

Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century: An Introduction

MARGARET KELLEHER

Private *virtues* are public benefits: if each cell were content in his cell, there could be no grumbling hive; and if each cell were complete, the whole fabric must be perfect.

Maria Edgeworth, *Letters to Literary Ladies* (1795).

After marriage, *home* is the abiding place of woman, the natural centre and seat of all her occupations, the cause of all her anxieties, the object of all her solicitude, and it is a deranged state of society that encourages her to seek employment beyond its precincts.

Patrick J. Keenan, *Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland* (1855).

Gender as a category for analysis may appear a recent preoccupation; its absence, until recent years, from studies of nineteenth-century Ireland might lead readers to infer that the questions it raises regarding the construction of identity are separate from that period. Yet central to literary, social and political writings of the nineteenth century are arguments regarding men and women's 'proper sphere': the fierce opposition of Patrick Keenan, school inspector, to the employment of married women illustrates just one of many such debates. Attempts like Keenan's to delineate women's 'place' and, by implication, men's 'place' through the doctrine of 'separate spheres', and the related separation of private and public realms, received strenuous support and significant opposition throughout the century.

While analogous debates in, for example, nineteenth-century America have received much scrutiny, the specific nature of Irish discourses on gender has remained obscure.¹ The path-breaking work on Irish women's history, in recent years, provides some key insights; yet, as Mary Cullen reminds us in her foreword to this volume, gender history is not a synonym for women's history. Alongside the continuing recovery of women's past, and facilitated by this work, the historical relations within and between the sexes deserve closer attention.

To this end, the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland chose the subject of gender in nineteenth-century Ireland as the central theme of its third conference, held in All Hallows College, Dublin, in the spring of 1995.

¹ See, for example, Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' in *American Historical Review*, xci (December, 1986), pp. 1053-75 and Linda K. Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History' in *Journal of American History*, lxxv, 1 (1988), pp. 9-39.

Scholars from various disciplines, sociological, educational, literary, historical and theological, gathered to discuss the potential of gender studies to re-evaluate not only female but also male history, together with the interconnections of these histories. The essays in this volume, arising out of the conference, unpack the ideology of gender and examine its operations in various ways; significantly, not alone in the domestic or family sphere – the terrain to which gender history is sometimes regrettably limited – but expanding the field of gender studies to include the history of education, social and religious institutions, and political events.

This expansion is especially apparent in the volume's first section, 'Gendered Re/visions', in which some of the dominant discourses and central events of nineteenth-century Ireland are reread from a gendered perspective. Timothy P. Foley's article provides a unique study of gender and political economy – traditionally the 'sovereign discourse of the public sphere, the quintessentially male space' – through a detailed examination of the debate surrounding women's employment which unfolded in the 1860s, the repercussions of this critique extending beyond the doctrine of spheres to the very basis of political economy itself. The dimensions of gender in nineteenth-century schooling, including significant differences in access to education, form the subject of John Logan's study; as he illustrates, prevailing notions of 'separate though complementary spheres' operated throughout curriculums of instruction of this period. In David Fitzpatrick's work on women and the Great Famine, gender's role as a category of historical analysis takes quite a different form. The supposition that women, as a group, were more vulnerable to famine or subject to large-scale discrimination, is challenged by recently-uncovered data, made available by the National Famine Research Project, regarding famine mortality, relief and emigration. In the course of his analysis, Fitzpatrick suggests an important extension to existing work on gender as a determinant of 'entitlements', to include not only women and men's role as workers or producers but also their non-monetary assets and services, as, for example, household managers and reproducers. In contrast to the 'cult of womanhood' challenged and redefined in the context of famine, Toby Joyce's work on the Fenians, which concludes this section, examines the 'cult of manhood' prevalent at the time. Linked to 'respectability', the 'spirit of manhood' proved a potent weapon in generating recruits from men of the middle and lower middle classes, to Ireland's 'trained and marshalled manhood'.

The revision of historical perspectives provided by the first section is continued in the second, with a specific focus on literature of the post-Union period. Siobhán Kilfeather's 'Sex and Sensation in the Nineteenth-Century Novel' re-examines the sensation novel of the nineteenth century as a central means through which the 'complexities of desire' were articulated. The novel's 'special ability to incorporate conflicting discourses' renders it not only, as Kilfeather demonstrates, a particularly 'significant source of information about sexuality' but also a key indicator of the conflicting political discourses of its time. Thus, Colin Graham's essay on 'History, Gender and the Colonial Moment' concerns Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, a novel 'placed precariously on the moment of Union'. Using

Homi Bhabha's theory of 'sly civility', Graham's reading of Edgeworth's 'textual tactics' uncovers the doubleness of colonial discourse, the cracks beneath the surface, in this 'slyly civil' narrative. The literary and historical contexts for Edgeworth's writings gain a further dimension in Cliona Ó Gallchoir's reading of *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) as a text grounded in the novelist's position as a woman writing in a post-Revolutionary culture. The recurring debate regarding the relations of public and private takes an interesting shape in this narrative, encapsulated in the extract quoted above; Ó Gallchoir shows how Edgeworth, refusing the hierarchy of metaphorical identification, turned to a metonymic system of representation in which the public sphere becomes 'no more than the sum of its domestic parts'. The narrative strategies employed by Edgeworth, in comparison with those of her contemporary Lady Morgan, form the subject of Anne Fogarty's essay, 'Imperfect Concord', which completes the section. Here Fogarty demonstrates how the novelists' attempts to write totalising fictions were 'countermanded by the contradictions and conflicts in Irish society which their work exposes' and by the 'spectral Irelands' of the past continually haunting their 'hybrid' texts.

The doubleness of discourse regarding Ireland in the early nineteenth century, as a country progressing into the future yet haunted by its past, reappears in travel writings, a genre studied in the third section of this volume. Anne Plumptre, 'An Independent Traveller', novelist and translator, and the author of a travel narrative concerning Ireland, published in 1817, is the subject of Glenn Hooper's essay. Plumptre, Hooper suggests, may be viewed as a proto-feminist writer, 'indifferent to contemporary discourses of femininity', while her treatment of Ireland contains an intriguing ambivalence: a country to be discovered but also the means through which the writer's own authority may be asserted. Both Hooper's work, and the succeeding essay by John McAuliffe on Irish travel writing of the 1840s, provide important applications of earlier theories of travel writing by Mary Louise Pratt and Sara Mills to the case of Ireland. The writings of Englishwomen Lady Henrietta Chatterton and Mrs Frederic West, with American woman Asenath Nicholson, employ prevailing conventions of sentimental travel writing yet also demonstrate distinctive features. Assertions relating to their individual presence and personal perspective enabled female writers to resist the 'all-seeing' role of male contemporaries, yet, as McAuliffe argues, such strategies also undermined their authority as commentators on Irish society. Later in the century, the genre of Irish travel writing was to be significantly extended by the writings of Irishwomen abroad, including Isabella Croke (1825–88), subject of Mary Ellen Doona's essay. Croke's diary of her experiences during the Crimean War (1854–56) provides, as Doona conveys, a unique testimony to the conflicts and philanthropic operations of the time.

The complex intersections of private and public spheres within nineteenth-century institutional life form the subject of the fourth section. In Oonagh Walsh's study of the Connaught District Lunatic Asylum, the first public institution established for the care of the insane in the west of Ireland, the importance of

lunacy with, in a majority of cases, male insanity attributed to physical causes and women's insanity more likely to be attributed to moral causes. Within the asylum, gender assumptions influenced where patients were housed and, consequently, during the famine, their chances of surviving fever and disease. Gender as a shaping force in men's history is a central theme of Brian Griffin's work on the Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police, in which he explores the influence of public and institutional life on the male domestic sphere – still a rare subject of enquiry. Membership of the police forces, Griffin demonstrates, controlled individuals' identities as husbands, fathers and lovers, with codes of rules and regulations extending to the most private sphere. All three of the studies in this section make available original historical research, contributing valuable new information and perspectives regarding nineteenth-century Ireland. Thus, Gráinne Blair's study of the Salvation Army Rescue Network, which completes this section, uses unpublished Salvation Army records to trace the histories and experiences of the 233 Irish women who used the Army rescue network between 1886 and 1892.

The fifth and last section expands, and rewrites, what is known regarding the writings of later nineteenth-century Ireland, and the intersections of gender, class and nationality which occur within these narratives. Christina Hunt Mahony's essay on 'Women's Education, Edward Dowden and the University Curriculum in English Literature' focuses on a little-known episode: the Dublin Afternoon Lectures on Literature and the Arts, held between 1863 and 1868, geared towards gentlewomen and male civil servants. Despite their 'extra-mural' nature, these lectures were to play an important part in the continuum of educational reform, serving as a proving ground for early canon formation in the university curriculum of English literature. The suggestion that the nineteenth century constituted a period of silence for women writers is fatally undermined by Anne Colman's work on nineteenth-century women writers. In the course of her essay, she estimates that some five hundred women were writing and publishing, throughout all genres, between 1800 and 1900. More specifically, the women of the *Nation* are discussed in Jan Cannavan's essay on 'Romantic Revolutionary Irishwomen: Women, Young Ireland and 1848'. Examining prose pieces and poems written by women during the 1840s, together with the responses of men, Cannavan situates these writings in the context of evolving debates regarding 'equality' and 'difference'. Finally, James H. Murphy's essay on the women novelists of the *Irish Monthly* continues the recovery of lesser-known writers of the period. In contrasting their fiction with that of George Moore, Murphy also uncovers the centrality of class concerns and the desire for Victorian respectability which characterised these writers, made clearly manifest in the subject-matter of their writings.

Taken as a whole, these essays challenge in many ways the accuracy and utility of the concept of 'separate spheres' to describe nineteenth-century Ireland. Interconnectedness, rather than separateness, is frequently evident: the domestic realm influenced by and itself shaping the public domain; male and female roles, in Mary Cullen's words, 'intermeshed and interdependent'. Yet the doctrine of

realm influenced by and itself shaping the public domain; male and female roles, in Mary Cullen's words, 'intermeshed and interdependent'. Yet the doctrine of spheres, while a cultural and rhetorical construction, was, as these essays also attest, no less powerful for its fictive basis. In a century of complex and changing power relations, key conflicts, negotiations and resolutions occurred along and between gender lines. From a variety of perspectives and disciplines, the contributors to this volume examine the operations of gender in nineteenth-century Ireland, deepening, in crucial ways, our understanding of the past and its legacies for the present.