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Introduction

The standard narrative of the emergence of the modern historical profession appears very different when women are placed at the center of the narrative. This book contributes to the reconsideration of the story by exploring the lives, works, and social and political activism of female historians in Ireland between 1868 and 1949. A social history of historiography, this study considers the role of women in the development of the Irish historical profession, and the place of Irish female historians in the wider context of women historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It discusses the careers of these women in light of major developments such as feminism and new educational and professional opportunities for women, Irish nationalism, and the emergence of the new Irish state in 1922.

This book is located within recent work on women historians in the modern Western world, gender and historiography, and Irish historiography and women's history. It also participates in histories of the social constructions of intellectual disciplines and in the recovery of women in the humanities and social sciences during a period when academic disciplines were becoming professionalized.¹ Bonnie Smith's *The Gender of History*, which proved instrumental in shaping debates in the field, presented an interpretive paradigm of Western women historians. Smith argued that between 1800 and 1940, female historians tended to write popular women's, social, and cultural history, while men wrote "high" political history that legitimized the state, simultaneously gaining greater access to political power and raising the profile of the historian-citizen.² Mary O'Dowd's article on Irish women historians discussed the contributions of nineteenth and early twentieth-century amateur historians, as well as university-based

women historians in twentieth-century Ireland. In addition, O’Dowd analyzed the Irish historiographical revolution in the 1930s, the position of women academics in Irish universities, and the relationship of Irish women historians to “scientific” history. The position of Irish academic women historians, she argued, declined during the modernization of the university-based historical profession in the late 1930s and 1940s, and some of the women expressed ambivalence about the intellectual and philosophical underpinnings of the new academic history. Anne Colman addressed the range of genres chosen by Irish women writers in the nineteenth century; a novelist such as Emily Lawless, for instance, also wrote history.³ Other historians have highlighted the importance of factors such as family support, education, relative affluence, and intellectual circles of friends in the formation of successful female historians,⁴ as well as the central role played by women historians in the development of social and economic history.⁵ Works by Maxine Berg and Julie des Jardins highlighted the political and social engagement of women historians in Britain and the United States respectively, which resonates with the focus of this study. The scholarly recovery of women historians in Scandinavia and Central and Eastern Europe⁶ also resonates with this study, as Irish women historians, in many cases, had much in common with their counterparts in small, peripheral European countries with active nationalist movements.

A new interest in Irish historiography and in the origins of the university-based historical profession emerged in the 1980s. The narrative held that pioneering male historians R. Dudley Edwards and T.W. Moody, armed with doctorates from the University of London’s Institute of Historical Research, had initiated a historiographical revolution in Irish universities in the late 1930s. Their promotion of objective, scientific historical practices professionalized the study of Irish history, undermining sentimental historical myths and partisan histories based on incomplete evidence and analysis. A critique of this narrative, and of the legacy of the founding fathers of the new “revisionist” school of Irish academic history, was offered by historian Brendan Bradshaw.⁷ His intervention helped stimulate new debates about Irish nationalist and revisionist historiography, the history of the Irish historical profession, and the role of the historian. Women historians and the role played by gender, however, have often been excluded from the reconsideration of the development of the Irish historical profession.

This book argues that political affiliation and social and political engagement have been central to the identity and formation of Irish women historians over several generations between 1868, when two women wrote histories of Ireland and the country had not yet achieved independence, and 1949, when Ireland officially became a republic and Irish history seemed to have become a male preserve. Irish women historians were often public figures who intervened in political and historiographical debates, and challenged political and intellectual establishments through both their writing and their political and social activism. They were instrumental in reinforcing Irish nationalist and unionist identities and communal historical memories before and after independence, and in the writing of histories during the Free State era that sometimes bolstered and sometimes critiqued aspects of the new state and Irish nationalism. This study demonstrates that Irish female historians could gain access to political power in a new state through both their own political activism and the writing of histories with a political dimension. For example, Alice Stopford Green and Helena Concannon became senators, and Dorothy Macardle and Rosamond Jacob helped establish the Fianna Fail party.

This book also argues that, while the official contours of the discipline of Irish history were largely shaped by university-educated male scholars in the late nineteenth century, and by male academics in the twentieth century, women played a more significant role in the shaping of modern Irish historiography than has previously been considered. While some female historians identified unexplored topics and made original contributions, other women played a less direct role in the historical imagination of the profession, because they raised a discordant voice with which the male professional historians were compelled to engage. While this point need not be belabored, the contemporary discourse on popular nationalist historiography has at times been strikingly gendered. According to this discourse, a (masculine) scientific, objective, impartial history emerged to do battle with a (feminized) emotive, sentimental, partisan popular tradition produced by amateurs, including women, whose emotional excesses rendered them incapable of unbiased and objective scholarship. A distinctive modern Irish historical profession may not have emerged the way that it did without a popular, nationalist historiography, produced by amateur female and male writers, against which it could define itself and construct a new collective identity.⁸

This study has engaged with the work of Rosemary Ann Mitchell on women historians, considering how the factors Mitchell outlines, such as family, education, socio-economic background, mentors, access to libraries and manuscripts, and supportive circles of friends informed the development of the historians under consideration. As was the case with women historians throughout Europe in this period, almost all of the Irish women historians came from wealthy or middle-class backgrounds. They were the daughters of doctors, solicitors, Church of Ireland clergymen, and businessmen. Their families valued education, though some of the historians were educated by governesses, rather than at school. The historians born before the mid-nineteenth century were unable to attend universities, as opportunities for higher education were not yet available to women. The majority of the women were single, several were married and childless, and only one married and had children.⁹ They found mentors, often male, who encouraged them and through whom they gained access to books and libraries. W.E.H. Lecky and F.J. Bigger were particularly noteworthy for the help they gave women historians.¹⁰ Access to libraries was harder to obtain for non-academic women historians than for university-based ones. Most of the women had close friends connected with antiquarian, cultural, nationalist, feminist, and literary circles, who encouraged and supported them in their endeavors.

Religion also played a role in the formation of Irish women historians. The majority of the women in this study were Protestant;¹¹ during the period under consideration Protestants were often wealthier and had greater educational opportunities than Catholics. Most were nationalists, or combined political unionism with Irish cultural nationalism. Political and cultural nationalists had more of an impetus to write history, as they wished to refute negative representations of Ireland, to promote new Irish scholarship and national pride, and, later, to bolster the new state or critique it when it failed to live up to their expectations.

The careers of these women took place during a period in which the feminist movement brought about major changes in European politics and society. European feminists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fought for the right to vote, as well as access to the universities and the professions. The feminist movement counted women historians among its supporters throughout Europe, including Irish historians such as Mary Hayden, Dorothy Macardle, and

Rosamond Jacob. While some feminists turned to the study of women's history, women historians in Ireland, with the exception of the non-feminist Helena Concannon, engaged less with women's history. The Irish feminist movement's early successes in obtaining the right of women to enter universities and vote (by 1918) helped structure the educational, professional, and political opportunities for women in the new Irish state after 1922.

Breakdown of chapters

This book is divided into three main sections. The first two chapters focus on women historians in pre-Independence Ireland, and cover the years between 1868 and 1922. Chapter 1 considers the careers of Mary Ferguson, Mary Agnes Hickson, Emily Lawless, and Eleanor Hull, most of whom combined political unionism with cultural nationalism. Chapter 2 addresses the careers of two popular nationalist historians of the period, Margaret Cusack and Alice Stopford Green, who constructed the persona of the Irish nationalist female historian as a politically and socially engaged public figure.

The next section focuses on academic women in Free State Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter 3 examines the careers of the academic Irish women historians of the 1920s and 1930s in relation to the changing context of academic history in Ireland, and discusses the careers of the women who taught in the National University of Ireland's constituent colleges. Chapter 4 considers the careers of Constantia Maxwell, Olive Armstrong, and Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven of Trinity College.

Chapter 5 discusses "amateur" or nonprofessional female historians in Free State Ireland. Helena Concannon (the only one who produced significant works on women's history), Dorothy Macardle, and Rosamond Jacob were all nationalists and political activists, in the tradition of Alice Stopford Green. They were involved in national politics to an unusual degree in the early decades of the Irish state's consolidation. This chapter also discusses the less well-known Isabel Grubb, Grace Lawless Lee, and Ada Longfield, all of whom made innovative contributions to Irish religious, early modern, and social and economic history in the 1920s and 1930s. This study concludes with a comparative discussion of the women historians under consideration.

This book, then, contributes to the comparative study of women historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to Irish women's history, and to the study of Irish historiography. It writes Irish women into the international study of women historians, and women into the study of Irish historiography and the development of the Irish historical profession. Engaging the themes of gender and historiography, the social and political context in which history is written and received, and the relationship between politics and the writing of history, it reconstructs the lives of Irish women historians, and recovers and assesses their contributions to the historical discipline.

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