HUMANITAS

Rua do lago, 717 – Cidade Universitária
05508-010 – São Paulo – SP – Brasil
Telefax: (11) 3091-2920
e-mail: editaorahumanitas@usp.br
http://www.editorahumanitas.com.br

A Garland of Words

For Maureen O'Rourke Murphy

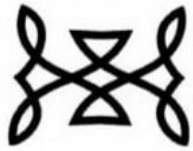
Edited by

Munira H. Mutran

Laura P. Z. de Izarra

Beatriz Kopschitz X. Bastos

HUMANITAS



Engendering the Nation: Irish Women and Nationalism[1]

*Adriana Bebiano**

Listen. This is the noise of myth.
Eavan Boland

The last decades have seen the production of a large body of work reclaiming all areas of both knowledge and the arts for women. This act of "engendering" diverse discourses – history, literature, cinema, science, etc. – is still in progress and, though much used and at the risk of becoming banal, the verb "engendering" is still relevant and, indeed, needed.

Women's relationship to "nation" and to nationalist narratives is one of on-going conflict. Even if we accept that identities are multi-layered and complex – identifications-in-progress – in certain historical circumstances, such as colonial or postcolonial situations, the question of the "split loyalties" between national and sexual identities keeps coming up. In an essay which discusses women's position in colonial or post-colonial nations, Anne McClintock addresses this matter in no uncertain terms:

---

* University of Coimbra.

[1] This paper is part of the Project "Representações da violência e a violência das representações" ("Representations of violence and the violence of representations"), CES/FCT. Project POCI/ELT/61579/2004.

> For many decades, African Women have been loath to talk of women's emancipation outside the terms of the national liberation movement. . . . All too frequently, male nationalists have condemned feminisms as divisive, biding women hold their tongues until after the revolution. (108-109)

Though McClintock is addressing African nations in 1997, the question is still relevant, very much a global one, and it does apply to Ireland as a nation with a colonial past. It is precisely this history of colonialism which has been used to explain the persistent strength of the nationalist discourse. According to Colin Graham, in the Republic of Ireland the hegemony of the narrative of the nation erases other issues and "gender becomes subaltern to dominant nationalism, being forced, in Gramsci's terms, into 'affiliation' in order to press its claims" (106). In Northern Ireland Margaret Ward finds this affiliation in both the Nationalist and the Unionist sides of the Northern Irish divide. Ward quotes the Republican slogan "There can be no women's liberation until national liberation" to illustrate her argument (191).

The issue is not new. Back in 1903 Virginia Woolf *famously stated* in *Three Guineas:* "[A]s a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (ch 3). Eighty years later Adrienne Rich responds to Woolf in the essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location":

> As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times "As a woman my country is the whole world." Tribal loyalties aside, and even if nation-states are now just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interests, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. (210-231)

The two statements were made in rather different historical circumstances; yet, the two positions they exemplify are still relevant. My question in

this essay is as follows: how does Irish women writing address the nation today?

In "The Floozie in the Jacuzzi: the Problematics of Culture and Identity for an Irish Woman," Ailbhe Smyth states her position: "The ex-colonised oppressor colonises. (Habit of centuries) Theirs is the Republic, the Power and the Discourse" (16). She then goes on to say: "The problem is not how to negotiate entry *inside*, into a tradition, culture, discourse which designated the Other as necessary alien, necessarily *outside*. . . . Nor can the (nationalist) discourse be altered to accommodate alien expression" (21). Women would then be the Other of the Ex-Other, the colonized of the post-colonized. Back in 1989, Smyth does not see place for Irish women in the master narrative of the nation.

It is worth noticing the staying power of old figurations, namely that of "woman" as an allegory which erases the multiple realities of actual "women" and their social conditions. The dangers of allegorical figurations are discussed by Elizabeth Butler Cullingford in "'Thinking of Her... as... Ireland': Yeats, Pearse and Heaney":

> The allegorical identification of Ireland with a woman, variously personified as the Shan Van Vocht, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, or Mother Eire, is so common as to be rhetorically invisible. Yet it is neither natural nor archetypal. Historically, the personification of Ireland as a woman has served two distinct ideological purposes: as applied by Irish men it has helped to confine women in a straitjacket of purity and passivity; and as applied by English cultural imperialists it has imprisoned the whole Irish race in a debilitating stereotype. (1)

Cullingford goes on to explain the historical process that creates these figurations, from the Female Goddesses of myth to warrior Queen Maeve and to Mary, Mother of God, through the influence of the Catholic Church and the model of womanhood it endorses, with its emphasis on virginity and motherhood which denies female desire and subjectivity.

In the essay "Into what West? Modernity, Moving Images and the Maternal Supernatural", Joe Cleary addresses the Marian apparitions in Ireland from the 1880's and the 1980's linking them to the "The Great Mother." Cleary reads the phenomenon as a symptom of the anxieties brought about by the changes of advanced capitalism: "a lack or hollowness is posited at the heart of Irish modernity, and it is this lack that then generates an appeal to the figure of the Great Mother, who serves somehow both to register and to assuage the suffering involved" (185). Whatever the reasons that produce it, an idealized Mother Figure remains at the symbolic centre of the nation.

The idealized forms of "woman" – Queen Maeve, Mother of God or Floozie in the Jacuzzi – result in the identification of women with the land /nature. Figurations that look like celebrations of woman, in fact "flatter to deceive," as Patricia Coughlan writes in "Bog Queens: the representations of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." "Bog Queens," "The Floozie in The Jacuzzi" or "Thinking of Her as Ireland" deconstruct the tropes whereby a social and cultural construct appears as "natural" and thus legitimizes and enforces social and cultural practices that "keep women in their place." The power of representations to shape our realities should not be dismissed or underestimated.

The absence of women from the (global) historical Archive – in Foucault's sense – has been the object of debate since the 1970's. In *Sisterhood is powerful* (1970) Robin Morgan came up with the concept of *Herstory*, that Maggie Humm later (1989) adopted and disseminated. *Herstory* has taken many forms: academic essays on literary and cultural studies, biographies, biographical dictionaries, life-stories, fiction and hybrid texts – as I will be arguing later – are part of this counter-narrative which interrupts and questions the hegemonic master narrative.

It is perhaps in the area of Literary Studies that greater progress has been made. The revision of the literary canon in English may be said to have taken off with Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their own* (1977) and it has not slowed down since then, being now highly visible

in conferences, university degrees and publications. One has only to remember volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology of Literature: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, its bulk but also the controversy at its beginning, to recognize the importance of this project for present and future times. One should also bear in mind the importance of digital archives and databases which keep expanding and generating more knowledge. In Ireland, the *Dictionary of Munster Women's Writers 1800-2000*, coordinated by Tina O'Toole – both in its printed form and on-line[1] – would be a case in point.

It should be noted that Women's Literary Studies do not live in a ghetto, as Margaret Kelleher remarks: "In the context of literary studies the material invites a radical rethinking of issues of authorship, production, genre and canon-formation, not just for women studies" (174). By asking new questions, women's literary studies are reconfiguring the discipline of literary studies itself.

If the rewriting of the history of literature is now established, historiography is a different matter. Feminist historiography is looked upon with suspicion, given that "science" is (supposedly) objective and (supposedly) not political.

It is the received idea that Irish Culture suffers from a surfeit of history or, in David Lloyd's words, a "surfeit of history" (4). Where women are concerned, however, rather than a surfeit of history there's *lack*, though the situation is changing. A major change might be perceived in Margaret Mac Curtain's early writing in the 1960's. Back then there was virtually no women's history and hers was a solitary voice. *Ariadne's Thread. Writing Women into Irish History,* a selection of Mac Curtain's essays written between 1963 and 2008 approaching issues from Early Modern to present day Ireland was published in 2008. This publication can be read as a just homage to her groundbreaking work but also as a

---

[1] Also available as online searchable database, it contains over 560 entries for both English and Irish-language writer. See: www.munsterwomen.ie

sign of the present strength of the field.[2] Mac Curtain was a pioneer in many ways, not least in her use of oral history, a methodology which is now central for women studies everywhere but one whose legitimacy is still a matter of fierce debate.

Precisely because of the transdisciplinary form that women studies take, I would like to briefly single out Margaret Ward's work. She is exemplary of the present blooming in Irish women's history both because she is committed into writing women into the nation and also because she has used different genres in this project. *Unmanageable Revolutionaries. Women and Irish Nationalism* (1983), is an academic study which covers a hundred years of female participation in nationalist struggle, from the Ladies' Land League of the 1880's to the protests of Irish Republican women in Armagh Jail in the early 1980's. *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and wicked Hags* (2004), co-edited with Louise Ryan, follows up on this research: it is a collection of essays that bear witness to the silencing of women's contribution to the national struggle, ranging from the 1641 rebellion to Northern Ireland in the last decades of the twentieth century, in each case reclaiming history for women. Furthermore, Ward has also written biographies of Maud Gonne and of Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. Something quite different has to be mentioned and, indeed, emphasized, in Ward's work. *The Female Line. Researching your Female Ancestors* (2003) is a handbook which teaches women students to write the stories of their families focusing on their female lines, while using a mixed methodology which includes oral history. Teaching *how to do it* makes Ward special, and is a symptom of her commitment to the project of *Herstory*.

At this point one must ask how far the project of trying to write Irish women into the nation has been successful. In this essay my aim is not to make a comprehensive survey of the existing material but to look at examples of recently published texts which can be read as

---

[2] I would like to thank Maureen Murphy, to whom this volume of essays is dedicated, for it was she who called my attention to the work of Margaret Mac Curtain.

symptoms of the ways by which the nation is being reconfigured and engendered. It should be noted that *Herstory* is not being written exclusively by women: *Gender in Irish Writing* (1991), edited by Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns, or the more recent *Cumann Na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (2007), by Cal McCarthy, would be examples of male contributions to a story that belongs to the whole community, regardless of sexual identity.

I would like to address "popular history" for books written outside the academy can be read as symptoms of emerging master narratives. *No Ordinary Women. Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923*, by Sinéad McCoole, first published in 2003 and with two reprints since then, calls for some reflection. The very process of the researching and writing of this book is worth thinking about: in 1994 the author, a graduate in history and then a guide at Kilmainham Gaol – an iconic space in the nationalist narrative – started gathering material on behalf of the Heritage Service for an exhibition on women who had participated in the struggle for Irish Independence. *Guns and Chiffon. Women and Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol 1916-1923* was opened by the then President Mary Robinson, in 1996. While collecting material for the exhibition McCoole also started gathering testimonies and stories from a few of the survivors – and, mostly, from survivor's relatives – having found out about quite a few figures who were previously unknown.[3] The book includes a large number of photos of all kinds of documents plus seventy two short biographies of Irish women nationalists of the early twentieth century.

Countess Markiewizc or Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington are quite well known but they tend to be seen as exceptions in what is essentially a male epic narrative. In *No Ordinary Women* Markiewizc, Sheehy-Skeffington and a few others who are also relatively famous do figure. However, among the seventy-two biographies, most are of unre-

---

[3] Again in this area Margaret Mac Curtain is a pioneer: she interviewed survivors of the Easter Rising for *Women in Irish Society: the Historical Dimension* (1978).

membered or even unknown grandmothers or old aunts who never talked about their past adventures, whose life as "spies, snipers, couriers, gunrunners" was ignored by history and also, quite often, by their own siblings or offspring. Very few people would have heard of May Zambra, whose life closes the biography section of the book: born in 1906 in Dublin, joined Cumman na mBan in 1922; was arrested in February 1923 for the shooting of a Criminal Investigation Division man; joined the hunger strike in November 1923; died in 1929, at 23, of tubercular meningitis (McCoole 214-215). May Zambra is an example of the kind of woman who did take an active part in the birth of a nation and then disappeared into the dark.

One might argue that there were plenty of men whose deeds would equal or even surpass May Zambra's and of whom nothing is now known. However, their absence from the collective memory does not have consequences in the representation of men's role in the nation's shaping as a whole, while, on the other hand, the absence of these women allows for the representation of Irish women as mainly passive and suffering victims. *No Ordinary Women* is important precisely because of the amount of historical documented information on a number of women who were actively involved in building the nation, thus calling for a reconfiguration of "woman" and its relationship to "nation."

Twenty years separate Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* and McCoole's *No Ordinary Women*. While Ward's is in poor paper and off-set – in a few years my copy will be unreadable – McCoole's is produced in high quality paper; it has beautiful colour illustrations in most of its 288 pages and its design is artistically sophisticated. The differences in the production of the two publications can be read in different ways:[4] the optimistic reading would say that it reflects a present deeper awareness of women's; however, one should wonder if women are being

---

[4] It should be noted that *No Ordinary Women* has a preface by Margaret Ward, thus establishing continuity between the work being done in the 1980s and in the present.

written into History mostly for the glamour effect and as part of the Heritage Industry. "Heritage" is also about history as product and a global phenomenon, both in the themes addressed and in its widespread existence, certainly not circumscribed to women or to Ireland. As part of a global process of the transformation of history into a marketable product I would suggest that Irish nationalism with women is a trendy commodity that sells well. My aim is not to dismiss or belittle *No Ordinary Women*, whose importance cannot be sufficiently emphasized. However, a euphoric view of the triumph of the history of women should be tempered by a reflection on how it is being done, on the market forces at work, and, furthermore, on how empowering for women are the histories and stories now in circulation.

Coda: Remember: or, if you don't remember, invent

The writing of *herstory* may – and should – be extended beyond historiography and biography to include fiction and other arts.[5] "Looking back with fresh eyes" (Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 35) historical fiction has been re-appropriating history for women by reinventing the lives of unknown or forgotten heroines and re-signifying historical events in the process.

Contemporary examples from different countries are plentiful. In Irish literature Emma Donoghue's fiction is a case in point. Novels such as *Slammerkin* (2000) and *The Sealed Letter* (2008), or yet the short-story collection *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), narrate the thinly documented lives of historical women. From these scraps of

---

[5] Judy Chicago's art installation *The Dinner Party*, first exhibited in 1979 and now on permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, in New York, is exemplary of how art can rewrite history: depicting place settings for 39 mythical and historical famous women at an empty table, while the names of 999 more women are represented on the floor tiles, it calls attention to the silencing of women throughout history.

history, by bringing "memory and invention together, like two hands engaged in the same muddy work of digging up the past" (*Slammerkin*), Donoghue brings those women back from the dark (Bebiano, "Da vida das mulheres infames"). Other examples in Irish fiction would be Anne Enright's, *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), about the notorious Irish lover of the dictator of Paraguay, Francisco López, known to local history as the "Lady Macbeth of Paraguay," or Nuala O'Faoilain's *The Story of Chicago May* (2006), a semi-fictional biography of an Irish thieve and hooker at the turn of the twentieth century (Bebiano, "Mad, bad and dangerous to know").

Donoghue, Enright and O'Faolain are quite well-known and respected writers. The rewriting of history in fiction, however, is also being done in "light" literature, which should not be ignored, given its power as an ideological tool. Morgan Llywelen's *Grania: She-King of the Irish Seas* (1994) is a very competent novel about the life of Granuaille, also known as Grace O'Malley, a powerful Irish woman pirate of the sixteenth century. *Granuaille. Ireland's Pirate Queen. Grace O'Malley: 1530-1603* (2002), by Anne Chambers, is a highly readable biography of O'Malley, whose absence from academic historiography is notorious.

Spanning from prize-winning to popular works, these narratives are part of the same cloth and equally important from a political point of view: they question the dominant patrilineal narrative of the nation and put forward a matrilineal one, thus re-inscribing women in the collective memory. Feminist historiography, with its specific methodology, has an important role in reclaiming history for women; on the other hand, only fiction can gather from the darkness the ones that have left no trace in the archive and re-inscribe them in the collective memory, thus providing women today with empowering role models. Fiction is thus an important part of *herstory*.

Only by rewriting history, through either the documented or the imagined lives of historical women – when little or no documents are available – can women be heard above the noise of myth. Only by the

act of telling the lives of actual women can we move from playing an allegorical role in the community to being entitled to a place in it: from being wedded to the land to being full citizens of the land.

Works Cited

Bebiano, Adriana. "Da vida das mulheres infames. A história segundo Emma Donoghue." *Anglo-Saxónica. Revista do Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa* II. 27 (2009): 17-32.

_____. "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know: the stories of Chicago May and Eliza Lynch." *Irish Women Writers. New Critical Perspectives.* Eds. Elke D'hoker, Hedwig Schwall and Raphaël Ingelbien. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010.

Chambers, Anne. *Granuaille. Ireland's Pirate Queen. Grace O'Malley: 1530-1603.* Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2006.

Cleary, Joe. *Outrageous Fortune. Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland.* Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007.

Coughlan, Patricia. "Bog Queens: the representations of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." *Gender in Irish Writing.* Eds. Johnson, Toni O'Brien and David Cairns. Milton Keynes, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991. 88-111.

Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. "'Thinking of Her... as... Ireland': Yeats, Pearse and Heaney." *Textual Practice* 4.1 (Spring 1990). páginas Donoghue, Emma. *The Sealed Letter.* London: Harcourt Inc., 2008.

_____. *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits.* London: Virago Press 2002.

_____. *Slammerkin.* London: Virago Press, 2000.

Graham, Colin. *Deconstructing Ireland. Identity, Theory, Culture.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

Kelleher, Margaret. "A Retrospective View on Irish Women's Literary Studies." *Kaleidoscopic Views of Ireland.* Eds. Munira H. Mutran & Laura P. Z. Izarra. São Paulo: Universidade de S. Paulo, 2003. (enlarged and updated version of "Writing Irish Women's Literary History." Irish Studies Review 9.1 [2001]).

Johnson, Toni O'Brien and David Cairns. *Gender in Irish Writing.* Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991.

Lloyd, David. *Anomolous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Movement.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Mac Curtain, Margaret. *Ariadne's Thread. Writing Women into Irish History. With a Forward by Maureen Murphy.* Galway: Arlen House, 2008.

McCarthy, Cal. *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution*. Cork: The Collins Press, 2007.

McClintock, Anne. "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race, and Nationalism." *Dangerous Liaisons. Gender, Nation and Postcolinial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shoat. Mmineapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 108-109.

McCoole, Sinéad. *No Ordinary Women. Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2008 [1st ed.: 2003].

Morgan Llywelen. *Grania: She-King the of Irish Seas*. London: Sphere, 1994.

O'Toole, Tina, Gen. Ed. *Dictionary of Munster Women's Writers 1800-2000* Cork: Cork University Press, 2005.

Rich, Adrienne. "Notes toward a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 2005. 210-231.

_____. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. 33-49.

Smyth, Ailbhe. "The Floozie in the Jacuzzi: the Problematics of Culture and Identity for an Irish Woman." *The Irish Review* (1989): 7-24.

Ward, Margaret. *Unmanageable Revolutionaries. Women and Irish Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press, 1995. [1st ed.: 1983].

_____. *The Female Line. Researching your Female Ancestors*. Newbury: Countryside Books, 2004.

Ward, Margaret and Louise Ryan, eds. *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004.

Woolf, Virginia.*Three Guineas*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1938.