

Concepts of Nation in Irish Feminist Thought

by Dana Hearne

L'auteure fait une enquête sur les concepts de la nation et se demande si les mouvements nationalistes en Irlande ont eu un effet libérateur sur les femmes.

There were, of course, many women (and men) who risked a great deal of hostility by giving priority to their feminist agendas. Their feminism was labelled anti-nationalist, and feminism itself was described in the mainstream as "a foreign import."

My topic is about nationalism and what it can mean and to whom. More specifically I want to address the question "Is nationalism liberating for women?" The simple answer to this question is that it depends on the ideological/philosophical content of the term "nationalism." Mainstream nationalism in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century and up to the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922 was concerned with the overthrow of British Rule in Ireland. The majority of women who engaged in political struggle in the pre-independence period (*Cumann na Mban* was the largest group) aligned themselves with the mainstream movement. Many of these women were also involved in the suffrage movement but were not necessarily involved in a sexual revolution, i.e., the overthrow of patriarchal institutions, ideology, and socialization processes. There were, of course, many women (and men) who risked a great deal of hostility by giving priority to their feminist agendas. Their feminism was labelled anti-nationalist, and feminism itself was described in the mainstream as "a foreign import." Unionist women who were loyal to Britain (or to British nationalism) experienced a similar set of conflicts and challenges. The political situation was extremely complex. The suffrage struggle had been a long one spanning from the 1860s to 1918 and beyond. That part of the movement which described itself as feminist, socialist, pacifist, and internationalist (as well as nationalist of course) clearly had the greatest potential to be truly liberating for women, but it was defeated by mainstream bourgeois nationalism.

A feminist perspective brings its own substance to the project of nation-building. In the pre-Treaty period the Irish suffrage movement generated debate around a wide range of issues from the role of mothers in the formation of citizens, to the nature of the work that women do, to questions of sexuality, to critiques of war and the problems

inherent in a male-run state, to analyses of the concept of equality, to questions about male-female differences and the implications of those differences for the nation as a whole. If the great majority of the people in the pre-Treaty period made no distinction between the state and the nation, feminists, especially those who had a strong class analysis and state critique were certainly aware of the distinction, most particularly because they were aware that while they were clearly a part of the nation (or people), they were not a part of the state (government apparatus).

In the course of debates around this issue of male-female equality there was a distinct divide between suffragists who were primarily nationalists and those who were primarily feminists. Those who described themselves primarily as nationalists had a view of nation where nation and state are one; whereas those who viewed themselves primarily as feminist or, more specifically, as pacifist, socialist, internationalist, nationalist feminists viewed the state with suspicion and saw the nation as "the people." This more radical view of the nation was not the view that survived the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The danger of a view of nation which calls all citizens to subordinate their personal claims to the "higher call" of the nation as represented by the state is very evident in the debates in early twentieth-century Irish feminist thought around the issue of "the citizen mother" or "civic motherhood." A striking example of this tendency is revealed in the assertion by university professor, historian, nationalist, and suffragist Mary Hayden, that "men will be what their mothers make them" (1912a, 27). In this view the mother, performing her "natural function" as it would appear, was seen to have a relationship to the state which was "pivotal." Her status as educator of useful citizens was of crucial importance to the state, and those people who considered it unnecessary to educate women, in Hayden's view, ought to realize that women needed the best education available if they were to produce the best citizens. We could, of course, take this to be a radically subversive interpretation and one which raises the status of motherhood. Yet, as we look a little more closely to see what these mothers are asked to teach future citizens, we hear a construction of nationalism and the nation that must make us pause.

The concept of the citizen-mother comes out of a European male tradition of intellectual thought. In this construction women's moral and educational influence in the family was seen to have the power "to brace nations and make them great" or "to weaken them to their fall" (Savell-Hicks 30). This view was based on the belief that men were ultimately controlled by women and thus, it was essential to instill in women a proper sense of values to

ensure that their influence and control would be beneficial to the welfare of the state. One late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century European historian (Louis Aimé-Martin), whose prescriptive work on the education of mothers was widely read, put it this way:

on the maternal bosom the mind of nations reposes; their manners, prejudices, and virtues—in a word, the civilization of the human race—all depend upon maternal influence. (qtd. in Bell and Offen 166)

This was a theme that could be used to pro-feminist effect



Rita Duffy, "Mother Ireland," oil on gesso panel, 1200 x 900 cm, 1989.

by both sides of the Irish divide to encourage the view that both the future of the Irish nation and the future of the British Empire depended on women. In fact, to use the words of writer, activist, socialist, and suffragist James Stephens,

if anything women should be better educated than men, for with women rests the moulding of the entire human race—male and female—of whom during the most plastic years they have ... complete control and guidance. (Stephens 27)

This approach has the potential of the double-edged

sword—telling women how important they were while, at the same time, limiting them to the confines of the home. In addition we must ask what kind of education was envisaged for women within this perspective and who would the educators be? Who would decide what a "proper system of values" should be? And who would benefit from this separate spheres ideology? Hayden's words in the extended version of the earlier citation reads as follows:

The home is a training ground for men who, in future years, will sway the destinies of village, town, and country, and to a great extent they will be, for good or bad, what their mothers make them. (1912a, 59)

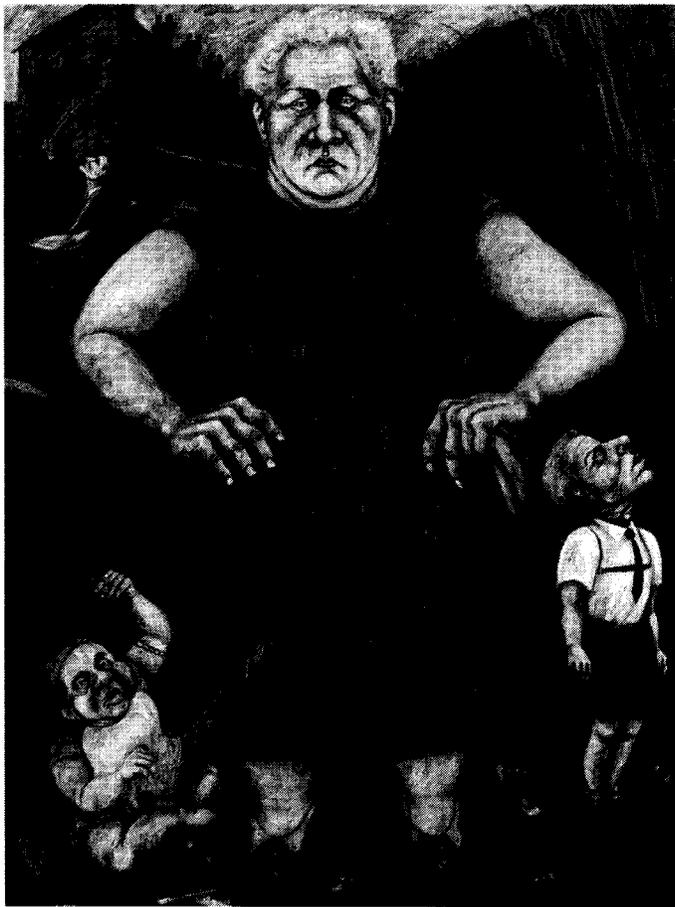
The irony of Hayden, a woman of power and influence in her own right, endorsing the status quo of the male monopoly of public power is noteworthy.

Both Mary Hayden and her fellow suffragist Maud Joynt wanted to ensure that the family would be the effective basis of the state (not unlike Mary Wollstonecraft in her time but in very different social circumstances), a place where women would recognize that country and community had claims on the family which ought to overrule their own (selfish) interests. In this view the truly patriotic, public-spirited, philanthropic woman knew that "her home is a part of the great national whole" (Hayden 1912b, 51). Here we see an ideal of absolute civic unity—an imagined community where all spoke in one voice; where civic needs were of a higher order than personal needs or desires (a lower level of interests). Women, in fulfilling this role, would be citizens in the highest sense of the word showing, in the words of Maud Joynt, "that they had entered into the spirit of the world of *men*, sharing *their* ideals and *their* sacrifices" (Joynt 27; emphasis added). Hayden even went so far as to outline a suitable educational program for girls in light of her concern for the production of women of the highest order. Included in the program was the cultivation of a healthy public spirit and a due interest in public affairs. National pride would be encouraged by hanging "pictures of public *men*" on the wall (Hayden 1912c, 59; emphasis added).

The most problematic aspect of this approach is that it pushes an agenda where women's subordination to the state is pressed; where the citizen-mother is totally at the service of the state. This cannot be an emancipatory role for women in a society where men are accorded all the public power and are apparently not expected to learn any of the nurturing, caring qualities of the domestic sphere. Hayden did seem to be aware of the potential problems of such a perspective as evidenced in some of her other writing where she spoke of men being subject to blind passions, self-interest, and pettiness; as well as having a penchant for engaging in useless, costly wars.

A very different approach was developed by a more radical branch of the suffrage movement. The meaning and scope of the concept of citizenship depends on the conclusions which are drawn about women's nature and

the extent to which female and male nature are perceived to be the same or different. Progressive early Irish feminists wanted to stress the similarities between women and men. So much so that in an editorial on the subject in the feminist newspaper of the day—*The Irish Citizen*—it was thought that a new word was needed to capture the kind of sex complementarity that was evident in the “new” women and men of the day. The word which was coined was “femaculine” and indicated a kind of sex complementarity which transcended stereotyped or socially-constructed “feminine” or “masculine” forms of consciousness. Women and men, the editorial noted, although



Rita Duffy, “Mother Ulster,” oil on gesso panel, 1200 x 900 cm, 1989.

manifesting “diversity of function on the physical side” had a “community of function on the mental side” and behind the physical and mental there was “a spiritual unity which coheres all diversity of manifestation” (“Editorial” 12). This insight was read with varying degrees of latitude by supporters of the suffrage movement but what it came down to in the final analysis was that women’s physical nature was a clear indicator that their primary responsibility was home and family but that they must not, in the words of one radical commentator, be restricted to the family “in a condition of sub-humanity under the despotic rule of men” (Wilkins 50). What this valiant attempt to conceptualize equality indicates is the difficulty of moving

beyond locating women in a realm of reproduction and child care, precisely, perhaps, because it was so difficult, if not impossible, to locate men in that realm. What it also indicates is how earnestly suffragists tried to work around the apparent obstacles to women’s equality presented by housework, reproduction, and child care.

As Europe came closer to war (1914) it was these progressive feminists, the pacifist feminists—those who gave their first priority to feminist struggles—who, faced with the realities of state power, challenged the whole basis of a theory of the state that assumed an organic unity between the family and the state especially considering the absence of any female point of view at the level of the state. Such a pacifist-feminist analysis pointed out that the state (government bureaucracy) and the nation (the people) did not necessarily coincide and argued that where the state did not represent the will of the people it was the first priority of pacifist feminists to challenge its authority.

The suffragist struggle continued until the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and it may have seemed like a triumph that in the 1922 Constitution, which appeared to uphold the gender equality provisions in the 1916 Proclamation, all Irish women over the age of 21 in the New Irish Free State were accorded the right to vote—six years before their sisters in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, the new state showed itself to be patriarchal and church-dominated. In the 1920s and 1930s a number of pieces of repressive legislation gave cause for alarm to women activists campaigning for equality. In 1925 a motion was passed in the Dail (the Free State Parliament) prohibiting divorce. That same year another bill attempted to restrict women to the lower grades of the civil service, solely on the grounds of sex. It was defeated but clearly, the very contemplation of such a bill was an ominous sign of the government’s willingness to restrict women’s attempts to achieve equal access to the job market. Further restrictive legislation followed and, with the drawing up of the second Constitution—commonly called De Valera’s Constitution—women’s primary function as homemaker was legally entrenched. De Valera’s Constitution recognized “the special position” of the Catholic church and “the primacy” of women’s role as mother and homemaker. It also prohibited divorce, instituted a criminal code which prohibited “artificial” methods of contraception, and outlawed abortion. The restrictive clauses in the new Constitution did not go unchallenged by women’s groups but those challenges met with no success. Thus militant nationalist-feminists like Helena Molony who, in the years prior to the formation of the Free State, had said “it is surely sound citizenship to put the welfare of the whole nation before any section of it” (404) could not have been so sure of this when in 1930 she described the status of women as “a sorry travesty of emancipation” (Cullen-Owens 45).

When looking back over the contributions of Irish feminists to concepts of nation it is clear that those

feminists who described themselves as pacifists, socialists, internationalist nationalists espoused a view of nationalism which did not rely on the perpetuation of patriarchal ideas of masculinity (or femininity for that matter), but which saw “redefining masculinity as integral to re-establishing national sovereignty.” This transformative feminist perspective was eclipsed by a narrow form of nationalism—one where women’s experience was marginalized, and where they were praised for fulfilling men’s ideals of purity and civic motherhood, ideals which they made their own. Espousing such ideals did not have the effect of enabling Irish women to be active creators of social policy

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in the new nation. Thus, the challenge to male privilege so boldly mounted by the suffrage movement, and particularly by the radical pacifist socialist side of that movement was thoroughly defeated.

All feminist activity did not cease in the decades following the formation of the Free State. But it is only since the founding of the second wave women’s liberation movement in the early ’70s that feminist campaigns around the issues of divorce and reproductive freedom so central to women’s autonomy have once more challenged the idea of an organic unity between nation and state.

The question of difference on which hinged a good deal of the rationale as to why it was essential that women have a voice in the government of the nation is still a matter of intense debate today as it relates to issues of equality. Thus, looking back at earlier debates and their level of sophistication is a valuable gauge of continuity and indeed, in the process, of the range of ways in which the nation was conceptualized. This brings me to some reflections by Irish culture critic Luke Gibbons in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* on the issue of “constructing the canon” where he talks about “versions of national identity” (Deane). Here Gibbons rejects the notion that Irish culture has been characterized by a resistance to theory and by the lack of a vigorous intellectual tradition. He argues, rather, that those strands of Irish thought that have moved beyond “nationalist” concerns to international concerns/ideals—to the human condition and not just the national condition—have been submerged in the “national question” understood in an ideologically narrow-minded way. Thus, the complexity of thinkers such as Thomas MacDonagh, James Connolly, George Bernard Shaw, and John Eglinton (here I add Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, Louie Bennett, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, and Greta Cousins *et al.*) insofar as it didn’t fit into the “national

project” was lost to the following generations. And of course, the feminist dimensions of this intellectual history was simply disregarded in its entirety, both then and now, by mainstream historians and culture critics alike. We see a perfect example of the process in F.S.L. Lyons’ assessment of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington in *Ireland Since the Famine*. Here Lyons tells us that Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was:

one of the best-loved figures in Dublin and a notable champion of all sorts of *notable* causes. He was a teetotaler, a vegetarian, a worker for women’s rights, a socialist, above all a pacifist. (373) [emphasis added]

Thus, it would appear, that Lyons sees no connection between the *majority* cause—nationalism—and pacifism, feminism, and socialism. That nationalism could be informed by these other ideologies does not seem to have occurred to him. His concept of nationalism here is purely territorial and thus is devoid of philosophical content.

This brings me full circle to reiterate that neither nationalism nor feminism is a monolithic ideology and that we need to pay attention to the range and variety of voices which are engaged in the attempt to envision the nation—the disparate set of responses to colonial domination. And let us not forget that women have the additional domination—patriarchal domination—to contend with and thus their feminist contributions are an essential element in the “variegated pattern” of nationalist thought. Lyons leaves Skeffington on the margins, a peripheral figure whose intellectual brilliance is robbed of its potential to interrogate “an essentialist national idea, a static monolithic tradition” (Deane 568).

Can nationalism be liberating for women? It entirely depends on the radical potential of its conceptualization. As long as challenges to old canons, and reconstructions along new lines continue to be androcentric, as indeed they are in mainstream literary and historical productions in Ireland, and as long as feminist history and feminist scholarship are excluded from the mainstream, as they continue to be, then the nation will be incapable of providing the space necessary for women to be able to call the nation their own.

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ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Quilting Bees

I've turned up my nose at them.
Not just since the neighbour
who stole my first husband

or, revising history a bit,
the neighbour to whom I
relegated him, even with gratitude—

not just because
the Other Woman
took up quilting—

with luck she got tangled in rags,
threads frazzled, pins scattered,
lost needles forever a threat

and her cobwebs still ensnare
cotton batting, goose down, unseemly
clues to unravelled afternoons—

I've shunned quilts
as women's work.
I was out to write like a man.

Today in a Tasmanian garden
I hang the guest-bed quilt
over two chairs to air not

because it needs refreshing but
the sun is out, I've washed the sheets,
and I procrastinate on facing the page:

the need to invent, piece together
ungainly incidents, unruly characters
ripped from impossible lives, or mine—

This quilt is signed: "Jill."
One side is white with minute florets
ivory, baby blue, and pink.

Reverse: glistening yellow ribbons,
gleaming green, navy, mottled orange,
a few huge open roses.

Borders grey and black
frame rectangles and squares
sewn side to side to side ...

How many months must this Jill
have spent locked in her tower
turning her wheel,

patching fragments of fabric,
re-threading tiny eyes,
pricking her thumbs.

A store-bought blanket
would keep me as warm.
Yet I am caught in the craft

of an artist who fashioned
patterns from tatters,
unwinding spools

and scraps of color,
her stitches, seams
and petty thefts invisible.

Elisavietta Ritchie's poetry collections include The Arc of the Storm, Elegy for the Other Woman, Wild Garlic, Raking the Snow, and Tightening the Circle Over Eel County. After five years in Canada, she is in Australia this year.