention of the global media. Anna Parnell's message to women was 'learn to depend on yourselves and to do things for yourselves and to organise yourselves'.⁷ Press coverage has been reproduced and analysed by Schneller, who concludes 'Though Anna Parnell is frequently compared to her brother, in the newspapers she appears to have been far more committed and far more radical'.⁸ From jail the male leadership issued a 'No Rent Manifesto', leaving the women to deal with the consequences. In an attempt to quell the agitation, the government in August passed a Land Act enabling wealthier farmers to apply for a re-evaluation of their rent. Some dropped out of the League, leaving the campaign to be continued by the smaller farmers and landless labourers. As the numbers of evictions increased, women travelled to eviction scenes to confront process servers and attempted to support the homeless by arranging for the erection of huts. They fed almost 1,000 prisoners daily and continued the production and distribution of the League paper *United Ireland*. Thirteen women were imprisoned, not as political prisoners like the men, but under harsher conditions of legislation to prevent prostitution.

By early 1882 the Ladies' Land League had 500 branches. As Parnell became alarmed by the women's radicalism, he and Prime Minister Gladstone agreed to what became known as the Kilmainham Treaty of May 1882, whereby the men promised to end the agitation if the prisoners were released and help given to tenant farmers who were in rent arrears. Parnell insisted that the women's organisation was disbanded. The women, unable to vote or to influence parliament, had regarded the land agitation as a first stage in the formation of a movement in which women and men could participate and which would transform into a movement seeking political independence from Britain. They dissolved their organisation after discharging their final liabilities to tenants.⁹

In 1907 Anna Parnell wrote a history of the Land League, which she entitled *The Tale of a Great Sham*. Her forensic critique of the failure of the male leadership, which had achieved no more than what she characterised as the ‘ridiculous mouse’ of the 1881 Land Act, was that the men had capitulated too soon and consequently had been unable to force the English to ‘relax their murderous grip’. She dismissed any belief in a parliamentary route to Irish independence. She predicted that the failure of the constitutional movement would, once again, lead to armed rebellion. In concluding ‘If the men of that country have made up their minds it shall not be done, the women cannot bring it about’, she made it clear that she understood the gendered nature of power.¹⁰ In future years the Irish Parliamentary Party would not allow women into most of its organisations and neither would it include women’s suffrage within Home Rule legislation.¹¹

Cultural nationalism and Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Erin)

Disillusionment with parliamentarianism saw a younger generation concentrate upon cultural nationalism in later years. The Gaelic League focused upon reviving the Irish language and Gaelic sports were promoted. A significant contribution was made by two Irish poets, Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston, who published a literary journal, *Shan Van Vocht* (Poor Old Woman), between 1896 and 1899. This was described as ‘firmly cultural-nationalist in orientation, and often implicitly feminist.’¹² Catherine Morris describes ‘the poor old woman’ (who represented the spirit of Ireland) ‘speaking out and speaking back against colonial occupation, cultural Anglicization, and the factional unionist and nationalist misogyny Irish women encountered’.¹³ Contributors included everyone prominent in advanced literary and political circles and its existence enabled women to create ‘a wider space for women’s involvement in nationalist politics.’¹⁴ Women were also active in the centenary celebrations of the 1798 United Irish rising and in the Irish Transvaal Committee, which supported the Boers fighting the British in the South African War. However, while men involved in the new cultural organisations had no objections to women’s informal involvement, actual membership (apart from the Gaelic League) remained male-only. The autobiography of Maud Gonne, one of the most prominent of activists, describes her work as a ‘freelance’, supporting Irish tenant farmers facing once again the threat of famine and eviction, having been refused membership of all groups she applied to.¹⁵

A new generation of female activists, building on the lessons of the past, began to challenge these gendered-based limitations upon their participation, insisting upon their right to have ‘a voice in directing the affairs of Ireland’.¹⁶ A visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland in April 1900 was the catalyst that brought some women together to organise a ‘Patriotic Children’s Treat’ as reward for those who boycotted the celebrations for royalty. Following this successful initiative, they decided that they wanted to form a permanent organisation. At the inaugural meeting of the new organisation, named Inghinidhe na hEireann, it was announced their aim was

'the re-establishment of the complete independence of Ireland', and they would encourage the study of Gaelic culture, particularly amongst the young, and give support to Irish manufacture.¹⁷ In reality, they did much more than that, participating in many protests against the British presence in Ireland, distributing anti-recruiting leaflets, providing the impetus for the development of a national Irish theatre (some became actors with what became the Abbey Theatre) and, through their educational work with children, developing a new generation of activists. What was notable was their preference for direct action and willingness to engage in physical confrontation, challenging Victorian views concerning appropriate behaviour for women. They were also visibly feminist in their critique of Irish society. Through their activities they helped 'to shape the extra-parliamentary nationalist movement in the early years of the twentieth century'.¹⁸ In 1911 Helena Molony became the first woman to be jailed for political protest since the land war, after throwing stones in protest against the visit of King George.¹⁹

Maud Gonne was President of Inghinidhe; an inspirational figure to many and a major source of financial support. Margaret Quinn, secretary of the group, said 'We would have done anything she wanted us to'.²⁰ Because of her complicated personal life Gonne spent a large part of her life in Paris, where she developed strong personal and political links with revolutionaries living in exile because of their opposition to British imperial rule. In so doing she 'internationalised the advanced nationalist movement, and especially the women within it'.²¹ She was close to Bhikaji Cama, a founder of the Paris Indian Society, and she supported Indian revolutionaries throughout her life, making connections between the Irish and Indian struggles for freedom. In the 1930s, living as a dissident in the Irish Free State, Gonne was a founder of the Indian-Irish Independence League.²²

Towards the end of 1900 the small literary and cultural societies came together in what became known as Cumann na nGaedheal. Inghinidhe was an affiliate member and from this time onwards women were accepted as equal members within organised nationalism. Maud Gonne, with Arthur Griffith, had been responsible for writing the programme of the organisation. In 1908 there was a further regrouping of groups under the title of Sinn Féin. Women were members of the executive, with Inghinidhe member Jennie Wyse-Power (a former member of the Ladies Land League) becoming vice-president in 1911.

Helena Molony, who edited the Inghinidhe paper *Bean na hEireann* (the woman of Ireland) throughout its three years of existence, described the paper as 'a funny hotch-potch of blood and thunder, high thinking and home-made bread'.²³ An editorial declared its battle cry to be 'Freedom for Our Nation and the complete removal of all disabilities to our sex'²⁴ and there was an emphasis upon separatism, socialism and feminism. Molony introduced Countess Markievicz to the Inghinidhe in 1908. Several contributors 'asserted both the necessity and the desirability of physical force as a means of liberating Ireland'.²⁵ Using the title 'A Worker', Molony wrote labour notes for the paper, and opened its pages to debate between feminists and nationalists on whether support for the suffrage movement entailed 'begging' the British parliament to pass legislation. As feminists

the *Inghinidhe* supported votes for women, but as nationalists they took the Sinn Féin line that ‘the rights of Irishwomen ... must be won in Ireland’.²⁶ The last edition of the paper appeared in February 1911. The attention of *Inghinidhe* members moved to practical issues, in particular a campaign to have a school meals act passed in Ireland and in supporting the families of the striking workers of Dublin during the Dublin Lock-Out of 1913.

The formation of Cumann na mBan (Irishwomen’s Council)

When the Irish Citizen Army (first formed as a workers’ defence group during the Lock-Out) was re-organised as a militant separatist organisation, some women from the *Inghinidhe* became members. When Cumann na mBan was formed in 1914, *Inghinidhe* became a branch of that organisation, but a significant proportion of the membership preferred the egalitarian ethos of the Irish Citizen Army. *Inghinidhe* as an independent organisation no longer existed, but its legacy was the presence of women within political nationalism due to the efforts of a new generation of self-confident activists.

In 1910 the prospect of a Home Rule bill being passed by a British parliament had become a more realistic prospect as a minority Liberal government was kept in power by an Irish Parliamentary Party insisting that this was the price for their support. Although Home Rule was far from full independence, this limited measure was contested by Ulster Unionists who wanted to remain united with Britain. They formed a paramilitary force, the Ulster Volunteer Force. In response, nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers, as a marker of nationalist determination. Unionist women had formed the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council in 1911, its sole purpose being to campaign against Home Rule.²⁷ The question now arose – would nationalist women be included within the Irish Volunteers?

Some men from the conservative end of the Volunteers argued that women should be limited to fund collecting and developing first aid kits, without the necessity of a formal organisation. The formation of Cumann na mBan and their founding objectives gave rise to questions concerning the extent of women’s agency as they were pledged:

To advance the cause of Irish liberty

To organise Irishwomen in furtherance of this object

To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland

To form a fund for these purposes to be called the ‘Defence of Ireland Fund

Did their status as an auxiliary to the Irish Volunteer organisation indicate a future subordinate status for women within an independent Ireland? A debate between suffragists and nationalists over this issue was a notable feature of the early months of the new organisation. While Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was chief critic from the suffrage side, Constance Markievicz (a Citizen Army member) was also critical,

declaring in a lecture in 1915 to the Irishwomen's Franchise League: 'these ladies' auxiliaries demoralise women and set them up in separate camps'.²⁸

The feminist critique that women were simply collecting funds for men to spend without having any say in how decisions would be made was reinforced by the inaugural speech given by the academic and Gaelic League enthusiast Agnes O'Farrelly, whose speech emphasised a highly gendered demarcation of roles within the movement:

Each rifle we put in their hands will represent to us a bolt fastened behind the door of some Irish home to keep out the hostile stranger. Each cartridge will be a watchdog to fight for the sanctity of the hearth.²⁹

There were, however, women who had private misgivings about the initial direction of the organisation. Their views provide 'a valuable, if necessarily subjective, guide to mentalities'.³⁰ Statements by early members of Cumann na mBan revealing the concerns of women to develop an organisation that would have autonomy have been incorporated into new research enabling a more nuanced picture to emerge. McCarthy, considering the testimony of Wyse-Power and Elizabeth Bloxham, concludes: 'It was clear that some women refused to work in a subsidiary capacity within the Volunteers, and so the idea of a separate women's organisation gathered momentum'.³¹ Pašeta, highlighting the cautious approach adopted, summarises the dilemma as the formation of an organisation 'advanced enough for the radicals, moderate enough for the constitutionalists, feminist enough for the suffragists and broad enough to appeal to the majority of female nationalists'.³² Matthews, considering the age profile of the first executive members, remarks that 'this was not a group of young enthusiastic firebrands'.³³ Of the eight members of the first provisional committee, six were well-known activists and three had been Inghinide members.

The moderates left the Irish Volunteers when nationalism split following Irish Party leader John Redmond's call for support to be given to the British war effort in 1914. Cumann na mBan lost more than half its branches but from that time the organisation was explicitly republican and increasingly militarised. By the beginning of 1916 'Cumann na mBan had become a small but reasonably well organised and partially trained, quasi-military organisation'.³⁴

Cumann na mBan and the Easter Rising

In 1969 former Cumann na mBan activist Lil Conlon produced a short history of the organisation as a response to the lack of any focus on women's contribution during the state commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Her account, which she described as 'a pot-pourri of bitter-sweet memories',³⁵ was factual with little commentary. Of the Rising she named only 'certain girls' who acted as despatch carriers, including also the names of some of those interned following the defeat of the insurgents.³⁶ The classic text *The Irish Republic*, commissioned

by Éamon de Valera when Taoiseach and written by Dorothy Macardle (an active republican who was imprisoned during the civil war), was first published in 1937. In this she states only that 'Units of Cumann na mBan were to serve as auxiliaries in several posts'.³⁷ Significantly, de Valera had been the only commandant to refuse women's help in his outpost at Boland's Mill. My monograph, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, published in 1983, was grounding in many ways. It sought to bring to attention the myriad roles played by women during the Rising, but could at that period find evidence only to hesitate a guess that around 90 women had been involved, out of an overall total of fewer than 2,000 insurgents.³⁸ In 1996 Ruth Taillon wrote a riposte to the 'shabby treatment by historians' with an account listing almost 200 names.³⁹ In 2003 Sinead McCool produced an illustrated study of female activists in the revolutionary years, *No Ordinary Women*, also concluding that 200 were involved.⁴⁰ *We Were There: 77 Women of the Easter Rising* uncovers the backgrounds, families, politicisation and motivations propelling the activities of the 77 women who were incarcerated in Richmond Barracks following the surrender of the outposts, and calculates an actual total of 280 female participants.⁴¹

The post-revolutionary claims for financial compensation contained in the Military Service Pensions Collection provide more detail than was known previously. It is 'one of the most detailed archival collections for charting the role of women in any national revolution ... as well as the subsequent treatment of female veterans by the state'.⁴² Lucy McDiarmuid, in *At Home in the Revolution*, describes how the sites of the Rising replicated in gender hierarchies the practices of the Irish home – during the Rising the women were out, but they were not as far 'out' as the men – instead, women existed in a borderland, positioned between the house and the front line – cooking, distributing food, dressing wounds, in a territory where women were using domestic skills to serve military purposes.⁴³ McCarthy argues their actual numbers were less important than the impact of their presence, proving 'some women were ready, willing and able to play a part in revolution and ... there was no rational reason why they should not continue to do so'.⁴⁴ Eve Morrison, focusing on women's testimonies, maintains that they illustrate 'the complexity of the relationship between nationalist women and prevailing notions of gender in Ireland's revolutionary period and after' as they reveal highly gendered activities, where women and men 'operated in separate organisations and were ideologically assigned roles and values according to what was deemed appropriate for their sex'.⁴⁵

Countess Markievicz and Margaret Skinnider were the only two women to act as combatants during the Rising. Markievicz, an officer in the Citizen Army, took the opportunity provided by the shortage of men to do so while Skinnider, originally working in first aid, argued with her commandant, Michael Mallin, that the Proclamation of Independence (issued on Easter Monday at the start of the Rising), guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities to women and a government 'elected by the suffrage of all her men and women', gave her the right to undertake such a role. Both women had trained in firearms.⁴⁶ Women's testimonies reveal a wide range of roles performed, with the vital task of carrying despatches between

outposts in the bullet-torn streets so terrifying that one woman admitted she was in tears each time she was given orders.⁴⁷

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, referring to a conversation between herself and Connolly, one of the signatories to the Proclamation, in which he assured her that equality for women had been agreed, described the Rising as 'the first time in history when men, fighting for freedom, voluntarily included women'.⁴⁸ The revolutionaries appointed her as the only woman in a five-member civil provisional government, to come into being if the insurgents had been able to continue beyond that first week. Pašeta, rightly, accuses historians of underestimating the impact of the women's movement on the thinking of republicans of the period.⁴⁹ Kathleen Clarke's autobiography makes it clear that she, as a leading member of Cumann na mBan in Dublin, expected women's equality to be enshrined in the Proclamation and had discussed this with her husband Tom, another of the signatories.⁵⁰ Such examples highlight the importance of including women's testimony and of considering how women make political impact in different ways. McCool's study *Easter Widows* provides biographical studies of seven of the women bereaved by the execution of the husbands, including the later contribution to Irish political life made by four: Kathleen Clarke, Áine Ceannt, Maud Gonne MacBride and Grace Plunkett.⁵¹

Women and the revolutionary years

At their 1917 and 1918 conventions Cumann na mBan policy was altered so that the organisation became more militarised and less of an auxiliary, pledged to working 'in conjunction with the Irish Volunteers'.⁵² Countess Markievicz was elected President. In 1918, as the Great War continued, women from suffrage, labour and nationalist groups united in a campaign to resist the imposition of conscription, organising a special women's day on 9 June when thousands of women in towns across the country marched together to sign a pledge of resistance. While the impetus came from a small pacifist element, the much larger force of women within Cumann na mBan dominated the organising group. By giving the day its Irish name 'Lá na mBan' (Woman's Day) they managed to imprint their dominance.⁵³

Much of the concern of republican women in the 1917–1918 period was to ensure that the political wing of nationalism recognised their right to equality within the movement. The men that now assumed leadership, in the wake of the executions, were not all as progressive as their dead comrades. Women caucused together, uniting within their ranks former Inghinidhe members, the Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan and the Irish Women Workers' Union. They also proposed co-opting Hanna Sheehy Skeffington from the suffrage ranks. At first they called the group the 'League of Women Delegates', but soon started to use the Irish form of Cumann na d'Teachtaire. As a result of their efforts the Sinn Féin Convention of 1917 agreed to affirm women's equality of status within the organisation and to elect four women to its executive. This evidence would have remained hidden if it were not for the fact that Sheehy Skeffington retained the women's minute book

within her papers.⁵⁴ Cumann na d'Teachtaire hoped to encourage a number of women to stand for election in 1918, only to find their list of names either rejected by Sinn Féin or the women offered unwinnable seats. Countess Markievicz in Dublin and Winifred Carney in Belfast (who had served in the GPO, headquarters of the Rising) were the only two female candidates selected. Carney, standing in a strongly Protestant and unionist area, secured only 395 votes.⁵⁵

The Irish Women's Franchise League, commenting on an election in which women over the age of 30 had for the first time won the right to vote and to stand for election, remarked, 'the majority sex in Ireland have secured one representative. That is the measure of our boasted sex equality.'⁵⁶ Refusing to take their seats in a British parliament, republicans set up Dáil Éireann and Markievicz, as Minister for Labour, became the second woman in the world to hold such a position.

Forty-two women were victorious in the local government elections of 1920, including a number of prominent feminists and Cumann na mBan members, but this remained a small proportion, given that 1,800 seats were available. Six women were selected to stand for the second Dáil Éireann in 1921. Other than Margaret Pearse (mother of two of the men executed in 1916), all were activists of some standing, but most were also relatives of other dead leaders, leading the *Irish Citizen* to warn that while the women often had 'outstanding qualities that justify that selection' the principle was 'a bad one, and a poor specimen of male logic'.⁵⁷ It was a precedent that would be followed by the political parties for many years to come.

As Irish resistance to British rule developed women were active in many different capacities: they took part in the underground courts as justices of the peace; they cared for victims of state violence; they organised vigils and protests on behalf of the prisoners; they raised funds to keep the movement going, but, above all, as the guerrilla war developed, members of Cumann na mBan gave full support to the men of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), as the Volunteers were now named. Some of that work – first aid and provision of safe houses where men were sheltered and fed – was gendered, but the tasks of 'signalling, intelligence and dispatch work would be considered combat support roles in any army of the period'.⁵⁸ Despite the evidence presented here regarding the key role played by women's activism, their applications for service pensions reveal a strongly gendered definition of 'active service', in which male assessors and former male comrades provided rulings upon the women's claims. As a distinction was drawn between 'routine Cumann na mBan activities', and 'useful service to the Brigade', women had to prove that they had transgressed traditional gender norms in their activities during the war. This archival information is organised on an individual county level, facilitating detailed local studies of the contribution made by women.⁵⁹ Ryan, analysing male versions of the period, demonstrated how they depoliticised women's involvement 'as a strategy for reasserting the gender hierarchy'.⁶⁰ Women's testimony serves as a significant challenge to such accounts.

Violence against women, including sexual violence, during the revolutionary period has received little attention until recently. Although women attempted to gather such evidence there was a reluctance by many to voice publicly their

experiences. In 2000 Ryan published a ground-breaking paper analysing the behaviour of Crown forces.⁶¹ The release of new sources now enables a fuller, disturbing picture to emerge; one which will transform 'The masculinist, militaristic framework at the heart of Irish historiography.'⁶² Gender-based violence was perpetrated by both Crown and republican forces and for many women, accosted within their homes, their domestic space was also a battlefield.⁶³

Benton, analysing the militarisation of politics in Ireland during this period, concluded that 'The abandonment of women's interests is the price women had to pay for the right to belong.'⁶⁴ This focus on women's activities provides sufficient evidence to question such a conclusion. Cumann na mBan was a military support organisation for men, but the goal of an independent, egalitarian Ireland was articulated by female representatives in the Dáil, who were all members of Cumann na mBan, several also having been members of suffrage organisations. The Treaty debates illustrate the efforts women made to assert their interests.

Women, the treaty and the aftermath

A political settlement, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was agreed by Irish and British representatives in December 1921, to be ratified by the British Parliament and Dáil Éireann. In rejecting the Treaty, women rejected a political settlement that created a 26-county 'Free State' which was far from the independent 32 county republic envisaged by the leaders of the Easter Rising. It also fell far short of realising the rights that had been promised to women in the Proclamation. Following the adoption of the Treaty by Dáil Éireann, Cumann na mBan became the first organisation to vote for its rejection. Their vote was overwhelming, 419/63, but the division was bitter.⁶⁵ As only women over the age of 30 would be eligible to vote in a plebiscite on the issue, the women of the Dáil, supported from the outside by delegations from former suffragettes, put forward a motion for women over 21 to be enfranchised before this was put to the people in an election. Kate O'Callaghan, proposing the motion, emphasised that she had been a member of a suffrage society, which was a cause she held 'very much at heart'. As women had '(taken) their share of danger' during the years of war and terror, they had 'purchased their right to the franchise and ... their right to a say in this all-important question'. Speaking in support Markievicz declared that her 'first realisation of tyranny came from some chance words spoken in favour of woman's suffrage'. It was 'one of the crying wrongs of the world, that women, because of their sex, should be debarred from any position or any right that their brains entitled them a right to hold'.⁶⁶ The motion was lost by 47 to 38 votes, but there was a promise that women over 21 would receive the vote under a new constitution to come into existence following the Treaty vote. The younger generation of women and men, who had been most involved in the fighting, were unable to register their preference and, narrowly, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was accepted by the people. A bitter civil war would be the result, one in which women played prominent roles on the anti-Treaty side, with almost 700 being imprisoned by their former

comrades, a vast contrast to approximately 50 women previously incarcerated by the British.⁶⁷

Women's rejection of the Treaty 'is fundamental to understanding the subsequent role of women in political life in Ireland'.⁶⁸ Republican women became a convenient scapegoat by which to rationalise the measures taken by the Irish Free State to exclude women from public life. A discourse developed that women were too emotional and inflexible; they were 'furies' and by their actions responsible for the death and devastation which marred the birth of the new state.⁶⁹ While a feminist voice within nationalism had helped to 'recast women from passive symbols of nation to active participants in the articulation of national identity',⁷⁰ once independence had been achieved women found that they had to resume the struggle for the realization of what had been previously promised: 'a voice in the affairs of the nation'.

For many decades historiography of the Irish revolution did little to challenge the discourse first articulated by pro-Treaty historian P. S. O'Hegarty that republican women were 'the implacable and irrational upholders of death and destruction'. As this chapter has demonstrated, research that has been primarily undertaken by women has challenged this depiction, providing a far more nuanced account of women's cultural, political and military involvement in the movement for Irish independence. Queer studies and the exploration of lesbian lives is becoming a new area of research that will further enrich our understanding of what it meant to be part of a 'revolutionary generation'. The digitisation of newspapers has facilitated greater study of women's role at a local level, and these sources, combined with the richness of the information contained within the military pension applications, are enabling scholars to develop more gendered accounts. Many of the contributions to the *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, using historical, geographical and literary sources, exemplify this welcome development. The Irish government has also responded to criticism that the initial programmes to commemorate the Decade of Centenaries (2012–2023) was insufficiently reflective of women's participation in the key events of the period. Consequently, in addition to supporting initiatives commemorating women's involvement, it has also provided support for the development of a website to memorialise the contribution of women to the Irish revolution, promising that the initial information will be added to as the decade progresses. The combination of a new generation of gender-aware and intersectional scholars, fresh directions of research and the explosion of additional source material should ensure much greater recognition of the complexity of roles undertaken by women in Ireland in the revolutionary period.

Notes

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- 18 Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 34.
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- 20 Margaret Keogh (née Quinn), Bureau of Military History (BMH), Witness Statement (WS) 273, Military Archives, Dublin. For biography of Gonne, see free online access *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Margaret O'Callaghan and Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéd MacBride, "(Edith) Maud Gonne."
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18

'A POLITICAL NONENTITY WITH INFANTS, CRIMINALS, AND LUNATICS'

First wave feminism in Ireland 1872–1922

Sonja Tiernan

Introduction

The first-wave feminist movement across the globe shared the single goal of obtaining votes for women in general elections. Yet the experiences of women in different countries varied dramatically. From 1800 until 1922, Ireland was part of the sovereign state of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland which meant that Irish women could only be granted votes through the British parliament based at Westminster. This placed Ireland in a different position from British colonies with self-government, such as New Zealand which extended the vote to women in 1893.¹

This chapter focuses on the time period from 1872, when the first suffrage organisation was founded in Ireland, until 1922, when the Irish Free State was declared. During this time period women under British rule had little equality with their male counterparts. Arguably at the core of this inequity was the fact that women had no voting rights in general elections nor were they eligible to stand for election. Ensuring that the government of the day was an entirely male body, placed there by an exclusively male electorate.

The Irish suffrage cause was fought during a heightened time of Irish nationalist and unionist action, with the fight for Irish independence often taking precedence over suffrage for women. Heightened political turmoil in Ireland complicated the goal for feminists and divided the suffrage movement across the country. The struggle for independence and the eventual partition of Ireland into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, became a central focus for historical analysis throughout much of the twentieth century. From the late twentieth century, historians, predominately female historians, have ensured that the history of suffrage in Ireland is now recorded and an increasing number of archival resources are being made available to scholars in this field.

This chapter employs the work of pioneering feminist historians which are referenced throughout and may be consulted for further information on related topics. The *Dictionary of Irish Biography* is a significant secondary resource, which is freely available on open access, providing further information about individuals noted in this chapter.² Primary sources are also utilised, including archival papers available through public libraries as well as digitised primary resources such as newspapers, the census and parliamentary debates. Digitised newspapers may be accessed for a subscription cost through the Irish Newspapers Archives and British Newspapers Archives sites.³ The Irish census of 1901 and 1911 is available for free access through the National Archives of Ireland and the parliamentary papers of Ireland and Britain are also available to search and access online.⁴

Irish Suffrage Movement in the Nineteenth Century

For many Irish and British women in the nineteenth century, their first experience of political campaigning was in response to repressive controls on women's activities enforced through a set of laws known as the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866 and 1869).⁵ These acts were established in response to an alarming spread of venereal diseases among members of the British armed forces. Rather than curtailing the behaviour of male soldiers and sailors, any woman suspected of being a prostitute was subjected to harsh legal controls, sometimes leading to forced medical examination and detention. Georgina Clinton and Linde Lunney note how the pioneer of Irish feminism, Isabella Tod, highlighted how these laws exposed the 'double standards of sexual morality'.⁶ In her assessment of 'Women and Politics in Ireland, 1860–1918', historian Maria Luddy pinpoints the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts as a defining moment for Irish feminist activity.⁷ Luddy's study was part of a large project published in 2002 for the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which focused entirely on 'Irish Women's Writing and Traditions'.⁸ These publications are the most comprehensive collection of Irish women's writings and provides a major resource relating to the history of women in Ireland.⁹

Through the campaign to overthrow the Contagious Diseases Acts, many women questioned why legislation placed them in a subordinate position to men. The fact that women had no access to the political sphere ensured that men could legislate in their own interests. As well as being excluded from national politics, women were also excluded from voting at local elections and were barred from sitting on local authorities or public boards, ensuring that at local community levels women also had little power. Such male-dominated governing led to a host of legal discriminations against women. Opportunities for women in employment were particularly restricted and in the limited number of jobs available to them, women were paid less than men doing the same work. Educational opportunities for girls were generally inadequate and women were barred from accessing further education at university level until late into the nineteenth century. Property rights legislation ensured that when a woman married, her property then became the possession

of her husband. In terms of parental rights, a child's father received custody if a legal dispute arose and women had no legal protection from violent husbands.

Prior to the establishment of formal suffrage organisations, women campaigned on these individual issues such as the implementation of the Married Women's Property Act 1882 which granted married women the right to own their own property.¹⁰ Women across the globe continue to campaign for better education for girls and young women, including Emily Davies (1830–1921), who established Girton College, Cambridge as the first university for women in 1873. Caroline Norton (1808–1877) led a personal campaign to increase parental rights for women and for their protection against violent husbands. Norton was successful when the Infant Custody Act 1873, allowed mothers to petition for custody of their children. She later instigated the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1878 granting women a protection order from a violent husband. However, these campaigns were led from England and mainly benefited middle-class or aristocratic women who had the resources to access support.

Isabella Tod played a leading role in many of these campaigns. Luddy maintains that Tod, like other feminist campaigners, began to realise that 'the acquisition of the vote was the best means of influencing change in society'.¹¹ With this in mind, Todd established the first suffrage society in Ireland, the Northern Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage, in 1872. The establishment of this organisation inspired others across the country to develop a strategy to obtain votes for women. In February 1876, Anna Haslam, along with her husband Thomas, established the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association (DWSA) which later became the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA).¹² These organisations are best described as suffragist, pursuing votes for women through constitutional and non-violent means. Members lobbied government for women's suffrage through petitions, sought support from individual politicians, held suffrage parades and raised awareness for women's rights through public meetings and speeches. The activities of the DWSA and IWSLGA were recorded at their regular committee meetings, these records now provide a vivid account of the developments of the association and successes achieved.¹³

The Irish Political Situation

The suffrage campaign emerged in Ireland alongside the campaign for Home Rule, which sought self-government for Ireland within the British empire, akin to the model then in New Zealand. The Irish question entered a new realm when then British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, proposed the first Home Rule Bill in 1886. The political situation in Ireland caused a divide in the feminist movement. Many politically active women in Ireland turned their attention to either the nationalist cause in support of Home Rule or the unionist anti-Home Rule movement. Tod prioritised anti-Home Rule over suffrage, arguing that women in Ireland should have a vote for a government based in London and remain united with Great Britain.¹⁴ Tod centred her energies on the unionist

campaign, establishing a Belfast branch of the Women's Liberal Federation to oppose the first Home Rule Bill of 1886.¹⁵ The first Home Rule Bill was rejected and a second bill was put forward in 1893. Among much female organising, including a monster petition signed by 20,000 women and presented to parliament, the second bill was defeated.¹⁶

Many women in the south of Ireland viewed Irish nationalism as a priority, seeking a vote for an independent Irish government, rather than a vote for a foreign government based in England. The work of the DWSA was greatly affected by this political turmoil and the organisation was effectively inactive from 1886 until 1895. The association's annual report for 1896 notes that this inactivity was due to 'the present condition of political controversy in Ireland'.¹⁷ Historian Mary Cullen has traced the origins of feminist activism in Ireland and notes that by 1896 there were only 43 members of the DWSA recorded.¹⁸ The Dublin association did have some success that year when they introduced a private member's bill to the House of Commons, calling for the removal of the sex disqualification in elections for poor law guardians.¹⁹ The bill was successful and allowed women in Ireland to stand for election to local boards of guardians. Within four years, nearly 100 women were serving on local boards across Ireland.

Local Suffrage Organisations

The success in local governing inspired women in rural Irish environments to establish suffrage branches, which were mainly centred in cities such as Belfast and Dublin. Eva Gore-Booth, the daughter of an Anglo-Irish landlord in Sligo, was enthused by ideas of suffrage politics. While in Italy recuperating from illness, Gore-Booth met Esther Roper, a young suffrage campaigner and secretary of the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage (MNSWS). The city of Manchester was by then the centre of the suffrage movement in England. The MNSWS was established in 1867 and had grown significantly by the 1880s. Roper was instrumental in organising the Special Appeal, which saw more than 3,500 people collect over a quarter of a million signatures demanding votes for women. The list of signatures was organised into volumes for constituencies across Ireland, England and Scotland and presented to the House of Commons in 1894. The complete set of volumes was later displayed in the library of the House of Commons in May 1896.

Gore-Booth was inspired by Roper's achievements and determined to establish a Sligo branch of the suffrage association. In December 1896, Gore-Booth launched the Sligo Women's Suffrage Association, the first such organisation in the area. Eva was elected secretary, her sister Constance (later Countess Markievicz), was elected as president and their younger sister, Mabel, was elected as treasurer. Reports of the first official meeting of the Sligo suffrage association were detailed in local and national newspapers, providing an insight into the issues faced by women during these early suffrage debates. Significantly, this meeting also marks the first direct political endeavour of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz, who later became key players in the suffrage campaign in Ireland and in England.

The first official meeting of the Sligo suffrage branch was held at Milltown National School in Drumcliffe, the *Sligo Champion* newspaper reported that there was

a very large attendance ... one third of those present were women. The large majority of the men appeared to be against the resolutions [votes for women] submitted at the meeting, while the ladies, with very few exceptions favoured the propositions.²⁰

While all women were then excluded from voting in general elections, the vast majority of Irish men were also excluded through a property qualification. Only men who owned or rented property to a certain value could then vote therefore, granting votes to women on the same terms as men caused concern especially for working class men who were not enfranchised.²¹

There were further concerns for men, as evident from Constance's opening address at the meeting. She began by recounting anecdotes about extending the vote to women explaining that,

I have been told amongst other things that [the vote] will cause women to ape the other sex, to adopt their clothes, copy their manners and peculiarities, that it will cause women to neglect their homes and duties, and worst of all prevent the majority marrying.²²

Although presented in a light-hearted manner, such concerns were in fact a prevalent argument against granting votes to women. Women's suffrage was seen as too radical and even foolhardy by many people, including a local man, Percy Clarke, who warned, 'enfranchisement of women would be Home Rule with a vengeance – petticoat government'.²³

The meeting gathered much media publicity in Ireland and Britain. The British society magazine, *Vanity Fair*, known for its witty satire, published a condescending sketch on the activities of Eva, Constance and their younger sister:

Miss Gore-Booth and her sisters, supported by a few devoted yokels, have been holding a few meetings in connection with the Woman's Suffrage (or, shall I say, 'The Revolt of the Daughters?') movement. Their speeches are eloquent, (un)conventional, and (non)convincing ... The sisters make a pretty picture on the platform; but it is not women of their type who need to assert themselves over Man. However, it amuses them – and others and I doubt if the tyrant has much to fear from their little arrows.²⁴

Shortly after her first taste of politics Gore-Booth moved to Manchester and became embroiled in the suffrage campaign in England, acknowledging that once votes for women were secured through Westminster, women in Ireland would secure equal voting rights.²⁵ Constance Gore-Booth married, acquiring the married title

Countess Markievicz and later settled in Dublin, where she continued working for the suffrage campaign and became deeply embedded in the Irish nationalist movement.²⁶

Irish and English Suffrage Cooperation

In Manchester, Gore-Booth joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) as an executive committee member and continued actively engaging with the cause of women's suffrage. In 1900, she became acquainted with Christabel Pankhurst, who was then twenty years of age and not yet politically active.²⁷ Gore-Booth mentored Pankhurst encouraging her to join the suffrage campaign and to pursue a degree in law, then recently available to women through Owens College in Manchester. Pankhurst would change the face of the suffrage movement in Britain and Ireland by instigating militant action into the campaign.

Along with her mother, Emmeline, Pankhurst established the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), in 1903.²⁸ The suffrage movement had one key goal, to achieve votes for women in general elections, after campaigning for over thirty years suffragists did not seem any closer to achieving this ultimate goal. A new generation of vibrant, educated women joined the WSPU. By 1905, members of the WSPU began staging militant and somewhat extreme protests in their campaign to achieve votes for women. Militant action included smashing the windows of public buildings, burning the contents of post boxes to disrupt postal services and placing incendiary devices at strategic sites.²⁹ Although these actions can be classified as violent and indeed were criminal, the suffragettes did not intend to injure people through their activities. The cause of women's suffrage became a regular feature in British newspapers and suffragists in Ireland monitored events in England eagerly. Media reporting generated more interest in the suffrage movement and, in turn, membership of the WSPU grew steadily over the coming months. In January 1906, the militant women were labelled as suffragettes by a *Daily Mail* journalist, a term that was adopted by the women themselves.³⁰ Within weeks, the activities of the English suffragettes began making it into the pages of Irish newspapers.

The onset of feminist militancy in Ireland was undoubtedly inspired by the actions of the British suffrage movement.³¹ This burst of activity in England inspired two veteran Irish suffrage campaigners, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Margaret Cousins, to take action.³² In 1908, the two women established the first militant suffrage organisation in Ireland, the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). The activities of the Irish suffragette organisation began with a low-key approach. In the 1910 British general elections of January and December, the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) held the balance of power and formed a government with the Liberal Party under Prime Minister Henry Asquith. The main objective of the Irish Party was to achieve Home Rule for Ireland. The Irish suffragettes demanded that female suffrage be included in the terms of any Home Rule bill sought.

In between these two general elections, the IWFL focussed on inspiring a more organised Irish campaign by inviting Christabel Pankhurst to deliver a public address

in Dublin on 11 March 1910.³³ The activities of the Irish suffragettes caused outrage among many nationalists who believed that the campaign for Irish independence was more important than that of votes for women – after all, what was the use of a vote in a British-led government? The nationalist newspaper, *The Leader*, reacted to Pankhurst's visit, noting that 'the movement in Ireland smacks rather of imitation of the English, and we do not regard it as a native and spontaneous growth'.³⁴

Irish Women's Franchise League Campaigns

The following year, on 2 April 1911, a national census was due in Britain and Ireland to record detailed information about every person and household. It was a legal requirement that every person present in the country on census day be entered on the official census form. Suffragettes across Britain and Ireland agreed to boycott the census as a matter of protest. A member of the IWFL wrote to the Irish newspaper, the *Freemans Journal*, explaining why members sought to boycott the census. The letter was simply signed 'D. W., A Woman,' noting the suffragette position:

So long as he is not confined to jail or a lunatic asylum, a man with the property qualification has the Parliamentary Franchise, even if he is a scoundrel or a fool, or both. A woman, however good, wise, public-spirited and wealthy, though taxed equally with men, and subject to the law, is denied all voice in the legislature, and classed as a political nonentity with infants, criminals, and lunatics ... Women do not want to protest unnecessarily; they want a share of the vote, which is the stamp of citizenship, and without which real representation is impossible.³⁵

Members of the IWFL met in the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin on 1 April to devise their strategy for boycotting the census. The complete census returns for 1911 are held by the National Archives in Ireland and a search through these records reveals that a number of politically active women did successfully boycott the census.³⁶ There are no returns listed for Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Margaret Cousins or Anna Haslam, who were all resident in Ireland on census night. Other women used the census form to make a political statement including Bridget Nugent from county Tyrone who noted her occupation as 'suffragette'.³⁷

The following year female franchise became a prominent and even more contentious issue in Ireland. The Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill was reintroduced to the House of Commons in February 1912. The leader of the IPP, John Redmond, refused to support the bill. Redmond met with members of the IWFL in April 1912 and made it clear he would not support the enfranchisement of women, either in the House of Commons or in an Irish self-government, in the event that Ireland received Home Rule. Redmond's colleague, John Dillon MP, was even more forthright. Dillon asserted that 'women's suffrage will ... be the ruin of our Western civilisation. It will destroy the home, challenging the headship of man, laid down by God'.³⁸ From newspaper reports it is evident that incidences of

suffragette campaigns in Ireland began to increase in direct response to the stance taken by the IPP.

The founders of the IWFL were supported in their campaign by their husbands, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and James Cousins.³⁹ Francis argued that an Irish paper, similar to the WSPU journal, *Votes for Women*, was needed. The two men established the *Irish Citizen* as the official journal of the Irish suffrage movement and not just the voice of IWFL.⁴⁰ First published in May 1912, the eight-page journal was published weekly. It was impressive, including articles, editorials, advertisements, news of activities and reports submitted by suffrage organisations from across the island of Ireland.⁴¹ One of the earliest issues recounted the activities of Irish women, all members of the IWFL, who had previously been arrested and imprisoned for 'their share in militant protests in London'.⁴² The list included a delegation of six women from Dublin who took part in the Parliament of Women at Caxton Hall in London in November 1910. The WSPU organised a number of such protests to coincide with parliamentary debates on women's suffrage at Westminster. After the November gathering a number of women were arrested for breaking windows at the prime minister's residence at Downing Street. Margaret Cousins was among those imprisoned for periods of between one and two months at Holloway prison in London. Although Irish women were keen to take part in the highly public events in England, the women were sure to identify themselves as a different nationality. Stalwart feminist historian and biographer of Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, Margaret Ward, notes that this involved wearing green dresses, carrying Irish flags and sometimes marching with bands of Irish pipers to accompany them.⁴³

On 11 April 1912, Prime Minister Asquith introduced the third Home Rule Bill to parliament. While the bill was facing lengthy debate through the House of Commons, the political crisis escalated in Ireland, resulting in a further split between the nationalist and unionist women on the issue of suffrage. Despite this political divide, the cross-over of activities between Irish and British suffragettes continued. The *Irish Citizen* reported how a group of English suffragettes (Mary Leigh, Gladys Evans, Mabel Capper and Jennie Baines) brought their militancy onto the streets of Dublin on 19 July 1912 when Prime Minister Asquith was engaged on an official visit to Dublin. As Asquith's carriage passed over O'Connell Bridge in the centre of Dublin city, Mary Leigh threw a hatchet through the carriage window.⁴⁴ The hatchet had a note strapped to the handle which read 'this symbol of the extinction of the Liberal Party for evermore'.⁴⁵ The hatchet narrowly missed Asquith but, much to the delight of the Irish suffragettes, hit his travelling companion John Redmond on the arm. Leigh escaped into the crowd and later that day made a dramatic reappearance at the Theatre Royal in Dublin where Asquith was scheduled to give a talk. Leigh was arrested by a Sergeant Cooper who discovered her attempting to explode the cinematograph box with matches and flammable liquid.

The women were arrested and imprisoned in Mountjoy in Dublin, where Leigh and Evans went on hunger strike, a tactic employed by members of the WSPU in order to demand rights as political rather than criminal prisoners. The IWFL pursued their case through the pages of *The Irish Citizen*, clearly noting how 'there

was no intention on the part of said Gladys Evans or Mary Leigh to injure any individual, and no individual was, in fact, injured by said acts'.⁴⁶ Sheehy-Skeffington organised public meetings to gain support for Leigh and Evans and went on, what was later described by Bridget Dudley Edwards in a letter to *The Irish Citizen*, a 'sympathetic hunger strike with them'.⁴⁷ Leigh continued with her hunger strike and on nearing death, authorities were forced to release her from prison in October, Evans too was later released.⁴⁸

World War and Irish Nationalism

The third Home Rule Bill was carried over to the House of Lords in January 1913, where it was duly voted down. Without the power to veto, the defeat in the Lords simply meant that the bill now faced a two-year wait to pass into legislation.⁴⁹ Eight members of the IWFL were arrested in June 1913 for breaking windows in government buildings.⁵⁰ That same month, Margaret and James Cousins were forced to leave Ireland for financial reasons. The couple moved to Liverpool where Margaret Cousins continued to support the suffrage movement, joining local groups and contributing articles to *The Irish Citizen*. Cousins also represented the IWFL in England when required. Two years later, Cousins moved to India with her husband, becoming the first non-Indian member of the Indian Women's University in Poona and a founder member of the Women's Indian Association.⁵¹

In 1914, the suffragette activities against the IPP continued. A plaster bust of Redmond, which was on display at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, was attacked by a member of the IWFL. Geraldine Manning smeared the sculpture of Redmond with green paint and placed a piece of paper on the pedestal which stated: 'Why didn't you get us votes for women Mr Redmond? A traitor's face is no adornment to our picture gallery!'⁵² The Home Rule Bill was finally passed as the Government of Ireland Act in May 1914, providing for Home Rule for the entire island of Ireland, including all 32 counties. When Britain declared war in August 1914, the enactment of Home Rule was postponed. This constant delay introducing self-government for Ireland, coupled with hostilities between unionists in the north of Ireland and nationalists in the south, escalated a more extreme nationalist campaign.

Almost immediately after war was declared an amnesty releasing all suffragette prisoners was announced. The leaders of the WSPU began a campaign to assist with the war effort, suspending their campaign for suffrage. This saw a split with Irish and English suffragettes when the IWFL called for continued activity from their members. An article in *The Irish Citizen* declared 'the suffragist who turns aside from the cause of Votes for Women at this hour is, indeed, helping to put the clock back'.⁵³ Constance Markievicz, now living in Dublin, was immersed in the nationalist movement to gain full independence for Ireland. Markievicz remained committed to cause of women's suffrage and while the Home Rule politicians would not support female suffrage, Markievicz found support elsewhere. The main orchestrators of the Easter Rising, an armed rebellion against British rule in Ireland,

promised gender equality in an independent Ireland. The subjection of women became a vital concern to those who signed the Proclamation, announcing an Irish Republic. Markievicz's close ally, James Connolly, wrote that the 're-establishment of the Irish State' is useless unless it embodies the 'emancipation of womanhood'.⁵⁴ The Proclamation, first read by Patrick Pearse outside the General Post Office on Easter Monday in 1916, declared the start of the Easter Rising. The Proclamation was distinctly addressed to Irishmen and Irishwomen as equal citizens vowing that a future 'permanent National Government ... would be elected by the suffrages of all her men and women'.⁵⁵

Numerous women, including Markievicz, took active roles to fight for the ideals expressed in the Proclamation during the Rising. Many women fought under the auspices of the Irish Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan. Six days after the rebellion began, the leaders surrendered to protect civilian life, more than 2,000 people had been killed during the rebellion, including a large percentage of civilians. A total of 16 men were executed by British forces following the Rising and just under 1,800 people were imprisoned, including 77 women.⁵⁶ Those imprisoned for their parts in the Rising were released gradually over the following months. Markievicz was one of the final prisoners to be released in June 1917, but she would spend numerous periods incarcerated over the following years. In April 1918, for example, Markievicz was arrested and imprisoned in Holloway as part of a supposed plot with Germany. In this instance Markievicz was not charged with anything as there was no evidence to support this claim.

First Female Member Elected to British and Irish Parliaments

While Markievicz was in prison the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed. The act vastly reformed the British electoral system by removing property qualifications for men and granting women over thirty years of age, with certain restrictions, a vote at general elections. These two reform measures vastly increased the size of the Irish electorate. A further act, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, enabled women to stand for election.⁵⁷ Seventeen female candidates stood in the British general election in 1918, including Christabel Pankhurst. Markievicz stood as a Sinn Féin party candidate and was the only woman to be elected. She was returned as an MP for St. Patrick's Division of Dublin, making her the first woman ever elected to the British House of Commons. In line with Sinn Féin policy Markievicz rejected her seat; as Irish politicians Sinn Féin members refuse to sit in a government based in England. Yet Markievicz did receive a letter from Prime Minister Lloyd George forwarded to her in Holloway Prison, which invited her to the opening day of Sessions. Letters had been sent to each elected MP indiscriminately. In a letter to her sister, Markievicz described how she thoroughly enjoyed replying to it.⁵⁸

The elected members of Sinn Féin formed the first Dáil Éireann, government of Ireland, in 1919. When she was released from prison, Markievicz returned to Ireland and to her first sitting at the Dáil. She was later nominated as Minister for Labour

becoming the first female cabinet minister in Ireland. In the local elections the next year, 43 women were returned. In the general election of 1921, a total of six women were elected as TDs, including Markievicz.⁵⁹ This and the promise of equal voting rights was surely what the leaders of the Easter Rising had envisioned. Even so, this is the point where the promise of gender equality in an independent Ireland started to unravel. Those men who signed the Proclamation embedding gender equality into their demands, had all been executed following the Easter Rising. The future of the Irish Free State was now in the hands of others. The Anglo-Irish Treaty first established in December 1921, in an attempt to end the Irish War of Independence, would grant dominion-like status to a Free State Ireland containing an article for the north of Ireland to opt out. This was neither full independence nor unity for Ireland. All six female TDs opposed the Treaty, as did the female nationalist organisation, Cuman na mBan.

The Irish General Election 1922 and Beyond

The 1922 general election essentially became a vote for or against accepting the Treaty. The promise to grant women equal voting rights with men was vehemently pursued by the female TDs in the Dáil.⁶⁰ A group of male TDs, led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffiths, maintained that there was not enough time to update the electoral register and therefore only women over 30 years of age received a vote in that election. Still, Irish women had now earned equal voting rights with men, something which the women of Britain, including Northern Ireland, would have to wait another six years to achieve. The Irish Free State drew up a constitution in 1922 which firmly placed women as equal citizens with men.⁶¹ To the objection of many feminist campaigners, this was replaced in 1937 with the current Constitution of Ireland which clawed back on some elements of this equality for women.⁶²

Through their direct actions, first-wave feminists in Ireland laid a path for a second-wave movement which secured a more even place in Ireland for women, legally granting women equality in work, education, family and personal rights as well as access to the political realm. Writing the history of Irish female activists and of the first-wave feminist movement is an intrinsic element in securing full gender equality, there is yet more research needed on individual women mentioned in this chapter. The importance of continuing such research is best described by veteran historian Mary Cullen:

For both boys and girls, women and men, knowledge of the women's movement, the gender relations that gave rise to it, its achievements and its failures, is important for understanding their past and for understanding themselves today. For most people, history is what is in the history books, and what is not there has not happened. We now have an impressive body of published research on the Irish women's movement. Already some survey histories of Ireland are including aspects of this. The challenge to all of us is to develop our understanding of the movement itself and to achieve its full incorporation into "mainstream" history.⁶³

Notes

- 1 The suffrage for women campaign was led by Kate Sheppard who was born in Liverpool, England and emigrated to New Zealand in 1869. For detailed information on women in New Zealand see Barbara Brookes, *A History of New Zealand Women* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2016).
- 2 <https://www.dib.ie>.
- 3 <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com>; <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>.
- 4 <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>; <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/>; <https://hansard.parliament.uk>.
- 5 Hansard UK contains the official records of British parliamentary debates dating back over 200 years and up to the current time which can be searched online. "Contagious Diseases Act," Hansard 1803–2005, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/contagious-diseases-act>.
- 6 Georgina Clinton and Linde Lunney, "Tod, Isabella Maria Susan," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009, accessed December 9, 2020, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8574>.
- 7 Maria Luddy, "Women and Politics in Ireland, 1860–1918," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volume 5*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 72.
- 8 Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhomhachda, Mary O'Dowd and Clair Wills eds., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, vols 4 & 5 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).
- 9 Originally three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology* were published in 1991 edited by Seamus Deane, the lack of women writers and women's texts was notable.
- 10 This act altered rights for women in England, Wales and Ireland. "Married Women's Property Act 1882," Legislation UK, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/45-46/75>. As discussed further in Maeve O'Riordan and Rachel Murphy's contributions to this volume of essays.
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- 12 Patrick Maume, "Haslam, Anna Maria Fisher," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), accessed December 15, 2020, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a3850>.
- 13 The archives of the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association and the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association are held by the National Archives Ireland (NAI), accessible online. 'Minute Book of the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association / Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (1876–1913),' NAI, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.nationalarchives.ie/article/minute-book-dublin-womens-suffrage-association-irish-womens-suffrage-local-government-association-1876-1913/>.
- 14 See Diane Urquhart's chapter in this volume for further information.
- 15 Ruth Taillon and Diane Urquhart, "Women, Politics and the State in Northern Ireland, 1918–66," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 353.
- 16 Diane Urquhart ed., *The Papers of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and Executive Committee, 1911–1940* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2001), xii.
- 17 "Dublin Women's Suffrage Association Annual Report, 1896," Minute Book of the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association, National Archives of Ireland (NAI).
- 18 Mary Cullen, "Anna Haslam's Contribution to the Cause of Women's Rights in Ireland," NAI, accessed 9 December 2021, https://www.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Anna-Haslam-Essay_MaryCullen.pdf.
- 19 For further details see Ciara Breathnach's chapter in this volume.
- 20 "The Woman's Suffrage Movement," *Sligo Champion*, December 26, 1896, Irish Newspaper Archive.

- 21 Three reform acts (1832, 1867 and 1884) gradually enfranchised all male householders, property qualifications for male voters in Ireland and Britain remained until 1918.
- 22 “The Woman’s Suffrage Movement,” *Sligo Champion*.
- 23 Ibid.
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- 27 Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Dame Christabel Harriette Pankhurst,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified September 18, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Christabel-Pankhurst>.
- 28 Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘Emmeline Pankhurst,’ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified July 10, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Emmeline-Pankhurst>.
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- 30 The first use of the term suffragette – ‘it was not surprising that Mr Balfour should receive a deputation of the Suffragettes’ *Daily Mail*, January 10, 1906 in Sonja Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth: An Image of Such Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 95.
- 31 See Ciara Breathnach’s chapter in this volume for discussion on suffrage methodology.
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- 36 ‘Census of Ireland 1901/1911,’ National Archives of Ireland, accessed December 13, 2020. Free to access resource <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>.
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- 39 Further information on James Cousins is detailed in Jyoti Atwal’s chapter in this volume.
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- 45 Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1925* (London: Routledge, 2000), 339.
- 46 *The Irish Citizen*, August 17, 1912, The British Newspaper Archive.
- 47 *The Irish Citizen*, December 6, 1913, The British Newspaper Archive.
- 48 *The Irish Citizen*, October 19, 1912, The British Newspaper Archive.
- 49 The Parliament Act 1911, reduced the power of the House of Lords by removing the veto over public bills with a power of delay.
- 50 *Irish Times*, June 14, 1912, Irish Newspaper Archive.
- 51 Margaret Cousins played a central role in organising the first all-India women's conference in 1926 and the all-Asia women's conference in 1931. She continued with an active campaign to improve rights for women and children until her death in 1954. Clarke, "Cousins, Margaret (Gretta) Elizabeth Gillespie". For more detailed information about Cousins international connections see Jyoti Atwal, "Global Lives: Margaret Cousins," *Century Ireland*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/global-lives-margaret-cousins>.
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- 53 *The Irish Citizen*, August 15, 1914, The British Newspaper Archive.
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- 58 Esther Roper ed., *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (London: Longmans, 1934), 88, The Internet Archive.
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- 60 "Dáil Éireann Debate," Thursday, March 2, 1922: Vol. S2 No. 3, Houses of the Oireachtas, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-03-02/23/>.
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- 63 Mary Cullen, "A History of Her Story," *The Irish Times*, October 17, 2012, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/century/century-women-and-the-vote/a-history-of-her-story-1.553415>.

19

MARGARET ELIZABETH COUSINS AND TRANSNATIONALISM

An Irish Suffragette as an Anti-Colonial Feminist in Colonial India

Jyoti Atwal

Introduction

This chapter explores the anti-colonial dimensions of the geographies of Western feminism through the experience of an Irish suffragette – Margaret Elizabeth Cousins (1878–1954). Margaret or Gretta (as mentioned in her jail records in Ireland) was born into a Church of Ireland family in County Roscommon, where the Anglican community was relatively small. After moving to Dublin to study for a degree in music, she moved in intellectual and relatively privileged circles, where she became more familiarised with Irish folklore, literature, and Irish politics. That is where she encountered like-minded influential women. She launched the Irish Women’s Franchise League in 1908 along with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Inspired and supported by the British suffragists – Emmeline Pankhurst and Charlotte Despard – Gretta and a group of other Irish women were imprisoned in 1913.¹

After an intensive suffragist career in Dublin in 1915, at the invitation of Annie Besant, she moved to India with her husband, James Cousins. Within three years of her arrival in Adyar (Madras), she had entered Indian political life primarily with the aim of forming women’s associations and in 1917 she wrote the draft of the Indian women’s voting rights bill. Cousins had an eventful public life in India: she was briefly the Magistrate of a district court in Madras in 1923, and in 1932 she was imprisoned for one year for speaking against an Ordinance passed by the colonial government to suppress freedom of speech and association. While she largely remained within the Gandhian paradigm² of *Satyagraha* (seeking truth through non-violence by courting arrest), she differed from the other two prominent anti-colonial Irish woman in India – Sister Nivedita and Annie Besant. The latter propagated a Hinduised role for Indian women. Gretta drew her radicalism from her Dublin days and carefully shaped her feminist anti-colonial consciousness in India around constitutional methods, as distinct from the English suffragists, who had

moved to other and often more violent means. This chapter argues that Margaret's experience of Irish feminism shaped her anti-colonial position in India, and she was at ease with both suffragist and Gandhian anti-colonial methodologies – which consisted of constitutionalism, passive resistance and hunger striking.

In 1992, Barbara Ramusack in her pioneering article³ discussed different categories of British women's engagement with women in colonial India – maternal imperialists, feminist allies and cultural missionaries. While the assemblage of these categories provoked interest in the varieties of feminist ideologies and practices, it broadened the space and scale of geographies of Western feminism. In the anti-colonial setting Western feminist activists were influenced by localised cultural and political diversity which governed women's agendas. Most Irish women associated with religious or charitable/educational institutions in colonial India had been nurses, nuns, teachers and social workers. However, a new variety of feminist/nationalist in colonial India came from Ireland, where the experience of Celtic revivalism, mysticism, occult, literary and cultural rootedness combined with anti-colonialism. Two such women were Margaret Cousins and Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita),⁴ although they followed very different trajectories of involvement in the anti-colonial movement and the women's movement in India. It is notable that both women moved away from the Christian beliefs that shaped their childhoods: Sister Nivedita was inspired by modern Hinduism and its leadership under Swami Vivekananda, whereas Cousins was a Theosophist.⁵

The shared histories of Ireland and India are contained within the colonial context and Western women largely figure as 'maternal imperialists' or 'extensions' of the empire. To scholars of India, they are largely seen as complicit with the colonial State.⁶ In that discourse, Indian scholars of gender history have ignored Western women and their politics at home. Christian missions and medical missions brought Western women across the continents. The more radically opinionated ones like the suffragists often focused on home and presumed that it was too premature for the Indian women to join this campaign. It is here that research on Irish women like Cousins, Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Margaret Noble (1867–1911) becomes crucial to changing that accepted narrative. These women were radical in terms of how they reimagined the positioning of colonial subjects; all three were ardent supporters of self-rule in India and worked lifelong towards organising Indian people to achieve self-rule and spiritual freedom.⁷ After the April 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Indian nationalists stood firmly united against the colonial violence and inhumanity. Gandhi's call for the establishment of a Non-Cooperation Movement⁸ became more popular in the nationalist circles as compared to the demand for self-rule.⁹

As several scholars agree, the Irish women's movement lost its independent character after 1912 as the idea of Home Rule (Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin) and Labour (The Labour Party) took over.¹⁰ Later in 1916, the association of radical women called *Cumann na mBan* devoted itself to Irish freedom.¹¹ The question of transnational feminism has received little attention in women's history writing.¹² This has primarily happened due to the presupposition that Indian

women's activism represents an underdeveloped phase and Western women failed to radicalise these sisters. The present scholarship does not explain the complex phenomenon of Western women's political encounter with the East. Some Indian scholars have complained about the visibility of 'othering' by Western scholarship.¹³ Exploration of women's history reflecting dynamics between global networks and local agency has already made a start in the present decade.¹⁴

There were important links not only between two independence movements (of India and Ireland) but between the mysticism of the Celtic Revival and the often-sympathetic engagement of these European women with spirituality and Hinduism. Furthermore, the fact that all three women were originally Protestants and yet supportive of Irish nationalism, reminds us that it was a very complex phenomenon. These women were not part of Christian missionary philanthropy; they, in fact, experimented within their spiritual domain of Theosophy and developed a political-cultural anti-colonial position. This chapter has utilised James and Margaret Cousins' memoir *We Two Together*,¹⁵ the letters of Margaret Cousins in the Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Papers, memoirs of her close associates in India and her jail records in India.¹⁶ Some materials which were also generously shared with the author by the descendants of Cousins and other suffragettes in Ireland have also been included.

Life and Activism in Ireland

Margaret Elizabeth Cousins (born as Gretta Gillespie) was more than an Irish suffragette or a humanitarian worker or an anti-colonial activist in India. Shaped in part by the Celtic revival in Dublin and the humanitarian spirit of rural Boyle, Cousins was driven by a fierce commitment to suffrage and the involvement of women in the public sphere. She arrived in India in 1915 with her husband on the invitation of Annie Besant. Margaret was born in Boyle in County Roscommon, Ireland in 1878, where her father, Joseph Gillespie, was Clerk of the Petty Sessions.¹⁷ Her mother, Margaret (nee Shera), hailed from Belmont. Joseph Gillespie's father, also called Joseph Gillespie (1815–1896), was married to Sarah Jenkins (1820–1906) from Mount Prospect near Boyle.¹⁸

Margaret's grandmother, Sarah Gillespie, had an extraordinary influence on her. Her grandmother was very active in mission prayer meetings and in singing and for Margaret this meant an exposure to women playing a greater role and participation in public life. This variety of freedom she often missed in the cities. The family were fervent Church of Ireland followers and she later recollected that she 'came most fully under this religious influence between twelve and fourteen when, after a series of evangelical services in a mission week, I determined to live a life dedicated to the service of God and humanity'.¹⁹ Margaret was the eldest of her large family of ten siblings. Their residence on 7 Crescent, Boyle was ideally suited for observation of the speeches made at the clock tower by important political personalities of the times. Besides being influenced by tradition, religion, community service and

political culture at her Irish home and outside, she became increasingly sensitive to the connections between dignity and the economic dependency of women:

My mother had to present the previous passbooks to my father and ask for the amounts. There were black looks on these occasions. He grumbled at the amounts and talked to mother as if it were her fault. We children always took her part. And it was there and then that my girlish determination began to try and change the financial status of wives and mothers, who all worked so hard and got no money for themselves ... One of my missions in life, Equal rights for men and women, was finding me.²⁰

In Boyle, Margaret passed out of the lower school and the intermediate one. It was due to the necessity of scholarship that she was sent to a boarding school in Londonderry (Derry Boarding School) for three years, where she finished her matriculation. Her 'provincial' experience in the school, she claims, helped her work in groups through the rest of her life. 'Residence amongst eighty girls between fourteen and twenty knocked the corners of my priggish provincialism and developed my power of working in organised groupings of women.'²¹ During her student days in Derry/Londonderry, where she spent four years, the lives of women saints attracted her. Inspired by the lives of Saint Catherine and Saint Teresa, she longed to be a 'cheerful saint'. More than the impulse to be a saint, her overall school experience strengthened her independence of character.

Dublin

In 1898, Margaret began a four-year course in study of music at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. It covered composition, orchestration, piano and organ playing, music history, composer biography, and the analysis of musical scores. Prior to studying music, she studied privately for a Fine Arts examination. She studied music under the Neapolitan pianist, composer and conductor, Signor Michele Esposito. Keeping in tune with her curiosity to learn beyond her subject, she took a course in acoustics taught by Professor W.F. Barrett at the Royal College of Science. Dublin had always been a city of intellectual and artistic preoccupation. Its interests lay in ideas rather than industries. In later life she remembered her time in Dublin as a natural extension of her early life in rural Ireland.

I always had ease in writing letters and in putting ideas on paper. I began as a secretary when I was thirteen' and continued the service to society after society till, at sixty, I was elected president of the All-India Women's Conference, which I had created a decade previously.²²

After their marriage in 1903, the Cousins went together to listen to 'AE' (author George Russell) expounding on Indian philosophy, art and idealism of the Irish Agricultural

Organization Society. The Dublin Vegetarian Restaurant became a rendezvous for them, even though Margaret initially disliked the vegetarianism of her fiancée, James. Later she became a vegetarian. Although she argued against this food ‘faddism’ at first, and had no natural inclination towards it, she found certain points appealing. Moreover, ‘AE’ was also the leader of a vegetarian literary set of people, whom the couple would often meet for lunch. This group included a few Hindu vegetarians who were residing in Dublin for studies in medicine and law. Some scholars have made efforts to contextualise Margaret’s vegetarianism and her vow towards sexual abstinence in the context of empire and middle-class Victorian feminism.²³ The claim that Margaret’s renunciation of meat came from the upper-caste Hindu influences on her, stands questioned because she turned vegetarian in 1903 soon after her marriage to James, to strengthen their companionship. James had initially been driven to vegetarian diet due to his brief illness in his early days of arrival in Dublin. Association with ‘AE’ and other Hindu upper-caste visitors in Ireland convinced the couple that that vegetarian diet was an aesthetically preferable as it was bloodless and slaughterless.²⁴ Furthermore, it was culturally fashionable to be vegetarian if one belonged to the literary Dublin circles. Familiarity with Indians (some Hindus in her case) and social diversity in a city life helped Gretta to prepare for her future life in India.

It is remarkable that in 1901, books of criticism, rationalism and socialism came her way, and her religious beliefs were challenged. Her free reason made her question faith based on the Bible. As an extension of the literary pursuit, James allied himself with the Gaelic League and began learning the Irish language. Nationality, wrote ‘AE’, was never so strong in Ireland as it was in the 1890s and that it was being felt as a spiritual force rather than a political one. In 1903 Margaret composed the music for ‘The Sword of Dermont’, a play written by James. It was staged at the Irish National Theatre Society. Simultaneously, she began teaching music part time. Around this time something significant happened. She came across two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* by H.P. Blavatsky. The same year *The Perfect Way* was published. Authored by Anna Bonus and Kingford and Edward Maitland, it was a subjective interpretation of the Bible and Christianity. She felt as though a ‘new universe’ entered her, and it led to the expansion of consciousness about time, space, ethnology, cosmology, symbolism and magic. In 1905 the Irish Vegetarian Society was established with Margaret as its secretary, it had connections with the Vegetarian Society in England. In 1906 the Cousins were introduced to the *Bhagavad Gita* by Dr. K.V. Khedkar of Kolhapur, who visited the couple on Sundays. Apart from literary figures like James Joyce, their Dublin home drew regular visits from actresses and actors from the Irish Literary Theatre, the National Dramatic Society, the Abbey Theatre and the Theatre of Ireland.

Suffragettes and Internationalism

To turn now to another major series of events. In 1907 the couple visited England. This was made possible by the prize money Margaret won for an chapter on vegetarianism. Even though they were not members, they were invited to attend a

convention of the Theosophical Society in London, where Annie Besant presided. On this visit, the couple had found themselves on an overcrowded footpath near Parliament Square where a small group of women (suffragists) had been arrested by policemen. She saw them marching these women to the police station. She wrote:

In their simplicity, respectability, and quiet dignified demeanour they were deeply impressive. I was so hurt by the indignity to which these educated women were subjected that cried for hours that night before I could get to sleep through intuition of the struggle that women would have to make to secure any freedom from the subjection which they had had to endure through the ages.²⁵

Margaret believed that liberal men and women had launched a constitutional struggle from 1800 to 1905 to bring women within the expanding circles of democracy. Yet these efforts had not borne desirable fruits. In 1905 the women's movement in England was led by Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenny from Manchester and Lancashire respectively.²⁶ Margaret joined the local Dublin branch on her return from England. In 1907, Margaret organised the first suffrage meeting in her house on Strand Road at Sandymount. She also followed the news in the suffragist monthly, *Votes for Women*, which was run by Mr and Mrs Pethick-Lawrence. It soon became a weekly as the militant suffragists' activity and agenda spread through their organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union. It was through this paper that Margaret initially participated in the campaign for voting rights in Ireland. The paper reported arrest and imprisonment of sixty suffragists led by Christabel Pankhurst to the women of Ireland. Their first challenge was to work out a scheme for a militant suffrage society suitable to Ireland (a subject-country seeking freedom).

While we were entirely in sympathy with the British women in their spirited frontal attack on their Government (then Conservative under Bonar Law) their policy of opposing at by elections any candidate who did not promise to support a Bill for which Ireland was fighting. Besides, we had no desire to work under English women leaders: we could lead ourselves.²⁷

Consequently, in 1908 The Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) was formed with Margaret as its treasurer, Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington as its secretary and Mrs Charles Oldham as its president. The IWFL wanted to obtain the parliamentary vote for the women of Ireland on the same terms as men then had it. The headquarters of IWFL was located in Dublin and had a team of volunteers who travelled the country to gather funds and recruit new members. It also aimed at educating the men, women and children of Ireland to understand and support the members of the IWFL in their demand for votes for women and obtain pledges from every Irish member of Parliament to vote for Women's Suffrage Bills introduced in the British Houses of Parliament, and, most importantly, include women's suffrage in any Irish Home Rule Bill. Another suffragette, Lady Sybil Smith, who shared Margaret's

interest in music, was also interested in Swami Vivekanand's works on Vedantic philosophy.

Margaret proudly declared the inclusiveness and purposefulness of IWFL and how they were a very mixed lot, a cross-section of all the classes, political parties and religious groups.

For each of us the cause was a whole time job, without pay, demanding all kinds of sacrifice, forcing us to do things for which we had had no training; pushing us into dreaded and undesired publicity; bringing us ridicule, scorn, misrepresentations ... a greater understanding of the difficulties of social living, an enlarges experience of inequalities of opportunity imposed on women, an increasing sense of protest against the injustices under which women lived, most of all the women of the working classes.²⁸

Christabel Pankhurst's visit to Dublin was a landmark event in Irish women's history. Margaret travelled with her from Cork to Dublin and back. The social support for the suffragettes was interesting. It comprised casual visitors at the railway station, all the station porters, car drivers, newsboys who formed a procession of sympathy behind them and their police guard, and escorted them from the station to the 'big feudal looking' Tullamore Jail.²⁹ Upon the beginning of the second reading of the Liberal Home Rule Bill, Margaret and other suffragettes decided that some extreme militant action should be carried out which would assure worldwide publicity to our protest against exclusion of women from the Bill. Margaret vividly describes how she and other suffragettes volunteered to break the windows of Dublin Castle, the official seat of English domination and how the sound of breaking glass on 28 January 1913, reverberated round the world.³⁰ The Irish women protested against what was seen as an imperfect and undemocratic Home Rule Bill. Mrs Meg Connery, Mrs. Hoskins³¹ and Gretta marched from the Castle to the College Street police station. They were the first women prisoners on behalf of women's demands for their sex in a Home Rule setting. On their imprisonment these suffragettes demanded to be treated as political prisoners, a classification which had been won by men in the Land League and the Home Rule clashes with the English government. The women went on a hunger strike as they were not accorded the status of political prisoners. Margaret believed the IWFL was not identical in its militant methods with the English suffragettes, because they were not attacking shopwindows; they had no Liberal by-elections and no cabinet ministers in Ireland (Figure 19.1).

The essential disappointment of Irish suffragettes was the non-inclusion of women as citizens in the agenda of Irish Liberal Party's Home Rule League proposal. Most Irish Liberal politicians, like Tim Healy, John Redmond, Hugh Law and Joe Delvin, initially looked down upon Irish suffragettes as 'gate crashers', who were 'interrupting' the cabinet ministers.³²

In 1915, upon leaving Dublin for India she continued to write letters to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Most letters expressed regret that she could not be in Ireland to support the IWFL. Upon her arrival in India, she wrote back describing the

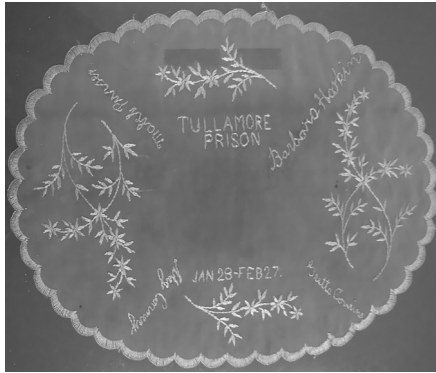


FIGURE 19.1 Embroidered tea tray cloth from personal collection of Prof Barbara Wright shared with Jyoti Atwal in 2013. Prof Wright was the granddaughter of Barbara Hoskins (who went to Tullamore prison along with Gretta Cousins and others in 1913). Embroidered names: Mabel Purser, Barbara Hoskins, Gretta Cousins and Meg Connery.

status of Indian women. Some letters described the ‘tragedy and horror of Ireland’ in the context of 1916 Easter Rising rebellion hangings followed by that of Roger Casement.³³ Margaret and James’ last visit to Ireland was in 1928.

Life and Activism in India

Within three years of her arrival in Madras, Margaret engaged herself with a group of women who were part of the anti-colonial movement and worked towards promoting reforms for women. Among her close associates were Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, Muthuluxmi Reddy and Sarojini Naidu.³⁴ From the formation of the Women’s Indian Association in 1917 to delivering the presidential address of 1936 Margaret wove herself into the socio-political world of the Indian women activists.

During one of their visits to Manchester, Margaret and James met Annie Besant, who was based in India as president of the Theosophical Society. By 1914, due to what James labeled as ‘expulsive forces’, the couple moved to India –

Economically I was in a cleft stick ... The attracting force came from India. Visitors from that country, intent on medicine and law, saw some possibility of service by us to education and womanhood. This added idealism and our growing desire for the touch of the posterity of the rishis and scholars and saints to economic necessity.³⁵

Besant was preparing to assume her role as one of the most important leaders of India’s national movement for freedom from British rule. She was the architect of the All-India Home Rule League Movement and became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. She was inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s call

for 'Poorna Swaraj' or complete self-rule. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose appearance on the national scene coincided with the arrival of the Cousins from Ireland, was a firm believer in the methodology of passive resistance, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Margaret's work in India was influenced by three different trajectories: her belief in the national ideal; her economic critique of colonialism; internationalism and centrality of women in the national politics.

In 1915 the Cousins had moved to the south of India (Adyar) on being invited by the Theosophical Society president, Annie Besant, to work as an editor of a newspaper called *New India*. Margaret taught school children at Madanapalle while James worked as an editor and later as the principal of the Theosophical College. Madanapalle is a small divisional headquarters in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh in South India. Within a short span of time Margaret began to understand that Hindu social order was diverse but had very visible caste divisions (more so in the south, where she spent most of her Indian life). She was pleasantly surprised to see some women from low castes gain confidence from her rattan weaving association in 1917 in India. Annie Besant had drifted away from the Gandhian method of boycott of colonial educational institutions by 1919. Instead the Theosophical Society became interested in evolving a national educational policy. Rabindranath Tagore was invited to Madanapalle as early as 1919. His visit to Madanpalle holds a great historic significance as it is here during his brief stay that Tagore asked Margaret to give music to the English version of 'Jana Gana Mana'. The original song in Bengali is sung today in Sanskrit as the national anthem. Tagore completed its translation into English at Madanapalle. The English version is called the 'morning song'.

Another significant event in Margaret's life was becoming India's first woman magistrate. On 19 February 1923, Margaret received a formal invitation to become an Honorary Bench Magistrate at Saidapet Courthouse in Madras. In Margaret's words,

The bench consisted of a retired Brahmin, a Mohammedan, an Indian Christian, and an empty chair to which I was conducted as the first woman Magistrate in Indian history under British rule. Rose garlands were distributed. Prisoners awaiting trial in a back room were filed into a space on one side of the Court room as witnesses of the event.³⁶

Margaret's acceptance of this offer is suggestive of her being a constitutionalist feminist. Indian nationalist women had been persuading the men in their family to give up government jobs and titles.³⁷ The offer had come from Mr Galetti who was Collector of the Chingleput district in Madras. There was no precedent of any woman being appointed to the post of a Magistrate. Margaret took up the position with the assurance from Mr Galetti that the post would be opened to Indian women as well after her appointment. Her term as Magistrate successfully ended in 1928.

Within two years of her arrival in India, Margaret became deeply involved in the Indian women's question (ideas on economic self-dependency). When Margaret

arrived, almost a century of socio-religious reformist debates had passed in India. She launched a society called *Abala Abhivardhani Samaj* (Association for development of the weaker sex). She popularised the art of rattan weaving for making baskets and plates. Women took to these small-scale industries easily. In July 1917, based on this model, a new formal body emerged – the *Women's Indian Association*. An English journal named *Stri Dharma* was its mouthpiece. This was a society of 70 women with Margaret as its Honorary Secretary and Annie Besant as its President. In this endeavour, Margaret received plenty of support from the local educated elite men and women. On request from certain prominent sections of the Indian women she drafted the demand for voting rights for Indian women. This draft was presented to the Montague Chelmsford delegation. In her memoir Kamladevi writes that 'the first political move by the Indian women was made when Gretta organised a women's delegation in 1917 to Mr Montague, the British Secretary of State for India, to press for women's political rights'.³⁸ The result was quite disappointing as Southborough Franchise Committee did not recommend extension of the suffrage rights to women. In the long run, the Bill had an impact on the colonial State and the right to vote for Indian women (based on property qualifications) was systematically granted between 1920 and 1930 (Figure 19.2).

In 1922 she wrote *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*,³⁹ which is a fascinating character analysis of Asian women (the Muhammedan, the Jewish, the Indian, the Burmese, the Chinese, and the Japanese). She referred to a rising in the hearts of



FIGURE 19.2 The Annual General Meeting of the Women's Indian Association 1930. Lower row left to right – Mrs Narayana Iyer, Mrs Swaminadhan, Miss Lazarus, Sir Sankaran Nair, Mrs Rustomji Faridoonji, Dr Muthulakshmi MLC, Mrs Cousins, Mrs Dadabhoy. Upper row: Mrs Ananda Rao, Mrs Hannen Angelo, Mrs Hilda Wood, Dewan Bahadur T. Rangachariar. Source: Published in *Stri Dharma* (1930) Adyar Library Research Centre, Chennai, India.

Asian womanhood of a mighty wave of desire for freedom. The World Conference of Communist Women held at Moscow in 1921 was attended by 25 women delegates from the Near and Middle East. In India, Margaret was deeply concerned about the custom of child marriage and the lack of education and freedom among the girls. In 1921, there were over 10 million girls who had been married between the ages of 10 and 15.⁴⁰ She pointed out the importance of social protest against these regressive practices by Hindus themselves. Some sections of Indian society were making efforts, but this was not sufficient. It was 'self-determination', according to Margaret, which was necessary for the individual man or woman, as much as caste, class or nation. For her, 'religion, education, patriotism and love' were the four liberators of women: 'the whole-time spirit is working towards the liberation of woman in very country, but along different lines according to the different civilizations'.

In 1916 Besant launched her All India Home Rule Movement along the lines of the Irish experience along with the Indian nationalist leader, Balgangadhar Tilak. She was arrested for campaigning for Home Rule. Meanwhile in 1917 she had been elected President of India's main political body – the Indian National Congress. In the years between 1920 and 1930 Margaret was actively involved in promoting social reform and educational campaigns.

In her work for the emancipation for the women of India, the climax was the creation of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. The resolutions of the Conference were drawn up by Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy. Dr Reddy was a very close friend and associate of Gretta. She was an educator, a surgeon, a lawmaker, a social reformer. She was also the first Indian woman legislator, a campaigner of women's rights; and the driving force behind one of the biggest cancer institutes in India. The AIWC laid out its main agenda as special education and training for women and children.

From 1927 onwards the national attention of the Indian social reformers was turned towards restricting child marriage. AIWC passed a resolution in favour of raising the marriage age for Indian girls to 16 years.⁴¹ Early marriage was a clear cause for ill health or death of Indian girls due to forcible consummation by the husband or due to miscarriages. She felt that she was born a 'natural equalitarian and rebelled against any differential treatment of sexes'.

Her Tullamore jail experience in 1913 acted as a precursor to her politics of protest in colonial India. Almost 20 years later, for participating in the Gandhian programme of protest against the Ordinances which choked expression of the people of India, Margaret was sentenced to one year of imprisonment at Vellore Women's jail (Figure 19.3).

With the dawn of the 1930s, the Women's Indian Association became actively associated with the freedom struggle. Its members like Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu and Rukmini Lakshmi pathi were arrested when they were protesting Gandhi's arrest. Around the same time, Margaret had to visit the United States where James who had been invited to teach modern English poetry by City College of New York, was not keeping well. This visit turned into an opportunity for Margaret to internationalise the issue of India's independence and to tie up

women's agenda with it. Margaret had heard with great interest Gandhi's speech from London during the Second Round Table Conference. Shortly after this, on Gandhi's return to India, he was arrested along with Sarojini Naidu. Margaret organised protest meetings in New York against the arrest of Gandhi and Naidu. She was appalled by the violence used by police against the protestors.

In 1931, James and Margaret travelled to Geneva where they met President of Ireland, Éamon de Valera, who was heading the Council of the League of Nations. Following discussions on equal citizenship for men and women, de Valera told Margaret that he was committed to women's equality. Margaret also attended the India Day meeting, which was attended by Mrs Pethick-Lawrence and fifty delegates from fifteen different countries. Her next stop was Tel Aviv and Haifa in Israel where she met women from Jewish and Arab communities. She further travelled to Iraq and met the Queen to discuss the question of women. Therefore, it is clearly not only her vegetarianism and theosophist training which provoked her to internationalise the issues of national freedom and women. Her internationalism was shaped by ideas of justice and equality.

Margaret simultaneously committed her energies to organising the All Asia Women's Conference. This idea had germinated during Cousins' visit to Japan in a couple of years ago. The international members of this Conference were Mrs Bhandaranaike from Ceylon, Mrs. Kamaluddin from Afghanistan, Mrs Shirin Fozdar from Persia, Ms May Oung of Burma and Ms Hoshi from Japan. Amongst the Indians, Margaret's friends like Dr. Muthulakshi Reddy, Sarojini Naidu and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur gave her unshakable support towards conducting meetings of AAWC by signing the resolution in the AIWC session.

On Margaret's return to India in 1932, she visited Gandhi in Yerawada prison near Poona.

33	21-10-33, 22nd being Sunday Received 48 days 21-2-0	Disposal with date.*	29
	11/11/33 12/11/33 13/11/33 14/11/33 15/11/33 16/11/33 17/11/33 18/11/33 19/11/33 20/11/33 21/11/33 22/11/33 23/11/33 24/11/33 25/11/33 26/11/33 27/11/33 28/11/33 29/11/33 30/11/33 1/12/33 2/12/33 3/12/33 4/12/33 5/12/33 6/12/33 7/12/33 8/12/33 9/12/33 10/12/33 11/12/33 12/12/33 13/12/33 14/12/33 15/12/33 16/12/33 17/12/33 18/12/33 19/12/33 20/12/33 21/12/33 22/12/33 23/12/33 24/12/33 25/12/33 26/12/33 27/12/33 28/12/33 29/12/33 30/12/33 31/12/33	Site of return of warrant to Court.	30
	11/11/33 12/11/33 13/11/33 14/11/33 15/11/33 16/11/33 17/11/33 18/11/33 19/11/33 20/11/33 21/11/33 22/11/33 23/11/33 24/11/33 25/11/33 26/11/33 27/11/33 28/11/33 29/11/33 30/11/33 1/12/33 2/12/33 3/12/33 4/12/33 5/12/33 6/12/33 7/12/33 8/12/33 9/12/33 10/12/33 11/12/33 12/12/33 13/12/33 14/12/33 15/12/33 16/12/33 17/12/33 18/12/33 19/12/33 20/12/33 21/12/33 22/12/33 23/12/33 24/12/33 25/12/33 26/12/33 27/12/33 28/12/33 29/12/33 30/12/33 31/12/33	Particulars and value of property delivered with or found on the prisoners on admission, or subsequently received on his account, with signature or left thumb print in acknowledgment of each accession, and on disposal.	31
	11/11/33 12/11/33 13/11/33 14/11/33 15/11/33 16/11/33 17/11/33 18/11/33 19/11/33 20/11/33 21/11/33 22/11/33 23/11/33 24/11/33 25/11/33 26/11/33 27/11/33 28/11/33 29/11/33 30/11/33 1/12/33 2/12/33 3/12/33 4/12/33 5/12/33 6/12/33 7/12/33 8/12/33 9/12/33 10/12/33 11/12/33 12/12/33 13/12/33 14/12/33 15/12/33 16/12/33 17/12/33 18/12/33 19/12/33 20/12/33 21/12/33 22/12/33 23/12/33 24/12/33 25/12/33 26/12/33 27/12/33 28/12/33 29/12/33 30/12/33 31/12/33	Initials of Deputy Jailer (with dates) in token of having received the property into his charge.	32
	11/11/33 12/11/33 13/11/33 14/11/33 15/11/33 16/11/33 17/11/33 18/11/33 19/11/33 20/11/33 21/11/33 22/11/33 23/11/33 24/11/33 25/11/33 26/11/33 27/11/33 28/11/33 29/11/33 30/11/33 1/12/33 2/12/33 3/12/33 4/12/33 5/12/33 6/12/33 7/12/33 8/12/33 9/12/33 10/12/33 11/12/33 12/12/33 13/12/33 14/12/33 15/12/33 16/12/33 17/12/33 18/12/33 19/12/33 20/12/33 21/12/33 22/12/33 23/12/33 24/12/33 25/12/33 26/12/33 27/12/33 28/12/33 29/12/33 30/12/33 31/12/33	Initials of Jailer and Superintendent certifying verification of entries.	33

FIGURE 19.3 Jail Record of Margaret Cousins at Vellore Women's Prison 1932. (Very grateful to IG (prisons), Chennai, Tamil Nadu Police Department, India for providing access to the document).

Margaret visited Gandhi in jail, where she mentioned to him how she had taken up the issue of India's freedom at Geneva.⁴²

He asked about the Women's Indian Association. Margaret told him of her intention to oppose the ban on public speech. She next visited her close friend Kamladevi at Belgaum.

She described her European experience with great enthusiasm:

Having come from the free air of America and Europe I was exasperated at the meanness of British bureaucracy in extending rule by Ordinance from three to ten months, then to five years, and, crowning evidence of the breakdown of foreign rulership, the incorporation of what was at first said to be an emergency expedient into the law of the land through spurious legislation by a group of men who had no relationship to the people or their leaders.⁴³

Her passion and commitment to opposing the Ordinance led her to jail. On 10 December Margaret was arrested and sentenced to one year of imprisonment for defying the Ordinances. During her time in prison, besides James, she was also visited by several friends. As newspapers, writing or discussing politics was banned, she spent most of her time gardening, reading and listening to music. While she was in prison, Annie Besant died in September 1933. After returning to Madanapalle, Margaret assisted James in his college. Amongst her prison experiences, witnessing capital punishment was the most negative one. At a session of AIWC held at Calcutta, she got her resolution against capital punishment passed.

A Note on the Sources

The memoir (*We Two Together*) by Margaret and James Cousins is extremely rich and continues to be the main source on Margaret's work and life for feminist scholars across the world. However, there are two aspects of her life that need attention – one that Margaret projects herself as a committed anti-colonial Gandhian nationalist without much reflection on her views on Irish freedom struggle. While the couples' discomfort and disapproval of violence of the 1916 Rising (and executions that followed) is quite clear, which other political events led them to endorse Gandhian methodology,⁴⁴ is not discussed in this memoir. Secondly, after Margaret departed from Ireland, there are very few letters of her correspondence with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington or other suffragettes. We do have letters which Margaret wrote to Hanna, but not vice versa.⁴⁵ This is mostly due to the lack of preservation of Margaret's letters and other correspondence in Adyar in India. I had personally faced disappointment when in 2013 when I was not permitted inside the locked room where Margaret's (and hopefully Annie Besant's) personal belongings are kept. Although the Theosophical Society has a research library, it houses only what was published – the magazine *Stri Dharma* and some authored books by Cousins and Besant. This problem of access to the archives needs to be addressed in future.

Conclusion

Towards 1936 Margaret summed up her ideas and suggestions for the future course of women's movement in her presidential address to the members of the AIWC.⁴⁶ She spoke about internationalism, health, elementary education, temple entry, village work, legalised economic status for home working women and issues concerning national freedom. Margaret was rendered publicly inactive by a paralytic stroke in the late 1940s. After India achieved its independence from Britain, Margaret was given an award by the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru for her contribution to the Indian freedom struggle. As part of the Theosophical Society's educational entrepreneurship – James was occupied with the establishment of cultural/musical school in South India from 1940s until the mid-1950s. To this day, both robust institutions – the Women's Indian Association in Madras (now Chennai) and AIWC in New Delhi – continue to work for women's welfare and empowerment. In conclusion, it can be said that the feminist activism that emerged in India had distinctly Irish origins, and that Margaret Cousins was instrumental in shaping it. As this chapter has shown by adopting a transnational approach, we can go beyond the narratives Barbara Ramusack posited in 1991. The life and times of Margaret Cousins challenges the existing historiography on the politics of complicity and resistance by Western women in colonial India.⁴⁷ Despite the given colonial context where Irishmen were part of the British administration and army (stationed in India) – forms of collaborative nationalistic/radical campaigns could emerge between Indian and Irish nationalists. Historically rooted transnational feminist campaigns for women's suffrage rights and political independence were quite a natural consequence of the growing political sensitivity of women in India, Ireland and Britain.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.dib.ie/biography/cousins-margaret-gretta-elizabeth-a2111>; Jyoti Atwal, 'Global Lives: Margaret Cousins', *Century Ireland*, September 2019, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/global-lives-margaret-cousins>.
- 2 Alternative forms of struggle existed in India. Eunan O'Halpin's article in this volume contains a rich comparison of Indian and Irish women in terms of how revolutionary feminist and anti-colonial methods appealed to women. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, and Historiography* (Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2005); Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1900* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993); Padma Anagol, 'Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers: The Beginnings of Feminism in Modern India', *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (September 2010), 523–546.
- 3 Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists and Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945' Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 119–136.
- 4 Sister Nivedita or Margaret Noble (1867–1911) was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and settled in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. She was born in County Tyrone, Ireland and met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London. See <https://www.dib.ie/biography/noble-margaret-elizabeth-sister-nivedita-a6218>.

- 5 Theosophy was an occult movement originating in the nineteenth century with roots that can be traced to ancient Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. The term *theosophy*, derived from the Greek *theos* (“god”) and *sophia* (“wisdom”), is generally understood to mean “divine wisdom.” Contemporary theosophical movement was born with the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and William Quan Judge (1851–96); <https://www.britannica.com/topic/theosophy>.
- 6 Noted works include Nupur Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Catherine Hall (ed), *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Colonial Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).
- 7 Annie Besant’s plan for All India Home Rule was not aimed at India’s separation from Britain, instead freedom was being sought regarding the domestic affairs. ‘INDIA SEEKING HOME RULE: PEOPLE SATISFIED IF CHANGE COMES SLOWLY, SAYS ANNIE BESANT’, *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1919.
- 8 For a discussion on tension within nationalist agendas and women’s agendas, see Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of Women’s Question’, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 233–235; Geraldine Forbes (ed), *Manmohini Zutshi Sehgal: An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).
- 9 Besant’s release from internment in 1917 has been described as a decision to exclude Home Rulers from the revolutionary category. Peter Robb, ‘The Government of India and Annie Besant’, *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no 1 (1976), 107–130.
- 10 Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Smashing Times: A History of the Irish Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1889–1922* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1984); Sinisa Malesevic, ‘Irishness and Nationalisms’, in *Are the Irish Different?*, ed. Tom Inglis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 10–21; Andrew R. Holmes, ‘The Church of Ireland and the Third Home Rule Bill’, *Irish Studies Review* 19, no 2 (2011), 226–228.
- 11 See Sonja Tiernan and Margaret Ward’s chapters in this volume.
- 12 See Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890–1920* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
- 13 Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988).
- 14 See Jane Ohlmeyer, ‘Ireland, India and the British Empire’, *Studies in People’s History* 2, no 2 (2015), 169–188; Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes (eds), *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts* (Dublin: Folens, 1997).
- 15 James and Margaret Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1950).
- 16 Kamadevi Chattopadhyaya, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces: Memoirs* (Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2014). First published in 1986, republished in 2014.
- 17 This would have been a lower middle-class ranking position but in the West of Ireland where few opportunities for upward mobility existed and most of the rural population was exceptionally poor. In fact, that year was the second of three successive failed harvests that gave rise to famine and starvation that continued well into the 1880s.
- 18 Gillespie family tree written by Phyllis Deverell (1934–). The information on genealogy for this biography has been generously shared with the author by Margaret’s great nephew’s family. David Gillespie (born 1938), married to Dorothy Gillespie (born 1940), together with their sons and grandchildren live in a large family house at Mount Prospect and look after the farmlands.

- 19 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 23.
- 20 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 55.
- 21 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 26.
- 22 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 53.
- 23 Catherine Candy, "'Untouchability', Vegetarianism and the Suffragist Ideology of Margaret Cousins', in *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens*, eds. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 154–170.
- 24 It may be worth noting here that Lord Buddha in the 5th century BC threw open challenge to Hindu caste system by denouncing idol worship and promoted vegetarianism. The presumption that vegetarianism indicated only the urge for purity and rise in social Hindu societal status needs to be questioned. Likewise, non vegetarian diet itself does not indicate low caste status of an individual.
- 25 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 130.
- 26 June Purvis, 'The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain', *Women's History Review* 4, no 1 (2015), 103–133. Purvis looks at the diverse social economic background of the suffragists and how women prisoners developed supportive networks, a culture of sharing and an emphasis upon the collectivity.
- 27 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 164. For a rich collection of British and Irish women's political activities see June Purvis and June Hannam, 'The Women's Suffrage Campaign in Britain and Ireland: New Perspectives', *Women's History Review* 29, no 6 (November 2020), 911–915.
- 28 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 166.
- 29 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 189–191.
- 30 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 188–189.
- 31 I was fortunate enough to meet with Barbara Hoskins' granddaughter Prof Barbara Wright. I am grateful to Prof Eunan O'Halpin for introductions. Prof Wright shared with me a personal possession of her grandmother. It is a tea tray cloth embroidered at Tullamore Prison with their names by all four suffragettes. For an insightful discussion on materialising the networks see Denise Jones, 'Articulating the Threatened Suffragette Body: Suffragette Embroidered Cloths Worked in Holloway Prison, 1911–1912', *Women's History Review* 29, no 6 (November 2020), 970–999.
- 32 Margaret Ward's chapter in this volume discusses the vast political canvas in which suffragists worked during the early decades of the twentieth century Ireland.
- 33 Letter from Margaret Cousins to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington from Adyar, Madras, July 17, 1916, MS 22,279 (iv) Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.
- 34 Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) emerged as a prominent nationalist around 1917. She was the second woman to become the first Indian woman president of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1925. Annie Besant was the first woman president of INC in 1917.
- 35 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 213.
- 36 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 406.
- 37 Shivrani Devi was wife of a well-known novelist Premchand. I have explored her feminism and Gandhian nationalism. In 1919 she persuaded her husband to give up his post of a school inspector in the colonial service was a remarkably tough decision. Jyoti Atwal, 'Revisiting Premchand: Shivrani Devi on Companionship, Reformism and Nation', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no 18 (2007), 1631–1637.
- 38 Chattopadhyaya, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, 79. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–1988) was an important contributor to the Indian freedom movement. She was the driving force behind the renaissance of Indian handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre in independent India.
- 39 Margaret Cousins, *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1922).
- 40 For more discussion on Age of Consent Act see Jyoti Atwal, 'Sati, Child Wives, and Prostitutes: Constituting Violence and Criminality in Colonial India', in *Gender and Violence in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives: Situating India*, eds. Jyoti Atwal and Iris Flessenkämper (London: Routledge, 2020).

- 41 Margaret Cousins, 'What Women Have Gained by the Reforms', in National Conference Series (Madras: The General Secretary's Office, Besant Press, 1925). *Report of the Age of Consent Committee, 1928–1929* (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1929). Scholars have looked at how through the nineteenth century, the Hindu woman's body was visualised by the women missionaries through efforts to deal with diseases of childbirth. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 'Mapping the Colonial Body: Sexual Economies and the State in Colonial India', in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 388–398.
- 42 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 580.
- 43 Cousins, *We Two Together*, 580–581.
- 44 India had other political movements in place by 1917. They were mostly agrarian /no rent campaigns. Communists had also begun organising themselves. Women entered the national movement in non Gandhian ways as well – see Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930–42* (Delhi: Sage, 2006).
- 45 There is rich material in the General Prisons Board (Ireland) records in Dublin.
- 46 Presidential address, All India Women's Conference, 1936 (Margaret Cousins Library, AIWC, New Delhi).
- 47 Margaret McCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy, *Women, Power and Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995); Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland: 1800–1918 A Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995). Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Recently an interesting book on comparative study of gender and nationalism in India and Ireland explores Bengal variety of militant anti-colonialism. Despite its limitations it explores the conceptualisation of effeminate and radical in the colonial context. Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence, and Empire in Ireland India, 1914–2004* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

20

FEMALE REVOLUTIONARIES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA AND IRELAND, 1919–39¹

Eunan O’Halpin

On 1 September 1933 at Midnapore in Bengal, District Magistrate Bernard Burge was shot dead by young assassins of the leftist Jugantar movement. His two predecessors had also been assassinated.

The killing was condemned by the governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson (1882–1958). Anderson was no stranger to separatist violence. In May 1920, as a pattern of terror and state counter-terror spread across Ireland, he had been sent from London to reform the decrepit Dublin Castle administration in preparation for self-rule and partition under the Government of Ireland Act. He also put out feelers to the underground Dáil government, elected in January 1919 by Dáil Éireann, the self-proclaimed legislature of the Irish Republic. These subterranean contacts were important elements in the eventual achievement of the Truce in July 1921 which ended Anglo-Irish hostilities. Anderson remained in Dublin until early 1922, overseeing the transition of power from the British to Michael Collins’s Provisional Government.² The Indian political unrest which he encountered in 1932 was of a rather different character: the main challenge to British rule came not through armed actions, but through peaceful means of protest and non-cooperation, under the general guidance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and implemented by the national movement led by the Indian National Congress.

There was a second significant difference, for our purposes a crucial one. What Anderson had encountered in Ireland was the work of the young men of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), fighting under the direction of an underground revolutionary government. In Bengal and across most of India, the popular movement demanding self-rule was committed to achieving its aims by non-violent means, including industrial action, civil disobedience, and individual acts of protest and self-sacrifice such as hunger-striking. This was recognised in Anderson’s condemnation of the Midnapore assassination: he argued that progress towards responsible self-government, a matter for cool heads, patient negotiation, and compromise all

round, was being jeopardised by 'the insensate behaviour of a few young men and women'.³ This inclusive phrase reflected the reality that in India, unlike in Ireland, the carrying out of political killings was not a male preserve.

Why was it that in India in the 1920s and 1930s young women participated in armed actions against the British state, not simply as assistants but as killers? The fact that females consciously chose to kill for political reasons is in clear contrast with the Irish War of Independence of 1919–21, the civil war of 1922–23, and even the bitter intercommunal violence in the newly created state of Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1923. In none of these three linked conflicts is there a trace of women themselves attempting to kill.

The general question of women as killers in conflict during the twentieth century has been addressed by Joanna Burke, who points to a widespread assumption that females were less capable of killing than men, even in war, on grounds of their gender, biology and associated attributes and sensibilities. There were exceptions, such as killing in defence of one's family or oneself. Yet she also notes how, 'although women were generally refused access to the front lines of destruction, they were an integral part of the killing process in a number of other ways'. In Britain these ranged from taking over industrial and other roles traditionally reserved for men – the 'Rosie the Riveter' phenomenon – to carrying out security tasks and, in the Second World War, to serving in anti-aircraft artillery units tasked to destroy enemy aircraft.⁴ A handful of women were also given firearms and sabotage training prior to despatch as secret agents to France. The story of the most celebrated of these, Violette Szabo (1921–45) has been framed in a very traditional way: the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* portrays her as a woman motivated primarily by the desire to 'avenge' a fallen man – her French husband was killed fighting the Germans the year before she was recruited and trained.⁵

A study of women in late-twentieth-century ethno-nationalist militant organisations concludes that, despite all the experience of women as warriors in the twentieth century, across the world not all that much has changed: discussing women activists in the IRA and in the Tamil Tigers, Miranda Alison comments that

the mere fact that it is necessary to specific 'female combatants' indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures. The assumption that women are more peaceful and less aggressive or warlike than men is a familiar one to most of us. The expectation of women as being nurtured and non-violent ... is held in many different societies.⁶

Debarred from killing, wartime women could instead mourn the dead, sustain the home, and nourish and inculcate the next generation of fighters with martial zeal and hatred for the enemy: reporting on a tour of the once-rebellious Orange Free State in 1915, the governor general of South Africa commented that 'women were largely at the bottom of the original mischief, and assiduously help to keep the flame of hatred burning. If men were only left alone relations would improve'.⁷

In general, such expectations prevailed in revolutionary Ireland. There were very few exceptions. Countess Markievicz, from an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, at first glance had more in common with the radical suffragettes who resorted to sporadic terrorism in Edwardian Britain than she did with militant Irish separatism, whose pantheon of physical force martyrs from the 1798 rebellion onwards was an entirely male preserve. But the Irish Citizen Army, the small workers' militia founded in Dublin in 1914 of which Markievicz was a leading light, did challenge gender norms by admitting women as full members. At least one other woman member, school-teacher Margaret Skinnider, definitely fought in 1916, and was badly wounded while leading a squad of men. She was initially refused a wound pension because a government lawyer maintained that the relevant legislation 'is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense' (Figure 20.1).⁸

But the example set by Markievicz and Skinnider in 1916 – that of uniformed, open combat alongside men in a quasi-conventional military body which adhered to the accepted rules and conventions of open warfare – was not followed thereafter in Ireland. In the guerrilla War of Independence of 1919–21, women did not bear arms, plant bombs or inflict fatal violence upon their enemies. The same held true for both sides in the civil war of 1922–23, and in horrendous intercommunal violence involving police, military, paramilitary groups and armed civilians in Belfast and other regions of what became Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1922. There were female victims, but no female perpetrators.

In interwar India, the picture was somewhat different. There some young women did take to arms and did kill in the name of independence. They did so as guerrillas, not as uniformed soldiers, and they exploited their gender to approach targets for assassination without arousing suspicion as would young men. The aim of their training, however limited, was to teach them to use guns and bombs not to defend themselves, but to strike the first blow. How useful is it to compare these women with Irish female revolutionaries, for whom deliberate killing was out of bounds, and how can that be done?

The increased availability of online archival material in recent years has greatly enhanced research opportunities for scholars across the globe. The release online of key Irish state records in recent years has transformed awareness of women's activism and gender issues within Irish separatism between 1913 and 1921, a hitherto under-researched aspect of the independence struggle.⁹ In 2003 the Bureau of Military History's 1773 'witness statements' assembled from veterans of the revolution between 1947 and 1956 were placed online; there are over one hundred statements from women, while many others touch on women's contributions within the revolutionary movement. They also cast light on the experience of women singled out for censure or punishment by revolutionaries, often for association with policemen and soldiers, and sometimes for allegedly passing information on separatist activities. These witness statements require careful analysis, not least where gender-related issues are concerned.¹⁰ They were prepared decades after the events

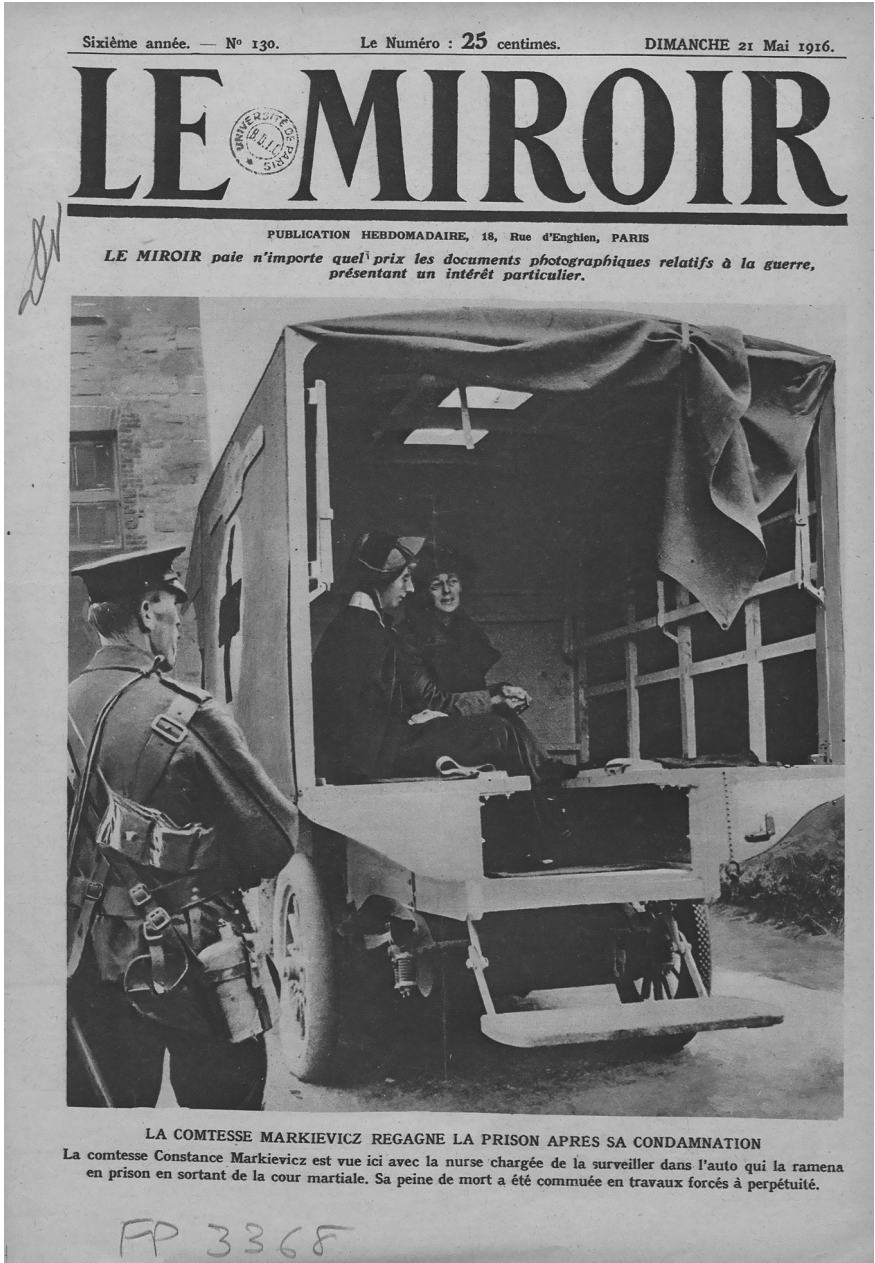


FIGURE 20.1 Countess Markievicz after court-martial.

Source: *Le Miroir*, 21 May 1916, accessed via <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6522757s/fl.image#>.

discussed. Women's witness statements proved very important in recasting our understanding of their engagement in the 1916 Rising and the subsequent years of disorder culminating in widespread insurgency and counter-terror in 1920–21, but these generally conform to a fairly monochrome heroic narrative of the struggle. Much is left unsaid particularly in respect of personal experience and of gender-related violence and intimidation. To provide an illustration, my grandmother Kathy Barry's statement prepared in 1952 makes only passing and almost dismissive reference to her own activities 'carrying guns or messages or clearing out a place that was in danger of a raid', as a civil war activist, and as general secretary of the anti-Treaty civil war 'Republican Prisoners' Dependants' Fund'.¹¹ A few years afterwards she regretted that she had recorded nothing of her own activities for her grandchildren.¹² Her formidable witness statement focussed almost exclusively on the story of her celebrated brother Kevin Barry, a medical student executed in November 1920.

A second, in many respects more important state source is being released online in tranches. This is the Military Service Pensions collection, with over 300,000 files – additional files are constantly being discovered. While focussing on those who fought – or claimed to have fought – between 1916 and the end of the civil war in 1923, these records provide extraordinary insights into the lifelong health and welfare not only of veterans but of their dependants, female as well as male.¹³ They are just as important for familial and social history as for what they tell us about the revolution itself. Other useful set of Irish records which have been digitised are those of the 1901 and 1911 censuses of population (<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/>) and birth, marriage and death registers (<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/irish-records-what-is-available/civil-records>). These greatly facilitate research into the family backgrounds of female activists, as of the general population.

On Indian revolutionaries, by contrast, my sources are extremely limited, and restricted to English-language records and memoirs. The oral history collection of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, a set of hundreds of interviews with veterans of the Indian independence struggle carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, resembles the Bureau of Military History series, and presents much the same problems. The contributors were a small elite of surviving prominent activists, almost all of whom ended up by choice or through force of circumstances in the new India rather than in Pakistan or, from 1971, Bangladesh. Most interviewees came from the Hindu community, and most were male. There are no accompanying administrative records and correspondence, so it is impossible to analyse the editorial process which produced the final text of interviews. While the collection includes recollections of physical force activists as well as of adherents of Gandhian non-violence, the interviews are framed within an uncritical 'job well done' consensus, without reference to problems within Indian society which the male leadership of the drive for independence had done little to address: reproductive rights for all; inequity in class, caste and gender relations; and women's general lack of autonomy in both private and public spheres. The Nehru Library has embarked on an ambitious programme to digitise these records. Once available online, they will

undoubtedly be used intensively by scholars across India and the world. A parallel online oral history initiative has been undertaken by the Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies – <https://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/> – although many of its interviewees are British. Amongst the few Indian women's voices to be found there is that of Mrs Goshiben Captain, who also contributed to the Nehru Memorial Library's Oral History project.¹⁴

The role and experience of women in the Irish revolution is currently much in debate. Linda Connolly notes 'the rewriting of women into Irish history in recent decades'.¹⁵ It was argued that women revolutionaries had been unjustly excluded in commemoration and in public memory, their actions, motivations, and aspirations being downplayed or ignored in favour of a male-dominated, heroic narrative. The centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising centenary was characterised by notable initiatives to write women into the grand narrative of armed struggle.¹⁶ There are echoes here of the views of Lakshmi Sehgal (1914–2012), who commanded the all-female Rani of Jansi Regiment of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) which served alongside the Japanese in Burma and Assam in 1944–5. She complained that the courage and patriotism of her women soldiers, all drawn from the Indian diaspora in Malaya, 'has been very much marginalised' in favour of uncritical lionisation of INA men's militarily debatable achievements.¹⁷

The wider and equally significant task of exploring the gendered experience of women and females generally during the Irish 'decade of revolution' of 1913–23, whatever their politics or lack of political affiliation or involvement, has only recently begun to be systematically addressed, notably by Pádraig Yeates in his trilogy of Dublin studies, and by Fionnuala Walsh's new work on *Irish Women and the Great War*.¹⁸

There remain issues of breadth and balance. The nature of the Irish sources encourages the study of radical activists (and their enemies and persecutors), at the expense of exploring the more prosaic struggles of ordinary women affected by political violence. Take Winifred Hunt, left widowed and with ten children when her husband was dragged from their County Sligo home in November 1922 and shot as a 'spy' by the anti-Treaty IRA.¹⁹ Determining how she fared with all those children to feed and to raise might tell us different things about the new Ireland than can the study of the individual lives of a small activist minority, female or male.

The same probably holds good for scholarship and writing on India's struggle for independence. The independence movements, and their security force foes, in a sense feed off each other archivally at the expense of wider society. In India, as in Ireland, the best-kept records of subversive organisations were generally those compiled by their police and intelligence enemies. It is not by chance that C.P. Joshi (1907–80), the last secretary general of the Communist Party of India under British rule, made such an extensive study of the surviving records of the (British) Government of India's Home Department and External Affairs Department.²⁰ Such fascination with activists and their state opponents, fuelled by the richness of the documentary sources available, may in India, as in Ireland, distract researchers from exploring the wider society within which these forces contended, and impede

reflection upon the impact of revolutionary struggle on ordinary people, female and male, and on ordinary lives in extraordinary times.

Women's political involvement in radical movements in both India and Ireland was conditioned in varying degrees by their economic and social circumstances, by their family backgrounds and responsibilities, by cultural norms, and by their degree of exposure to political discourse and ideas from inside and beyond their own societies. Activists such as Shivrani Devi Premchand identified gender inequality, and men's lack of awareness of women's oppression within the independence movement, as factors inhibiting achieving an independence which would benefit women as well as men.²¹ Gandhi, who had applauded the Edwardian suffrage movement in Britain, consciously involved women in the non-violent campaign for self-government. He did so, however, less by challenging than by valorising their traditional roles and place within society, as the loyal daughters and dutiful wives of Indian men. He encouraged them to contribute to the independence struggle outside the home through non-violent collective protest, but did not realistically address how they might be empowered within their domestic settings. He made his views clear in correspondence with the American Birth Control League, founded by Margaret Sanger (1879–1966), the great pioneer of women's reproductive rights (Sanger was one of eleven children of penniless Irish immigrants). Gandhi was totally opposed to artificial birth control. He maintained that 'resolute women could simply refuse their husbands', as though only men had valid sexual needs.²² There is a marked similarity between his attitude and the prevailing outlook within the male Irish independence movement.²³

In India, most female activists came from comfortable backgrounds. Geraldine Forbes ascribes the political involvement and trajectory of Manmohmi Zutshi, who took a BA and MA at the University of Lahore, to her unusually progressive as well as privileged family: her father was a prominent lawyer and first cousin of Jawaharlal Nehru, whose Kashmiri clan were 'cosmopolitan, anxious to work with other communities, and interested in reform ... the caste discouraged child marriage and encouraged education', an unusual attribute as 'north India was conservative, even backward ... female seclusion remained the model for respectable families whether Hindu or Muslim'. During her Masters graduation ceremony, Manmohini Zutshi witnessed the attempted assassination of the provincial governor by a young man, Hari Kishan (1912–31), who instead killed a policeman and was later executed. Although Zutshi's activism earned her years in jail, she was never an advocate of physical force, though she campaigned for the reprieve from execution of the assassins Hari Kishan and Bhagat Singh.²⁴ This, incidentally, serves as a reminder that whereas in Ireland, armed force became the dominant motif of the independence struggle, in India it was, by and large, the slow grind of peaceful political mass mobilisation of women and men which secured independence. The great majority of politically aware women activists who followed the non-violent path were as committed to securing freedom, and equally as outraged at British injustice, as were those who took

up arms. This is illustrated a letter from Nehru's youngest sister, herself no stranger to political imprisonment, Krishna Hutheesing (1907–67). Her brother-in-law R.S. Pandit (1893–1944) died, shortly after he was released from prison when mortally ill. Hutheesing told a friend in Kashmir of Nehru's 'deep cry of anguish from the bottom of his heart' at the news (he could not attend the funeral as he was in prison himself). Hutheesing then expressed her revulsion at British rule:

God! How I hate them and some day I hope if not I, my sons will have their revenge. There is no non-violence or forgiveness in my heart. I tried not to grow bitter, not to feel revengeful, but all the hatred of years has come back to the forefront now.²⁵

Suruchi Thapar argues that the Gandhian and Congress drive to increase nationalist consciousness legitimated a greater public role for Indian women than had previously been acceptable. A wide spectrum of Indian female society, Muslim as well as Hindu, the poor as well as the comfortable, took part in mass protests, rallies and other forms of collective action from 1920 onwards. She maintains that middle-class women's 'activities differed ... according to age', with younger women active in establishing revolutionary sabotage cells, bomb making, and direct action.²⁶

On 14 December 1931 two schoolgirls, Santi Ghosh (1916–89) and Suniti Chaudhury (1917–88), visited district magistrate Charles Stevens in his office near Comilla in East Bengal (now part of Bangladesh). Their ostensible reason was to seek permission to organise a swimming gala. As Stevens handed back their document, Chaudhury shot him through the chest from about three feet. Stevens tottered, stepped back towards his office, and died. Ghosh's father, a supporter of Indian independence, was a professor in a local college. Chaudhury's father was a government pensioner. Although only in their second year of high school, they had joined the Jugantar movement, a militant nationalist organisation greatly influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution and by socialist ideology. Indoctrinated, they were also given firearms training.

The girls' trial opened the same day that Mrs Uma Nehru (1884–1963), a feminist and activist related by marriage to Jawaharlal Nehru, was sentenced to 'six months rigorous imprisonment' for inciting tenant farmers to protest in Allahabad.²⁷ Thus females from both the non-violent and the violent strands of the independence movement faced British-administered justice at the same time for different kinds of political activism. What they had in common was their backgrounds and education (Figure 20.2).

Ghose and Chaudhury were duly convicted, but spared execution because of their youth (and probably also their gender). A judge belittled their stated reasons for their action, instead depicting them as naïve teenage dupes: 'It may be a reasonable surmise that they are the instruments of sinister agencies.' When sentenced, they reportedly commented 'Better to die than live in a horse's stable', and 'were as calm ... as throughout the whole trial and ... were again wearing flowers in their hair as they stood in the dock unperturbed'. Although 'their demeanour in the dock has been one

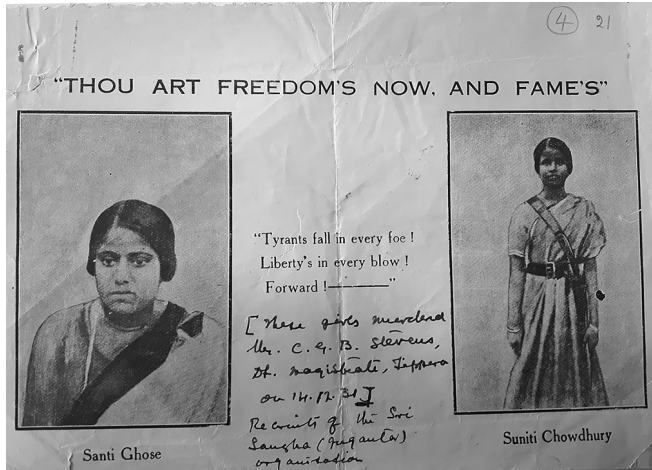


FIGURE 20.2 Handbill of Ghosh and Chaudhury, undated.

Source: Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies, Tegart papers, Box 49.

of cheerful disregard of the consequences', the judges observed that 'the fact remains that they are not more than 16 and are girls of a respectable family'.²⁸

The two were released in 1939. They remained committed to radical causes, albeit through peaceful activism. They expressed no remorse for their deed, and exhibited no particular trauma arising from their experiences of killing and of imprisonment. Ghosh eventually married, joined the Indian National Congress, and was elected to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. Chaudhury married, and became a doctor. Their stories support the thesis that the long-term impact of so extreme an event as inflicting death is determined not by an objective factor such as gender, but by an individual's psychological composition and belief that the action involved was justified and necessary.

As assassins in India Ghosh and Chaudhury were unique in their exceptional youth, but not in their backgrounds, gender or actions. Kamala Dasgupta (1907–2000) recalled how, at university in Calcutta, she enrolled in a self-defence course for young women. She asked the instructor Dinesh Mazumdar, a young law student who was 'sturdy and strong and also handsome', 'how revolutionaries would free us from foreign rule consider[ing] that the British seemed to be all powerful'. He spoke of 'the secret work of young revolutionaries; their preparedness for self-immolation', and told her of 'the Irish insurrections, the rising movement of Cavour in Italy, and of the Russian Revolution. Fights and resistance, small separately were converging towards a full-scale revolution'. He introduced her to the Jugantar party in 1929. There was already tension at home, because her father was searching for a suitable husband for her, but she committed herself to the struggle. She hid bombs in her student hostel and distributed them around the city, and undertook other subversive tasks. On 25 August 1930, together with another young woman, Anuja Sen, and other student radicals, she and Dinesh ambushed the hated Calcutta police chief Sir Charles Tegart

(1881–1946), an Irishman, as he drove through Dalhousie Square. They used home-made grenades, which could be as dangerous to the user as to their intended target: one stopped the car, but when ‘Anuja threw the second bomb ... it burst before it reached its destination’, wounding her fatally (Figure 20.3).

Tegart escaped without a scratch. Dinesh was eventually tracked down, and sentenced to death in 1934: ‘even his own mother was not allowed to see him’ before his execution.²⁹

Kamila Dasgupta avoided arrest. A year later, she supplied the revolver with which another young woman student, Bina Das, attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal during a university graduation ceremony. At her trial, Das was polite but unapologetic: ‘my object was to die ... nobly fighting this despotic system of government’. In a statement she invoked both Hindu and Christian spirituality – ‘my sense of religious morality is not inconsistent with my sense of political freedom’ – reconciling her Hindu upbringing and her education in a Christian college which ‘exercised the highest influence on my life and character, and which I looked upon with all the regard due to a mother’, with her ‘love of my country’. She had been willing to kill, but

I am glad that the life of Sir Stanley Jackson has been saved by Providence ...
I am glad that I have attained my end without loss of life ... the measures of
the government ... can unsex even a frail woman like myself, brought up in
all the best traditions of Indian womanhood.

Amongst material seized from her possessions were pictures of various executed Indian revolutionaries, and of the Irish hunger-striker Terence MacSwiney, as well as various revolutionary tracts. These included a newly printed pamphlet on Santi Ghosh and Sunita Chaudary, who had just been sentenced. A friend told police that Bina Das ‘had no faith in the Gandhi Movement’, ‘used to tell her that the Movement must fail’, and had given her subversive works by Maxim Gorki and other revolutionary writers. The police also uncovered a connection with her former teacher Kamala Dasgupta, ‘a well-known member of the revolutionary party’. In London an official noted gloomily that ‘there are a number of women interested in the movement’.³⁰

Bina Das’s case echoes other accounts from independence veterans, both female and male, in Bengal, in the Punjab, in Bihar, the United Provinces, and elsewhere. These indicate that revolutionary awareness was spread mainly through high schools and institutions of higher education. The poor and the uneducated, although they participated in mass protests across India, had neither the opportunities nor the time to engage with revolutionary discourses. While the Irish example is often cited as important, furthermore, in India proponents of armed action, as distinct from non-violent protest and contestation of British rule, were very much influenced both by leftist ideology and by international examples of radical violence. The assumption that female recourse to armed action was inherently unwomanly had been challenged as early as the 1880s by some radical

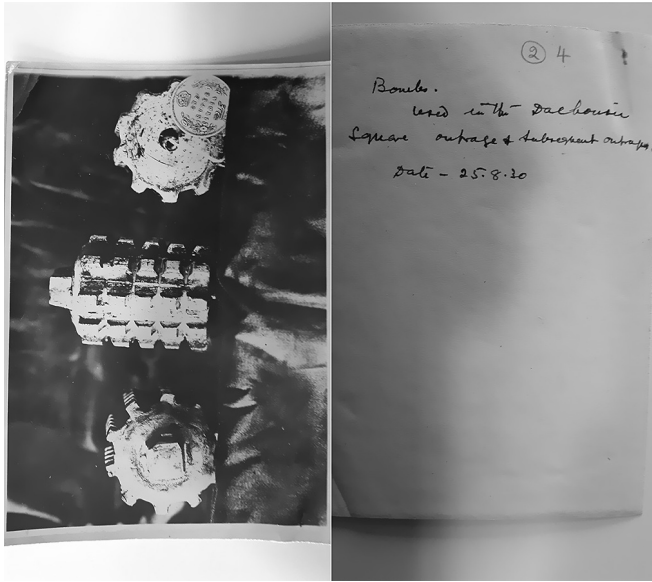


FIGURE 20.3 Unexploded grenade similar to that which killed Ajuna Sen in the Dalhousie Square attack on Charles Tegart, 1930.

Source: Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies, Tegart papers, Box 49.

groups, notably in Russia. There the authorities were so alarmed by female radicalisation through higher education that in 1887 the state ensured that ‘the courses available to women were drastically reduced’.³¹ During the Edwardian era, radical elements within the British suffragette movement had adopted terror tactics: in 1912 in Dublin an English suffragette threw a hatchet at prime minister H.H. Asquith (1852–1928), and her comrades narrowly failed in an attempt to set fire to a crowded theatre which Asquith was visiting.³² In Britain itself, the suffragette campaign, which involved the use of explosives as well as less lethal and more easily ridiculed actions – see the portrayal of suffragette balloonist Lady Agatha D’Ascoyne in the British comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) – such as setting fire to post boxes and smashing shop windows for which the activists are best remembered, led to a number of violent deaths.³³

For young radicals in interwar India, the most significant example of direct action was the Bolshevik Revolution. There men and women were equals in principle, if not in practice, and women could bear arms and fight and kill alongside their male comrades. In the Punjab, which despite its relative wealth and mainly rural character became a stronghold of leftist opinion, students and other activists were radicalised by socialist organisations.³⁴ Of these the Hindustan Republican Socialist Association is best remembered, due to the actions and eventual execution of the charismatic revolutionary and assassin Bhagat Singh (1907–31), who has become a ubiquitous symbol of youthful Indian sacrifice in the fight for freedom.³⁵ Bhagat Singh’s initial escape from Lahore after shooting an official was due to a courageous

woman comrade, Durga Bagwati Charan, who had also discovered revolutionary socialism while a student. Her own husband, also a student radical, was blown up shortly afterwards. As in Bengal, in the Punjab it was leftist ideology which both inspired physical force activism and facilitated the involvement of women as equals.

This is not to say that the Irish independence narrative was unimportant or overlooked. The famous Chittagong armoury raid of April 1931, carried out by a leftist revolutionary group of young men and women, was timed for the fifteenth anniversary of the 1916 Rising as 'they read that Irish rebel Dan Breen's book'.³⁶ A young woman activist sentenced in 1933 in Calcutta described how

Police Commissioner, Mr P.A. Kelly, called me before I went to jail and said: 'What is the need of your joining the movement?' I said: 'Look, Mr Kelly, it is not your business. You are an Irishman. What do you feel about it?'. He kept mum.³⁷

But it was primarily leftist international revolutionary doctrine, including the principle of gender equality, which encouraged and enabled young Indian women radicals to take to arms, and their male comrades to accept this.

By contrast, in Ireland female involvement in the independence struggle after the 1916 Rising was entirely in non-combatant roles. Many women participated in operations which resulted in deaths. They provided logistical support, including carrying weapons and munitions; they observed enemy movements, and watched suspected enemy agents and informers; they secured information from enemy records; and a few used their gender to entrap enemy targets for the IRA. Women activists also hid and fed combatants before and after operations, provided them with first aid, concealed their weapons before and after engagements, and nursed the wounded and sick who were on the run. But Irish women revolutionaries never got to fire the guns or throw the grenades which they carried for others to use.

The Bureau of Military History and Military Service Pensions collections contain hundreds of instances of women who performed crucial support work for the revolutionary movement. Typically, they were drawn into activism through family associations or friendships, rather than through higher education. Margaret Morris initially wrote on her pension application form that 'I wish to state that my boyfriend was shot dead' during the Rising, and 'I joined at once'. When interviewed, however, she said that his death was not her motivation: 'I should not have put it on ... It had nothing to do with my activities. It only led up to my joining ... It just led up to my joining.'³⁸

Margaret Morris was one of many women who told the pensions board about their intelligence work, which included shadowing suspected informers and enemy agents. She gave this up after 'Hoppy' Byrne, a disabled pedlar whom she had been watching for over a year, was, notoriously, carried out of a hospital ward by the IRA while recovering from an assassination attempt, and finished off. In some cases where their investigations resulted in killings, women were disinclined to state this even in confidence decades afterwards: others, such as Dublin-based Lily Murnin,

and Cork woman Nora O’Sullivan, were willing to be explicit about the fatal consequences of their work, controversial though some of these killings were.³⁹ Similar variations arise in IRA men’s recollections. For example, Seán Lemass (1899–1971), who was a modernising head of government from 1959 to 1966, would never discuss his own involvement in revolutionary killing, including the shooting on ‘Bloody Sunday’ of an unarmed British officer in his bedroom. It would be foolhardy to explain any woman’s reticence about her role in a killing simply in gender terms.⁴⁰

One rank-and-file activist, Alice Mallon (1899–1986), of County Tyrone, is of particular interest. This is because her revolutionary experience and interactions with state security spanned two phases of British rule, that within Ireland as a whole prior to 1921, and from May 1921 in the new self-governing province of Northern Ireland. In addition, her story illustrates the lasting impact which long-term state containment measures could have on a young woman’s opportunities to pursue a career outside the home.

The 1911 census shows Alice Mallon as one of six children of an illiterate elderly farmer, who had been involved in the Fenian movement in his youth.⁴¹ After primary school she was sent to technical college. By becoming a short-hand typist, she acquired transportable skills: unlike most young women from poor farming backgrounds, if she left home, her prospects were not confined to the usual lowly occupations of domestic servant or shop assistant. By 1918 she was a typist/clerk in a lawyer’s office in the nearest town, Cookstown. She cycled to and from work every day, and so had some independence of movement. Two of her brothers were in the IRA, as was her employer.

Her office skills, the fact that she was in town every day, and that she had reason to be travelling the local roads, all came into use when she joined Cumann na mBan, the female arm of the separatist movement (see Margaret Ward’s and Sonja Tiernan’s contributions to this volume). She received training in first aid, observation, and other roles considered suitable for women. Testimonies from IRA men fully supported her claims that she carried despatches, typed brigade documents, collected and passed on intelligence, smuggled weapons and explosives, concealed munitions on the family homestead, and nursed and fed IRA men ‘on the run’. In December 1921 weapons which she smuggled were used in an attack in which a policeman was seriously wounded (in 1967 she could still recall his surname). Her home was frequently raided, and her father was badly injured by ‘Specials’ (a Protestant militia co-opted into the service of the new Northern Irish state). She was eventually interned in the spring of 1923, recalling, unusually among republicans, that ‘she was well-treated ... the Governor ... was a perfect lady’.⁴² Months later, the security authorities discussed her possible release. Their comments reflect a clash between gender and what might be termed ethnic-conflict norms. One official described her as ‘a very bad type of woman ... evidently in touch with the IRA movement’, whereas her local police inspector said ‘her character, apart from her political views, is good’. She was ‘a vicious, bitter, foolish young girl with very little intelligence or ability and although her intentions might be bad enough, her

power for evil ... would be nil, as Sinn Féin activity in the town is entirely stamped out'. She was 'only a young girl scarcely out of her teens'. Yet an intelligence officer of the Special Constabulary, reflecting the particular perceptions and prejudices of the local Protestant community, thought her 'a dangerous type of girl ... the brain of the IRA in Cookstown'. Nevertheless Alice Mallon was released, after falsely claiming that 'I never had anything to do with the IRA'. An order was issued excluding her from living anywhere near her home and workplace: fortunately, her office skills had already enabled her to find an office job in Dublin. When she returned quietly the following year to care for her father, she was made subject to a further exclusion order which allowed her to remain at home but prohibited her indefinitely from entering Cookstown.⁴³ The consequence, if not the deliberate intention, was to make her choose between pursuing a career as a skilled office worker, and remaining at home as an unpaid carer.

Some Irishwomen clearly resented the patronising attitude of their male comrades towards them. Kathy Barry was furious when her fiancé clumsily suggested that her presence with other women in the besieged anti-Treaty headquarters in Dublin in the first week of the civil war 'must have prevented our fellows from fighting to the end': she replied that

I love [d] those three days at the end because I felt I was nearly as useful as a man and you don't know how helpless it is to be a woman when you feel you ought to be a man.

Yet her record as a senior organiser and propagandist between 1920 and 1924 indicates that she was of far greater value in those roles than any individual could have been in a firefight.⁴⁴

This cursory survey has revealed both commonalities and differences in the backgrounds and political formation of the Indian and Irish young women involved in radical activism after the First World War. The commonalities lie in the fact that they came from politically conscious families. The differences lie partly in social class: in Ireland, unlike in India, it was economically feasible for young women without significant means to play an active part in revolutionary affairs. Ideology also appears to have made a difference: the young Indian women who took to arms were evidently inspired specifically by the example of radical politics in Russia from the 1880s onwards, where successive generations of women took responsibility for the act of killing their enemies.⁴⁵ There was nothing comparable in the political education of most young Irish female separatists in the early twentieth century. Perhaps this helps explain why, in contrast to their Indian comparators, Irish rebel women did everything but kill during the second phase of the Irish revolution.

This chapter merely scratches the surface of a range of issues which require greater research and analysis. As Natalya Vince's fascinating study of female veterans of the Algerian independence struggle (1954–62) shows, young women from rural and urban, from poor and from comfortable backgrounds, engaged in resistance to colonial rule both in adjunct support roles, and as covert bombers who used their

gender to plant explosives undetected.⁴⁶ They did so for a range of reasons. Some followed husbands or brothers into the struggle; others were radicalised by French colonial repression of their communities. Decades later, some saw their participation as part of a wider fight for gender emancipation; others maintained that freedom from colonial rule had been the driving force for their activism at the time, even if they later began to question gender inequality, and official amnesia about the role and motivations of women in anti-colonial struggle, in Algerian society. The same surely holds good both for India and for Ireland.

If I may end with a personal illustration; both my grandmothers were involved in the Irish independence struggle. Kathy Barry, born in 1896, was already politicised and conscious of social and gender inequalities; Annie Rice, whose activities of carrying messages, keeping watch and concealing weapons ended with her marriage at seventeen years, widowed in poverty at a young age with thirteen children to raise, remained a resolutely conservative rural Catholic.⁴⁷ In Ireland and in India, we must be careful about ascribing wider emancipatory and progressive agendas to young women who were willing to risk all in a fight for freedom against colonial masters.

Notes

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- 4 Joanna Burke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999), 312–14.
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- 7 The National Archives (UK), CAB37/132/16, Governor General’s report, July 31, 1915.
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- 16 Laura McAtackney, ‘1916 and after: Remembering “Ordinary” Women’s Experience of Revolutionary Ireland’, in *Women and the Decade of Commemorations*, 57–73, 60.
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- 38 MAI, MSP34REF20579, Margaret Cromien (née Morris) interview with Advisory Committee, July 8, 1938.
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