

WOMEN AND THE IRISH NATION

GENDER, CULTURE AND
IRISH IDENTITY, 1890–1914



D. A. J. MACPHERSON



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1890–1914

D. A. J. MacPherson

Lecturer in History, University of the Highlands and Islands

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For Alison, with all my love

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACS	<i>An Claidream Soluis</i>
CDB	Congested Districts Board
DATI	Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction
IAOS	Irish Agricultural Organization Society
ICA	Irish Countrywomen's Association
IHA	Irish Housewives' Association
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCD	University College Dublin
WUTRA	Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association

Introduction

Irishwomen! Remember that we have National Industries, a National Language, a National Dress! Be proud of them.¹

This rousing slogan reminded women of the role they could play in the formation of Irish identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Appearing at the head of the catalogue for the industrial show of the West Clare branches of the United Irishwomen in 1913, this call to national pride identified how women could apply their skills in home-based textile industries, and their influence on the language spoken in the home and on the clothes worn by their families, to shape an Irish national identity. The West Clare industrial exhibition showcased women's domestic skills, yet projected them onto a far broader canvas. Offering prizes for best costume and best-kept cottage, it garlanded everyday household tasks with national aspirations. The United Irishwomen, the sister association of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society (IAOS), provided an organizational focus for these Irish ambitions, taking activities deemed to be purely domestic and feminine and refashioning them to promote a sense of Irish identity. Irish women, then, in the estimation of this organization and the others examined in this book, could participate in the public life of the nation not through imitating men's roles in politics but by reinforcing and extending existing notions of acceptable female behaviour.

This book is about women's print and associational culture in turn of the century Ireland. It focuses on three organizations in particular: the United Irishwomen, the Gaelic League and the Sinn Féin movement. These organizations emerged during a period of intense debate about Irish identity. At the end of the 1890s, Irish nationalist politics was injected with renewed fervour by two key events: the centenary of the

1798 rebellion and the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. Women participated in radical nationalist groups such as the Irishwomen's Centenary Union and the Transvaal Committee. Formed in 1897, the Irishwomen's Centenary Union grew out of broader nationalist efforts to celebrate the 1798 United Irishman uprising, while the Transvaal Committee was founded by Maud Gonne, a leading Irish nationalist woman discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5, to organize demonstrations against the Boer War.²

Following on from these earlier efforts, the Gaelic League, the Sinn Féin movement and the United Irishwomen demonstrate how women participated in public activism at the beginning of the twentieth century, either by becoming members or by writing in the pages of these organizations' newspapers. In both their associational activism and in their writings, women became engaged in public debate about Irish identity. Women's entry into this debate and the role they played in the construction of Irish identity were both highly gendered, being determined by late-Victorian and Edwardian ideas about acceptable 'womanly' behaviour. Prevailing gender discourse maintained that women and men had distinct and innate qualities which set clear boundaries between men's public world in business and politics and women's private domain of family and domesticity. However, these 'separate spheres' were never as clear-cut in practice. In their pioneering study of the emergence of domestic ideology in nineteenth-century England, Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff explored the business practices of families in the Midlands and found that such gender discourse was 'riven with contradictions'.³ Other historians have subsequently discovered how the languages of motherhood, femininity and domesticity could be used by women to negotiate and justify their participation in public life, often emphasizing the moral superiority that caring for children gave them.⁴

In Ireland, we see a similar process occurring during a crucial period of cultural and political debate about Irish identity and the emerging Irish nation at the turn of the twentieth century. While Irish women in this period were, like their sisters in Britain and many other countries across the globe, denied the rights of full citizenship, they did become enthusiastic participants in public debate about Irishness. Women's public associationalism through groups such as the United Irishwomen, the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin allowed women to contribute to discussion about Irish identity. Rather than restricting their activism, women in these organizations often negotiated access to public life by emphasizing their 'feminine' qualities of nurturing and caring. Women such as

Nelly O'Brien (examined in Chapter 4) framed their extensive activism for the Gaelic League with a distinctly gendered and domestic vision of women's role in the Irish nation, stressing how their work (in the case of O'Brien, setting up an Irish language college at Carrigaholt, Co. Clare), concentrated on training Irish-speaking girls in domestic science and housewifery.⁵ The public sphere of women's activism was, then, shaped by conventional gender norms and limited women to certain types of highly gendered work in these organizations. It is important, though, to demonstrate that this gendered and often domestic work was still a public form of activism, albeit frequently operating in a rather different register to more overtly public and political acts. Working on the committee of the local branch of the Gaelic League or United Irishwomen involved women in activism at a distinctly local level, in what Kathryn Gleadle, in her study of women in British politics in the early nineteenth century, has described as the 'community sphere'.⁶ Fundraising for the Gaelic League or working with the local school to establish the United Irishwomen's 'cocoa lunches' scheme was highly visible work within the local community, allowing women an opportunity to engage in the public life of their village or town. Moreover, some women did rise to positions of significance at the national level of the organizations examined in this book, especially in the Gaelic League and the Sinn Féin movement. Examined in detail in Chapter 4, women such as Jennie Wyse Power played a significant role in, for example, the running of the Gaelic League's Industrial Committee, promoting Irish manufactures, often in a highly gendered way. Women in these organizations, then, had considerable agency in their engagement with public associations, despite working within the constraints of conventional gender and domestic ideology.

While many useful studies of Irish women in this period have emerged in recent years,⁷ this book's approach is different because it does not focus exclusively on prominent women within feminist or nationalist organizations. By turning our attention away from leading republican women, such as Maud Gonne or Constance Markievicz, or well-known feminists, such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, a broader repertoire of activism emerges. Many of the women examined in this book were from ordinary, largely middle-class backgrounds and they often advocated women's greater participation in Irish public life by stressing the importance of their role in the home as wives and mothers. At the Enniscorthy branch of Sinn Féin, for example, women's public activism focused on campaigning for better access to Irish material for making clothes; a highly gendered activity, but taking place in the public arena of the

radical nationalist movement in which both men and women debated the nature of Irish identity.⁸ Lindsey Earner-Byrne and other historians have written about this kind of activism in post-independence Ireland, when women in organizations such as the Irish Housewives' Association (IHA) and the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) campaigned for improvements in rural life and maternity care, claiming a 'right to protect family life' through public activism.⁹ It is important, however, to consider how the form and content of this later activism had its roots in the early twentieth century, when women's membership of the Gaelic League, the Sinn Féin movement and the United Irishwomen (the forerunner of the ICA) was based on domesticity, caring for children and promoting Irish identity in the home and local community.

This book also breaks new ground in its analysis of women's membership of the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin or the United Irishwomen as a form of associationalism. Through both their committee work and as ordinary members, women were prominent in the day-to-day running of these organizations. On committees, women were especially active as Gaelic League secretaries or treasurers, performing vital tasks in the management of local branches. As ordinary members, turning up at weekly meetings, helping with fundraising and other forms of organization was a vital part of women's activism. A Gaelic League committee room or a Sinn Féin lecture or concert constituted specific spaces in which women engaged in public activism, indicating how some aspects of Habermas's 'bourgeois public sphere' can apply to women's associational culture in early-twentieth-century Ireland, discussed in Chapter 1. While historians of Ireland have begun to explore associational culture in Ireland, few have addressed the role women could play in organizations such as the Gaelic League or Sinn Féin and how Irish associationalism was, therefore, gendered.

Furthermore, it is important to analyse women's writings as a form of public activism. Writing in the rural reform, Gaelic League or Sinn Féin press gave women access to public debate about Irish identity and women's role in the construction of Irishness. As both Gerardine Meaney and Leeann Lane have argued, by writing about the nation, Irish women claimed a right to participate in the public and political life of the emerging Ireland.¹⁰ Columns in the *Irish Homestead* (the newspaper of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society) or *Bean na hÉireann* (the newspaper of the radical nationalist women's group, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, examined in Chapter 5) were often used by women to negotiate notions of femininity and domesticity. Women's writings for these newspapers could, then, be thoroughly gendered, often focusing on topics such as cookery, housekeeping and fashion, setting out how

women could contribute to debate about Irish identity while still working within the boundaries of conventional gender ideology. Women such as Elizabeth Somers in the radical nationalist newspaper, the *United Irishman* or Susan Mitchell in the *Irish Homestead* wrote about the need, respectively, for affordable, fashionable women's clothes in Irish manufacture, or how women needed to reform the nature of housework to make homes more Irish.¹¹ Somers, Mitchell and many other women writers discussed in this book demonstrated considerable agency, working within conventional gender norms but also using them to leverage access to Irish public life and public debate about Irish identity through their writing.

This book begins with a chapter which places Irish women's experience of print culture and associational life in a theoretical and comparative perspective. It is argued here that women's public activism in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century can only be understood by comparing their experience to women across the globe. By analysing Irish women side by side with their sisters in England, Scotland, Germany, India and the British Empire, this chapter argues that the nature of Irish women's engagement with public life, through organizations and newspapers, was not unusual. Women taking part in the Gaelic League or writing for the *Irish Homestead* often conformed to conventional notions of feminine behaviour while simultaneously claiming a right to public life and challenging these Edwardian gender discourses. The Irish case study presented here helps us to understand these processes in the context of debate about national identity, throwing light especially on how women used associational culture to shape a sense of Irishness. Theoretical perspectives are also important, as they help us to understand how recent feminist scholarship can be brought to bear on Irish women of the beginning of the twentieth century. Examining feminist critiques of Habermas's 'bourgeois public sphere', Chapter 1 argues that Irish women's experience of associational and print culture adds much to our awareness of the permeability of public and private spheres. In turn, by studying the 'everydayness' of Irish women's public activism and writings, concentrated on housekeeping, cookery and clothes, we gain an insight into the gendered ways in which national identities are fashioned.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider women's activism in the rural reform movement, focusing on the *Irish Homestead*, the newspaper of the IAOS, and the United Irishwomen, the sister organization of the IAOS. The *Irish Homestead* provided a forum not only for the thoughts of leading male rural reformers, such as Horace Plunkett and George Russell (AE), but also functioned as a public space in which women could contribute

to debate about how rural Ireland could be regenerated. Following Plunkett's notions of 'better living' and AE's philosophy of 'rural civilization', women writers in the *Irish Homestead* debated how women could improve both their home environment and their immediate local communities, making their homes more Irish and improving village social life with Irish entertainments. Chapter 2 considers in detail the writings of Susan Mitchell, who used the newspaper's 'Household Hints' column to challenge some aspects of conventional gender ideology. She argued that, while women should work to improve their domestic skills, they should not be restricted to life in the home and, instead, should play a role in Irish public life. Debate in the *Irish Homestead*, coupled with local activism in Wexford led to the formation of the United Irishwomen in 1910 as the women's section of the IAOS. The United Irishwomen were notable for promoting a form of public activism that focused heavily on women's role in the home and caring for children. From school meal schemes, to working to improve women's domestic skills and promoting Irish games, the United Irishwomen supported a distinctly Irish cultural identity that sought to improve rural life by making it more thoroughly Irish. Moreover, the United Irishwomen attached a strong public aspect to their activism, advocating women's work as Poor Law Guardians, councillors and other locally elected officials. One of the pioneers of the organization, Anita Lett, described the United Irishwomen as working in a 'woman's sphere', where female public activism was directed in gendered areas deemed to be suitably feminine.¹² Indeed, the United Irishwomen provide perhaps the clearest example of all the organizations considered in this book of women working in a 'feminine public sphere', in which their public activism was shaped by gendered notions of acceptable 'womanly' behaviour.¹³

Women's public activism in Irish cultural and political nationalism is examined in the final two chapters of this book. Chapter 4 examines women's role in the Gaelic League. Formed in 1893 to revive and promote the Irish language, the Gaelic League involved women in its work at all levels, from the national executive in Dublin to local branches throughout Ireland. As with the United Irishwomen, work such as fundraising, promoting Irish manufactured goods through the League's Industrial Committee, or forming Irish language colleges was presented as a particularly feminine type of public activism. Mary Butler's journalism is analysed in the second half of this chapter. Butler was a leading figure in both the Gaelic League and the Sinn Féin movement and comparing her writings in the Gaelic League press to her column for the nationalist *Irish Weekly Independent* reveals that Butler considered

the home to be women's true sphere of influence, where women could teach children Irish and make the surroundings of the home thoroughly national in character. While women's print culture in the Gaelic League was relatively limited, in Chapter 5 we discover that the Sinn Féin press provided a fertile arena for debate about how women could mould an Irish identity through gendered work. Echoing Susan Mitchell's writings, which are examined in Chapter 2, women such as Elizabeth Somers wrote in the pages of the *United Irishman* about housekeeping and fashion, demonstrating how women could promote an Irish identity through gendered, 'feminine' activities, creating a sense of agency based on perceptions of 'womanly' qualities. The fashion columns published in *Bean na hÉireann* (the newspaper of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann) and *Sinn Féin* demonstrate the complex ways in which clothes could be used to express an Irish identity. These radical nationalist newspapers indicated to women a number of ways in which they could 'perform' Irishness, from wearing Irish designs to recreating the latest Parisian fashions using Irish materials. The need for Irish clothes to be fashionable was central to this debate and indicates the ways in which women could express an Irish identity that was both modern and subversively feminist. Women's activism in radical nationalist groups such as Cumann na nGaedheal, the National Council and Sinn Féin was relatively limited, as Rosamond Jacob's experience in Waterford illustrates, where she was continually frustrated by the lack of women members and the chauvinistic attitudes of some of the men. Yet the Inghinidhe na hÉireann, a women's radical nationalist organization, demonstrated how women's activism that was overtly feminist and republican could still be shaped by prevailing gender discourses. The Inghinidhe na hÉireann, while devoted to promoting a distinctly feminist Irish nationalism, concentrated their activism on nurturing the patriotism and well-being of children, teaching them Irish language and history, providing 'patriotic treats' and supplying school meals in Dublin. Echoing the print culture of their newspaper, *Bean na hÉireann*, the Inghinidhe na hÉireann were devoted to women's emancipation and Irish separatism, but much of their activism continued to operate within the bounds of gender convention while not diminishing their radicalism.

Many of the women involved in the radical nationalist movement, as well as the Gaelic League and the United Irishwomen, went on to be highly active in women's politics during the interwar period. The Conclusion traces how women's early-twentieth-century print culture and associationalism influenced women's activism in post-independence Ireland. During the interwar period, women such as Elizabeth Somers,

in her work for the National Agricultural and Industrial Development Association,¹⁴ or the Irish Countrywomen's Association (the successor to the United Irishwomen) demonstrated considerable continuities with the activism of women at the turn of the twentieth century. Campaigning for improved living conditions or women's better access to maternity care, women in organizations such as the Irish Housewives' Association continued to operate in public life within the constraints of prevailing gender ideology.¹⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s, these gender discourses were sharpened by the prominent role Catholic social teaching played in shaping state formation in post-independence Ireland. Yet, just as women in the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin and the United Irishwomen negotiated with and often subverted Edwardian gender convention, they also continued to demonstrate considerable agency in their public activism later in the twentieth century.

Moreover, *Women and the Irish Nation* helps us to understand the experience of less well-known women writers and activists in a period of intense debate about Irish identity.¹⁶ Focusing on 'lesser'¹⁷ female activists highlights how ordinary women could become involved in public life and in debate about Irish identity. Using the digitized Census of Ireland for 1901 and 1911, this book analyses the social background of the women who became members of the United Irishwomen, the Gaelic League and radical nationalist groups.¹⁸ In particular, it focuses on how lower-middle-class women came increasingly to play a role in these organizations, especially in rural areas where being a schoolteacher or shopkeeper gave women considerable status in their local community. The emergence of a more confident and prominent Catholic middle class in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland that was characteristic, in particular, of provincial society, gave impetus to women's membership of the Gaelic League and, to a lesser extent, the United Irishwomen.¹⁹ In urban centres, a different class dynamic was at work, where women from more solidly middle-class backgrounds mixed with white-collar workers in organizations such as Inghinidhe na hÉireann, examined in Chapter 5.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women's public activism in print culture and associational life was often highly gendered, and this book explores how women negotiated with, and sometimes subverted, conventional ideas of acceptable feminine behaviour in order to become active agents in Irish public and national life.

1

Women, Gender and National Identity: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives

Many vested interests . . . are openly opposed to any broadening of woman's horizon in Ireland. Public opinion, educational fallacies, convention militate against her assuming her rightful place in public life. In the Gaelic movement, in the Industrial revival and in the Sinn Féin organization she has undoubtedly made her power felt . . . The reason, however, is obvious; it is not due, as many would have us believe, to a reversion to the older Irish . . . , but rather because of the nature of the work involved. The Gaelic League must make its final appeal to the young, unless those to whom the very beginning are entrusted take up Irish it will surely perish. So too with the Industrial revival – it is the woman who looks after the domestic budget, her voice can make or mar Irish Industrialism. Therefore, it is primarily in her capacity as mother and housekeeper, not as individual citizen, that those movements have of necessity recognized her importance.¹

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, one of the leading feminist and nationalist campaigners in twentieth-century Ireland, argued that women who were members of the organizations examined in this book did not participate fully in public life because of the prevailing gender ideology which saw women as, first and foremost, wives and mothers. When Sheehy Skeffington wrote in the pages of the women's radical nationalist publication *Bean na hÉireann* in 1909, she was caught up in the intense heat of debate between suffragist and nationalist women in Ireland about which campaign to prioritize. Her analysis, however, misses some of the complex ways in which public and private overlapped in Edwardian Ireland. While being perceived as mothers and housekeepers, women

used this perception to negotiate participation in public life, through the associational life and print culture of the United Irishwomen, the Gaelic League or Sinn Féin. Women in these organizations demonstrated considerable agency, using conventional gender norms of domesticity, femininity and motherhood as a basis for a limited form of citizenship in the emerging Ireland of the early twentieth century.

Irishwomen's activism and writing at the turn of the twentieth century contributed significantly to Irish nation-building and identity formation. This chapter argues that Irishwomen's public engagement with notions of nation and identity can only be understood by placing the women of the rural reform movement, the cultural revival and radical nationalism within a broader British, European and global context. These women were active agents in deciding how they should be represented in the public sphere, using associational life and print culture to negotiate and, on occasion, subvert conventional Edwardian gender ideology. In turn, women's public activism in early-twentieth-century Ireland was inflected by debate about Irish identity. Across the globe, women were engaged in similar types of activism which challenged the prevailing 'separate spheres' ideology.² In Scotland, Megan Smitley has written about the emergence of a 'feminine public sphere' in which women's activism was shaped by existing notions of acceptable gender behaviour.³ In Ireland, this chapter argues, there was an Irish 'feminine public sphere', in which women engaged in public debate about Irishness, femininity and activism, while negotiating and challenging aspects of early-twentieth-century gender norms. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates how the process of nation formation was distinctly gendered. Early-twentieth-century Ireland provides a useful context in which to consider women's role in the construction of national identity and this chapter draws comparisons with women's experiences in Germany, India and the British Empire.

1.1 Women, gender and the public sphere

During the nineteenth century, women's self-representation in the public sphere was both highly contested and complex. Feminist critiques of Jürgen Habermas's important work on the emergence of a public sphere during the eighteenth century have inspired recent scholarship that stresses the permeability of women's public and private roles and the varied repertoire of public activism available to women. The languages of motherhood, sisterhood and 'separate spheres' shaped public femininity, both in associational culture and in print media. In Ireland,

the leading suffrage newspaper, the *Irish Citizen*, captured this contested language of gender identity, in which women not only challenged dominant gender discourse but also negotiated within this discourse to shape a public sense of femininity. The publications discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 were part of this debate about gender identity in Ireland, emphasizing the central role played by the print media in women's engagement with the public sphere and with social movements.

Following its translation into English in 1989, Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* had a significant impact on how feminist cultural theorists and historians interpreted women's engagement with public life.⁴ Scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Joan Landes and Mary Ryan challenged Habermas's interpretation of the public sphere as inherently masculinist.⁵ In her assessment of the 'post-socialist' world, Nancy Fraser acknowledged Habermas's 'de-centering' of the public yet argued that there are multiple, interacting public spheres ('subaltern counterpublics') in which women can shape a public identity.⁶ Mary Ryan's research on early-nineteenth-century American female activism builds on this notion of 'competing public spheres',⁷ arguing that women could subvert the constrictions of gender ideology in order to enter public life. The 'proliferation of publics' gave women in the early Republic new political opportunities, taking part in meetings and forming their own voluntary associations from the 1830s onwards. Such participation in public life was, however, contrary to prevailing notions of acceptable feminine behaviour, and American women often became political by embracing activities such as work on municipal sanitary commissions or on the boards of orphanages, which played on such gender discourses.⁸ While historians of Ireland have only recently begun to realize the utility of Habermas's conception of the public sphere,⁹ the evidence presented in this book demonstrates how such notions about the gendered nature of the public sphere can be useful to historians of Irish women. Chapters on the rural reform movement, the cultural revival and radical nationalism suggest that there were multiple public spheres in Ireland which grew especially rapidly at the turn of the twentieth century. Branches of the Gaelic League or the pages of the rural press, to give just two examples, opened up spaces for women to participate in public life, creating public arenas in which women could contribute to the debate about national identity.

Recent research on women's experience in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain has highlighted the complex ways in which women engaged with public life and demonstrates the traction that feminist critiques of Habermas can give to historians of Britain and Ireland.

Women's self-representation in the public sphere during this period was deeply contested and public femininity was shaped by gendered debate about 'separate spheres'. Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff's work on the gender identities of the middle classes in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century provincial England set the terms of debate for much subsequent research on women and public life.¹⁰ *Family Fortunes* (1987) explored the emergence of 'separate spheres' ideology, the belief that women should be confined to the private, domestic realm of the home, while men were free to operate in the public world of business, industry and politics. Far from accepting this ideology as the organizing principle of Victorian society, and despite some of the more trenchant criticisms of their book, Hall and Davidoff present a sophisticated analysis which stresses the complexities of men and women's lives, recognizing the permeability of 'public' and 'private' spheres.¹¹

Influenced by feminist critiques of Habermas, more recent studies of women in the nineteenth century have sought to question the centrality of the separate spheres thesis in Hall and Davidoff's work and, instead, have attempted to demonstrate the different ways in which men and women could interpret their lives. Jane Rendall offers a stimulating account of how Habermas's idea of the public sphere can be used to interpret the women's suffrage movement in mid-Victorian Britain.¹² She argues that there was no single, unitary bourgeois public sphere and that the existence of counterpublics, such as women's involvement in religious organizations, illustrates 'the complicated variety of ways in which women might identify with communities which stretched far beyond the borders... of home and family.'¹³ The importance of religious organizations to women's engagement with public life has been stressed by a number of historians. Alison Twells, for example, explores the missionary work of evangelical women activists in early-nineteenth-century England and concludes that 'missionary domesticity' provided women with access to public life while conforming to the 'limits of women's sphere' in their home life.¹⁴ Other historians have stressed the importance of philanthropic or associational activity to women's engagement with public life. Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair have argued that women in Victorian Glasgow participated in the public lives of their communities in a variety of ways that were often at odds with traditional interpretations of a male-dominated public sphere. The discourse of separate spheres was, according to Gordon and Nair, only one of many that the middle-class women of Glasgow could use to interpret and shape their family, social lives and economic activity.¹⁵ In the context of English civic culture, Simon Morgan pursues a similar objective in his analysis of women's engagement with notions of civic virtue