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Fallen angels: the lost warriors of the 1916 Proclamation

Abstract:

Irish Studies is a vast cornucopia of stereotypes, topics, debates, discourses and fissures where writing as an act of homage and as an act of theft can occur. Furthermore, Irish migration is just one field of scholarly study where migrants' lived experiences elicit continuing interest with many questions remaining unanswered. In this paper I reflect on some of the Irish official documentation that positions Irish women, including Irish female migrants, through negative stereotypes. However, the POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN (Irish Proclamation) is one document that can be seen as an act of homage to the notion of equal rights which were promised in 1916 and supported in the Constitution of the Irish Free State in 1922. Viewing POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN as an act of homage allows my project, which consists of a work of historical fiction and an exegesis, to engage with the past on a practical level and function as an 'alternate' history (White 2014: 10). The relevance of the promises of equality made in the 1916 Proclamation to my project is in discovering how far they have slipped away, and this information is a foundational marker for my creative work. Sadly, the promises made in the 1916 and again in 1922 were progressively watered down. Enactment of the Constitution of Ireland - Bunreacht na hÉireann in 1937, validated that dilution of women's rights to equality. As a result, the 1937 Constitution can be viewed as a document that epitomises 'authorised theft' by breaking the promises previously made.

Biographical note:

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Key words:

1916 Proclamation – 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State – 1937 Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht na hÉireann – historical fiction – Hayden White – Irish female migrants – Irish women

Introduction

I have chosen to locate this paper in the gaps between the conference topic of '*Writing as homage or as theft*', and official Irish documents (1948-1954) viewed as part of my research project which consists of a work of historical fiction and an exegesis. The promises made to Irish women for equal rights and opportunities in the 1916 Proclamation and supported in the 1922 Constitution were broken. A broken promise can be regarded as theft because a commitment has been given and subsequently withdrawn. The promises of equality made in 1916 and again in 1922, were broken through a progressive watering down of women's rights, which was eventually validated by the enactment and the authority of the 1937 Constitution.

My project is looking at post World War II Irish female migration to Britain, predominantly England, but its focus is on women before they left Ireland. The result is a story about what it might have been like for women as they lived and worked in Ireland before deciding to leave and find work elsewhere. The theoretical underpinning of my project is Hayden White's argument that historical fiction is able to engage with the past on a practical level and can function as an 'alternate' history (White 2014: 10). Applying his argument enables my project to move beyond the often polemic and binary perspectives of the history vs historical fiction debates. It also allows me to (re)locate Irish women (including Irish female migrants) within the 'Ireland of equal rights and equal opportunities for all its citizens', as promised by the POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN. To do this, my project recognises, and will call for the recognition of the sacrifices they made, big or small, willingly or unwillingly, to the 'Ireland' that followed enactment of the 1937 Irish Constitution.

This paper showcases a part of the research journey this writer is undertaking and, just some of the documents that are guiding the writing of a work of historical fiction, and yet it might easily read as a history lesson. I have learned that this is the nature of undertaking research for a work of historical fiction. The paper will also lightly touch on topics such as: women's equality, historical fiction; archival research and Irish female migration, but it is important to acknowledge at this point, that it is unable to turn its gaze on major academic and public debates that cluster around them.

Writing as an act of homage – Irish women, including Irish female migrants

The issue of gender manifested itself during research of archival documentation dated from 1948 to 1954 as part of my research project. Part of the research journey has included learning about the Proclamation of the Irish Easter Rising in 1916, and discovering how close Irish women were to achieving equality at that time. Equal rights were promised in 1916 and again in the Constitution of the Irish Free State in 1922, but these were reduced by the time of the enactment of the 1937 Irish Constitution. Documentation from 1948 to 1954 viewed as part my research project shows how Irish women were regarded and treated in Ireland at that time. They were not the equals of men. However, despite the act of theft of women's individuality and presence that official documents in the archives can be said to have manifested after 1922, the 1916 Proclamation remains an important document that can be considered as an act of homage to Irish men and women.

Excerpts taken from the 1916 Proclamation

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades in arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline, and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called. POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN.

Shortly after noon on Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916 when the *Proclamation* was read aloud by Patrick Pearse outside Dublin's General Post Office, it firmly situated Irish women as equal to Irish men. This document clearly spelled out that Ireland's children and its people, and the suffrages of all of her men and women were to be held in 'equal' regard and respect. Thus the position of both men and women was 'written' as it was recognised that the Republic of Ireland would need its people, equally, for its future endeavours. Although the Ireland of the 1916 *Proclamation* never became a reality, the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State also offered equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens (Beaumont, 1997:1). Along with these offers the Proclamation and the 1922 Constitution claimed not only the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman, but also their sacrifice and adherence to the obligations of citizenship. Like men, women did not fail in their efforts to support their country in its hours of need and conflict. If they were not directly involved in the conflict, they were in the home supporting their families.

The relevance of the promises of equality made in the 1916 Proclamation to the research I am undertaking is in discovering how far that opportunity has slipped away from Irish women, and this information is a foundational marker for my work of historical fiction.

Writing as an act of theft: The *Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht na hÉireann* enacted in 1937 and Irish women (including Irish female migrants)

While the 1916 Proclamation and the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State offered women

equal rights, under the *Constitution of Ireland - Bunreacht na hÉireann* which was enacted in 1937, the State was given the power to subject the equal rights of all Ireland's citizens to a number of qualifications:

1937 CONSTITUTION

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Personal Rights.

Article 40.

All citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law.

This shall not be held to mean that the State shall not in its enactments have due regard to differences of capacity, physical and moral, and of social function." (Extract from University College Cork: Corpus of Electronic Texts Edition).

The important and crucial phrase:

... without distinction on the grounds of sex (Mullally, 2006:126).

had been part of the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State but was considered as unnecessary, and deleted by Prime Minister, Eamon de Valera (Mullally, 2006:126). Women were not involved in the drafting of the 1937 Constitution. Instead, de Valera and people he trusted in the civil service and the Catholic Church had carriage of the role ((Mullally, 2006:122). This document, like many that have been viewed as part of my research, firmly positions women in the home. While it is a product of its times, it can also be viewed as:

... the enshrinement of the state's formal values ... (Ballin, 2002: 24).

But there was some resistance to the 1937 Constitution by women's movements in Ireland including *The Women's Graduate Association*, and from outspoken advocates like Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. (Mullally 2006: 126). There was also criticism of those who protested against the 1937 Constitution by those who railed at the possible undermining of church and nationalistic values of who and what Irish people were (Mullally 2006: 126). However, the positioning of women within a role of domesticity was further reinforced in de Valera's now infamous and much referenced St Patrick's Day speech of 1943. With its embedded mythic vision of an ideal Ireland and encompassing issues of representation, and personal and national identity (O'Shea 2008: 64), the integral role of women was seen as fundamentally bonded to the home.

Following the Second World War, Eire was ruled by a conservative government whose limited visions for the future would see it remain a patriarchal rural society for many years. My research shows that during the period 1948 to 1954, it can be said that the 1937 Constitution actively reduced women's prospects for equal pay for equal work and, their access to interesting work with opportunity for promotion. For those Irish women who may have thought they were on the brink of enormous leaps forward in their struggle for gender equality, another opportunity came about in 1952, The *Private Deputies' Business - Equal Pay for Equal Work - Motion (Bill)* October 1952 was put and then rejected. The motion read:

The Dáil Éireann is of opinion that the Government should take immediate steps to introduce

proposals for legislation which will ensure the application to all wage earners of the principle that women shall be paid the same rates of remuneration as men for work of equal value.

Unfortunately, the response was, Tá, 23; Níl, 56, and another opportunity to properly recognise the work and value of Irish women was lost. There has been more than one occasion then, when Irish women could have been formally recognised as equal citizens of Ireland as nominated in the Proclamation of 1916, and supported in the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State. I have found through my research that inequality between Ireland's men and women manifested itself in a number of ways, including in the work place. For example, in the Irish Civil Service (1948-1954), there existed a rigid hierarchy. A woman could only rise to certain levels, with many positions, such as typists and writing assistants, open solely to women. These were of a much lower status than male positions and therefore attracted lower levels of pay, particularly those where promotion was not an option. Unsurprisingly, many young women left Ireland in search of better pay and living conditions, although these were not the only reasons they emigrated. However, through 'national' storytelling, or stories about the nation over the years, the story of a woman's rights has been lost; official writing has become an act of theft. In essence, all Irish women have become 'lost warriors'¹ of the 1916 Irish Proclamation.

The theft of the promise for equal rights for Irish women does not mean that they had no agency. But how might the Irish women of 1948 to 1954 want their lives portrayed? If they could be asked, what type of artefact, story, creative and scholarly output would they want to depict their history? While historical fiction offers me the opportunity to write a story based on the information I have found in the archives, and how it constructs the identity of Irish female migrants, how might I portray their agency? Thus I, as author, am conflicted! I feel for Irish women who have had their chance of equality, as declared in the 1916 Easter Rising Proclamation, misappropriated. Yet I cannot re-create their lived realities and 'write' them back, even though it could be regarded as 'writing as homage' to a time when their status, though fleeting, was promised to be the equals of men. However, there is at least one way to portray the agency that Irish women, including Irish female migrants had. Ariella Van Luyn writing about her historical novel, *Treading Air*, discusses new historicism, women's stories and historical agency, and provides clarification of a similar issue that she faced in regard to women's agency:

... historical fiction can draw attention to how narratives are at once shaped by social structures and are shaping them.

Such an awareness can function as a form of historical agency, which den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) define as 'an imaginative capacity for shaping intentions, forming choices and undertaking action' (145). According to den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) 'agency involves the active interpretation of experience, the application of lessons to present socially interpreted situations' (145). den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) argue that historical fiction can be a means of historical agency because it helps 'inform consideration of the inner life of historical fact' (154). Historical fiction can also offer 'a rich perspective on the meanings of past lives' and illuminate 'patterns that exist in human motivation, action and cohabitation' (154) Van Luyn: 2015: 4).

Van Luyn's approach to the term 'women's agency' encapsulates what I am trying to achieve in the project, which is to highlight that Irish women used whatever was at their disposal to

advance their lives, and it is their lived reality we are trying to understand now. Historical fiction based on research can help identify the many questions that remain unanswered about the lived experiences of Irish women and, how they have been constructed in documents in the archives. Not only that, but by using and absorbing archival sources, insights into their constructed nature, and the historical discourses shaping the lives of their subjects, are also presented (Haebich, 2015: 5). However, I am also aware that as a writer of fiction who constructs historical realities, I too construct identity and play my own role in dominant narratives and discourses, which are themselves underpinned by a variety of ideologies (Scott 1991).

By 1948 Irish women were not regarded as the equal of Irish men. Female Irish migrants have been stereotypically portrayed in Irish official documents in the archives and various discourses of the times as hapless victims and uneducated women, with few skills, who were either in need of moral guidance or already morally lost; ‘fallen angels’². Missing entirely is any construct of an Irish female migrant who might successfully find work and make a life for herself or her family, and directly contribute to Ireland in a number of ways, including economically. Writing historical fiction is an opportunity to look beyond the constructed images of Irish women in archives and consider what the lived realities of the women involved might have been like (Van Luyn, 2015:4). But it has also means negotiating a path through the information found, and deciding how best to use it to write a creative work. I am aiming to tell a story about Irish women in the post-World War II period of 1948-1954 and have researched subjects such as the Irish economy, the Irish Government, the Civil Service, and the political debates in the Dáil Éireann of the late 1940s and early 1950s. As a writer, I want to ensure that my characters, dialogue and setting are plausible, while not lecturing the reader on history. Now, armed with information about the social, cultural, political and financial aspects of Ireland at that time, the novel’s narrative traces the lives of four main characters, which have been imagined. Their lives move between real, and yet, imagined places and events through prose which narrates what it might have been like at that time. I aim to be true to the information found in the sources I study so there is a certain type of authenticity about the novel in its highlighting of some of the issues that cluster around the extent of power held by female Irish migrants of that time. This is a learning journey and I know that it is worthwhile. As Delia Falconer writes:

All novel writing is, in the end, consciously or subconsciously, the product of philosophical inquiry about the nature of writing itself. A good novelist is always asking: What is a novel? What is the point of writing one? The historical novelist is also always writing to answer the question of why we should bother to write novels in the present about the past (Falconer, 2007:108).

It is hoped that my work of historical fiction about the agency and the experiences of Irish women (as they relate to migration) can show that most Irish female migrants differed markedly from these stereotypical representations found in the Irish archives. Most Irish women simply sought a better life for themselves and their families. Some wanted to move beyond the oppression of their familial, religious, social and cultural traditions and leave behind the lowly opinions held of them. The fact that many may have had few skills does not mean that they were stupid. The repressive gender inequality of the time meant that many were denied ‘opportunity’ and, as a consequence, struggled to make a reasonable living in

post-Emergency Ireland. Little wonder then that so many opted to leave.

The tide is slowly turning and Irish historian, Enda Delaney, who is interested in the lived experiences of Irish migrants, points out that, while the stories of the individual migrants do not appear in official records, work is being done to try and understand their lived experiences. (Delaney, 2007:7). That said, research of the lived experience brings with it challenges and excitement, because:

our facts do not come to us unvarnished, but are loaded, slanted, and embedded in narratives (1991: 69-70) (Brien, 2015: 3).

As a researcher writing a work of historical fiction, awareness of this fragmentary illusion of a complete history when writing, is important when using primary sources. Also worth noting is historian, Diarmaid Ferriter's caveat:

... the danger of reading history backwards and of imparting present-day values to past situations, and, in turn, bringing to an assessment of twentieth- century Ireland a corrosive cynicism that does scant justice to its complexities (Ferriter 2005: 5).

History continues its march through time and my research shows that gender equality in Ireland continues to be a worthy topic of study. A Constitutional Convention was established in 2012 to consider and deliberate on eight separate matters which might have led to recommendations for possible future amendments to the Constitution. As part of the process, in September 2012, the National Women's Council of Ireland set up a working party to identify key changes they would like to see made to the Constitution, and to try and assist reforms of women's positioning in Ireland. Aware that they faced a challenge they noted that a cautious approach was needed. They also stated:

Since the 1937 Constitution was first drafted women in Ireland have lived under the shadow of its sexist and reductionist language and philosophy. Many attempts have been made to change, reform and improve the Constitution since then. Some of these have been successful, while others, such as the work of the Constitutional Review Group in 1996, made little or no impact on the Constitution itself (*The Constitution, Gender and Reform: Improving the Position of Women in the Irish Constitution*, 2012: Introduction).

The final meeting of the Convention was Sunday, 23 February, 2014 and suggestions were taken forward to be considered by the Irish Government which undertook to provide its responses and debate the matters in the Dáil. However, there still seems to be a lack of resolve to see these changes through and, more work needs to be done to improve the status of women in Ireland. Clause 40 remains the same. Nevertheless, one momentous change has been made in the Constitution:

Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Act, 2015
[provided that persons may marry without distinction as to their sex.] 2015

[source: Department of the Taoiseach, Historical Information, the Constitution]

In line with the theme of *Authorised Theft*, I have reflected my research journey and learning about the enactment of the 1937 Irish Constitution and, how its impacts are encapsulated and operationalised in the official Irish documentation viewed as part of my research. The 1937 Irish Constitution can be considered as a document that illustrates 'authorised theft'. At the time of the 1916 Proclamation, Irish women were on the cusp of achieving equality but, more

than 100 years later, this goal remains elusive. In 2016, as I write a work of historical fiction, I ponder how an important issue, such as equal rights and opportunities for women, can be pushed aside and allowed to languish on the dusty shelf of indifference for over 100 years. Do we no longer care about unfairness?

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Endnotes

1. The term 'lost warriors' is intended to highlight that 'The Irish Republic' of the Proclamation claimed not only the '... allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman', but, 'In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline, and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called' (POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN).
2. Fallen angels. A metaphor to describe young Irish female migrants (1948-1954) whose behaviour was considered by the church and others as leading to moral danger, promiscuity, and/or in need of guidance and support from either the church or its welfare agencies.