

# Mary O'Brien

## ... Certainly the Most Important Single Intellectual Influence ...

BY JEFF HEARN

### What kind of connections?

In some ways my contacts with Mary O'Brien were rather few and far between, not least because of the Atlantic Ocean; in other ways I count her as certainly the most important single intellectual influence on my life. So how come this has been so?

I first came across the writings of Mary O'Brien in about 1979. It was her article in the first issue of *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, "The Dialectics of Reproduction" (1978), that caught my eye. Then shortly after, I discovered her chapter, "Reproducing Marxist Man," in the Clark and Lange collection (1979).

Although I did not realize it at the time, looking back I can now see that I was involved in four closely interrelated personal, political, and academic projects, beyond my immediate domestic situation. All of these were heavily influenced by O'Brien's theoretical and actual presence in my life. There was the men's group (broadly consciousness-raising, broadly anti-sexist) that I had co-founded in 1978, and related men's anti-sexist activity; the campaign group around improving provision for mothers and preschool children—the Bradford Under-fives Group (BUG)<sup>1</sup>—that had started at the end of 1978; then there was personal/political writing; and finally, there was theoretical, historical, and contemporary academic work on patriarchy in its various guises.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I was also trying to make sense of living with young children, "being a father" and the contradictory relation to power that involved (gaining status for doing nothing, yet having less control over my life), doing childwork (as I called it), doing politics, and theorizing "the whole thing." That attempt to make sense of it all became *Birth and Afterbirth* (Hearn, 1983, also see 1984); and eventually led into a longer book, *The Gender of Oppression* (Hearn, 1987, also see 1992). All of these presented a sustained critique of the institution of fatherhood. Interestingly even "good fathers" can easily reinforce dominant gender power relations, benefitting themselves and "their" children, but having no interest in children more generally and doing nothing to change power relations between men, women, and children.

In acting and thinking on these questions, I found I had increasingly "strange" (at least relative to the malestream)

ideas about what was going on in society, politics, and my life. The base of society, politics, and my life seemed to be best understood as a matter of reproduction not production; the reverse of the usual marxist formula. So when I read Mary's work, along with that of a number of feminist and materialist anthropologists and sociologists (for example, Mackintosh; Edholm, *et al.*; Bland, *et al.*), I felt reassured that I was not going mad, at least not yet.

In 1981 I remember finding a copy of *The Politics of Reproduction* in that Bradford (U.K.) institution of the 1970s and '80s—the alternative bookshop, "Fourth Idea"—now sadly gone. Before seeing it, I did not know the book existed. I immediately bought the book and it remains the most prized in my collection. I met Mary the following year when she visited England for the British Sociological Association annual conference held at the University of Manchester. On that trip she also lectured at the University of Bradford (where I worked then), at the invitation of Jalna Hanmer, to students and staff of the newly developing MA in Women's Studies (Applied), other students and staff in the University, as well as lecturing at the University of Warwick. Our subsequent meetings were at conferences, and when she came a second time to lecture at the University of Bradford about 1986.

Reading her work opened up not only new ideas but whole new vistas of



analysis and recognition. I became a "fan," although there were a number of areas where I thought her work stopped short, especially around the relation of birth to other gendered processes of reproduction throughout society. My shorthand for this approach was and still is reproductive dialectical materialism (RDM).

I regularly used her work, especially *The Politics of Reproduction* but also other texts, for teaching—on men, on fatherhood, on gender relations, on social theory. As well as having a lot of theoretical and political sympathy for it, I particularly liked it for teaching purposes, as I think quite a few students did. This was for several reasons. For a start it was on what continues to be a neglected subject—reproduction—and as such was exceptionally interesting—it prompted a form of debate that many students, women and men, had not been able to have or had assumed was not permitted in universities; it was feminist; it was strong theoretically and politically relevant; it was a way of making sense of people's own lives, politics and experiences; it also engaged with a wide range of other traditions, both non-feminist and feminist, so that to really appreciate the arguments you were encouraged to find out more about de Beauvoir or Hegel or Arendt.

Another of the great strengths of Mary's work was that, although it was often rather difficult, it was also very clear. *She actually told you, the reader, what her assumptions and arguments were*; this is something that remains so rare in academic writing. And this is something that those wishing to do academic writing could frequently learn from—by reading and noting the way she writes, whether or not the subject matter is specifically of interest. So you did not necessarily have to agree with everything she was saying but at least you could begin to work out what you thought in relation to her writing, and then, if you had the time and the motivation, develop your own thinking further. And it was also surprising. It made you rethink the social categories (and the language) we all use.

One year I decided to run a postgraduate option course on the MA in Social and Community Work Studies simply on the one book, *The Politics of Reproduction*. I had thought for a while that to do a one term course on one book through the method of collective reading (roughly one chapter per week) and collective discussion would be really worthwhile, as long as the book was good enough. *The Politics of Reproduction* was ideal for the job. As well as having very stimulating seminars, the work that was produced by the students was original and very varied. It ranged across the social construction of biology

and the gendered citizenries of Ancient Greece, contemporary local community organizing and welfare politics, religion and reproduction, feminism and breast-feeding, and so on. It had also prompted each of the students and me to do substantial reading and thinking beyond the book of the course.

The first time she came to Bradford University, I remember going to a small discussion of perhaps ten or twelve people (I recollect about eight or nine students and three staff), some of whom had studied the option course I have just mentioned. She talked mainly about her materialist feminist theory of alienation. It was a rather intense and restrained event—people (in the seminar) were thinking, and struggled to find the words to debate. The second time she came to Bradford was very different; there was a very large turnout; I remember the room being very crowded with about 50 or more people, some sitting on the floor or perched on tables. She seemed surprised by the level of interest and that clearly quite a few of those present had read her work. I also remember that some ex-postgraduates had travelled a long way from the Midlands to listen to her. The occasion was such that she abandoned her notes and talked about the things that were concerning her at the time—issues that were very apparent in her book, *Reproducing the World* (1989). These included the growing importance of new reproductive technologies, the need to examine reproduction in its specific cultural context, and the impact of the changing global and globalizing scene. When the session finished, she immediately came up and greeted me warmly. I was moved.

A little later, in 1988, she agreed to be a member of the international advisory board of the Unwin Hyman (later Routledge) book series, "Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities," for which I was Series Editor. She understood immediately the need for critical work on men to be done in relation to feminism and with the collaboration of feminists rather than as some new special interest for certain men free from those influences (the much narrower "men's studies" approach). She also combined this interest and support with a very non-stuffy and informal way of communicating. Getting a letter from her was a very great pleasure.

More specifically, her work has been very important in rethinking not only reproduction, but many other areas of social life. These include, from my own and my collaborative work, organizational analysis, leadership, sexuality, social policy and social planning, fatherhood, the relation of the public and the private, and men's violence toward women. In particular her work is essential reading for anyone interested in what are now generally called "men and masculinities"; it provides a radically different frame of reference to most dominant "common sense" and social science approaches to men. Throughout all this I remain a historical reproductive dialectical materialist; it is just that I want to look at everything this way and not just "work," class, and production.

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## Why not more attention?

I do not intend to attempt to summarize her work here; it would be impossible in this short space, and I feel it would be a kind of insult. But I hope that a few remarks on the *kind* of theoretical and political work it is might be useful at this point. It certainly stands in a critical and complex relation to historicism, structuralism, materialism, and dialectical materialism. Her materialism is far from a simple materialism or simple structuralism: it is *fully dialectical*; it is reproductive, bodily, really material; and it is also centred on consciousness, experience, and alienation rather than on some abstracted forms of structuralism. It is closer to the early Marx of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx 1975) than the later Marx of political economy. But above all, it was fundamentally critical of marxism, and fundamentally feminist.

And this leads onto the second major feature of her uniquely radical work: the development of radical feminist and materialist feminist elements in her own original theory.

Then third, her work is anti-positivist; at a more theoretical level her work can thus be placed within a general critique of positivist social science that has gathered pace since the 1960s. I think it comes close to celebrating social conscious “practical human-sensuous activities” (Marx 422) and experience. I have always seen a strong link between dialectical materialism and everyday experience, meanings and “common sense.” It seems likely that Mary’s work for many years as a midwife brought her to a similar conclusion.

What is interesting, and now distressing, is that, despite the theoretical sophistication of her ideas, they still have not received the attention they deserve—at least I can say that with some certainty with regard to the U.K. and the Nordic region. Why is this so? Well, there would seem to be several reasons. For a start her work is not easy; it forces you to think and rethink the very basic categories of social life. Linked to this there has been in recent years a reaction against theory, and especially modernist theory, in which tradition I think it would be fair to locate her and her feminism. Similarly, although it is, to my mind, much more difficult to describe her as a structuralist, the neglect of her ideas could also be seen as part of a move away from structuralism. This especially follows for those that would crudely and wrongly simplify her work as deterministic or worse still biologicistic. Mary herself was aware of this situation and wrote in her article, “Loving Wisdom”:

The reception of this theoretical exercise by Marxists has not been encouraging: with a few exceptions, male Marxists have ignored it. Marxist feminists have labelled the work as biologically reductionist. (1987, 6)

Then there was the fact that her work became known in the late 1970s and early 1980s at the very same time as

there were growing critiques of the concept of patriarchy from both within and outside feminism (for example, Beechey; Atkinson; Rowbotham; Barrett; also see Alexander and Taylor). Similar arguments were also being made with regard to the general critique of categoricism in conceptualizing gender (Connell). Such critiques need to be understood in relation to academic and political attacks on structuralist, especially Althusserian, marxism, and the reformulation of the Left at the time.

Another difficulty in gaining acceptance for her ideas has, I think, been the dominant reactions to “radical feminism.” A full hearing has probably been impeded by the frequent caricaturing of radical feminism, as biological, ahistorical, categorical, monolithic—charges that are difficult to substantiate when you read what radical feminists actually write and listen to what they actually say.

Linked to this issue that the body was clearly another central focus of her work—as it is of feminism generally and radical feminism in particular. The concern with the sociology and politics of the body has grown greatly in recent years, as evidenced by the very interesting journal *Body and Society*. But why is it Foucault and Turner that people (men, and indeed often women too) turn to and cite so often; why do they not read O’Brien? I am reminded of the “making feminism invisible” in studies of sexuality that has been previously catalogued (see, for example, Stanley).

I think there is a further reason why less than full attention has been accorded her, and that is that she was a Canadian writing in the 1970s and 1980s. I think that the recognition of Mary’s work has suffered from the particular time and place when and where it happened to be produced. Indeed, in contrast, at the time I found a range of Canadian feminist writing on reproduction, the state and welfare of special interest and relevance to the issues I was working on in a U.K. context. Although there are of course many famous Canadians both within and outside feminism, there seemed and still seem to be quicker routes to academic recognition elsewhere. United States domination of academia, publishing, and marketing persists, and this probably applied even more so in the 1980s. Having said that, the extent of that domination has changed and probably decreased, so that if Mary was writing now it is more likely that her work would be taken up. I say this as a citizen of another former imperial power, the U.K, living in Finland, on the relative margins of Europe. I imagine Mary with her interest in internationalism would have something to say about such formulations of the global malestream.

I wonder whether we will wit-

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**Her materialism is far from a simple materialism or simple structuralism: it is fully dialectical; it is reproductive, bodily, really material; and it is also centred on consciousness, experience.**

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ness another case of greater recognition after death than whilst alive—a clear irony that would not have been lost on her as someone so interested in life.

#### What's in a name?

I have often mused about why she has been so important; apart from the rather rational explanations that I have tried to condense above, there are two other odd details of contact, and they both concern her name. While to the best of my knowledge, Mary O'Brien was from Glasgow, or at least worked there before emigrating to Canada (like many before from Ireland and Scotland), her name is unmistakably Irish. One is my lost "family connections" with Ireland (Hearn 1991); like many "English," a large chunk of me is Irish in the sense that both sides of my family have hidden Irish roots. Of course the irony of this is that I remain highly dubious of the notion of "family connections," not least because of the lessons of her own work. The other is that the name "O'Brien" conjures up very mixed feelings, as the only other person I have known "well" by that name happened to be the first teacher I had when I moved at the age of seven from my mixed infant school to an all-boys junior school. To cut a long story short, I was extremely scared of the shouting Mr. O'Brien. I was a lot less comfortable in that school than I had been before at the mixed infants school with my best friends of Gillian, Judith, and Mavis. At the time this huge transition was hardly noticed as of course it was completely expected that, as a boy, I would now move on to more boyish things and leave behind these girlish connections. It was many years later that I realized what had happened then, and that I became an almost, but not quite, taken-for-granted male. Un-learning that meant

making connections with both Mr. O'Brien and Mary O'Brien.

She was a very warm woman and a great inspiration and support to me. Her work stays with me.

*With thanks to Cecilia Benoit for local information.*

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*Consuming Cultures (co-edited with Sasha Roseneil), Transforming Politics (co-edited with Paul Bagguley) (both Macmillan/St. Martin's 1999), and Children, Child Abuse, and Child Protection (with The Violence Against Children Study Group, John Wiley, 1999).*

'BUG was an especially interesting development; it included a number of long-term friends and activists such as Jean Gardiner, Chris Carling, Alison Richards, Alison Attenborough, Errolyn Bruce, Julia Graham, Ginny Murphy, Julia Poulton, Judy White, Digby Stalman, Francis Woodward, and many more. Amazingly, it continued for about eight years; organized demonstrations and petitions, lobbied the local authority, linked with many other organizations, opposed cuts, and so on; it also produced three versions of the "Bradford Under-fives Guide," listing everything we could find to assist mothers and young children (in a way that was way ahead of the local authority at the time). It was part of a politics of reproduction—a way of exploring the public politics and implications of feminist motherhood (though very importantly it should be added that not all the members or supporters were mothers).

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## MARY O'BRIEN

### XII

I was young in a land  
 where the harsh voice of John Knox  
 still stained the passionate loveliness of the land  
 while runts with bad teeth sang  
 of his old young antagonist  
   Mary, Queen of Scots  
   got her head chopped off.  
 We sang, playing games  
 in the chasms of tenemental grime  
 except, of course, on Sundays:  
   Work and pray child.

I was young in that land  
 where acres of aching loveliness  
 were turned to purple playing fields  
 where stags and little birds  
 could be murdered for fun  
   while the people  
 huddled with fleas in rancid beds  
 or prayed, but also sitting up  
   for kneeling's popish.



Mary, May 1957