

Review and short notices

READING THE IRISH WOMAN: STUDIES IN CULTURAL ENCOUNTER AND EXCHANGE, 1714–1960. By Gerardine Meaney, Mary O’Dowd and Bernadette Whelan. Pp 270. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2013. £75.

The time period covered by this book takes women from mass illiteracy in the eighteenth century to full immersion in popular culture through reading in the twentieth. The focus is on gender and cultural change/exchange related to three key areas that reflect the expertise of the authors: the Enlightenment, emigration and modernism, all of which have been studied before in the Irish context but never together.

The book draws attention to its multidisciplinary perspective and carefully outlines what can be gained in the collaboration between literary and historical scholars of modern Ireland. The result is a book that challenges the conventions of both disciplines as well as offering fresh insights. Just as there is no one disciplinary perspective being given dominance, there is also no ‘one’ Irish woman to be studied, as the authors point out. Meaney, O’Dowd and Whelan are eager to avoid a hegemonic interpretation of female experience in Ireland, paying attention to the intersecting categories of identity that shape experiences in different ways, including class, religion, location and opportunities. This means the book offers something for disparate readers – from those with a general interest in the experiences of women in the modern period, to the specialist who will gain insight into specific issues such as reading, political engagement, migration and literature.

In the section on the Enlightenment, the authors highlight writings that advocated sexual equality and advances in women’s education before Wollstonecraft’s famous ‘call to arms’, and this piece explores popular publications that circulated in Ireland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It seems that advice about what women should or should not learn abounded, with advocates such as Fénelon expressing the view that ‘gentlewomen’ should be prepared for their roles as future household managers by learning a wide array of useful subjects: they should know how to do accounts, have some knowledge of the law as it pertained to property and inheritance and they should acquire competency in foreign languages so as to be able to read the best foreign books of the time. While this rather liberal and wide-ranging curriculum might be thought to be progressive, Fénelon (and many others) also warned against the dangers of women reading improper literature. The guarding, moralising and censoring of women in relation to reading material is a consistent theme in modern Irish history and a connecting one throughout the book. However readers may be surprised to learn of the popular circulation of progressive ideas on women’s role such as those found in Erasmus’s *Parliament of women* or the cultural negotiation involved in its translation by Ó Colmáin.

The book demonstrates that women in Ireland were part of an international circle of readers on appropriate education for children in the eighteenth century. Women of the Protestant Anglo-Irish class were reading French writers on education and attempting to implement their ideas, but such ideas were also influential in Catholic education of both the poor and middle-classes. This research also fits well with the work of historians such as Mary Kelley in *Learning to stand and speak: women, education, and public life in America’s republic*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), which has sketched similar trends in women’s reading and learning in the American context in the same time period.

The international aspects of women's experiences also feature in the chapters on emigration, as might be expected, but this book, by foregrounding interdisciplinarity and the modernist lens, offers some new perspectives on what is one of the better researched areas of Irish women's history. It also traces a narrative that shows that migration was a way to expand choices and control over one's life, but, crucially, within a wider family dynamic. Furthermore, direct connection is made with the first case study on elite women's reading and learning by drawing attention to the greater literacy and English language skills of female migrants of the nineteenth century which enabled them to emigrate and prepared them 'for the challenge that lay ahead in the public rather than the private world' (p. 89). This was also a factor in shaping a new kind of woman by the turn of the twentieth century, the 'returned yank', a financially successful, independent and modern archetype who embodied cultural change on their visits back to the homeland. This transformation could occur despite the predominance of emigrants in domestic service, an occupation in Ireland that was often poorly paid and regarded as low status. Women were clearly capitalising on the opportunities offered to them and passed on the cultural capital accrued through hard work to their relatives by paying passages to America, and to their daughters, who successfully infiltrated the professions of nursing, teaching and clerical work. The story of women's autonomy through the financial independence they found through migration is a compelling one, and the book gives detailed, personal examples of how this facilitated women to marry and live lives on their own terms. The two-way cultural transmission process is also emphasised in the book, demonstrating not simply a process of modernity being 'imposed' on Irish emigrants from their American experience but a more complex exchange of mores, manners and ideas.

The final section of the book focuses on cultural history and textual analysis with regard to the *avant-garde*, a movement that came to define Irish literary output internationally, but, as is pointed out in the text, did not fit well with the cultural mores of twentieth-century Ireland. This section offers a fascinating insight into literature that was produced from Ireland, such as that by Katherine Cecil Thurston, which may not be well known by contemporary readers. In this sense *Reading the Irish woman* also makes an important contribution to the canon of women's history in recovering the lives and works of influential women in past periods.

The book concludes by reflecting on the agency aspects of women's identity and experiences in the past – how they were both receivers *and* shapers of the cultural influences of the modern period, all of which had an impact on taking women beyond the barriers of the domestic sphere, a message this book outlines in impressive detail.

doi: 10.1017/ihs.2015.3

JENNIFER REDMOND

Department of History, Maynooth University
jennifer.redmond@nuim.ie

ULSTER PRESBYTERIANS AND THE SCOTS IRISH DIASPORA, 1750–1764. By Benjamin Bankhurst. Pp 202. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. £53.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries large-scale migrations affected parts of Britain and Ireland. No class, religious, regional or national group was entirely excluded from the swirl of human traffic. First the English, and then the Scots, comprised the bulk of leavers till the 1710s, with heavy migrations to Ulster, North America, and Europe. Thereafter, the Scots Irish of Ulster assumed centre stage. Along with migrants from the German territories they utterly dominated British colonial traffic till the American Revolution. Benjamin Bankhurst's fine book, which won the Donald Murphy Prize for Distinguished First Books from the American Conference of Irish Studies, deserves a place alongside classic works on Ulster by R. J. Dickson, Patrick Griffin, and Kerby Miller et al. His sustained foray into a field marked both by