

Ireland is alarming, so it is no wonder that Ailbhe Smyth writes with impassioned optimism of the meaning of Mary Robinson's presidency for Irish women.

In a second grouping of articles, Madeleine Leonard and Eileen Drew speak of the micro-economics of daily living for Irish women. Leonard describes the collective efforts of women in Belfast to counteract poverty and unemployment. She argues that the humanistic concerns of women in the workplace "may have a radical edge equal to that of the economic concerns of men, by which industrial militancy had been traditionally judged." Drew examines the part-time, and usually female, worker in Ireland. As in all parts of the industrialized world, legislators and protectionist unions have been slow to acknowledge the contributions of part-time employees and to respond with protective regulations.

The part of the special issue which I find most intriguing, though, is the triad of articles devoted to the politics of the female body. Pauline Johnson and Vicky Randall offer historical and comparative perspectives, respectively, on the issue of abortion—perhaps the most volatile and oppressive issue for women in this century in any country. But my highest accolades, despite my disciplinary interest in the articles on literature which round out the volume, go to Jo Murphy-Lawless's Foucauldian analysis of obstetric practice in Ireland. Structurally, the article reveals the best of theoretical analysis and qualitative research, using a single case study of one woman's dubious triumph over a medical institution possessing frightening power—the maternity hospital. As Murphy-Lawless points out, there are no winners in such contests. Mary Dunne suffers not only for a dead child and its brain-damaged twin, but also because her defense reveals her belief in the claim of incompetency of delivering women which is the thesis of the discourse of obstetrics. Irish obstetricians, too, are victims of a discourse that prescribes a maximum of twelve hours for delivery and a text-book approach to childbirth.

As a journal published at the University of Saskatchewan, the editors have justly chosen to include the work of two local graduate students who represent the next generation of Irish scholars outside of Ireland. Their articles prove that the study

of Irish literature and feminist criticism flourishes on the prairies. Catherine Gutwin's bold critique of a Yeats Summer School in Ireland denounces the complete absence of feminist criticism from seminars and lectures; she concludes that "academia doesn't necessarily represent what's available, but recognizes and teaches what it approves." To read the remaining articles on Irish literature is to realize that as elsewhere, women's literature has too often been marginalized. Shawn Mooney, another University of Saskatchewan graduate student, argues for the need for reevaluations of even recent biographies of the literary partnership of "Sommerville and Ross" (Edith Sommerville and Violet Martin) in view of the generational controversies about lesbianism between turn-of-the-century "New Women." Patricia Boyle Haberstroch discusses the current debates about literary politics and the issue of marginalization of women's texts. The recovering of women "hidden from history," she says, is akin to a "Rising and a Renaissance." Ann Beer's article on the celebration of maternal thinking in Medbh McGuckian's poetry completes the volume. The nurturing values held to be inviolate by parochial institutions are reborn in erotic, humorous, and compassionate metaphors. In truly feminist terms, the patriarchal opposition of motherhood to career is rewritten: "physical and artistic motherhood . . . become the stimuli and symbols of each other."

Like all life-affirming structures, there is a circularity about *Women and Irish Politics* that unites the articles of the text. The umbilicus which nourishes them is the poetry of Eileán Ní Chuilleáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Ruth Hooley, Eithne Strong, Eavan Boland, and Medbh McGuckian. The *touch* of effective editing is apparent not only in the choices of the poems but in their placements as well. One juxtapositioning is particularly apt: Eithne Strong's poem "Spring: Concerning Shape," speaks of student dissection of dogs as a part of the cyclical pattern of education which "proceeds/holding links of blood and root and force." Strong's poem follows the Murphy-Lawless article on the discourse of obstetrics in which dissection is the final word in the powerful language of medicine.

I cannot recall when I have read a jour-

nal from cover to cover as I have this one. I believe that its value for those interested in Women's Studies lies, outside of claims to national interest, in what it offers of eclectic and multi-disciplinary feminist research. This special issue might prove an interesting text for a Canadian and/or comparative Women's Studies course.

## ASSERTIVE BIBLICAL WOMEN

William E. Phipps. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992.

by Rev. Louise Mahood

William Phipps is a professor and chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Davis and Elkins College, Elkin, West Virginia. He is author of *Influential Theologies of Wo/Man* (1980), a book that explores 5 major theologians' unChristlike treatment of the status of women. He has published other works including *Genesis and Gender* (1989) and now *Assertive Biblical Women* in 1992.

In his forthright manner Phipps states from the beginning that he is not a Progressionist who supports the notion that the status of women in society has improved over the ages. No; rather Phipps believes that women's status was better in the past and that we ought not to dismiss earlier times as more oppressive of women than today. Nowhere, however, does Phipps acknowledge that his position can inadvertently romanticize an earlier time, a time none of us lives in, and of which none of us can speak from experience. Phipps announces his bias, declares that he will only examine some women of scripture, and compare them to contemporary figures to aid our understanding.

For Phipps, assertiveness is "self-expression that enhances both individual freedom and social responsibility." Women of the Biblical era had little opportunity for self-expression per se. Of-

ten, they used their sons to speak for them. So for any woman of this era to speak for herself was considered exceptional. While Phipps welcomes assertiveness in women, his analysis suggests that he is ambivalent at best.

Beginning with Sarah, his focus suddenly switches to Abraham's experience of hearing God as an example of religious mania. He suggests that Abraham suffered from such a malady and that had Sarah been present she might have prevented the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, their son. Phipps then concentrates on Abraham's actions and introduces rhetoric from other theologians with little reference to Sarah's behaviour.


Moving on to Tamar, a non-Hebrew woman who is marginalized for not bearing an heir before her husband dies, we are regaled with her creative and valiant effort to honour Hebrew heritage by tricking her father-in-law, so that she is im-

pregnated by him. While Tamar is assertive according to Phipps' definition, he cannot resist the temptation to finish the chapter on her with a discussion on Onanism, artificial insemination, and the Vatican's position on procreation.

As we move through the book, we have a survey of other notable women. Naomi and Ruth are two women who move from suffering to fullness of life and hope by taking the initiative. On the other hand, Jezebel, her daughter Athaliah, and later Herodias (who requests John the Baptist be killed) are all women whose assertiveness shifted to boldness, power, and wickedness. The treatment of Jezebel is particularly distressing. Phipps emphasizes the role of the prophet Elijah and remarks that Jezebel's great contribution to the world is that her name is now used to refer to a vicious and shameless woman! Unfortunately, he can only deal with her as a villain, and makes no use of her as an

example of an ancient non-Israelite queen. Phipps bases his analysis repeatedly on the point of view of the male opponent to a woman of power. So, what we have is a volume written by a man from a male perspective, but concerning the assertiveness of some two dozen women of the Bible.

As one moves through the book, it becomes apparent that, while Phipps cites today's foremost women biblical scholars in his selective bibliography (Peggy Day, Rosemary Ruether, Phyllis Tribble and more), his work is not of their calibre. He writes in circles, remains unfocused, and his slender volume requires several readings to discern if he is making a relevant argument or not. These seem like harsh words but in these days of anti-feminist backlash in secular and religious society, this volume does not add much to the growing scholarship that reexamines women of the Bible.



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