

## Review of A History of Women in Ireland

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Albion@h-net.msu.edu (November, 2005)

Mary O'Dowd. A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800. Women and Men in History Series. Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005. xi + 334 pp. Graph, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 0-582-40429-0.

Reviewed for H-Albion by L. A. Botelho, Department of History, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

### The Tentative Achievement of an Ambiguous Equality

Raised, as it turns out, on stories promulgated by nineteenth-century folklorists, I harbored images of fierce Gaelic princesses, such as Scathach, Nessa, and Maeve fighting to protect their lands from a host of invaders, with the English being only a later day manifestation of the same. Mary O'Dowd does much to set the story straight and, while disabusing us of the early modern incarnations of such women, sketches the outlines of a much more complex and nuanced story of the role and place of women in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Ireland.

O'Dowd's aims are ambitious in one sense, while being modest in another. They are to discover what the lives of women were like between 1500 and 1800; to determine the key moments that transformed or changed their position; and to begin to explore the ways in which social and ethnic background shaped women's experiences. These are modest goals, as O'Dowd herself points out, that have more a shared spiritual kinship with the desires and aspirations of 1980s women's history than with today's emphasis on theory and criticism. In fact, at her most elemental, O'Dowd seeks to prove that women were more than just "an interesting footnote" to Irish history (p. 5). She does just that; however, the road traveled must not have been easy, as our understanding of women in Irish history is beset by a two-fold problem: one, there is little secondary source literature and, two, Irish social history--the traditional bedrock upon which women's history is built--is underdeveloped. It is in single-handedly addressing these obstacles, by the sheer volume and breadth of her archival work and by the creation of a scholarly synthesis out of raw data, that O'Dowd is at her most ambitious and successful.

The story that emerges is of eighteenth-century change, built upon two centuries of slow and uncertain travel toward women's rights, and significant improvements for women in politics, inheritance, religion, marriage, education, and employment. While the eighteenth century proved to be a springboard for a more fully articulated set of female freedoms, the century itself was not stable in this regard and its women were jostled around on uneasy seas for most of it, before gaining relatively dry land in the nineteenth century. O'Dowd explores this theme in four parts of unequal length and weight: "Politics," "The Economy," "Religion and Education," and "Ideas"; in each section O'Dowd tells versions of this same story.

The political world of Irish women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was primarily played out within the structure of the household--as providers of hospitality and manipulators of kin networks--and for the benefit of their husband or sons. Much changed over the course of the eighteenth century and the repositioning of women in politics can be tied

directly to Parliament's new role as the center and focus of debate. The printing press and the newly opened Parliament building (1731), with its clear intent to foster and facilitate public participation, only served to reinforce the trend. Politics was the lingua franca of eighteenth-century Ireland and elite women managed to get more than a word in edgewise.

Among the lower orders, women were initially vital and keen members of a whole host of popular--and frequently secret--societies. The development of the "Wear Irish" and "Free Trade" campaigns that sought to foster domestic economic independence morphed into an overtly political, anti-English movement, characterized by the Volunteers and their female supporters. Female sympathizers wore "uniforms" to advertise their cause, spinning fashion into politics, as they found a new form of political expression in public marches. This hard-fought visual presence did not last and by the 1780s, with the development of the paramilitaries and their male-dominated constructs, women found themselves once again confined to traditional and household-based methods of political expression. While slow in coming and uneven in its arrival, women's political participation--as in the other areas covered in the book--was unstable and fleeting.

For much of the period, the economic position of women was tied directly to the good will of the head of their families. The eighteenth century, however, witnessed significant urban growth and a demographic expansion that resulted in a vibrant urban life, fueled by the expansion of the Irish linen trade and maintained by the widespread use of single women and widows in the burgeoning service industry, either as domestic servants, milliners, seamstress, and the like. Women, for the first time, could now achieve financial independence and married women could become contributors of cash to their household economies. The decline in textile manufacture during the 1780s, coupled with increased population, resulted in the crashing of many women's economic opportunities and personal economies. Consequently, their "main economic contribution" was no longer "through spinning but through begging" (p. 143): the eighteenth-century economic bust returned most women to economic precariousness.

Women's place and function in organized religion followed a familiar pattern. For those in the Church of Ireland, their main responsibility was to provide a religious education for their children. Roman Catholic and non-mainstream Protestant women, however, figured prominently in the continuation or development of their faiths by providing a safe haven for illegal priests or ministers, by catechizing their children and servants, and (sometimes) by converting their husbands. Women were in fact the motivating force and logistical keystone of their legally problematic beliefs. With the easing of religious sanctions in the eighteenth century, women outside of the establishment and on both sides of the confessional divide found their roles becoming more like that of their Church of Ireland sisters, as men could now legally step forward into leadership positions. For such women, the eighteenth century was a period of both progress and loss, of legal recognition and personal subordination.

The final section of the book, "Ideas," is a sweeping survey of the underlying principles, theology, and medical views that informed and shaped society's understanding of women. As such it would have best served the reader's interest as an opening section to the text.

O'Dowd's A History of Women in Ireland should be read on two levels. First and most obviously, it will be a welcomed addition to undergraduate courses in Irish history and women's history. Its prose is clear and direct, and its many examples will go far in helping students identify with

the lived experiences of these early modern women. Second, more advanced scholars of women or early modern England will find a number of points thought-provoking. One is quickly reminded--or taught--that turning points in English history are not necessarily Irish ones or that, if they are, their emphasis and meaning were often significantly altered. At a time in our historiography when we are strongly encouraged to think in Atlantic terms, this is a strong warning against merely extrapolating from England to other places in its Atlantic sphere, be it Ireland or the New World. In a related vein, O'Dowd offers a brief, yet fascinating, discussion on the "colonial context" of early modern Ireland and the place of women, as "the antithesis of the ideal Christian woman" within it (p. 250). This too should cause historians of England to pause and consider closely the prism through which we view England's lands and possessions. O'Dowd has written more about this elsewhere and I wish that she had done so here.[1]

O'Dowd has been remarkably perceptive and forthright about this book's shortcomings, such as its uneven coverage of topics. For example, while much was gleaned from inheritance practices, other subjects, such as women and crime, pass by in silence. She has gone to great lengths to look at the various constituencies of women in early modern Ireland (elite and poor, married and single, Anglo-Irish and Gaelic, Catholic and Protestant), yet all of her women are ageless, being neither young nor old. How did old age change the dynamic, say, in family politics? Was there a grand matron as in English fashion, such as Lady Sarah Cowper, who deliberately played upon her advanced age and religious piety to assert her will in eighteenth-century political life?[2] Ultimately, the field is still too young to expect such a comprehensive review and O'Dowd is to be applauded for the work that she has done here and for the questions that her work raises.

Mary O'Dowd has given us a long overdue and valuable look at the lives of women in early modern Ireland. She has done yeoman service in the archives and has set us firmly down the correct historical path. By doing so, she does scholars a service. Her text dovetails nicely with the work of Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford for England, and Olwen Hufton for France to form a fairly full view of early modern womanhood in the European North Atlantic.[3] Consequently, the shape of a shared female culture emerges with some clarity. O'Dowd does students an equal service by making her work accessible and by her careful articulation of both problems and approaches faced by historians of Ireland. Not only will they learn about early modern Irish women, they will also learn something about the historians' craft--and that is never a bad thing in an undergraduate survey text.

#### Notes

[1]. Mary O'Dowd, "Women and the Colonial Experience in Ireland, c. 1550-1650" in *Gendering Scottish History: An International Approach*, ed. T. Brotherstone, D. Simonton, and O. Walsh (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1999).

[2]. Anne Kugler, *Errant Plagiary: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper: 1644-1720* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); see Susan E. Whyman, "Review of Anne Kugler, *Errant Plagiary: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644-1720*," *H-Albion*, June, 2003 <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=326741058385140>>.

[3]. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

Purchasing through these links helps support H-Net:

[http://www.powells.com/cgi-bin/partner?partner\\_id=28081&cgi=product&isbn=0582404290](http://www.powells.com/cgi-bin/partner?partner_id=28081&cgi=product&isbn=0582404290)

[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0582404290/hnetreview-20?dev-t=mason-wrapper%26camp=2025%26link\\_code=xm2](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0582404290/hnetreview-20?dev-t=mason-wrapper%26camp=2025%26link_code=xm2)

<http://www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/ASIN/0582404290/hnetreview-21>

<http://service.bfast.com/bfast/click?bfmid=2181&sourceid=41034484&bfpid=0582404290&bfmtype=book>

Copyright ? 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).