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## Title:

**Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Review of *Women Writing War: Ireland 1880-1922*, edited by Tina O'Toole, Gillian McIntosh, Muireann Ó'Cinnéide (University College Dublin Press: Dublin, 2016), 170pp, £36.65, ISBN 978-1910820117.**

## Review:

Written within the Decade of Centenaries commemorating modern Ireland's engagement with violent conflict (1912-1922), *Women Writing War* gathers together a series of studies of Irish women's writings about war: from the Land Wars to the Boer War to the violent campaigns of the revolutionary years (1916, the War of Independence, and the Civil War). In doing so, it continues the work of feminist scholars like Sarah Benton in the 1990s and Lisa Weihman in the 2000s who have investigated the roles and experiences of Irish women in militarised politics, thereby countering the historical amnesia about women's contributions to nationalist activism in the Irish Free State. The difference is that whereas previous recoveries of revolutionary women's histories were few, this book is published amid what Margaret Ward says is a proliferation of feminist scholarship prompted by the national commemorations ('Preface' to the collection). Ward states that there is now 'a hunger to know more' that is exemplified through writing that uses new methodologies or sources to open up new histories or adopts new approaches to cast fresh light on familiar stories to create a growing body of innovative feminist scholarship. (Here, we can think of the recent contributions of scholars like Margaret Ward, Louise Ryan, Senia Pašeta, Sinéad McCool, Ann Matthews, and Karen Steele, among others.)

Contributors to the book work to uncover the voices of women who have been witnesses to, commentators on, or combatants in national and international conflicts in or involving Ireland. Their modes of expression have been diverse. In her chapter on *A Garden Diary, 1899-1900* (1900) by Anglo-Irish writer, Emily Lawless, Heidi Hansson explores how this female writer uses the well-established genre of the garden journal to continue women writers' tradition of interspersing philosophical, political, and personal insight among horticultural tips. In doing so, Hansson shows how Lawless's representation of her unionist politics and support for the British cause in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) amid mundane gardening descriptions acts to domesticate the concerns of the international conflict. In moving what is a very public, global event into a local and privatised setting – the garden – *A Garden Diary* helps to feminise the masculine genre of war reportage.

Lawless's expression of a heterogeneous sense of nationality in her espousals of support for the British war effort elided Irish political divisions. However, not all writers with intersecting Irish and British sympathies produced uncomplicated portrayals of wartime sensibilities. In her contribution, Lucy Collins argues that the now largely forgotten poet, Winifred Letts, examined World War One in a way that managed to present itself as being specifically English while also revealing itself to be subtly Irish. Collins' most interesting approach to Letts' poetry is to use it to expand the traditionally accepted definition of war poetry to include writings not only by those who were witnesses to the war rather than combatants, but also those penned by females. Letts' articulations of her experiences as an Irish Red Cross nurse in World War One offer what Collins says is a rare poetic insight into the feelings of a woman who bore witness to the suffering of wounded soldiers and to wartime loss and grief in general. Letts' wartime testimonies also contribute to the

ongoing, contested process of uncovering and acknowledging the extent and nature of Irish First World War experiences.

Ríona Nic Congáil plots another contested legacy, that of Agnes O'Farrelly (Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh). O'Farrelly was remarkable in her achievements as an Irish language scholar and poet. She was also a nationalist activist. However, her reputation suffered as a result of the compromises she made as a woman dedicated to both a reinvigoration of Irish culture and to the nationalist movement. Not only did her reputation fall foul of militant nationalists and militant suffragists, but as with the works of other Irish language female writers, her body of work disappeared from public consciousness amid the Free State government's regressive attitude towards women's participation in the public sphere. In rejecting what she deems a tendency 'to pathologise figures of compromise' in Irish historical and literary scholarship, Congáil uses O'Farrelly's history and writing to attempt to restore her reputation and reinstate her writing in the Irish literary canon.

In their respective chapters, Diane Urquhart, Tina O'Toole, and Maureen Connor make valuable contributions to an expanding field of study; that of the transnational kinship networks that facilitated women's involvement in radical Irish politics. Urquhart examines the English press's representation of women involved in Irish and English branches of the Ladies' Land League. In particular, she exposes many of the unflatteringly, sexist depictions of Anna Parnell. By focusing on this aspect of public reaction to Parnell and other women of the League, Urquhart emphasises just how radical this phase of Irish women's political activism was. As she elucidates in her conclusion, the transference from land reform to Home Rule politics in the nationalist agenda meant that women who had previously claimed space for engaging in radical activism were prevented from continuing that level of political participation.

O'Connor continues this examination of Irish and English intersections and divergences in her study of socialist and feminist, Eva Gore-Booth's approach to war. By taking into account Gore-Booth's Irish loyalties – including those to her sister, Constance Markievicz, who both perpetrated and was subject to the violence of war – O'Connor complicates assumptions made previously about the unambiguous nature of Gore-Booth's pacifism. She makes a valuable contribution to the history of the fraught experiences and conflicting loyalties of Irish women living in England during the revolutionary years.

O'Toole describes the networks of women activists which acted as transmitters of Irish cultural and political values across Protestant and Catholic communities, and across Ireland and Britain. In particular, she focuses on female activists from the Glens of Antrim who supported Roger Casement's political endeavours. In exposing the works performed by this network, O'Toole challenges what she claims is the general tendency to see Irish revolutionaries as men existing and operating alone in isolation from the wider community; a romanticised notion of revolutionary masculinity that represents the political man as exceptional. Using the often limited information available to her, O'Toole reconstructs the political and social interconnections existing between 'part of that generation of newly empowered, educated, active and radical women in Ireland – scholars, educators, artists and writers – who openly professed first-wave feminist ambitions'. Partition, not simply the sexist agenda of the new Free State, however, consigned the voices of many of these female networks to a silent past. As O'Toole explains, for example, the dynamic group of feminist nationalist activists – those in the Glens of Antrim – were left 'stranded' and the names of individual women activists 'forgotten' in the historical amnesia that followed the creation of the border that divided the two Irish states.

Not surprisingly, given the book's focus on women's engagements with war, a number of chapters make fascinating contributions to emerging histories of not only violence and the female body, but also of feminist appraisals of women's engagement with violence. Muireann O'Cinnéide uses the vignette of Lady Anne Blunt's upper-class English body being hurled from the platform at an anti-eviction meeting at which her husband was speaking to initiate her analysis of gender politics and the Land wars. Public violence against women's bodies was a shocking spectacle. A study of masculine reactions to Suffragette militancy across Britain demonstrates that this was to continue to be the case into the twentieth century. However, physical mistreatment of the female body was not unprecedented in the Irish Land wars. The fact that Blunt was both upper-class and English shaped reactions to her involvement in political demonstrations. It sensationalised her experience. Blunt's assaulted body was, O'Cinnéide asserts, 'a rhetorically contested space'. Men and women claimed or chastised her according to their particular political viewpoint. To some, she was a devoted wife who sacrificed her physical safety in support of her husband's political ideals. To others, Irish nationalists in particular, her body was represented as having its own agency. To them Blunt was an activist dedicated to the Irish cause in her own right.

Lucy McDiarmid's chapter offers insight into less sensational spectacles of violence enacted on women's bodies during 1916. She uses the diaries, memoirs, and witness statements retained by the Bureau of Military History to enlighten readers about issues that have so far elided historical interest in the Easter Rising such as 'toilets, nakedness, prostitutes, or sexual harassment'. McDiarmid's accounts of women's observations about the more intimate aspects of violence and the female body provides for absorbing reading on women's experiences of 1916. She convincingly states that these idiosyncratic vignettes – 'the missing lavatory door, the heads and the heels, the girl who boxed the soldier, the door woman with nothing under her shawl' – together 'convey the life of the body with vitality and eloquence, though such was never the object'.

Jody Allen Randolph conducts an insightful foray into the experiences of Peggy Kelly, an activist and writer who often wrote under the male pseudonym, Garrett O'Driscoll. Like many Irish women, Kelly experienced first-hand the violence of the revolutionary years. She had to go on the run in Glasgow. She endured the imprisonment and death of those dear to her. However, Randolph's unique contribution to the study of forgotten women writers lies with her elucidation about how feminist scholars often have to navigate around existing fragments of testimony, history, biography, and fictional writing in order to reconstruct the missing aspects of past women's lives. In applying this method to her study of Kelly's experiences, Randolph forces herself to surmise aspects of Kelly's life that cannot be verified. She attempts to present a fleshed out profile of a woman involved in the early twentieth-century Irish conflicts – experiences that have been sacrificed to the historical amnesia wrought by not only the sexist agenda of the Free State, but also the marginalisation by that state of republican revolutionaries who found themselves on the losing side of the Civil War.

The collection concludes with one contemporary woman writer's attempts to overcome gendered historical amnesia by resorting to fiction. Lia Mills' commentary on and excerpts from her 2014 novel, *Fallen*. Mills takes readers on a journey that plots with honesty the concerns and difficulties of a writer who wants to convey what might have been the felt reality of those living in Dublin during the 1916 Rising without compromising either historical or literary integrity.

Overall, this book presents an exciting, diverse, but not incoherent collection of recoveries of Irish women's views on war. Taken together, the contributors reveal the complexities of intersecting or competing allegiances. They point to the multitude of women's wartime experiences. They also convey a sense of the

uniqueness of Irish women's experiences of conflict. The collection demonstrates that while more research is being conducted into the experiences of women in wartime Ireland prior to partition, there is still much more to be done to uncover the rich histories of women buried beneath the masculinist agenda of a post-colonial and a northern settler-colonial state that were embarrassed by their need for the patriotic activism – often violent activism – of Irish womanhood.