Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change

Race, Sex, and Nation

Gerardine Meaney

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Contents

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Practice Vol. 14, no.3, Winter 2000, pp. 519–29; 'Decadence, Degeneration and Revolting Aesthetics: The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston', *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 36, no.2, June 2000, pp. 157–76; 'Landscapes of Desire: Women and Ireland on Film', *Women: a cultural review*, Vol. 9, no. 3, Nov 1998, pp. 238–251; 'Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction', *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, Vol. 2, issue 2, Dec 1997, pp. 77–93. Chapter 7, 'The Devil's Own Patriot Games: Ireland and the Hollywood Action Thriller,' was previosuly published in *Representing the Troubles*, eds. Eibhear Walshe and Brian Cliff, Four Courts Press, 2004, pp. 79–92 is reproduced with permission of Four Courts Press. Chapter 8 was previously published as 'Not Irish Enough? Masculinity and Ethnicity in *The Wire* and *Rescue Me*' in *Postmodernism and Irish Popular Culture*, eds. Wanda Balzano, Anne Mulhall, Moynagh Sullivan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 and is reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. 'The Woman with Child' from *The Transitory House* by Freda Laughton, published by Jonathan Cape is reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

Introduction

In an interview at the time of the publication of her 2007 novel, *Foolish Mortals*, Jennifer Johnston commented on the historical range of her novels, "I seem to be writing a sort of history of Ireland, starting at the beginning of the century and coming up to date. It's not deliberate, I didn't set out to do that."[1] Johnston began her career with novels exploring the impact of World War I and indirectly that of the Northern Irish conflict. *Foolish Mortals* was her "Celtic Tiger" novel, tracing the socially and emotionally complex lives of a twenty-first-century Dublin family. Johnston's fictional "history of Ireland" has dealt with major historical events, though usually from the perspective of characters marginal to those events. However, her primary focus has been on the fabric of ordinary lives, on the changing social, psychological and emotional habits, norms and crises of Irish lives lived, for the most part, rather quietly. While her fiction began chronicling decaying big houses shipwrecked by history, her milieu has predominantly been the small house novel. For this reason it is useful to begin an account of cultural change in Ireland with two scenes from her novels, thirty years apart, both domestic and family scenes that indicate a great deal about the public world outside. In Irish fiction and in Johnston's novels in particular, the domestic and familial are vortices of economic and political forces, philosophical and psychological intensities. Her families are allegories of the nation in general and very particular in their miseries—and joys. In *Shadows on Our Skin,* published in 1977, the Logan family sit down to their tea in Derry:

> "Five were lifted last night." As Brendan spoke he worked at a piece of bread on his place with a finger until it turned into a terrible grey, inedible lump.
> They were sitting as the perfect family should sit in apparent peace around the table. The mother poured golden tea from a large tin pot.
> "They ask for it," she said, lifting a flowered cup and passing it to the father across the table. He grunted.
> Anyone coming in now, Joe thought to himself, would think how nice. How lovely. That's what they'd think.[2]

The Logans are a foursquare, normal family, neatly divided into two Oedipal triangles. The father is an alcoholic, trading on the myth of his heroism in an unidentified IRA campaign. His compulsively house-proud wife works at the local bakery, the only one of her family productively employed. The eldest son, Brendan, has returned from England, joined the IRA and begun to find that armed struggle is not quite what his father's stories might have led him to believe. Characteristically for the 1970s, all of this is filtered through the consciousness of the youngest son, Joe, a schoolboy who writes poetry and sets the whole narrative in motion with his friendship and doomed infatuation for a young English teacher from Wicklow. A family argument here is a political row and vice versa:

> "You never used to talk like you do now, Mam."
> "Quit it, Brendan. Does it not enter your head that there's a rare difference between sitting round and listening to a bunch of old men telling their hero stories and what is happening now. I've learned a bit more sense. I see only sadness. So much for the heroes."
> "If Ireland were free . . . "
> "Words."
> "The Tans in their big Crossley tender . . . " sang the father in his tired voice.
> "Words. Words. Words. God. If I'd've had the guts I'd've left you. To drown in your words. I've no doubt that in forty years time, or in fifty maybe, you'll be doing the same thing as he is now."[3]

There is no safe boundary here between the domestic and political, nor between the mythic and the realistic. The novel's title is taken from a song by the Celtic rock band, Horslips, who recorded a concept album in 1973 called *The Tain*, based on the stories of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The song, "Time to Kill," is the last on the album: "Now we've got time to kill. Kill the shadows on our skin. / Kill the fear that grows within. Killing time, my friend." Horslips both works within and criticizes the heroic tradition of *The Tain*. The sleeve notes quote W.B. Yeats's view on the figures of Irish mythology: "We Irish should keep these personages in our hearts, for they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadows upon our doors at evening."[4] The shadows of the past in "Killing Time" are not connected with life (riding, marketing and meeting) as they are in Yeats's remarks, but with death. In *Shadows On Our Skin* the song fascinates Joe and the novel references the heroic sacrifice of Cuchulainn and the female allegorical figure for Ireland in the name of the teacher, Kathleen. In Johnston's novel it is the female protagonist who becomes the target of ritual violence and a disastrous excess of immature love when Brendan falls in love with her and a jealous Joe blurts out that her fiancé is in the British army. Unlike Cuchulainn, Kathleen not only survives but offers Joe a different legacy,

offering him as a parting gift her copy of *A Golden Treasury of Verse*, inscribed: "Kathleen Doherty is my name / Ireland is my nation / Wicklow is my dwelling place / And heaven's my destination." Kathleen has somewhere to go and she is capable of constructing a different future for herself and others.

In marked contrast to the tragic structure of the family in *Shadows on Our Skin*, the family in *Foolish Mortals*, published in 2007, is comically amorphous. This time the title comes from *A Midsummer's Night Dream*:

> PUCK. Shall we their fond pageant see?
> Lord, what fools these mortals be!
> OBERON. Stand aside: the noise they make
> Will cause Demetrius to awake.
> PUCK. Then will two at once woo one;
> That must needs be sport alone;
> And those things do best please me
> That befal preposterously.[5]

Things befall quite preposterously at times in *Foolish Mortals*, a carnivalesque novel that uses amnesia as one of its central narrative devices. In contrast to the Logans' nuclear square, the shape of the O'Connor family defies linear description. Turning up for Christmas dinner as the novel draws to a conclusion are Tash, "the head of the family," painter, mother to Henry and George; Stephanie, writer, ex-wife of Henry, beloved of George, mother to Donough and Ciara; Henry, publisher, amnesiac, father; George, Henry's brother and Stephanie's lover; Jeremy, Henry's lover, brother to Henry's dead second wife; Ciara, Henry and Stephanie's daughter; Donough, Henry and Stephanie's son; and Brendan, Donough's lover. In contrast to the Logans this group is defined by the intricacies of love and desire and consequently it has a very tenuous grip on the past. Henry lives in a perpetual present: "Words spin in my head, like fishes in a pond, small colored fishes, and you put your hand to grasp one and it is gone, a flash of gold or green and it dives into the depths and your hand is left empty; they brush your fingers, teasing, gold and red, silver, blue and green, but you have not the dexterity to catch one."[6] In a constant internal dialogue with himself, Henry asks, "But why do you want to remember those words? I don't remember, I just remember their importance in my life."[7] The novel defies expectation by leaving Henry with no more than edited highlights of his past: his forgetting is associated with his belatedly learning to live. "How can I continue to live without my past?"[8] he asks, but he does continue, loves and even thrives. In this respect he represents a version of twenty-first-century Ireland. Another version shadows and overshadows him, however. His mother, Tash, once a prodigious artist, forgets how to paint and quite quickly ceases to be:

> She [Stephanie] stood for a moment in the hall; Christmas was all around her, holly, ivy, mistletoe hanging from the lamp above her head; candles flickered on the mantlepiece, deep bronze chrysanthemums were on the table, the smell of food and the sounds of laughter . . . a chord on the piano, a moment's silence and then Tash's voice. "Somewhere over the . . . " The others backing her. "Rainbow, way up high." La la la la. "There's a land that I dreamed of . . . "[9]

Tash has this one glorious final moment center stage: Stephanie, who is herself a writer, has set the scene quite deliberately, staging a traditional Christmas for this very untraditional family. Her mother-in-law derails this attempt to stabilize the new order through continuity with past ritual. Neither family nor history is predictable and death disrupts the celebration of life. Tash "was the diva. They all stood and watched her with awe, waiting for the high note. . . . She stopped and looked round, keeping them in suspense. For a split second she looked puzzled. 'I?' She fell backwards."[10] Tash is an unusual figure of female authority in Johnston's fiction. She is a creative force rather than a maternal presence and her dramatic death, which saves her from a no longer livable life, is appropriate and even funny:

> Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed . . . towards a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world.[11]

Stephanie's postmodern utopia is not achieved, but rebirth of a sort occurs. "Tomorrow. And tomorrow. 'The fucking dinner,' she thought. 'All that work and stress. We'll eat it cold tomorrow and we'll open our untimely presents tomorrow.'"[12] Comparing the two family meals in Johnston's novels, thirty years apart, shows fiction in which history is written neither in terms of a linear narrative of progress nor dreary ideological stasis, but as a series of junctures of loss and life, beginning and endings, impossibilities imagined and untimely events.

This study of cultural change is itself untimely. It was written as Ireland was slipping, almost imperceptibly at first, from the almost utopia of *Foolish Mortals*, a byword for economic development, to an exemplary case of the perils of overconfident capitalism. It was written at a point where the radical extent of changes in attitudes to such basic and primal areas of experience as sexuality and children obscured their rapidity. The very prevalence of images of how dreadful the Irish past was (such as *Angela's Ashes*, *Song for a Raggy Boy*, *The Magdalene Sisters*) made it seem incredibly remote. And

the rapidity of change obscured the depth of continuity. The drearily familiar concatenation of motherhood, nation, referenda and paranoia erupted periodically at crisis points around issues of sexuality, sovereignty and, eventually, race. The narrative of rapid national progress was dependent on suppression of the evidence of the persistence of structures of conformity, domination and exclusion at the heart of Irish society and culture. Retrospectively, I can see that this book and significant change in my practice of feminist criticism have been shaped by two ongoing processes in Irish cultural, social and political life. One is the impact of the dramatic shift from emigration to immigration in the last decade, which has been a cultural liberation but also produced a xenophobic backlash in politics and policy that is all the more insidious for being almost unconscious. The results of the 2004 referendum were a shock to the cultural system that fractured any remaining complacency about racial politics in Ireland. Over 80 percent of the Irish electorate voted to revoke the automatic right of citizenship to all children born on the island of Ireland and to restrict citizenship on the basis of kinship and ethnicity. This massive majority was at radical odds with the artistic celebration and external perception of Ireland's vibrant new multiculturalism. It revealed a substratum of intense conservatism and potential racism, just as a succession of referenda on abortion in the preceding decades had revealed a substratum of misogyny. A substantial section of the first chapter of this book was published under the title "Race, Sex and Nation" in response to an invitation from Moynagh Sullivan to revisit, in the light of these developments, the analysis of "sex and nation" that had informed my work on Irish women's writing in the 1990s. Sections of Chapters 2, 4 and 7 were written and published before the referendum, but hopefully are set in a new framework by the reevaluation of the relationships between gender, nation and race prompted by it.

The second process is outside the focus of this book, but has inevitably impacted on its analysis of Irish culture. The accumulating evidence over the last decade of the scale of the institutionalization, degradation and casual torture of children by religious orders acting with the active collusion and support of the state in Ireland between 1930 and 1980 culminated in the publication of the Ryan Report in 2009. The terrible seeping sense of horror with which many in Ireland responded to the revelation of the systemic nature of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse and economic exploitation of children in "care" and of women unfortunate enough to be caught in the Magdalene laundry system has been deepened by the uncanny sense that this story was already known. The nature of that knowledge and the price of suppressing it are dealt with in detail in Chapter 3. Any evaluation of nationalism in the Irish context has to be conditioned at this stage by an understanding of the kind of state it produced and what that state and its dominant church were capable of perpetrating. This book draws on the insights of postcolonial criticism, but it is also informed by unease at the way in which a crude political variant of a postcolonial understanding

of Irish history has become a recurrent alibi when the state seeks to avoid responsibility for either the Irish past or present. This reached an apotheosis when several government ministers, responding to the Ryan Report, used the excuse that the industrial school system was inherited from Britain. Former minister Michael Woods insisted, in an extraordinary radio interview defending the deal that effectively gave the Catholic Church a state indemnity against compensation claims by victims of abuse while in its care, that the benign intentions of the founder of the Christian Brothers had been undermined by the directives of the British state school system, which at the time demanded that corporal punishment be imposed. The documentary maker and activist Mary Raftery touched a political nerve when she pointed out (also in a radio interview) the unpalatable fact that the establishment of an independent Irish state meant that vulnerable Irish children did not benefit from the reform of these systems until decades later than their English counterparts. Child abuse is not a uniquely Irish problem, though the Ryan Report indicates the systematic scale of it was unique to Irish conditions. Postcolonial states sometimes go through long and painful periods of adjustment where the insecurities of the state are visited upon its more vulnerable citizens in the form of native oppressions replacing imperial ones. A considerable number even resort to pitiless theocracy. One of the more pressing tasks for postcolonial theory in Ireland is to critically analyze the toxic potential in the synergy of nationalist and religious certainties, to move on from insistence on the potential for gloriously complex and hybrid identities in pre-state Irish nationalism to consider why this potential was unfulfilled and how the crippling ideological mix of national and religious fervor produced the history it did.

While this book is informed by postmodern and particularly psychoanalytical feminism, this is tempered by an emphasis on material social and political conditions that have required an ongoing dialogue with historical research. In some respects my approach to the relationship between cultural production and social structures is Gramscian, tracing extended processes of cultural negotiation through a variety of thematic areas. The organization of the material thematically rather than chronologically is informed by this approach. Because the focus of this book is on change from a feminist perspective, it is concerned with cultural processes and social movements that have impacted on the most intimate experiences and the most deeply held senses of identity. Consequently, that Gramscian structure is inadequate without the benefit of psychoanalytic criticism. One of the insights I have gained from working on interdisciplinary research teams is the value of bringing different methodologies and even epistemologies to bear on the same material, but also the redundancy of divorcing textual analysis from historical understanding in seeking to understand cultural change. In the Irish case, the extent to which that history has been hidden requires attention to ongoing historical research on everything from the design of rural cottages to infanticide.[13] Maria Luddy has observed that her "investigation into the history

of prostitution in Ireland," for example, problematizes the image of Irish purity maintained by successful repression, "and suggests that resistance to the Catholic Church's teaching on celibacy and sexual continence . . . was far more common than generally believed."[14] Historical sources are sometimes hard to find for an understanding of intimate areas of human experience, especially where those experiences have been formed in resistance to the dominant ideology of the time. As the process of locating and analyzing these sources proceeds, a chance for a dynamic partnership between cultural and social history has opened up in Irish studies. Deepika Bahri argues that literature can treat as fiction what cannot be admitted as fact, even by the participants. Consequently, it can explore the repressed in any given culture and can sometimes be a privileged point of insight into history.[15] The literary manifestations of the official gendering of Irish national identity and of resistance to those official identities offer such a point of insight, but only when tempered by an understanding of the material grounding of both. Cultural criticism and cultural history need to be predicated on an understanding of the role of the socio-symbolic order in the production of gender roles *and* an awareness of the way in which those roles were played by historical men and women, real bodies, lived lives.

This book finds itself in a series of studies of "Twentieth-Century Literature" and substantial tracts of it do engage with the twentieth-century novel in particular. However, it engages with a broad range of texts not normally included in the category of literature. These are predominantly narrative fiction, in film and television form, but occasionally also folk songs, ballads, documentaries and even devotional literature. Poetry and painting figure occasionally, but the focus is on the stories we tell ourselves and have told about us and that enable us to imagine who we are, whatever we mean by "we." The organization of material in the following chapters is determined by an understanding of culture as a complex fabric where multiple forms, revered and derided texts, past and present, writing and reading, are interwoven. Cultural definitions and generic boundaries shift and change, canonical certainties are reevaluated. Tradition is not constituted by a monumental array of great works, still less a procession of great men, but by what the present needs from the past. That need requires from the critic both analysis and circumspection. "Virgin Mother Ireland," the first chapter in the part on "Race, Women and Nation," is an exercise in such analysis and proposes that the relationship between gender and national identity in Ireland is exemplary of the transition from insurgent to state nationalisms, but that it is also structured by an understanding of the national in racial terms. The second chapter, "Landscapes of Desire," focuses on film and the way in which a gendered construction of national identity and in particular the allegorical configuration of Ireland as Mother Ireland or fair Hibernia persisted throughout the twentieth century. The concluding chapter in this part focuses on Maud Gonne and Augusta Gregory's short plays and Dorothy Macardle's gothic fiction to examine the

relationship between feminism and nationalism in the literary revival and in the post-independence southern state. It also outlines the suppression and persistence of dissent from the dominant social and sexual order and the ways in which the ghosts of the new Ireland's "illegitimate" subjects began to haunt its legitimizers.

The part on "Writing, Bodies, Canons" is predominantly, but not exclusively, concerned with literature, with decadence, modernism and postmodernism and with the relationship between sexual and aesthetic freedoms. Several key chapters here are devoted to novels by Irish women writers and all of it is informed by the project of feminist recovery of the vast array of work by Irish women that challenge the prevailing definitions of Irish writing. The volume of writing by Irish women would indicate that neither the construction of the myth of the writer as spokesman for his tribe, nor the configuration of the canon in national and masculine terms, nor even the symbolic function of women in nationalism were in any way disabling for the production of work in a very diverse set of genres and media by a very large number of women. The Women in Modern Irish Culture Database had by 2008 identified work by 9,334 women, who between them had produced 14,131 books, 16,212 articles, 651 films and 320 plays between 1800 and 2005. If Irish women were a subaltern group, the subaltern spoke long, loud and often. Their silence has been a construct of literary criticism and history and of a very narrowly defined canon, not a historical reality. While the analysis of twentieth-century fiction and drama here tries to do justice to the extent and compexity of women's cultural expression, the overall focus is on gender, that binary system in which the masculine term is too often taken for granted. So Joyce is set beside Kate O'Brien, but also Emily Lawless, Katherine Cecil Thurston and Rosamond Jacob. Yeats, Synge and Deevy's plays are juxtaposed with Jim Sheridan and Johnny Gogan's films. This diverse company is illuminating for all parties. Running through these chapters is a concern to reevaluate the history of Irish literature in the context of what we are rediscovering about its diversity and the social contexts in which it was written. The extended discussion of the role of Joyce's work in the configuration of contemporary Irish literary criticism and the field of Irish cultural studies is concerned to move beyond the fetishization of modernism and the Revival, on the one hand, and the trauma of the famine and the authenticity of folk culture on the other.

The ubiquity of images of Irish masculinity in early twenty-first-century popular culture has already attracted considerable critical comment.[16] The concluding part of this book, "Race, Masculinity and Popular Culture," seeks to set these images in context and to examine them as part of the project of other national identity formations. It identifies and analyzes the signification of Ireland in a globalized world of images. This part begins with a chapter examining the representation of the Northern Irish conflict in Hollywood action thrillers and then maps out the role of Irish-American masculinities in US television drama. The concluding chapter is primarily

concerned with the representation of Ireland in contemporary English culture, specifically in the work of Howard Brenton, but sets this work in a context derived from Trollope and Stoker. Beginning with an extended analysis of the representation of Ireland in feminine terms, it seems appropriate to end with a discussion of the role that Irishness plays in the construction and differentiation of national identities in masculine terms and masculinities in national terms. Any analysis of gender, culture and Ireland must perforce analyze the role of nationalism, but in the chapters that follow I have sought to present the national as a category demanding explanation rather than an explanatory category. Perhaps that task is easier now that Irish nationalism has itself undergone significant cultural change. The last three decades have seen significant reconfigurations of the political landscape. The two largest political parties still derive from the old Civil War treaty split, but it is twenty years since either has been able to form a one-party government. Stability has depended on the formation of coalitions with small parties ranging from the right-wing Progressive Democrats to the environmentalist Green party. The third largest party, Labour, has been an intermittant partner in government since the late 1940s and its left of center, social democratic influence has been a persistent agent of legislative changes that have had profound social effects, although it is almost invisible in most mainstream Irish Studies accounts of Irish politics. Nationalism in Ireland as in most Western states remains a pervasive political discourse, but is only part of the picture. The increasingly complex body politic has lurched awkwardly from center right to center left and back again during the last twenty years of rapidly accelerating social and economic transformation. One of the many features that all nationalisms have in common is their conviction of their national uniqueness. Unease in Ireland about fuller integration into the European Union is perhaps rooted in the dawning anxiety that Irish uniqueness has become increasingly implausible, a commodity sold to too many tourists to retain an innate value.

Two different but related images adorn the cover of Tom Inglis's study of the impact of globalization on Irish culture and society, *Global Ireland: Same Difference*. The Virgin Mother and Barbie are strikingly juxtaposed in a design that illuminates the way in which gender has been constructed in critical accounts of Ireland's rapid cultural and social changes. Explicit in the contiguity of these images is a high degree of pessimism about the extent to which the radical changes in women's position in Ireland has brought about liberation. Implicit is the symbolic configuration of the state of the nation through images of women. Both of the images on the cover of *Global Ireland* are images of images: they are photographs of a statue and a doll but also refractions of centuries of representation of female purity and commodified sexuality. In stark contrast, the introduction to Inglis's book is almost uniquely honest in contemporary Irish Studies about the subjective experiences that shape its sociological perspective and consequently individual women figure strongly. Yet the paradigm of representing Ireland

in terms of iconic femininity remains. Neither Virgin Mary nor Barbie is an image that originated in Ireland: if these images represent the meaning of Irishness it was always already globalized. It is not simply that these are mythic images to be countered by a more authentic history. They are both representative of dominant ideologies of gender and both remain powerful. Myths are part of history, produced by and producing it. Yet a fascination with these images runs the danger of assuming their ubiquitous power, rendering invisible the history of resistance to the dominant ideology of gender in Ireland and once again rendering masculinity invisible as if it were somehow unproblematic, unmarked by ideology. This is not the tenor of *Global Ireland*, but it is a very strong tendency within Irish cultural studies where the work of feminist and queer theory tends to be partitioned from the mainstream, often coexisting within the same academic institutions but publishing and presenting research in parallel universes. There is a notable imbalance of citation between these two, with the margins perforce debating ideas and texts in the mainstream without reciprocity. This is extraordinarily striking in Joe Cleary's widely praised study, *Outrageous Fortune*, for example, which argues that feminism has joined revisionism and postcolonialism as an institutionalized critical practice in Ireland, but cites no Irish feminist criticism. In contrast, the historian R.F. Foster appears to endorse the claim made by Mary Robinson in 1971 that the Irish Women's Liberation Movement constituted "the only radical force in the stagnant pool of Irish life" at the time[17] and to credit feminism as a major force for social change. Foster's discussion of feminism is, however, as no more than one aspect of the decline of the influence of the Catholic Church, and he recruits evidence of women's increased freedoms to his argument against the "Begrudgers," those who at the height of Ireland's prosperity were nostalgic for a romanticized past, "less prosperous, certainly, less enlightened, possibly, but kinder, more ethical and less barbarous than the times in which we now live."[18] It seems likely that economic decline will rapidly bring about a decline in such nostalgia, but it will also create problems for the liberal feminism that became mainstream on the basis that women's participation in the workforce and consumer spending power were a force for economic development. It is significant that one of the emergency cost-cutting measures introduced by the Irish government at the height of its financial crisis in 2009 was a reduction in tax relief for childcare. Foster's account does not map the extent to which Catholic social teaching retained a residual hold on both attitudes and legislation in relation to women's rights in Ireland. The apparent ambivalence about European integration in Ireland in the twenty-first century is problematic given the extent to which recourse to the European courts was a necessity for both women's and gay rights groups in bringing about precisely the changes Foster lauds. The extent to which national referenda have manifested this unease in a desire to reassert control, over women, migration or the structures and borders of an expanding Europe, should strike a warning note.

If the Virgin Mary and Barbie have one striking thing in common, it is their combination of white face and golden hair. The critique of Ireland as a racial state and the study of the formation of Irishness as a white identity have emerged most strongly from sociology in Ireland, but it is a very rapidly expanding force linked to the emergence of a new Irish cultural studies. It is notable that in the first major collection of critical essays on contemporary Irish popular culture, *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*,[19] almost half of all the essays are concerned with race and almost all are concerned with gender and/or "quare theory." According to Cleary:

> The proper business of any critical theory is not to validate a pregiven political position, whether to the left or right. It is, rather, to track the matrix of oppressive and emancipatory forces at work in every period of modernity, and indeed to be attentive to how even the most emancipatory developments can sometimes collude with or be commandeered by the regressive.[20]

Feminist criticism, queer theory and migration studies will always be improper by this definition and their impropriety in the field of Irish cultural criticism is compounded by their attention to how even the most regressive developments can be countered by emancipatory strategies. Moreover, all tend to be part of a broad coalition of social movements for social and cultural change. This coalition is not always strong, confident or successful, rarely organized and never unified, but it does exist and it is defined by an orientation toward present struggles and future possibilities beyond the academy, at odds with the orientation toward the past that has come to define postcolonialism as well as revisionism in Irish Studies. At its best it can upset all "pre-given" political positions and is concerned to track oppression, but more concerned to change consciousness. From Mary Wollstonecraft to Judith Butler, feminism has promulgated the idea that a change in the material of culture can bring about a change in material conditions. The movement that declared the personal is political has a particular commitment to changing the way in which the respective roles of women and men are imagined and, once imagined, felt. Feminism is much criticized for being a movement of the Enlightenment, of modernity, of the West, but among the multiplicity of positions embraced by the term *feminism* there has been a sometimes submerged but always persistent critique of Reason's excesses, an occasional bracing antidote to the romanticization of tradition and a sustained and sometimes anguished debate about the relative claims of community and the rights of individuals and groups of women, for whom a break with tradition can be a matter of basic survival.

The focus of the opening chapters of this book is on the construction of Irish uniqueness and the consequences of that construction for the regulation of gender roles, sexuality, artistic expression and any manifestation

of difference or dissent. That focus also reveals the extent to which the carapace of Irish national uniqueness concealed inner tensions, the rapidity with which the cracks (already more than evident when Johnston's Logan family sat down to their uncomfortable tea in 1977) proceeded to create fractures in the whole edifice and the fact that residual chunks of it remain standing.

Part I

Race, Women, and Nation

1 Virgin Mother Ireland

FEMINISMS AND NATIONALISMS

If "all nationalisms are gendered,"[1] the Mother Ireland trope merely indicates the operation of a fundamental structuring principle recognizable in both official and insurgent nationalisms. It is one instance of the structural interdependence of gender and national identities. "The hegemonic process of constructing a nationalist ideology depends upon distinguishing between self and other, us and them, in the creation of a common (shared) identity; women as symbol, men as agents of the nation, colonized space as feminine, colonial power as masculine."[2] Miroslav Hroch argued in the 1990s with regard to both the then resurgent Eastern European nationalisms and to nineteenth-century nationalisms that:

> Identification with the national group . . . includes . . . the construction of a personalized image of the nation. The glorious past of this personality comes to be lived as part of the individual memory of each citizen, its defeats resented as failures that still touch them. One result of such personalization is that people will regard their nation—that is, themselves—as a single body in a more than metaphorical sense. If any distress befalls a small part of the nation, it can be felt throughout it, and if any branch of the ethnic group—even one living far from the "mother-nation"—is threatened with assimilation, the members of the personalized nation may treat it as an amputation of the national body.[3]

If the nation is experienced as "a body," then the body in Western culture is primarily figured as and through the female body. The systematic violation of individual women's bodies in a way that understands itself as destroying both an organic community and an abstract nation is a horrific validation of Hroch's analysis of the new nationalisms in this respect. According to Anne McClintock:

> All too often in male nationalisms, *gender difference* between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference

> and power between *men*. Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit.[4]

Women are obviously crucial to national expansion and consolidation in their role as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities, but something more complex than the desire to see the nation's population expand is at stake. Peggy Watson offers an explanation that would indicate why certain nationalisms seem more prone and some less prone to obsession with control of women through and as mediums of reproduction. Watson offers an example with striking parallels to Ireland. She recounts a response from an unnamed member of the post-communist Polish senate that:

> The reason for concentrating on the abortion issue at the expense of other pressing problems was simply because it was regarded as something which *could* be done . . . the regulation of women was seen as an area which required action, but also one where power could readily be exercised, whereas the economy engendered feelings of powerlessness . . . Attempting to legislate against the right to abortion in effect serves both to institutionalize the power of men, and to legitimate this power by providing a platform for new, more radical and "modernized" definitions of women as *exclusively* grounded in domesticity.[5]

A range of legislative measures to promote just such ends occurred in newly independent southern Ireland after 1922, culminating in the delineation of women's social function within the home in Article 41.2 of the 1937 constitution. The elision of women's role as activists into idealized passivity and symbolic status is again characteristic of the transition from national movement to state authority internationally. (The analogy with Poland is another reminder that the conjunction of white faces and histories of colonization and migration is not nearly as unusual as Irish cultural theory has sometimes made it seem.) Gender resurfaced as an area where reassurance could be sought against political violence, mass unemployment and rapid social change in the 1980s, a decade characterized in the Republic of Ireland by bitter constitutional campaigns to control the domains of reproduction and the family and ferocious divisions over sexual, familial and religious values.[6]

It might be assumed that the emergence of a prosperous post–Celtic Tiger Ireland would have eliminated the need for this kind of policing of the internal border constituted by women's bodies. In some regards that has been the case. In most important respects, however, the work of national scapegoat has simply been outsourced, as so much other domestic labor, onto immigrant women. The ease with which popular hysteria about pregnant migrants "flooding" Irish maternity hospitals with their nonnational

babies could be translated into 80 percent electoral support for a constitutional amendment limiting Irish citizenship on the basis of ethnicity and affiliations of kinship and blood indicates that racism was never a marginal factor in Irish political life nor a specific historical response to the numbers of actual migrants arriving in Ireland in the late nineties. It was and is now constitutionally enshrined as a structural principle in national identity. Liberal appeals for Irish sympathy with immigrants on the basis that previous generations of Irish emigrants shared their experience ignore the extent to which the Irish cultivated, traded in and still exploit the valuable commodity of their white identity both abroad and at home. Kingsley's cry of horror that Irish white chimpanzees were so much worse than black African ones is perhaps too much quoted for a reason. It obscures the extent to which subsequent generations of Irish have been able to trade on their difference from the Africans with whom Kingsley's racist perceptions were more comfortable. The Victorian parlor game that Luke Gibbons so influentially described halted, like Kingsley, at the one point in the map of the British Empire where the natives were white.[7] Far from subverting racial hierarchies, the existence of liminally white groups has always been a functioning part of the racist system. Colonized or ethnically distinct whites such as the Irish and Scottish provided the British Empire with a highly expendable soldiery and an army of civil servants to deploy around the empire in the nineteenth century. As the Irish emigrated to the US, they progressively "became white"[8] without at all disconcerting racist structures. (The way in which certain kinds of white ethnicities such as Irish and Polish function in the construction and control of working-class identity in the US is an increasing area of study.[9]) Long overdue, as studies of Irish emigration develop, is a thorough analysis of the way in which the experience of Irish emigrants abroad had an impact on how the Irish who remained at home viewed themselves, particularly in relation to race. It is certainly the case that a highly racialized and rigidly gendered identity was promulgated by both church and state in Ireland as true Irishness.

GENDER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS

Without rehearsing in detail well-known arguments, it may be useful to summarize. The psychodynamic of colonial and postcolonial identity often produces in the formerly colonized a desire to assert a rigid and confined masculine identity, against the colonizers stereotype of their subjects as feminine, wild and ungovernable. This masculine identity then emerges at the state level as a regulation of "our" women, an imposition of a very definite feminine identity as guarantor to the precarious masculinity of the new state. The specific role of the Irish Catholic Church in this maelstrom of economic, political, social and psychological forces is rather more than one among a number of regulatory institutions. It is after all sometimes very