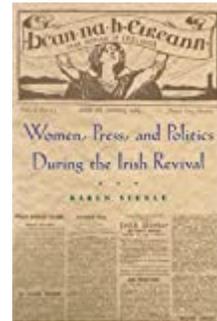




**Karen Steele.** *Women, Press, and Politics during the Irish Revival.* Irish Studies Series. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007. xii + 273 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-3141-5.



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## Feminist Authors of the Irish Revolution?

A welcome trend in recent histories of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century has been an increasing willingness to recognize some of the interconnections between literature and politics that helped shape Irish identity.[1] Few studies, however, have paid significant attention to feminist contributions to the vibrant newspaper and periodical culture of the Irish revival.[2] Drawing on broader theoretical considerations of women's literary production, Karen Steele's book seeks to outline a feminist genealogy of nationalism through a study of Irish women's journalism in the two decades leading up to the Easter Rising in 1916 (p. 2). *Women, Press, and Politics during the Irish Revival* interprets the broad canopy of the Irish-Ireland movement as forming a textual meeting place in which newspapers functioned as sites for women to articulate their feminist and nationalist political beliefs (p. 10). This is an important book that opens up a number of exciting possibilities for future research and indicates that the press is a vital, and underused, source for the study of Irish feminist and nationalist identity at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Steele's book is structured around a number of case studies of feminist and nationalist newspapers: the *Shan Van Vocht*, the *United Irishman*, *Bean na h-Aireann*, the *Irish Citizen*, and the *Irish Worker*. Steele's close reading of women's contributions to these publications may, at first glance, appear to follow the concerns of a prior generation in the historiography of Irish women, viewing these texts through the prism of the period's star attractions, Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz. However, Steele's approach to these two figures is rather different. Analyzing Gonne's articles for the *United Irishman* and Markievicz's for the *Irish Citizen* and *Bean na h-Aireann*, Steele delineates the complexities of their political thought and the strong connections both women had with other activists and feminist, nationalist, and socialist organizations. This interconnectedness informs each of the book's chapters.

The first two chapters, examining the *Shan Van Vocht* and the *United Irishman*, outline what Steele terms the quiet feminism of such authors as Alice Milligan and Gonne (p. 73). Echoing Angela Bourke's notion of fem-

inist codings,â Steele identifies how articles in these two newspapers could employ relatively narrow conceptions of acceptable womanly behavior (usually centered on the home and family life) to engage with aspects of feminine agency and activism.[3] In chapter 1, she examines the nationalist and feminist content of Milliganâs stories in the *Shan Van Vocht*. According to Steele, such stories as âThe Little Green Slippersâ illustrate how Milligan politicized “the Ascendancy girlsâ domestic realm,” using seemingly banal, everyday themes to engage with broader nationalist politics (p. 37). The second chapter addresses Gonneâs columns in the *United Irishman*, placing them in the context of other female writers for this newspaper, such as Mary Butler, although Butler did not deplore the feminist activism of Gonne and others quite as much as Steele suggests (p. 74).[4]

The authorâs discussion of Markievicz retreads the familiar ground of her “Woman with a Garden” column in *Bean na hÃireann*, but, instead of confirming her status as an âexceptional woman,â Steele relocates Markievicz in the nationalist and feminist networks of Inghinidhe na hÃireann and the Irish Womenâs Franchise League. Steele successfully captures how Markievicz embodied many of the connections and tensions between the nationalist and feminist movements. Markievicz, according to Steele, deployed domestic themes for subversive ends, using her garden as âa field of multiple political strugglesâ and suggested a powerful political role for women outside of the home (p. 116).

Chapter 4 takes as its premise the dispute between Delia Larkin and Augusta Gregory over Larkinâs production of Gregoryâs *The Workhouse Ward* (1908). Larkin produced this play as part of a fundraising tour in 1914 but had done so without first seeking Gregoryâs permission. In some respects, this is the least successful chapter in the book, focusing on a quarrel that seemingly tells us little about the nature of Irish womenâs activism or writings in the period. However, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to a perceptive analysis of the tone of Larkinâs writings in *The Irish Worker*. Larkinâs âWomenâs Workerâ column was written in an abrasive, sarcastic style, which perhaps explains why her work was received poorly by working women. In many ways reminiscent of the sharpness and caustic character of Susan Mitchellâs writings in the *Irish Homestead*, Larkinâs overtly masculine style stood in contrast to the more feminine genres (romance, gardening advice column) adopted by Milligan, Markievicz, and Gonne.

Steele ends this book by addressing the debates about motherhood, militancy, and nationhood within the pages

of the *Irish Citizen*, deftly capturing the deeply contested nature of Irish feminism both before and during the First World War. The center piece of this chapter is an examination of the rhetorical deployment of motherhood in discussions about suffrage militancy and republican nationalism. Steele traces the intriguing development of motherhood as a trope in feminist thought, from Lillian Suffernâs defense of militancy as entirely congruent with a motherâs concern for the health and well-being of her children, to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffingtonâs complete rejection of motherhood as a rationale for feminist or nationalist opposition to the First World War.

This book reveals much of the complexities of Irish womenâs feminist and nationalist thoughts during the period of the Irish revival, and offers historians a broader model of how we can use newspapers to discern womenâs engagement with public debate and activism. There is much to admire in Steeleâs approach to her subject, from her measured engagement with theoretical approaches, to her lucid presentation of the shifts in feminist and nationalist thought and her evocative use of images that serve as an important reminder of the visual impact of newspapers. Although much work remains to be done on Irish womenâs journalism, this book functions as an important foundation for an emerging and vibrant area of scholarship in Irish studies.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see P. J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, The Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003).

[2]. Recent articles that examine Irish womenâs journalistic output at the turn of the twentieth century include Catherine Morris, âBecoming Irish? Alice Milligan and the Revival,â *Irish University Review* 33 (2003): 79-98; James MacPherson, âIreland Begins in the Homeâ: Women, Irish National Identity and the Domestic Sphere in the *Irish Homestead*, 1896-1912,â *Ãire-Ireland* 36 (2001): 131-152; and Virginia Crossman, âThe *Shan Van Vocht*: Women, Republicanism, and the Commemoration of the 1798 Rebellion,â *Eighteenth Century Life* 22 (1998): 128-139.

[3]. Angela Bourke, “More in Anger Than in Sorrow: Irish Women’s Lament Poetry,” in Joan Newlon Radnor, ed., *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1993), 160-82.

[4]. See Mary Butler, âTo the Women of Ireland,â in *The Irish Yearbook 1908*, ed. The National Council (Dublin: The National Council, 1908), 336-339.

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