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Sally Barr Ebest

*University of Missouri-St. Louis*

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# Irish American Women: Forgotten First-Wave Feminists

Sally Barr Ebest, University of Missouri–St. Louis

**Abstract:** Numerous books have been written about American feminism and its influence on education and society. But none have recognized the key role played by Irish American women in exposing injustice and protecting their rights. Certainly their literary heritage, inherent knowledge of English, and membership in the single largest ethnic group gave them an advantage. But their dual positions as colonized, second-class citizens of their country and their religion gave them their political edge, a trait that has been evident since the Irish first stepped off the boat and that continues to this day. This essay focuses on the first wave of these feminist messages by introducing Irish American writers and activists who emerged between the 1830s and 1960s. It locates Irish American women's influence in three different, yet overlapping milieus—political activism, journalism, and literature.

**Keywords:** feminism, Irish American literature, Irish American women, Irish women, first-wave feminism, feminist literary history

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Numerous books have been written about American feminism and its influence on education and society. But none have recognized the key role played by Irish American women in exposing women's issues and protecting their rights. Certainly their literary heritage, inherent knowledge of English, and membership in the single largest immigrant ethnic group in the United States gave them an advantage (Fanning 2001). But their dual positions as colonized, second-class citizens of their country and their religion gave them their political edge.

This trait has been evident since the Irish first stepped off the boat and it continues to this day. In this essay, I focus on the first wave of these feminist messages by introducing Irish American writers and activists who emerged between the 1830s and 1960s. The following discussion locates Irish American women's influence in three different, yet overlapping milieus—political activism, journalism, and literature:

- Irish American women fostered assimilation by helping ensure union representation for women as well as men (Ruether 2003, 4).
- Irish American female journalists established their reputations by exposing and deflating prejudicial patriarchal practices.
- Irish American women's novels were the first to lament and expose women's second-class status at home and in the church.

Taken altogether, Irish American women represent the earliest, largest, and most enduring body of feminist activists.

## Who Are These Women?

Irish Americans may be defined in a number of ways. The most obvious is by their surnames: "By Mac and

O, you'll always know / True Irishmen, they say" (Lysaght 1986, 57). But many Irish families dropped the "Mac" or "O" when they emigrated; since then, names such as Barry, Brady, Brennan, Carey, Corrigan, Cullinane, Daly, Flynn, Gallagher, Manning, Moore, Sullivan, and many others have also been identified as Irish (Lysaght 1986, 259–80). "Irish American" identity can be defined by geography as well as birth. Maeve Brennan, for example, was born in Ireland but lived in America as an adult (Bourke 2004). Other authors, such as Mary McCarthy and Carson McCullers, were born in America but can trace their lineage through their forebears. This ethnic doubleness allows the authors to draw on what Vincent Buckley calls their "source-country," whether that be through names, myths, speech, or slant (24). As Irish Americans assimilated into the US, measuring these traits became more difficult; nevertheless, these writers' literary works remain recognizably Irish insofar as they are characterized by "a penchant stylistically for formal experimentation, linguistic exuberance, and satiric modes" (Fanning 2001, 3).

Self-deprecation and social anxiety are ubiquitous among these descendants of immigrants (Dezell 2000, 65). Such feelings were often expressed through satire, an Irish habit traceable to Gaelic poets, essayists, and playwrights to parody and deflate anti-Irish stereotypes. In 1835, *Six Months in a House of Correction; or, the Narrative of Dorah Mahoney, Who Was under the Influence of the Protestants about a Year, and an Inmate of the House of Correction in Leverett St., Boston, Mass., Nearly Six Months* was published anonymously to counter Rebecca Reed's anti-Catholic tale, *Six Months in a Convent*, which had resulted in a mob burning down a convent (Fanning 1997, 47). Building on the model of satire exemplified in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," the author urges fellow immigrants not to learn to read or write, arguing: "Besides, it is a great trouble and expense to build schools and maintain them, and a great botheration to the brains to pore over books. The Catholic Sentinel and the Jesuit, those two admirably conducted receptacles [sic] of knowledge, contain all that ever was known since the creation of the world" (Anonymous 1835). At the opposite end of the first wave, Mary McCarthy's satire is evident in practically every novel she penned. Satire allowed Irish Catholic women writers to "push the paradoxes of their religion with an irreverence that lessens the severity, although not always the sincerity, of their belief" (Del Rosso 2005, 149). Addressing issues previously excluded from Catholic women's lives, topics include erotic pleasure, egalitarian marriage, homosexuality, engrossing careers, or political activity. These women used their writing to construct an inner life and assert women's dignity so as to overcome, if not deny, the traditional roles they were assigned in society (Del Rosso 2005).

Historically, Irish American women have enjoyed a degree of independence unknown to their European counterparts (Meagher 2005, 173–74). Between 1846 and 1875, half of the 2,700,000 Irish entering the United States were female; by the 1870s, female immigrants outnumbered the males. The typical Irish female immigrant was young, single, and traveled alone or with sisters or female relations. She bought her own tickets, traveled unchaperoned, found employment (usually as a domestic servant), and then saved her salary to bring over family members, build churches, attend concerts, support nationalist movements, and pay parochial school tuition for nieces or nephews (Meagher 2006, 623–24). Three-quarters of these women were hired as domestic servants, a position which ultimately led to their social and economic mobility. This steady work, as well as the daily opportunity to observe models of middle- and upper-class culture, helped Irish American women grow into solid members of the community and promote their daughters' education and independence (Nolan 2004; Diner 1993). By the end of the nineteenth century, these women represented over 60 percent of the Irish American population (Dezell 2000, 91).

As this evidence suggests, the most distinguishing characteristic of Irish American women was their feminist bent—a trait they shared with the banshee. A mythical Irish being, the banshee has been variously

translated as “scold” or “a scolding woman”; “war goddess” or “dangerous, frightening and aggressive being”; “heroic individual” and “threatening” female (Lysaght 1986, 37–39), whereas tales associated with the banshee convey the role of guardian (216). Irish Women United, a radical feminist group, named their journal *Banshee* “not only because the being is feminine, but also because her appearance and behavior do not correspond to conventional male ideas about what a woman should look like and be like” (Lysaght 1986, 243). New Irish authors Emer Martin and Helena Mulherns revitalized the term for a literary website: “We chose the name *Banshee*,” Mulherns explains, “because we wanted something strong, loud, female, and Irish” (quoted in Wall 1999, 67).

Like the banshee who delivered messages forewarning of imminent death, through their activism Irish American women have repeatedly warned of the death of women’s rights. These messages carried the greatest potency at liminal times when feminism was under attack due to the politics of society, the government, or the Church. Similar to the banshee’s plaintive lament, Irish American women’s writing has been cautionary if not “tutelary” (Lysaght 1986). Moreover, just as the banshee’s lament was not heard by everyone, Irish American women—and their contributions to women’s rights—have been overlooked in religious, historical, academic, and popular works (Dezell 2000, 89).

The American Catholic church was responsible for women’s absence in religious histories. Early works, generally written by and about priests, contained very little information about lay men, but lay women were “invisible” in them due to what Mary Jo Weaver terms the authors’ “invincible ignorance” (1985, 11). More recent historians, writing after the women’s movement, have simply been guilty of neglect. In Robert Trisco’s *Catholics in America 1776-1976* (1976), thirty pictures are of male clerics, only seven of females; out of 331 pages in James Hennessey’s *American Catholics* (1981), information about women comprises approximately ten pages. William Shannon’s *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait* (1990), devotes only a few paragraphs to women, most often citing their relationships with Irish men or their involvement with the suffrage movement; however, since suffragists were generally upper-class Catholic women, most Irish Americans of that era were overlooked. Even as late as 2005, Tim Meagher’s *Columbia Guide to Irish American History* cites only 36 women within over 300 pages of text. Such oversights are not limited to Catholic historians. Rather, they reflect the fact that throughout much of American history, women’s relationship to religion and Catholicism was rarely addressed (Weaver 1985, 11–13).

Such attitudes have long prevailed in the history of the Irish. Apart from the early sixteenth century, when Irish women “esteemed learning” and were allowed to pursue education in convents (Mac Curtain 2008, 229), the years between the Council of Trent in 1563 and the growing enlightenment in the mid-1700s saw patriarchal attitudes increase in government, church, and family structures (237). Nuns were supposed to be contemplative, wives and daughters obedient—beliefs held by Protestants and Catholics alike—which culminated in the “gradual exclusion of women from virtually all spheres of productive work, including intellectual activity” (246). Thus, it is not so surprising that Irish women were also excluded from their country’s history.

Between the Famine years and the mid-twentieth century, Ireland remained a backwater known for its “economic isolationism, social conservatism, and Catholicism” (Cochrane 2010, 161), thanks in part to the politics of American-born Eamon de Valéra. When de Valéra was elected Irish Prime Minister in 1937, he revised the 1922 Constitution to deny women equal rights in language implying that woman’s place is in the home. Indeed, as *Irish Independent* columnist Gertrude Gaffney wrote,

The death knell of the working woman is sounded in this new constitution. Mr. de Valéra has always been a reactionary where women are concerned. He dislikes and distrusts us as a sex and his aim ever since he came

into office has been to put us into what he considers our place and keep us there. (quoted in Ellis 2006)

Under de Valéra, culture, politics, and religion became intertwined, with the Catholic Church essentially determining public policy (Cochrane 2010, 165).

Although the election of Sean Lemass in the late 1950s signaled the end of economic isolationism, women's roles in Irish history were not addressed until 1966 when, during the commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising, it became clear that they had been actively involved (Mac Curtain 2008, 81).<sup>1</sup> Coinciding with the rise of second-wave feminism, the fiftieth anniversary became the impetus for the Report of the Commission on the Status of Women, which called for the inclusion of women in Irish history (81). Still, not until Mary Robinson was elected President in 1990 did the "tight corset" that de Valéra and Church leaders had bound around the government begin to loosen (Cochrane 2010, 156). Contraception was legalized in 1985, homosexuality decriminalized in 1988, and divorce officially authorized in 1995 (155).

Nevertheless, Irish women remained largely invisible in scholarly works. In 1991, when the three-volume, 4,000-page *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* was published, feminists were outraged to discover that editor Seamus Deane had "overlooked" the contributions of Irish women. As recently as 2002, a survey of Irish literary, historical, and sociological studies revealed that "the women's movement [was] not considered an integral agent of change in dominant interpretations of the development and progression of Irish society, from the foundation of the State (in 1922) to the present" (Connolly 2003, 3). Such oversights were finally corrected in 2002 when the *Field Day Anthology* was updated with a two-volume, 3,200-page addition, *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*.

In contrast, outside of Ireland and Irish America, women of various nationally defined and diasporic ethnicities have been the object of academic studies since the 1980s. Recent years have seen publications devoted to Jewish, Hispanic, Russian, Chinese, African, African-American, Italian, Korean, Polish, Asian-Pacific, Japanese, Pakistani, Arab, Greek, and Roman women. Studies have focused on lesbians, vampires, lesbian vampires; Islamic, Appalachian, Medieval, and Victorian women, to name just a few groups. But to date no similar efforts have been undertaken on behalf of Irish American women.

Within literary studies, *Making the Irish American* lists only (non-Irish) Betty Smith, Mary McCarthy, and Flannery O'Connor (Casey and Rhodes 2006). Charles Fanning, recognized nationally and internationally as the foremost Irish American literary scholar, devotes portions of *The Irish Voice in America* (1991; 2nd ed. 2001) to women writers; however, since the study covers 250 years, analysis is limited. Conversely, Caitriona Moloney and Helen Thompson's *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field* (2003) features interviews with seventeen contemporary Irish and Irish American women writers, but only six of them are Irish American. While Ron Ebest's *Private Histories: The Writing of Irish Americans, 1900-1935* (2005) addresses detailed attention to women authors of the period, the book's coverage is limited to just three decades. Sally Barr Ebest and Kathleen McInerney's edited collection, *Too Smart to be Sentimental* (2008), represents the first in-depth study of contemporary Irish American women writers; however, its twelve essays introduce only a fraction of the total. Even the most recent research, such as Christopher Dowd's *The Construction of Irish Identity in American Literature* (2011), includes only one Irish American woman: Margaret Mitchell.

Irish American women have been overlooked by literary scholars because their writing not only avoids classic Irish American themes such as male camaraderie, drink, violence, and pub life, but also because they refuse to reify mothers or glorify priests (Monaghan 1993, 340). Historians and feminist scholars have also ignored Irish American women—historians because the writers were female, and feminists because the writers were presumably Catholic (Del Rosso 2000; Weaver 1985, 11). Irish American women

writers have also been ostracized because of the traditional definitions of the Irish American literary field. Eamonn Wall suggests that “[if] a writer does not write about Irish Americans ... he or she will be labeled an American writer. The problem for an Irish American writer is that the field of operation is rather small, but if he or she abandons this field, there will no longer be an Irish American novel, *unless the parameters are extended*” (1999, 37; emphasis mine). Feminist historian Gerda Lerner offers a prescription for what such an extension might mean in this case. In her argument for adding women to historical studies, she recommends that the parameters be extended to include “sexuality, reproduction, role indoctrination, [and] female consciousness,” as well as women’s culture, which might encompass their “occupations, status, experiences, rituals, and consciousness” (quoted in Weaver 1985, 5, 15).

Irish American women writers have done just that: they extended the boundaries of the Irish American literary canon by moving inside the bedroom, outside the home, and into the workplace. Perhaps as a result, their writing has been overlooked because of their feminist stance. Since they arrived in America, this cohort has protected women’s rights by fighting prejudice and refuting political attacks.

### **Political Organizing, Labor Rights, and Education**

Irish assimilation was fostered in large part by politically active, highly literate Irish American women. In 1914, Irish-born Dr. Gertrude Kelly issued a call for “women of Irish blood” to organize an American chapter of Cumann nam Ban (the Irish Women’s Council) to collect funds for Irish Volunteers fighting in the Great War. A medical doctor and secretary of the Newark Liberal League, Kelly also contributed polemics to the individualist periodical *Liberty*. Termed by editor Benjamin Tucker “among the finest writers of this or any other country” (quoted in McElroy 2012), Kelly’s first article argued that prostitution stemmed from women’s inability to find gainful employment. In subsequent essays she declared that women were victims of prejudicial stereotypes:

Men ... have always denied to women the opportunity to think; and, if some women have had courage enough to dare public opinion, and insist upon thinking for themselves, they have been so beaten by that most powerful weapon in society’s arsenal, ridicule, that it has effectively prevented the great majority from making any attempt to come out of slavery. (quoted in McElroy 2012)<sup>2</sup>

Following the 1916 Easter Rebellion and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921, Dr. Kelly was among a group of women who organized the American Women Pickets for the Enforcement of America’s War Aims to blockade the British Embassy in Washington, DC. Later that year, this group and the Irish Progressive League organized a strike to protest the arrests of Irish Archbishop Daniel Mannix and Cork Lord Mayor Terence MacSweeney. Among the women participating were Kelly, labor organizer Leonora O’Reilly, suffragist Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, and Celtic actress Eileen Curran. Supported by thousands, the strike halted the loading and unloading of British ships at Manhattan’s Chelsea Pier for more than three weeks (Dezell 2000, 97).

Although many in the Irish diaspora were put off by the suffragists’ temperance sloganeering, Irish American activists such as Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, and Margaret Foley supported women’s suffrage, as did Leonora O’Reilly and Mary Kenney O’Sullivan, who conjoined their activism with support for labor unions (Dezell 2000, 97). Similarly, although her propaganda clearly targeted Irish Catholics, Irish American Margaret Higgins Sanger was a key figure in promoting birth control. Sanger supported her cause by passing out copies of *The Woman Rebel*. The first woman to open a family-planning clinic, she used the periodical as a forum to argue that the Church had “historically sustained an exploitative capitalist system that kept

women in bondage” (Tobin 2003, 203). Unfortunately, she lost the support of Catholic women when she implied that without birth control the high birthrate among the working class would mentally weaken their offspring—even though she went on to argue that making birth control available would help liberate them. Needless to say, the Church hierarchy condemned Sanger’s advocacy along with the women’s movement and urged good Catholics to participate in neither. In a final irony, Sanger’s support for women’s sexual freedom alienated the women’s movement, although she found proponents among the eugenicists, neo-Malthusians, and Darwinists (Tobin 2003).

As Irish American women moved into the workplace, protecting the domains of family, church, and nation began to seem less important than exposing the injustices perpetrated on their sex. As early as 1892, this group represented “a sizable presence” within the general workforce (Nolan 2004, 1). Among their supporters were Irish American labor activists Leonora Kearney Barry, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, Mary Kenney O’Sullivan, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who helped ensure union representation for women as well as men (Ruether 2003, 4). Mother Jones, who emigrated as a child from County Cork, was a teacher and a dressmaker before she became involved with the unions, particularly the United Mine Workers (Weaver 1985, 24). Throughout her life she worked to protect the underdogs—blacks, women, children, and the poor—and recounted that story in *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*. Another dressmaker, Mary Kenney, who later married journalist John O’Sullivan, helped found the Chicago Women’s Bindery Union and the Women’s Trade Union League. With the support of Jane Adams’s Hull House, Kenney formed the Jane Club, a cooperative where poorly paid working women could live together (Simkin 2012).

Labor activist and journalist Dorothy Day also began publishing during this period. Early in her career she worked for the socialist newspaper *The Call* and then moved on to *The Masses*, where she served as a reporter. When *The Masses* closed, she left journalism and entered nursing school, believing it offered a better way to support the troops fighting in the Great War. In 1917, Day was among the forty women arrested and imprisoned for protesting in favor of women’s suffrage outside the White House (Forest 1994). Seven years later, drawing on these experiences, she published an autobiographical novel, *The Eleventh Virgin* (1924). A cofounder of *The Catholic Worker*, Day was a lifelong activist, ultimately publishing over 1,000 articles as well as *Houses of Hospitality* (1939), which recounted the founding of the *Catholic Worker*; *The Long Loneliness* (1952), an autobiography; and *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties* (1972) (Simkin 2012).

Despite being dismissed as a “lady tramp,” Leonora Barry, a member of the Knights of Labor, rose through the ranks to become a master workwoman in charge of 1,000 female workers and the first woman to be elected to the position of General Investigator (Weaver 1985, 23). In this office she was in charge of a new division—women’s work—and helped further the development of unions. A former teacher, Barry drew on this experience to educate her female workers. Elizabeth Flynn, a cofounder of the American Civil Liberties Union, supported women’s rights, among them equal pay, birth control, day care, and suffrage; she also wrote a feminist column for the *Daily Worker* (Simkin 2012). These activists were joined by Kate Mullaney, who organized Irish laundry workers; Lucy Burns, a suffragist and militant activist; and Kate Kennedy, Margaret Haley, and Catharine Goggins, who unionized public school teachers to demand equal pay (Dezell 2000, 95).

Unionizing teachers was an important political move, for by 1910 Irish American women—many of them daughters of domestic servants—represented the majority of public elementary school teachers in Providence, Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco (Nolan 2004, 2). By 1939, 70 percent of Chicago’s schoolteachers were Irish American women (Nolan 2004, 92). Clearly, teaching was a major entrée into the middle class.

Irish American women's upward mobility was fostered by nuns and teaching sisters. As early as 1884, the American Catholic Church was directing its parishes to build and run their own schools using teaching nuns. These women, many of them Irish, went on to establish the "most extensive and accessible system of higher education in the country" (Dezell 2000, 82). In Maryland, Notre Dame Academy for women opened in 1896 (Shelley 2006, 580). By 1900, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur had established a girls' industrial school; the Sisters of St. Joseph were teaching typing, bookkeeping, and accounting; and the Sisters of St. Francis were operating a nursing school. By 1918, fourteen parishes had collaborated to open Catholic women's colleges such as Trinity (founded by Sr. Julia McGroarty), the College of St. Catherine (founded by Mother Seraphine Ireland), Manhattanville, and St. Mary's. In 1925, the Sisters of St. Joseph Carondelet founded Mt. Saint Mary's College in Los Angeles for daughters of immigrants, most of whom were Irish (Dezell 2000, 177). By 1926, twenty-five Catholic women's colleges had been opened; by 1928, 50 to 66 percent of all Catholic college students attended Catholic colleges and universities (Shelley 2006).

Given this degree of support, it is not surprising that Irish American girls were attending school at rates higher than other Americans (Nolan 2004, 81). Moreover, they continued their education: long before it was common or acceptable, a greater proportion of female Irish Americans attended college than did their WASP counterparts (Dezell 2000, 83). These schools were "pioneers in educating women" (96). The Irish religious provided not only strong role models, but also a sense of feminism especially evident among the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd (Shelley 2006, 580). Perhaps most importantly, these women's colleges were academically superior to many of the men's (Gleason 1985, 252).

### **Spreading Feminism through the Written Word: 1830s–1930s**

Through their writing Irish American women illustrated the axiom that one need not be an activist to be a feminist. Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, better known as Nellie Bly, is a fine example. Bly got her start after she wrote a satirical response to a sexist article in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* and signed it "Lonely Orphan Girl." Despite the pseudonym, the editor was so impressed by the strong voice and convincing argument that he assumed a man had written it and invited Bly to interview for a staff position. When she appeared for the interview, he initially refused to hire her because of her sex; however, Bly soon managed to change his mind. Once on the job, Bly immediately began turning out stories about the rights of women factory workers—a focus which resulted in her transfer to the women's pages. Bored and discouraged, at age twenty-one she took a position as a foreign correspondent and traveled to Mexico, from where she sent home dispatches that were eventually published as *Six Months in Mexico*. When this work was not sufficient to change her stateside assignments, she left Pittsburgh in 1887 and traveled to New York, where she convinced yet another editor to hire her at the *New York World*. Working undercover, she feigned insanity and was committed to the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell Island. After the *World* secured her release, she published her findings, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, whose ensuing publicity led to a review of women's commitment policies and better funding for their asylums. Bly's next adventure, and the one which contributed to her lasting fame, was to replicate Jules Verne's fictional journey in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Unchaperoned, she completed the trip ahead of schedule and famously went on to write about the experience in *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days* (1890) (Kroeger 1995).

Early twentieth-century Irish American women writers were unflagging in their focus on women's rights. Kate Cleary, who began publishing when she was thirteen, wrote for the *Chicago Tribune* and published in *Century*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's*, *Lippincott's*, and *McClure's* magazines, churning out hundreds of poems and short stories. "The Stepmother" (1901), one of her best stories, recounts the bleak life of Mrs. Carney,



a former school teacher whose energy and optimism have been drained by lonely life on the prairie. She makes this point abundantly clear on her deathbed when she warns her stepson, “I hope you’ll remember ... that a woman isn’t always—well—or happy—just because she keeps on her—feet—and doesn’t—complain” (Cleary 1901, 244).

Margaret Culkin Banning echoed these messages. Writing for *McClure’s*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper’s*, *Redbook*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, Banning produced over 400 articles addressing issues such as alcoholism, body image, sexism, the plight of the single woman, marriage and remarriage (Minnesota Historical Society 2012). Like her contemporaries, Banning was an early advocate for women’s rights, often making her point by putting female characters in nontraditional roles and calling for their participation in World War II. Like Mary McCarthy, although she married four times, Banning kept her own name. Clara Laughlin, whose parents hailed from Belfast, was a journalist and editor at *McClure’s Magazine* and contributed to *Scribner’s* (Ebest 2005, 30). Her novel “*Just Folks*” (1910), which evolved out of a friendship with a member of Chicago’s Hull House neighborhood, not only represented an early foray into realism but also echoed first-wave critiques of marriage seen in the works of Kate Chopin and Kate Cleary. Laughlin’s non-fiction study, *The Work-a-Day Girl: A Study of Some Present Conditions* (1913), based on her experiences as a settlement worker, similarly critiqued women’s plight, implicitly reiterating the “almost universal” statement by Irish women, “If I had it to do over again, I’d never marry” (Anthony 1914, 20).

Anne O’Hagan’s commitment to women’s rights shone through her journalistic pieces. In “The Shop-Girl and Her Wages” (1913), for example, she exposed the mistreatment of working women. Given the social mores of the times, this commitment was possible in large part because O’Hagan was unmarried. As a result, her activism was unrelenting: in her magazine articles, she supported women’s suffrage and right to work, exposed the unfair treatment of female schoolteachers, and praised women’s clubs, business women, and female athletes. But when questions arose regarding her sexual preference, O’Hagan’s Irish satirical talents were awakened (Ebest 2005, 114).

In a 1907 series of essays for *Harper’s Bazaar*, O’Hagan began satirizing the idealization of marriage. After *The Survey* published some essays regarding a married woman’s wifely obligations, she asked whether the magazine also proposed reviving the stagecoach; when *Vanity Fair* attacked feminism for its supposedly negative effects on married life, she skewered the notion with a story about Mr. and Mrs. Cave Man; in *Harper’s* she ridiculed the treatment of single women, while in *Munsey’s Magazine* she poked fun at stereotypical romantic depictions of literary heroines. Inadvertently anticipating the actions of some second-wave feminists, O’Hagan even criticized her peers: she considered Charlotte Perkins Gilman an hysteric and dismissed the next generation of women as “trivial and ill versed in the contributions of their foremothers” (Ebest 2005, 116).

Katherine “Kate” O’Flaherty Chopin addressed similar themes in her novels—*At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899)—and short stories in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, and *The Century*. Perhaps the best known first-wave feminist novelist, Chopin’s *The Awakening* dealt with formerly taboo topics such as miscegenation, adultery, and unhappy wives, which led to charges of mental illness, not to mention negative reviews. Eventually critics such as Edmund Wilson helped reestablish Chopin’s reputation, but only Per Seyersted’s critical biography, published in 1980, ultimately elevated her status (Kolosky 1996, 5). As Seyersted writes, “Revolted against tradition and authority; with a daring which we can hardly imagine today; with an uncompromising honesty and no trace of sensationalism, she undertook to give the unsparing truth about woman’s submerged life” (1980, xx).

The novels of Chopin’s contemporary, Scots Irish Ellen Glasgow, reveal a consistently strong feminist

stance. *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909) and *The Miller of Old Church* (1911) imply that women should begin writing their own stories and challenging patriarchal traditions. *Virginia* (1913) argues that a woman must search for and establish her own identity. *One Man in His Time* (1922) suggests that females reject the notion of being a “womanly woman” and focus on developing friendships with each other, while *Barren Ground* (1925) hints that self-denial is not a necessary part of a romantic relationship (Matthews 1995). Further anticipating twentieth- and twenty-first-century gender theory, Glasgow asserted that gender roles should be viewed as socially constructed. She expanded on these issues in “Some Literary Woman Myths” (1928) when she attacked the “subservient” role of women vis-à-vis their male colleagues in the publishing world. In 1938, she incorporated some parts of this essay into her novel *She Stooped to Folly*, noting at one point that the derogatory view men took of women could be traced to the Garden of Eden (Matthews 1995, 10).

Glasgow’s contemporary Kathleen Coyle, who was born in Derry, worked as an editor in London, and later emigrated to America, was of a similar mindset. A suffragist, she divorced her husband after four years and took up writing to earn money, ultimately publishing thirteen novels. Using stream-of-consciousness narration (a method emulating her friend James Joyce’s approach in *Ulysses*), *A Flock of Birds* (1930) conveys a woman’s jumbled thoughts about her life: she hates childbirth yet bears children, she wants to engage in sexual intimacy without losing herself, she enjoys the company of other women who despise their husbands. Also writing during this period was Kay Boyle, who published more than forty books, including fourteen novels that explored power differentials in male-female relationships.

But these writers’ accomplishments pale in comparison to Margaret Mitchell. Christopher Dowd maintains that *Gone With the Wind*

is one of the most significant and popular works by an Irish American woman.... Mitchell offered a unique female voice and created a female character that appealed to Irish American women.... [A]ny study of Irish American literature that ignores the importance of *Gone With the Wind* is missing one of the biggest pieces of the puzzle.... In rewriting the story of Irish America, Mitchell established one of the most enduring myths of post-immigrant Irish identity. (2011, 174–75)

Not coincidentally, Scarlett’s character personifies aspects of Mitchell herself. Better known as a novelist than as an Irish American, Margaret Mitchell was the daughter of Irish Catholic suffragist Mary Fitzgerald Mitchell, herself the daughter of Irish immigrants (Pyron 1992, 252) and cofounder of what eventually became the League of Women Voters. Margaret grew up in a staunch first-wave feminist environment, which emphasized the importance of fighting for one’s rights (41). Although mother and daughter did not always see eye to eye, this early influence was evident throughout Mitchell’s life. After capturing everyone’s attention at a debutante ball—much like Scarlett O’Hara in her low-cut gown and casting a provocative gaze—she later took to the stage to belittle marriage, stating that she and her friends were “coming down off the auction block ... and going to work” (quoted in Pyron 1992, 161). Under the nom de plume Peggy Mitchell, she worked as a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal* where she focused her work on women’s rights. As her biographer puts it, “She wrote as a woman, with women, and for women, and women dominated the content of her essays” (Pyron 1992, 169).

### **1940s–1960s: Anticipating the Second Wave**

Irish American women’s feminist practices became more widespread during World War II, when prohibitions against working women changed rapidly: media propaganda encouraged women to support their country

not only as wives and mothers but also “as workers, citizens, and even as soldiers” (Hartmann 1982, 20). By 1945 the female labor force, three-quarters of whom were married, had doubled in size (21). By war’s end married women represented the majority of female workers (Chafe 1991, 13). But as the war wound down, the same forces that had encouraged women to work outside the home suggested they should now return to their “true calling” as wives and mothers.

Many prominent Irish American women writers refused to go that route. Although Maeve Brennan’s “Talk of the Town” columns appeared to be aimed at the *The New Yorker’s* advertisers, she was actually speaking directly to her women readers. Brennan’s essays about working, shopping, drinking, and watching her fellow New Yorkers provided a subversive counterpoint to the post-war campaign to rid the workplace of women, to advertising’s efforts to compensate them for the absence of paid employment with “fun” household appliances, to Joe McCarthy’s attempts to curtail feminism, and to the fashion industry’s emphasis on sexy, non-utilitarian women’s clothing (Brightman 1992, 189).

Brennan’s fiction reiterated these messages. Throughout “An Attack of Hunger,” Rose and Hubert bicker, reflecting spousal tensions generally unaired at the time in women’s fiction. Rose glares at Hubert. He watches her “with dislike and alarm,” shouting, “You shut up! ... Do you hear me? Shut up before I say something you won’t want to hear” (Brennan 1997a, 161). As the fighting escalates, Hubert accuses Rose of driving their son John from home: “He was sick of you and I’m sick of you, sick of your long face and your moans and sighs—I wish you’d get out of the room, I wish you’d go, go on, go away.... All I want is not to have to look at you anymore this evening” (162). Forcing herself out the door, Rose resists the urge to beg forgiveness. She considers borrowing money from her parish priest to go to John, but realizes “he would disapprove. He would tell her to go back to her husband”; such was the plight of many a married Catholic woman in those days (Dezell 2000, 105).

In “The Shadow of Kindness,” Brennan describes the condescending attitude of the working man toward his stay-at-home wife:

Martin had warned her often enough against thinking, because thinking led to self-pity and there was enough of that in this world. What he had really told her was that she must stop forcing herself, stop *trying* to think, because her intelligence was not high and she must not put too much of a strain on it or she would make herself unhappy. (1997b, 244)

Such portrayals were said to reveal “the emotional landscape of Ireland” (Bourke 2004, 173), but this landscape was not so different from Brennan’s America, where, as Betty Friedan famously diagnosed in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), housewives were also unhappy and their husbands resentful.

Mary McCarthy, a descendant of Irish immigrant John McCarthy, married immediately after graduating from Vassar and then married three more times; nevertheless, she worked from 1937 through 1962 as a writer and editor for the *Partisan Review*, the most intellectually elite “old boys’ club” in New York City (Brightman 1992; Showalter 2001). McCarthy’s prominence in this imbalanced work environment is all the more striking given the low stature of its female contributors: in the *Partisan Review Reader* (1947), a collection of the “best and most representative” essays published from 1939 to 1944, only fourteen of the 92 selections were by women.

Although McCarthy abjured feminism in her personal life, from 1942 to 1967 feminist themes dominated her fiction. These are best exemplified in *The Group*, the most infamous of her novels, in which she attempted to document the “idea of progress ... in the female sphere” (McCarthy 1963, 62). In this novel McCarthy explores the aspirations of seven female graduates of the Vassar class of ‘31, juxtaposing desires for a meaningful career and a happy marriage with the realities of American society in the 1930s. In the

process, McCarthy introduces the reader to formerly taboo subjects such as birth control, women's sexual pleasure, adultery, impotence, mental illness, homosexuality, spouse abuse, and the double standard—nicely illustrated when McCarthy's antagonist, Norinne, visits a doctor to seek advice about her husband's impotence. She reports that the doctor asked "whether I wanted to have children.... When I said no, I didn't, he practically booted me out of the office. He told me I should consider myself lucky that my husband didn't want intercourse. Sex wasn't necessary for a woman, he said" (165).

McCarthy uses *The Group* to remind readers of the unfortunate disparity between young women's liberal theories and the reality of their marriages, for once they marry independence disappears. At the beginning of the novel, Kay is a strong-willed, independent woman, but as the story progresses she becomes increasingly helpless and miserable. Soon she is tiptoeing around husband Harald, eager to please and afraid to upset him. Priss, another group member, is introduced as a political activist; however, after she marries and gives birth she becomes so weak-willed that she lets her newborn cry for hours rather than disobey her husband and nurse the baby before he is "scheduled" to be fed.

Lulu Carson Smith McCullers was half Irish (on her mother's side) (Savigneau 2001, 11). A Southern Baptist, music was her religion until it was replaced with Marxism, and then again with feminism when she began developing the character of Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). As Cynthia E. Call claims, McCullers rejected the Marxist view of men in the household as bourgeois and women as the proletariat (Call 2012). She wanted more for her persona, for Mick Kelly goes far beyond the role of women as described by Marx and Engels: she wants to compose music and be a world-famous conductor who wears "either a real man's evening suit or else a red dress spangled with rhinestones" (McCullers 1940, 241). This losing fight against traditional femininity is exemplified in all of McCullers's tomboy characters (Westling 1996). After Mick loses her virginity she essentially loses her freedom, for she is suddenly afraid of what might happen in the dark and so no longer roams the streets. McCullers's fifth novel, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, epitomizes women's struggles against male domination. Tall and tough, the character of Miss Amelia Evans suggests no need for men (Gilbert and Gubar 1989, 148). However, Miss Amelia's fight with her ex-husband offers a strong allegory for woman's status at the time. After her defeat, Miss Amelia has been transformed from "a woman with bones and muscles like a man" to "[thin] as old maids are thin when they go crazy" (McCullers 1951, 70). Like Brennan's and McCarthy's characters, women might fight but they could not win.

## Conclusion

Amidst a literary field dominated by male Jewish intellectuals, Irish American women stood out. Through their activism, journalism, and fiction, they reminded readers that in love, marriage, work, and religion, women were second-class citizens and they were not happy about it. Why such a consistent message? Because Irish American women had an advantage unavailable to their peers. Whereas most women found it difficult to organize because they lived in different neighborhoods or lacked a central organizing body and could not build the critical mass necessary to effect political change (Woods 2005, 364), through the mid-sixties Irish Americans were still bound by their religious beliefs and practices, and thus possessed a "collective consciousness" (Cochrane 2010, 2).

First-wave Irish American feminists possessed an iron will. Although their husbands, their culture, and their church told them to stay home after they married, they kept on working. Despite the collective failure of theologians, historians, and feminist scholars to acknowledge them, they continued writing. When politicians, presidents, and priests tried to take away their rights and freedom of choice, they exposed such misogynistic attempts. This cohort merits our sustained attention, for they represent the first and largest

group of American feminists.

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## Notes

1. These female leaders were not unknowns: they included Yeats's paramour, the feminist activist Maud Gonne; activist and actress Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington; Kathleen Clarke, widow of republican Tom Clarke, elected representative to the Dial, and outspoken critic of the Anglo-Irish Treaty; and Margaret Pearse, mother of martyred political activist Padraic Pearse. Among the ranks, over 140 women served as soldiers, couriers, nurses, and volunteers who carried food to the soldiers, hid guns, and distracted the British so Irish fighters could take position or take cover (Trotter 2012).

2. Indeed, during the protests disrupting the debut of *The Plough and the Stars* (due to the negative portrayal of women, which in turn downplayed the contributions of women during the Easter Uprising and Irish Civil War), Maud Gonne made sure that her speech was carefully planned to avoid just such attacks (Trotter 2012).

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