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Irish Women: Late Developers?

David Lloyd (1999) asks whether there are other methods and theoretical approaches that might open up the field of Irish studies to alternative perspectives and narratives. Occlusion of the women’s movement, and indeed other social movements, calls into question the theoretical foundation that frames much conventional analysis of contemporary Ireland – in particular, the historical determinism of Enlightenment or developmental varieties of ‘modern Irish history’ and modernisation theory. A meticulous survey of mainstream historical, literary and sociological literature confirms that the women’s movement is 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 day. Interest in Ireland and the Irish microcosm has more recently developed an international field, that of Irish studies. Tom Garvin (1988: 1) writes:

Ireland and the Irish microcosm came under increased scrutiny, a scrutiny perhaps disproportionate to the real importance of the country itself. This attention, due to Ireland’s accidental presence at the heart of the Empire, aggravated Irish self-consciousness and self-importance. After all, all these important people were paying attention to us. A result was that few countries spend so much time and intellectual effort on self-definition as does Ireland. Endless and occasionally entertaining debates on what it means to be Irish go on in Ireland and among some sections of the diaspora in Britain and the United States. A minor publishing industry exists built around the subject.

Because so many scholars in this field write from outside Ireland, a range of theoretical and comparative perspectives beyond a national
paradigm have now been established (see O'Dowd, 1996; Lloyd, 1993; 1999; Kearney, 1997; Howe, 2000). Yet the ongoing debate about the past has been dominated by a localised and narrow focus on political history, particularly. In agreement with Ó Thuathaigh (1994) 'the real heat has centred on a relatively limited corpus of historical writing – writing which has become influential both within the profession and, for a variety of reasons, among the wider public.' Beyond the vociferous arena of nationalism and revisionism, a range of alternative and emerging post-revisionist perspectives in Irish studies, and their cognisance of 'Irish women', requires consideration (especially post-colonial studies). In the writing of this book, four general approaches in Irish studies proved especially problematic and are scrutinised in two stages in this introductory chapter (metanarratives (I) and de-centred narratives (II)):

1. **Totalising accounts of 'modern Irish history' which frame the development of Irish society since independence within a restricted sphere of nation-building and 'politics'**. Mainstream political historians tend to analyse the past through the lens of nationalist/unionist ideologies, the biographies of prominent political leaders and decision makers, the Church/State apparatus, and party politics and elections. The politics of civil society and social movements receive cursory attention in such developmental models of political change and linear interpretations of 'progress'.

2. **The incontrovertible tone of the revisionist and nationalist interpretations of Irish history since the 1980s (Foster, 1986; Ellis, 1991; Bradshaw, 1989) and the marginalisation of women's history in the associated controversy.** The intellectual antecedent of women’s history is frequently thought to be a simple task of inserting 'women' empirically as a category or group of historical actors. Women’s history is of course concerned with inserting women into the mainstream history but, more specifically, it is a distinct and variegated paradigm. Historiography itself has now become an integral part of any study of Irish history and contemporary ideology (see Brady, 1994). The issues women's history raises for historiography – its aims, methods, influence and public role – and the interdisciplinary field of Irish studies have not been considered comprehensively or interrogated adequately in recent, all-encompassing appraisals of the writing of Irish history (see several contributors in Brady, 1994; Boyce and O'Day, 1996: 1–14). Moreover, searching for the pre-existing