Introduction

In 1700 few Irish women were literate. Most lived in a rural environment, rarely encountered a book or a play or ventured much beyond their own domestic space. By 1960 literacy was universal, all Irish women attended primary school, had access to a variety of books, magazines, newspapers and other forms of popular media and the wider world was now part of their everyday life. This study seeks to examine the cultural encounters and exchanges inherent in this transformation. It analyses reading and popular and consumer culture as sites of negotiation of gender roles. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the theme but focuses on three key points of cultural encounter: the Enlightenment, emigration and modernism. The writings and intellectual discourse generated by the Enlightenment made it one of the most influential forces shaping western society. It set the agenda for scientific, political and social thought for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The migration of peoples to North America was another important historical marker in the development of the modern world. Emigration altered and shaped American society as well as the lives of those who remained behind. By the twentieth century, aesthetic modernism suspicious of Enlightenment rationalism and determined to produce new cultural forms developed in a complex relationship with the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation and social transformation.

This study analyses the impact of these forces in western culture on changing roles and perceptions of Irish women from 1700 to 1960. It examines the processes of cultural influence and exchange, looking at long-term alterations in behaviour and attitudes. The analysis ranges from eighteenth-century advice books to theatre in the twentieth century and will argue that international popular culture and didactic and educational material aimed at women were a locus of conflict and change.

While this study has a broad historical span, the focus is on cultural change. This facilitates tracing distinctive patterns of cultural encounter and influence at specific times rather than seeking to produce a ‘one size fits all’ explanation of how these forces operate for all historical periods. The
organisational principle of each section is to examine the nature of the cultural encounter, how it took place and how Irish women engaged with it.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment has long been recognised as opening up the agenda of equality for women as well as men. If man was a rational animal so too, it was increasingly argued, was woman. The Enlightenment initiated a debate on women’s intellectual ability and led to an expansion in the provision of schools for girls and a corresponding rise in female literacy. In England and colonial America, Enlightenment ideas fused with evangelical Protestantism to construct a new model of ideal womanhood which began to prevail particularly within middle-class society. The new woman was literate and actively engaged with religious reading and spiritual activities. She was often involved in philanthropic work and her local community. The new woman also believed in reading for leisure but was selective in her choice of reading. She read serious, often religious literature rather than fiction. She rarely wrote for publication herself but admired the women writers associated with the bluestocking movement in England. Her views on the role and status of women combined the intellectual equality advocated by the Enlightenment with a religious belief in the equality of all souls. At the same time, most advocates of the new model of womanhood of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries rejected any notion that men and women were equal in every respect arguing instead that their different characteristics were complimentary. Women should be educated to enhance their natural instincts for motherhood and care of the home while the curriculum in boys’ schools should prepare them for engagement with the public and the professional world. Young women could be given translations of classical texts to read but only young boys should be taught classical languages. By the late eighteenth century, there is also evidence of a more radical view of women’s role in society. The political debate on equality infiltrated the discussion on women and a small number of writers supported the notion of societal and political equality for the sexes.¹

The first section investigates the impact that this Enlightenment debate had on women in Ireland. The aim of chapter one is to explore the ways in which ideas about the new woman filtered into Irish society. Printed literature was the principal media through which women encountered these

¹ For a survey of the engagement of British women with Enlightenment thought see Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds), Women, Gender and Enlightenment (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
debates. Throughout the eighteenth century, Irish printers and booksellers profited from the absence of strict copyright laws and reprinted English editions of books without fear of prosecution. Large numbers of books were published in Ireland that were directed at a female readership. Many were books advising on the education and formation of young girls. The emerging Irish periodical market also relied a great deal on the reproduction of material from English journals and magazines. Thus the scores of books and periodicals that appeared on the Irish market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are a key source for tracing this cultural encounter and transfer. Although often confining in their advice, the encouragement of young women’s literacy skills and independent intellectual thought paradoxically incorporated what historians have identified as an early form of feminism.

The second chapter explores the impact of Enlightenment ideas on women’s lives and the emergence of different versions of the new Enlightenment woman in Irish society. As elsewhere, education and philanthropy provided women with new roles as teachers, foundresses of religious congregations and published writers. While women from Protestant denominations were the first to participate in public affairs, particularly those associated with philanthropic projects, by the 1820s, Catholic women were also developing a public profile. In addition, women participated in Irish political life in a way which would not be possible in the later nineteenth century. The leisure and resources to read and engage with Enlightenment ideas were predominantly available to middle-class women. By 1850, however, rising female literacy facilitated female agency and gave more women the means by which to determine their own lives. This included the life-changing decision to leave Ireland.

**Emigration**

Emigration was a fulcrum of cultural exchange which influenced women’s lives profoundly and defined or redefined ideas about womanhood. In the nineteenth century, knowledge of America was circulated through printed literature and letters. Information about conditions in America for women at work, in the home and at leisure was disseminated through newspapers, magazines, books and eventually film in the twentieth century. The image of the female emigrant was joined by that of the career woman, the female consumer and the American film star, among others. The values represented by these figures were not just those of modernity and progress, but also of greater personal choices for women. The transfer of these ideals was not direct but was mediated through Irish and British newspapers, magazines
and books and in the twentieth century, controlled within the framework of social mores set down by successive Irish Free State governments’ legislation and Roman Catholic principles. The extent to which individual Irish women accepted, rejected or adapted these external messages to suit their own lives offers an insight into how external cultural influences actually operated in women’s everyday experiences. Women’s accommodation of external and internal cultural influences emerges in the prevalence of American music, dance as well as film, in twentieth-century Ireland. It also challenged the prescribed church and state ideal of an Irish-speaking, rural society imbued with cultural and sexual purity.

Chapters three and four focus on the female emigrant and the female consumer of American popular culture as a conduit for cultural engagement between America and Ireland. Between 1815 and 1845 approximately one million Irish settled elsewhere. The 1845–53 Famine accelerated this movement with 2.5 million leaving between 1846 and 1855 and the departures continued despite the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. America was the preferred destination and at certain periods more women than men emigrated to the USA, which distinguishes the pattern of Irish departures from other European emigrant societies. Most were Roman Catholic, poor women from rural parts, single and under thirty years of age.

Chapter three examines how by 1900 America was perceived as a place where women could lead independent lives. They could find work, at good rates, could progress to better employment and have a more comfortable home, with electricity and running water, than in Ireland. They could also have a social life with other Irish and new friends, marry, delay marriage or not marry. The extent to which America offered young women independence and better living and working conditions is clear from the gendered advice and warnings emanating from the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy. The chapter explores continuities, namely that even when work was available to young women in twentieth-century Ireland many still chose to leave, which suggests that while leaving was difficult (indeed the American ‘wake’ persisted into the 1950s), America offered more attractions. A final aim of the chapter is to examine the female emigrant’s ‘round trip’ with packages, letters and temporary and permanent returnees arriving back home. She could bring money, clothes, food and news of life in America but her appearance, behaviour and presence in her home community also represented a visual image of American life that emphasised the contrast between the old and the new worlds. The confrontation of the two cultures merits investigation.

Chapter four contextualises the female emigrant alongside contrasting
images of womanhood emanating from American material and popular culture. The dissemination of these images across the world remains today a matter of discussion and debate particularly in the context of American ‘imperialism’.2 Ironically the ‘American way’, born out of Enlightenment-inspired values of rationality, individualism and self-determination, also came full circle back to Europe in the twentieth century. The gender dimension to this cultural exchange is explored in chapter four through investigation of images of womanhood inherent in American consumerism, advertising, and popular culture in the form of film, fiction, music and dancing. From the 1930s onwards, the expanding media incorporated more sophisticated advertising strategies which targeted woman as consumers and projected certain messages about gender relations in modern America. During the period 1922 to 1960, some writers in Irish woman’s magazines and in the newspapers thought that the woman worker could learn some lessons from the ‘modern American career woman’ or the ‘career mother’, who was portrayed as fashionable, clever and independent. However, the most popular reading matter in Ireland was religious magazines, which offered contrasting but equally influential messages about woman’s lives in America. The strained relationship between traditional and progressive models of behaviour intensified in the middle decade of the twentieth century and is also reflected in the tension between avant garde modernism and the cultural agenda of the Irish Free State.

Modernism

Through the twentieth century, modernist aesthetics was one of the most influential frameworks adopted by literary and cultural critics. In an influential article, Miriam Hansen links modernism with modernity to include in the study of modernist aesthetics cultural practices that were manifestations of modernity. This includes ‘mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio and cinema’. Hansen’s development of ‘vernacular

modernism’ is particularly apt for analysing cultural production and consumption by women in twentieth-century Ireland. The official discourse of the newly independent Irish state was almost equally suspicious of the foreign, the urban and the sexual and frequently associated all three in the figure of the modern young woman. However, the degree of resistance to the dominant ideology of womanhood in this period has frequently been underestimated. Irish women persistently engaged with modernity. They purchased and read foreign and mass-produced reading materials and attended American film with enthusiasm. Newspapers, books, cinema-going and shopping provided the consuming woman with further ways to engage with America.

Chapter five looks at women as cultural producers. Popular literature provided the means by which Irish women could develop public reputations as novelists and playwrights. From the nineteenth century onwards Irish women such as Katherine Cecil Thurston and L.T. Meade were highly successful purveyors of popular fiction to an international market particularly in the USA. They also promoted themselves as ‘Irish women writers’.

Chapter six focuses in particular on the programme of plays produced by the Gate Theatre from its foundation in 1929 to 1960. It points to the mixture of popular and more challenging modernist productions presented in the Gate during these years. The diversity and range of work by women in this period has been overlooked until recently by Irish literary history. These productions were part of the Gate’s diverse programme that indicates that theatre-goers were equally willing to attend plays by Dorothy Sayers, Anton Chekhov and Eugene O’Neill and promiscuously mixed ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Chapter six also examines the Gate as a space of cultural and sexual dissidence in Dublin, suggesting a trace of an ‘other’ city, where both gender and other forms of identity were much more fluid than in official Ireland. The relationship between aesthetic and sexual freedom is a key theme in Irish writing in the post-independence period, but also an important point of intersection with both modernist and realist writing by women in the inter-war years. This chapter explores the paradox by which Christa Winsloe’s Children in Uniform could be performed on the Dublin stage in 1934, albeit to discretely subdued acclaim, but Gone With the Wind could not be screened without significant cuts until 1968. Class and particularly the desire to control the cultural life of the working class are obviously key here, but analysis of Irish modernism in all its forms creates a more complex picture. The permeability of the boundaries

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4 Cathy Leeney, Irish Women Playwrights, 1900–1939: Gender and Violence on Stage (Irish Studies 9) (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).
between high and low cultural forms and the processes of cultural exchange mediate questions of the ‘proper’ role of women in domestic, national and international contexts.

**Methodological Approaches**

New electronic and printed resources have made visible the hitherto hidden diversity and scope of the cultural lives of Irish women, from subscribers to eighteenth-century journals to cinema-goers in the twentieth century. Identifying and quantifying this material is insufficient for an understanding of the complex processes of cultural and social change, however. This work draws on these resources to facilitate interpretation and analysis, combining literary and historical research techniques in the multidisciplinary, collaborative mode demanded by the new range of primary material. It maps the complexity and range of the much disparaged cultural lives of these literate women, readers and writers of novels, playwrights and theatre goers, emigrants writing home and their correspondents, girls at the movies and advertising copy-writers.

This is an ambitious book which explores the relationship between historical and literary methodologies and approaches in the analysis of cultural engagements. In the course of writing this book, we have become more aware of the alternative approaches of historians and literary critics. The methods of the literary and historical scholar can lead to different insights into ‘Reading the Irish Woman’. Literary analysis is primarily interpretative in its operation. It produces readings of texts, and on the basis of a detailed reading of a single key text it can propose an analysis of an entire cultural or social movement. It does not work on the basis of empirical evidence of actual social practice and it is frequently concerned with unconscious social processes and ideologies. It does offer an insight into the imaginative and philosophical lives of women readers and a trace of their desires and aspirations. It also challenges approaches which understand Irish women’s cultural and social history in a predominantly national frame.

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5 See, for example: Breaking the Silence (http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/testing/breaking/narrators/); Eighteenth Century Collections Online (http://gale.cengage.co.uk/product-highlights/history/eighteenth-century-collections-online.aspx); Irish Newspapers Online (http://www.irishnewsarchive.com); Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals Online (http://mlr.com/DigitalCollections/products/ukperiodicals); Women in Modern Irish Culture Database (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/irishwomenwriters). See also the Inventing and Reinventing the Irishwoman website. The respondents to the oral history projects were selected through personal contact. Semi-directed interviews took place.
The complexity of cultural production and consumption by Irish women indicates that ‘as people move with their meanings and meanings find ways of traveling even when people stay put, territories cannot really contain cultures.’

Historical analysis is grounded in empirical evidence that shapes and refines the conceptual framework. Historians require a range of sources and documents and build their arguments on the basis of a plurality of evidence. The methodology of the historian also provides a chronological context through which changes and continuities in women’s lives can be discerned. These differences in approach were not easily accommodated. Understanding what we mean by terms such as ‘modernisation’, ‘progressive’, ‘conservative’, ‘traditional’, ‘ideology’ and ‘agency’ has been problematic. These words carry different meanings in the different disciplines and are contentious in both. Nevertheless, the collaborative nature of the project has led to much cross-fertilisation and interdisciplinary discussion. The overall theme of the book of cultural encounter, exchange and adaptation crosses disciplines and each discipline has brought particular insights. The engagement of women with the Enlightenment is primarily through printed texts. The role of women in this diverse intellectual movement has only become visible in recent years through collaboration between historians and literary critics. Dialogue between historians and literary critics on the nature of the Irish Enlightenment has begun in recent years although there has been a more limited engagement with considerations of gender. Asking how women


7 See, for example, Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds), Women, Gender and Enlightenment (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf and Iain McCalman (eds), The Enlightenment World (London: Routledge, 2004).

participated in this diverse intellectual movement compels scholars to operate in an interdisciplinary way and reveals the central significance of debates around women for Enlightenment thought. The understanding of emigration similarly benefits from interdisciplinary approaches which produce a more nuanced and gendered understanding. Early studies of emigration were predominantly concerned with male emigrants, offered the ‘exile’ interpretation and concentrated on one stage of the emigration process. A focus on women and the ‘round trip’ from departure to return in some form reveals the limitations of the ‘exile’ interpretation and places the female emigrant at the heart of the transatlantic exchange alongside her male counterpart. The application of different methodologies, including folklore and oral history, and closer textual analysis of letters and diaries illuminates women’s distinct experience. The analysis of Irish women’s participation in vernacular and high modernism needs to be set in the context of broader debates about canons, cultural history and the questioning of historicism as the dominant mode of literary analysis. The mode of literary criticism brought to bear in the concluding chapters is heavily influenced by the concerns of cultural studies as a distinct discipline, but seeks to integrate them in analysis of the relationship between history and literature.

Reading the full complexity of the Irish woman requires this interdisciplinary approach. Throughout the period 1700 to 1960, women in Ireland defied official and social norms and adapted, adopted, conformed to and sometimes rejected cultural ideas and practices from home and abroad. In short, there is no one ‘Irish Woman’.

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