

Introduction

This book is comprised of five portraits of Irish women from various fields – literature, journalism, music and politics – who have achieved outstanding reputations since around 1960: Edna O’Brien, Sinéad O’Connor, Bernadette McAliskey, Nuala O’Faolain and Anne Enright. This is not offered as a representative sample of accomplished Irish women but neither is it a merely random selection. For they are, all of them, quite exceptional in their achievements: all are or have been famous abroad as well as in Ireland, and several could claim at some point of their lives to have been among the most recognisable Irish people in the world. It is quite a homogeneous group in sociological terms: one – McAliskey – is from a working-class Northern Irish Catholic background, but the others all come from the southern Irish Catholic middle class. However, this book does not aim to be a comprehensive record of the successes of modern Irish women or Irish feminism. Numerous, diverse Irish women have had remarkable careers, sometimes in even more heavily male-dominated realms; there are many other extraordinary women, including important feminist campaigners, who may not have attracted the same level of international media attention as the women considered here. Rather, my focus is on the ways in which these particular distinguished women make sense of their formative experiences as Irish people and how they in turn have been understood as vibrant figures in whom certain liberating aspects of modernity in Ireland have been realised. Their creative work and their broader careers raise particularly compelling questions about women’s emancipation, the

legacies of modern Irish history and the possibility of radical social transformation in contemporary society. In my view, these are among the most important themes in academic and public debate in Ireland over the last sixty years or so.

In her classic work of 1949, Simone de Beauvoir described women as members of the 'second sex'. While there is no perceived contradiction between a man's humanity and his masculine identity, women have been defined as the 'other' of men – that is, they have usually been regarded as human beings of a different and secondary order. In philosophical terms, Beauvoir described women as confined to 'immanence': close to nature, passive, responsible for the reproduction of people and culture. Men (or at least privileged men) could far more easily aspire to 'transcendence' and to becoming creative innovators. A woman interested in the arts or science or politics was obliged to confront all kinds of preconceptions about her capacities, often including her own internalised ideas about feminine identity. Perceived primarily as a woman, rather than as a person who happens to be female, she was burdened with always having to think about her femininity. Beauvoir wrote that 'it is very seldom that woman fully assumes the anguished tête-à-tête with the given world';¹ yet, this was necessary if the female artist or thinker was to claim her freedom to express or challenge the human situation. In other words, it was difficult for her to confront the universe directly, leaving gender entirely aside. Beauvoir believed that in her time 'the free woman is just being born'.²

Beauvoir's *The second sex* has been much discussed and sometimes criticised by feminists in succeeding decades, especially since the emergence of the 'second wave' women's movement at the end of the 1960s. To some, her analysis seemed too dismissive of certain traditional dimensions of women's lives, such as motherhood. Further, in holding women to standards of 'universal' achievement that are in practice defined by men, Beauvoir could herself be accused of being 'masculinist' in her values. She is certainly no separatist and she does not regard women as fundamentally different (or superior) to men. But despite all the inevitable disputes about Beauvoir's legacy, some feminist theorists including Toril Moi argue for the continuing importance of Beauvoir's theory of women's freedom for feminism

today. As Moi suggests, every woman has the right to speak about her experiences as a woman: it is oppressive to reduce women to their 'humanity' in a way that takes no account of their female bodies or their social experiences. But by the same token, feminism

does not have to be committed to the belief that sex and/or gender differences always manifest themselves in all cultural and personal activities, or that whenever they do, then they are always the most important features of a person or a practice. Women's bodies are human as well as female. Women have interests, capacities, and ambitions that reach far beyond the realm of sexual differences, however one defines these.³

In other words, women do not always speak just *as* women.

I will look at this chosen group of five women in the light of Beauvoir's feminist philosophy in particular. All of them to a greater or lesser degree are influenced by but also resistant to stereotypes of feminine identity; other questions arising from Irish history and contemporary society in Ireland preoccupy them too. Yet they are heroic exemplars of the free woman, still perhaps just being born in modern Ireland. All of them are famous in their own right and not because of their connections to prominent families or male partners. Their careers were facilitated by the emergence of the Irish women's movement and several have also made key contributions to the feminist analysis of Irish culture. Yet they are all singular or even, in some cases, at times apparently lonely individuals. This is no doubt mainly due to their willingness to break with standard expectations of women's lives. It is also in part an impression created or heightened by press or media attention and one which at times may have suited the purposes of these women themselves. Indeed, we may sometimes be more comfortable hearing from a solitary, supposedly exceptional woman, especially if she is young and conventionally attractive, rather than contending with the questions posed by feminist or radical politics more generally. However, ultimately I am most interested in what the uncommon lives of these women tell us not just about themselves but about our common life – in general, but specifically in Ireland.

Anyone who considers the history of women in Ireland confronts a key question: compared to other Western European countries, was (or is) Ireland an especially dreadful place for women? For centuries, Ireland had been imagined as a woman in legend and poetry: Róisín Dubh, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Mother Ireland. Such images also became associated with the Virgin Mary as an icon of passive suffering and sexual purity. The 1937 Constitution of the Irish Republic acknowledged the special position of the Catholic Church in the state and the importance of a woman's 'life within the home' for the common good of the nation. Feminists and liberal campaigners in favour of liberalising the country's laws on contraception, divorce and other issues of sexual morality have endured long and bitterly contested struggles from the 1970s on. In Ireland, feminism could not but seem threatening to the traditional life of the country as that had been moulded by the teaching of the Church.

It is unsurprising that for many of the generations emerging after the mid-century, Ireland's historic struggle for political independence seemed to have little to do with the freedom of Irish women. In her memoir, the novelist Edna O'Brien recalls her first sight of Dublin's O'Connell Street:

Opposite [Nelson's] pillar was the General Post Office, where the men of the 1916 rebellion proclaimed the Irish Constitution, raised the Irish flag, but were soon overwhelmed and summarily executed in Kilmainham Yard. Further along, a statue of Daniel O'Connell, the Catholic emancipator, an iron man in a black iron coat with iron angels guarding him. But I was finished with all that, with history and martyrs and fields ... being, as I believed, on the brink of daring emancipation.⁴

Mary Robinson, on her election as the first female President of Ireland in 1990, hailed the women of Ireland in particular – 'mná na hÉireann' – who, in choosing a liberal, feminist candidate, 'instead of rocking the cradle [had] rocked the system'; Irish people, she said, had 'stepped out from the faded flags of the Civil War and voted for a new Ireland'.⁵ Some thirty years after O'Brien, Robinson too associates the liberation of Irish women – and of the citizens of Ireland generally

– with a willingness to lay aside earlier conflicts in and through which the definition of the twentieth-century nation had been drawn.

However, feminism has not consistently been simply uninterested in or hostile to nationalism and republicanism in Ireland. A proportion of women in Northern Ireland, for example, took a different view of supposedly archaic disputes about the partition of Ireland in 1922. And as scholars have turned to the project of recovering the neglected histories of Irish women, it has become clear that many early twentieth-century ‘first wave’ Irish feminist thinkers were as profoundly committed to nationalist anti-imperialism as they were to campaigns for female suffrage and the equality of the sexes. Republican women have been caricatured as the diehard, ultra-conservative widows or other relatives of the lost martyrs of the Irish Revolution. In fact, female nationalist activists and artists were often daring and unconventional. They consistently criticised the independent Irish state for what they saw as its failure to live up to the radical political ambition of the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic.⁶ Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward point out that while Irish nationalism has certainly been sexist, this has not necessarily precluded the involvement of women in nationalist movements. They argue that we must

distinguish between how women have been represented in national histories and cultural and symbolic repertoires [and] how they have actually negotiated and challenged their roles and contribution to nationalism ... While nationalist symbols, images and texts have continued to depict women within a narrow range of cultural stereotypes, women’s roles within nationalism have been, and continue to be, diverse, multifaceted and dynamic.⁷

This point is most directly relevant to one of the women I write about here: politician Bernadette McAliskey (formerly Devlin), one of the founders of the civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland and a Westminster MP at a pivotal moment in Northern Irish history. Yet the distinction drawn here by Ryan and Ward is important in a more general sense for Irish feminism. When women artists and scholars began to look into the history of their female precursors,

especially in the early twentieth-century period, they did not tend to find individuals who would have declared with Virginia Woolf: 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'⁸ Some of the most impressive of these women were prepared to work for and even fight over issues of sovereignty, empire and nation, alongside their commitments to suffragism and other campaigns for gender equality. As the republican leader Constance Markievicz put it in 1909: 'No one should place sex before nationality or nationality before sex.'⁹ Even when contemporary Irish women may have felt no particular emotional connection to politicised women from the time, it still remains the case that, in the words of Margaret O'Callaghan, 'the story of Irish women is part of the complex story of partitioned Ireland's self-fashioning, and the relationship of cohorts of people within that society with their own pasts and the pasts of their parents; it is at the heart of that story and not an addendum to it'.¹⁰ For example, O'Brien's fiction and memoirs clearly show that she was never, in fact, to be finished with Ireland and its 'history, martyrs and fields'. Among the women I discuss here, another celebrated memoirist, Nuala O'Faolain, dwells in most detail on how the Irish patriarchs of her childhood, including her own father, were intensely conscious of being the inheritors of a new state that the previous generation had struggled to create. She believed that this helped to shape nearly every dimension of her early experience: sexuality, family life, politics. For various reasons – some of them biographical – O'Faolain was also preoccupied with the question of Northern Ireland to a degree that was highly unusual for a southern Irish feminist. This was a concern shared with O'Brien and musician Sinéad O'Connor. The latter, as a female performer who has engaged with the traditional Irish musical repertoire and with received images of Irish femininity, has from the outset of her career been understood to be experimenting with and expanding the received idea of the female voice as expressive of the suffering Irish nation. In their various works of fiction, journalism and social commentary, O'Brien, O'Faolain and Anne Enright have all explored the specificities of Irish landscape, speech and sensibilities (which is not to say that such interests necessarily correlate with any particular political stance on the question of nationalism). But while O'Connor challenges aspects

of the role of the female singer that in itself was understood to be a conventional one for an Irish woman, in their fiction O'Brien and Enright (and O'Faolain too in her two late novels) take up the position of national storytellers in an art form that had been dominated throughout the twentieth century in Ireland by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and other male writers.

All the women considered here are strongly associated with what has come to be thought of as the liberal critique of Ireland. This is especially true of the women from the Republic, who have spoken out in opposition to aspects of the Catholic-dominated independent Irish state in particular. But in the late 1960s, McAliskey, as a young woman whose rhetoric chimed with that of student and youth protest movements of the time across Europe and America, was also seen as galvanising and modernising a previously ineffectual political resistance to the sectarian Northern Irish state in the late 1960s. But each of these women also frequently articulates a strong sense that while they are criticising Ireland as it is, *by* that very action they are also creating and revealing a more positive and more authentic sense of what 'Irishness' could mean or what it could become. However inescapably oppressive their own complex identifications with Ireland can be for them, at times, they also suggest that Irishness itself, understood as an historically determined condition, is in fact fundamentally hospitable to such values as diversity, equality and tolerance. Robinson herself struck exactly such a note at the conclusion of her inaugural speech. She declared that as President she hoped to sing the 'joyous refrain' of a medieval Irish poem adapted by W. B. Yeats: 'I am of Ireland ... come dance with me in Ireland.'¹¹

Robinson's message about change, then, was also one about revival. She said that she hoped that her presidency could become a kind of symbolic 'fifth province'.¹² She was drawing here on the notion that ancient Ireland had recognised a spiritual space, beyond the four provinces of the real Ireland, which represented empathy and reconciliation. It surely must have seemed particularly appropriate for a woman leader – even a campaigning barrister and professor such as Robinson – to draw on such imagery. This is especially true in the case of Ireland, where associations between the national territory and femininity remain familiar and resonant. But her inauguration

also provided a striking visual image of a modern feminist challenge to masculine power. Television footage and photographs of the ceremony memorably show the new head of state dressed in vivid purple seated in front of rows of almost exclusively male politicians in dark suits. For many, this imagery almost immediately became a classic representation of a less hierarchical and a less repressive Ireland: its first definition was a political and social synthesis embodied in this female figure who had just emerged with such *éclat* from the pallor of the political system. This is just one example (although a central one) of how the enormous impact of many prominent female figures in Ireland in recent decades has depended on their capacity to draw on both archaic and contemporary ideas about women and on their having found the means to express these through media images as well in their own more specialised fields.

We can shed light on these conjugations of sex, tradition and change by exploring the question posed by Rita Felski: does modernity as such have a gender? Felski suggests that in fact the modern era can be understood as having both a 'masculine' and a 'feminine' face. Becoming modern is evidently the achievement of people who are rational, daring and transgressive and such qualities are primarily associated with men. By contrast, women may seem to be inherently traditional: as life givers and nurturers, they are more concerned with preserving stability than plotting revolutions. But while the advent of the modern is associated with, for example, images of industrialisation or machinery and of masculine ingenuity and strength, we think of women as in some senses better suited than men to a later capitalist era of consumerism with all its cultivation of the pleasures of self-adornment and mass culture. They are perhaps more at home in what Walter Benjamin calls the 'phantasmagoria' of the modern.¹³ Through certain key representative figures, including the shopper, the feminist, the hysteric and the prostitute, who feature so recurrently in popular culture, cinema, literature and journalism, woman becomes 'a powerful symbol of both the dangers and promises of the modern age'.¹⁴

In some of the widely disseminated images of the women celebrated here, modern Ireland has produced its variants on such figures. There are good historical reasons why – in Felski's phrase – the feminine

face of modernity in Ireland was particularly important. Outside Belfast and some other Northern urban areas, Ireland was not heavily industrialised. When the southern Irish economy did achieve growth, during the late 1960s up to the Oil Crisis of 1972 and during the 'Celtic Tiger' boom from around 1995 until the crash of 2008, its expansion was due mainly to foreign direct investment, high-tech industries, financial services and a property boom. Not much muscle or sweat there. And while women in Ireland may long have been considered the very embodiments of tradition, they also came to be regarded as the most salient victims of old Ireland (especially in the decades between the rise of the women's movement and increased public consciousness of other major issues such as child abuse and discrimination against gay people). The biggest battles between liberals and Catholic Ireland were concerned with sex and reproduction. Of course contraception, divorce and abortion were not just matters of relevance to feminists. They were also bound up with a more permissive attitude to sexuality in general and thus feminist campaigns in part represented an extension of earlier protests against the puritanical regime of the independent state. Although they may have been dismissed by many people as members of an unrepresentative elite, feminist journalists and activists were at the forefront of these debates, entertaining and scandalising a wide audience with their fearlessness, wit and flamboyance.¹⁵ The five women considered here were not part of this specific grouping; however, both their work and its reception were shaped by this new awareness of women's experience and interests. The feminist herself became one of the paradigmatic modern figures in the Irish imaginary. And traces of stereotypes of the legendary 'wild Irish girl', from the warrior queen Grace O'Malley down to the red-haired Hollywood colleen, were also seen to cling to 'feisty' Irish women. This is true even when the latter are being most 'modern': 'strident', candid about sexual matters, taking on unconventional roles as spokespeople or public representatives. Of course, not all perceptions of 'women's libbers' were positive. As well as representing a defiant rebellion against the past, the feminist could shade into the hysteric: another modern type, but one whose rejection of social norms supposedly took the pathological forms of anarchy or promiscuity. Nevertheless, a previously marginalised section of the

population had apparently found its authentic voice for the first time: here was a more spectacular emergence than (for instance) that of the Northern Catholic minority at roughly the same moment, or of any group representing the economically disadvantaged throughout the entire history of the state.

The women considered here are deeply committed to significant artistic and political values and were never just interested in becoming celebrities. Nevertheless they were all highly visible in the media during key episodes in their public lives. McAliskey's youth and gender inevitably meant that she was able to attract increased press attention to the movement for civil rights. A powerfully telegenic Edna O'Brien became a literary star in Ireland and the United Kingdom even as her local parish priest in Co. Clare was publicly burning copies of her banned first novel. Sinéad O'Connor's tearing up of a photograph of Pope John Paul II live on US television in 1992 was probably the pivotal moment of her entire career. Nuala O'Faolain is perhaps better remembered for two viscerally powerful interviews in the Irish media than for any of her works in print: the first on television with Gay Byrne on *The late late show* the day before the publication of her memoir in 1996, and the second with Marian Finucane on RTÉ radio a few weeks before her death in 2008. Only Anne Enright, as a more securely 'literary' figure, inhabits a world where the public relations is less sensationalist. Indeed, with the exception of Enright, the artists here (O'Brien, O'Connor and O'Faolain in her career as a novelist) all have affinities with 'light' or commercial forms, especially pop music and romantic fiction. At the same time, these artists are by no means ignorant of the immensely seductive and sometimes damaging power of manufactured fantasies. Women still belong to the second sex, so any assessments of the notable achievements of these individuals must involve consideration of how they have dealt with inherited, commodified and contested notions of feminine identity.

I will investigate here what we might call the genealogies of the media images and events involving these figures: their origins in the lives and ideas of the women, the ways in which they were received by people more generally, their crystallisation of certain key ideas about gender at a time of conflict and transition in the culture. For better or worse, late twentieth-century Ireland needed its unconventional or

feminist women, as mavericks who nevertheless seemed to dramatise the possibility of major, far-reaching change. To paraphrase Freud's question about the supposed enigma of 'feminine' desire, in these five cases we might ask: 'What did these women want?'¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 721.
- 2 Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 723.
- 3 Toril Moi, *What is a woman? and other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8; in this book Moi offers a superb account of Beauvoir's thinking about gender and of later feminist debates about *The second sex*.
- 4 Edna O'Brien, *Country girl: a memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 81.
- 5 Mary Robinson, 'Acceptance speech', 9 November 1990, www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/president-robinsons-acceptance-speech (accessed 21 June 2018).
- 6 Among other recent accounts of women in this period, see Senia Pašeta, *Irish nationalist women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and R. F. Foster, *Vivid faces: the revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).
- 7 Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, *Irish women and nationalism: soldiers, new women and wicked hags* (Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2004), p. 3.
- 8 Virginia Woolf, *Three guineas* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), p. 129.
- 9 Constance Markievicz, writing in the nationalist-feminist paper *Bean na hÉireann*, quoted by C. L. Innes, *Woman and nation in Irish literature and society, 1880–1935* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 138.
- 10 Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Women and politics in independent Ireland, 1921–68', in Angela Bourke *et al.* (eds), *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing: Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), vol. 5, p. 134.
- 11 Mary Robinson, 'Inaugural speech', 3 December 1990, www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/address-by-the-president-mary-robinson-on-the-occasion-of-her-inauguration (accessed 21 June 2018).
- 12 Robinson, 'Inaugural speech'.
- 13 For Walter Benjamin's classic account of the 'dreamworld' of modern commodity culture, see *The arcades project*, trans. Howard Eiland

- and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 14 Rita Felski, *The gender of modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 3.
 - 15 There is a growing literature on the history of Irish feminism: see, for example, Bourke *et al.* (eds), *The Field Day anthology*, vols 4 and 5; Linda Connolly, *The Irish women's movement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Clara Fischer and Mary McAuliffe (eds), *Irish feminisms: past, present and future* (Galway: Arlen House, 2014).
 - 16 Sigmund Freud's remark 'What does a woman want?' ('Was will das Weib?') is recorded by Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: life and work* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 2, p. 468.