Reading the Irish Woman

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Meaney, Gerardine, et al.
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Educating Women,
Patriotism and Public Life, 1770–1845

Introduction

Chapter one traced the amassing in eighteenth century Ireland of printed literature on the education of women and, more widely, on the role and contribution of women in society. Interest in this type of literature declined in the early nineteenth century. By 1800, there is a noticeable absence in the pages of *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine* of articles that focused on the merits of female education or that discussed the role of women. They were replaced with items that were to become the standard fare of women’s magazines: advice on marriage and married life, serialised romantic tales and fashion.\(^1\) The unsuccessful attempts in the 1790s to produce periodicals for women readers were not repeated in subsequent decades. Instead, the new weekly or monthly publications of the early nineteenth century were aimed at a Catholic and nationalist readership and did not have an explicit gender dimension to their marketing.

1 See, for example, ‘The Land of Matrimony: On Precepts for Promoting Conjugal Happiness’ by ‘A Lady’, in *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine*, July 1810. Other periodicals searched for this study include *The Monthly Pantheon or General Repository or Politics, Arts, Science, Literature and Miscellaneous Information* (1809), which included articles entitled ‘Hints to the Fashionable World for the Year 1809’ (March 1809); ‘The Mirror of Fashion. To Shew the Very Age and Body of the Times, its Form, and Pressure’ (April 1809); and ‘Irish Varieties. Fashion for May’ (May 1809). *The Belfast Monthly Magazine* published a series of articles on education in the 1810s but they mainly related to the education of poor children. See for example, ‘For the Education of Female Children’ (31 October 1812); ‘On the Lancastrian System of Education’ (31 January 1812); ‘Observations on Female Charity-Schools’ (31 August 1812); ‘Remarks on Apprenticing Female Children on their Leaving a Charity School’ (30 September 1812); ‘Plan of a Female Benefit Club’ (30 April 1814); ‘Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Carter’ (31 January 1814). Women were listed among the prize winners for mathematical puzzles in *The Literary and Mathematical Asylum* (1823).
strategies. A small number of magazines such as the Dublin Family Magazine or Literary and Religious Miscellany (Dublin, 1829) were produced for a school market but, unlike in the 1790s, they did not focus specifically on female readers.

For most of the nineteenth century there were no Irish-produced magazines directed at a female readership. The first, Lady of the House, appeared in 1890. Prior to that date, Irish women were among the readers of the expanding number of women’s magazines that were published in London. The most successful in the early nineteenth century was La Belle Assemblée, which was one of the first to feature full-page engravings of women’s fashions from London and Paris. Other items advertised in La Belle Assemblée included luxury consumer items like furniture, silverware and paintings. The commercial potential of the middle-class woman consumer was increasingly recognised by English publishers.

The most successful nineteenth-century women’s magazine was the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, edited by Samuel and Isabella Beeton, from the early 1850s. It set the model for future women’s magazines. By contrast with their eighteenth-century predecessors, the editors of the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine produced their magazine for the middle-class woman in charge of a household. Their emphasis was on ‘homemaking’ and, as Samuel Beeton wrote in the first issue, the magazine was for women who wanted ‘to make home happy’. The articles in the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine were a successful mixture of practical household advice, serialised fiction and accounts of the latest fashions, which were often accompanied by patterns and dressmaking guidance on how to recreate them. The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine had an Irish readership. The correspondence and query page of the magazine regularly included Irish

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3 See p. 33 below.

correspondents. Irish readers also inserted notices in the classified lists of family births, deaths and marriages.\(^5\)

Paradoxically, while the public debate on women’s education faded in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there were more women being educated. The early nineteenth century witnessed an increase in the number of schools available for the education of girls and a corresponding rise in female literacy. Similarly, while the periodical literature seemed to assume that most women spent their time in the home and on domestic duties, the 1820s and 1830s were marked by an expansion in the public space in which women could move without social disapproval. The widening of women’s access to the public sphere has long been recognised by historians as one of the most significant ways in which Enlightenment ideas made an impact on women’s lives. The aim of this chapter is to explore how the public profile of many Irish women changed in the early nineteenth century as they gained access to education and, as a result, could participate more fully in public life. As in the eighteenth century, there continued to be a tension in the perception of women’s role in society. As the public discourse increasingly emphasised the domestic and the private, educational, political and economic developments in the early decades of the nineteenth century constructed new images for Irish women and womanhood in the public sphere.

**The Educated and Educating Woman**

My grandmother, though an earl’s daughter, could write only a short letter, containing a few kind sentences, in a very large hand, spelling very ignorantly, and yet she was considered a sensible woman, and had energy enough to establish a little school, at Inistiogue, where girls were taught to make lace, at a time when there were scarcely any schools for the poor in Ireland. … Lady Betty must have had … some taste for literature if we may judge from her having left her name on many of the best authors of that day. She read, I have heard, well and committed to memory many passages from Young\(^6\) and Milton while sitting at her work.\(^7\)

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6 Probably Edward Young, *The Complaint, or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742–46), which was reprinted five times in eighteenth-century Dublin.
7 Caroline Hamilton, ‘Reminiscences’ in NLI, MS 4811.
Thus, in her memoirs, written in the mid-1820s, Caroline Hamilton wrote of the educational achievement of her grandmother, Lady Elizabeth Fownes, and drew attention to the irony of a semi-literate wealthy woman establishing schools for the poor. Unlike her ancestor, Hamilton could read and write lucidly, leaving behind several volumes of reminiscences of her family which she composed ‘for my children’. In her memoirs, Hamilton detailed the care which her mother, Sarah Tighe (née Fownes), took with the education of her children. Having read Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, Tighe sent her sons to public school in England while she employed ‘every kind of master, at first an English and afterwards an Irish governess’ for her daughters. In addition, Caroline, who became an accomplished artist, had a drawing master, ‘my mother caring little what expense she incurred for our improvement’.

Hamilton also wrote of the considerable effort and attention that her aunt, Theodosia Blachford, gave to the education of her daughter, Mary Tighe. Blachford, who had been virtually self-taught, was dismissive of governesses and agreed with the fashionable view, inspired by Enlightenment thinking and texts such as de Genlis’s *Adèle et Théodore*, that mothers should be involved in the teaching of their daughters as much as possible. Although she sent her daughter to school and employed drawing and music masters for her, Blachford also devoted a considerable amount of time to Mary’s education. She encouraged Mary to improve her writing skills through the transcribing of literary texts and to learn French and Italian by reading and translating books in both languages. With her mother’s encouragement, Tighe kept a journal in which she ‘noted down every book she read and her observations upon them’.

Caroline Hamilton’s writings thus chart the changing pattern of the education of middle- and upper middle-class women. She was born in 1777 and her cousin and sister-in-law Mary Tighe was born five years earlier, in 1772. They were members of the first generation of middle- and upper-class Irish women for whom a formal education in their childhood was the norm rather than the exception. As Hamilton noted of her grandmother’s generation,

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\text{Half a century ago, a governess was not considered as at present an indispensable member of every gentleman’s family. An old nurse}
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8 Ibid. and NLI, MS 4810.
9 NLI, MS 4811.
10 Ibid.
11 NLI, MS 4810, pp. 13–16; Harriet Kramer Linkin (ed.), *The Collected Poems and Journals of Mary Tighe* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), pp. xx, 240–53; See also the *DIB* entry for Mary Tighe by Harriet Kramer Linkin.
12 NLI, MS 4910, p. 34. The journal has not survived.
generally taught to read and the parish clerk, to write and if a young lady professed any taste for literature, she was permitted to read what she pleased in her father’s library which generally consisted of old romances, books of divinity, and tedious histories.\footnote{13} In this way, her grandmother learnt to read but not to write with fluency. A similar transition can be traced in the family of Belfast merchant and landowner, William Tennent. Tennent’s mother, Anne was clearly an enthusiastic reader who sent numerous requests for books to her son. All of the book orders were, however, communicated through her husband’s correspondence. The Tennent family archive in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland is a rich one with extensive correspondence between members of the family in the last quarter of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but it contains only one letter by Anne Tennent, which suggests that although she was an enthusiastic reader she found writing more difficult. Her son, William, however, took care to educate all his daughters (legitimate and illegitimate). Each was sent to school for a number of years and wrote articulate and clear letters to their father.\footnote{14}

The generation of Irish women born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were, therefore, better educated, on the whole, than their antecedents. Nor was this phenomenon limited by class or by religion. Niall Ó Ciosáin has explored the available historical data on literacy skills of women in the early nineteenth century. Relying mainly on the statistical information provided in the printed reports of the 1841 census, Ó Ciosáin’s analysis suggests that the growth in the number of schools had made a significant impact on female literacy by that time. The census data indicates that 47 per cent of the Irish population over five years of age could read in 1841 and of those 44 per cent were women. There were regional differences in the literacy rates. The number of women able to read was noticeably higher in Ulster although more women in Leinster and Munster had both reading and writing skills.\footnote{15} Thus, in the decades before the Famine in Ireland (1845–53), the transition in female literacy was well under way. The reading ability figure for Ulster reflects the Protestant emphasis on literacy, but the expansion in Catholic education in the course of the early nineteenth century helped to reduce the denominational imbalance. As

\footnote{13} Caroline Hamilton, ‘Anecdotes of Our Family, Written for My Children’ (NLI, MS 4810, pp. 1–2); Linkin (ed.), The Collected Poems and Journals of Mary Tighe, p. 247.

\footnote{14} See the Tennent papers in PRONI, D1748. There is a digitised catalogue which can be consulted in PRONI but many of the family letters remain uncatalogued. The authors are grateful to Leanne Calvert for her work on this source.

noted in chapter one, the foundation of private and church-run schools for girls as well as boys burgeoned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The rise in literacy rates was also assisted by the establishment of the government-funded primary school system in 1831, which created a national network of free schools.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the principal focus was on teaching basic literacy skills to young children, more advanced schools for older girls also began to be advertised in Irish newspapers at this time. They catered for girls over the age of nine or ten and were essentially secondary schools that built on the literacy skills which the children had learnt elsewhere, either in a school or at home. The academic curriculum in some of these establishments was surprisingly rigorous and was often modelled on a French or English prototype.

In the 1790s, Sydney Owenson and her sister, Olivia spent three years as borders in a French Huguenot school in Clontarf outside Dublin.\textsuperscript{17} The school was under the management of Madame Terson who, according to Owenson, modelled the discipline in the school on that of Saint Cyr with which Fénelon was associated.\textsuperscript{18} Saint Cyr had a strong academic reputation and its principle aim, according to one contemporary, was ‘to give the state well-educated women’.\textsuperscript{19} Like Saint Cyr, the school day in the Clontarf school followed an impressive schedule and, as recommended by John Locke, was divided between healthy outdoor exercise and academic study. School activity began at six in the morning in the summer months and seven in the winter. Upon rising, weather permitting, the girls bathed in the sea. Following this, prayers were said and the pupils received instruction in English grammar and geography before they had their breakfast. After breakfast, there was time for exercise and recreation in the school grounds. Classes resumed again at twelve and continued until three. Dinner was served about four and then time was allocated for walking either along the seashore or in the grounds of Clontarf Castle. A two-hour study period started at seven o’clock after which the girls had supper and then retired to bed. On average, therefore, the pupils in Madame Terson’s school spent about seven hours


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 103. Madame Terson had taught at the Huguenot school in Portarlington but had moved to Clontarf on Dublin bay for health reasons.

a day on academic study. The subjects taught included English grammar and writing, the French language, geography and history, arithmetic and drawing. Prayers and all conversation were conducted in French.20

Owenson described the education that she and her sister received in Clontarf as ‘the best instruction that the best masters could bestow and we were subjected to a discipline which … was the very best ever introduced into a female seminary in any country’.21 Madame Terson’s establishment clearly had a reputation as a good school for girls. There were thirty to forty pupils at the school when the Owensons joined it and among them were the daughters of parliamentarian Henry Grattan and of Church of Ireland ecclesiastical, Richard Marlay.22 Owenson’s description suggests that French Enlightenment ideas on education directly impacted on the lives of the daughters of the leading members of the Irish Protestant elite. It was probably also at the Clontarf school that Owenson became familiar with the publications of Madame de Genlis.23

Schools for middle-class girls, particularly in the main cities, could also be based on English or Scottish models. This seems to have been particularly the case in Belfast where schools provided a solid academic education as well as training for employment for girls and boys. In January 1828, for example, the Belfast Newsletter published the names of the boys and girls who had excelled in the recent examinations held in the Belfast School in North Street. The subjects examined were spelling, reading, grammar, parsing, sacred history, writing, arithmetic, algebra and geography. Both sexes were taught similar academic subjects but the advertisement for the school noted that it prepared the boys for college while the girls were instructed in ‘plain and fancy work’.24 Similarly, in July 1828, the English and Mercantile School in Belfast published the names of the boys and girls who had been rewarded with premiums. The names of the girls in the ‘Ladies School’ were listed separately but again the subjects examined indicate a solid academic curriculum. They included spelling, reading, history, grammar, parsing, geography, writing and arithmetic. Letter-writing and ‘bills of parcels’25 were also listed among the subjects studied, which

21 Ibid., p. 98.
22 Marlay was bishop of Clonfert (1787–95) and later bishop of Waterford and Lismore (1795–1802). See Lady Sydney Morgan, Lady Morgan’s Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence, pp. 101, 105.
23 See chapter one.
24 Belfast Newsletter, 1 January 1828.
25 A bill of parcels was the invoice of goods drawn up by a shopkeeper or manufacturer for a customer. It would include such details as the date, the name of the shopkeeper and customer, an itemised list of the goods sold and the cost and details of payment.
suggests that the girls were also being trained for employment or assisting in a family business.  

Whilst such schools were primarily aimed at girls from Protestant and Presbyterian families, the impact of the new emphasis on an academic curriculum can also be documented in schools frequented predominantly by Catholic children. The daughter of Daniel O’Connell, Ellen, recalled in her memoir of her father that while in the first decade of the nineteenth century ‘almost all the Catholic ladies of Ireland’ attended a boarding school managed by ‘two old maids the Misses O’Rourke who had been educated in France’, she implied that Catholic girls also attended Huguenot day schools in Dublin in the 1820s and 1830s. Antonia McManus also pointed to the advanced nature of the literature being taught in some of the hedge schools for poorer children in the early 1820s. Among the books listed as being used in such schools in 1825 were Eliza Haywood’s *Female Spectator*, Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, Lady Mary Wortley Montague’s letters, Madame de Sevigne’s letters and the novels of Samuel Richardson.  

The early decades of the nineteenth century was also the period during which convent schools began to flourish. While many concentrated on the teaching of literacy and practical skills to poor children, the Catholic hierarchy were also anxious to support more elite schools for the daughters of the Catholic middle and upper classes. Their model was the French or Belgian convent school which had been favoured by many wealthy Catholic families in the eighteenth century. The Bar convent school in York was also popular as a school for middle-class Irish girls, particularly in Dublin. By the 1800s, however, the Bar was used as a training location for Irish women intending to return to Ireland to establish religious communities and schools. The founder of the Loreto Order, Mary Teresa Ball, for example, spent three years at the York convent as a teenager and later returned to enter the novitiate there in 1816. Mary Aikenhead was also a professed nun in the York convent although she used the French order of the Daughters of Charity as the prototype for her new Irish order of the Sisters of Charity.  

The first successful Irish-based Catholic school that provided an advanced education for girls was run by a branch of another French order,

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26 *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 July 1828. For a similar type of school in Dublin, see the reference to the annual examinations at Russell Place Boarding and Day School in *Freeman’s Journal*, 9 August 1820.

27 ‘Recollections of Daniel O’Connell by His Daughter, Ellen Fitzsimon’, 1876 (NLI, MS 1504).


29 *DIB* entry by Frances Clarke.

30 *DIB* entry by Marie O’Leary.
the Ursulines. The nuns in Cork were, by the 1810s, endeavouring to establish a strong academic ethos in imitation of the schools established by the order in France. In 1813, the school introduced a biannual system of examinations for which pupils were rewarded with premiums and certificates at a formal prize-giving ceremony.  

By 1840, Ursuline boarding schools were also established in Thurles, Limerick, Sligo, Waterford, Lifford and Galway, catering mainly for daughters of the mercantile and commercial classes of those towns. These schools also had a strong French ethos.

As noted in chapter one, the nuns teaching in Ursuline schools spent time thinking and writing about pedagogy. They also wrote their own school textbooks. This was particularly the case in Cork. Mother Ursula Young, for example, published two books on Irish history in 1815. Young’s general history of the United Kingdom of England and Ireland was accompanied by a teacher’s aid, which listed questions that could be asked through a study of the volume. Although the introduction to the history included a denunciation of the ‘insinuating accents of a Voltaire or a Rousseau’ and warned against an ‘incautious selection’ of books that denigrated religion, the main text consisted of a patriotic interpretation of Irish history. The book was, however, considered politically biased by educational inspectors who denounced its use in a Christian Brothers’ school in Dublin. The inspector’s report assumed that the book was written by the nationalist-minded Christian Brothers rather than by a member of the Ursuline Order. The curriculum devised by the Ursulines for the school

31 Sister Ursula Clarke, *The Ursulines in Cork since 1771* (Cork: Ursuline Convent, Blackrock, Cork, 2007), p. 56. By 1831 there were monthly examinations in Catechism; spelling; geography; vocabulary; globes; the solar system; English grammar; chronology; rivers; English; French; English, French and Roman history; mythology; phrases; verbs; French reigns; translation and repetition; English reading; ‘attention to rule’; speaking French; carriage and work; politeness; neatness in person; arithmetic; order; tables (Ursuline Convent Archive, Blackrock, UCB/01505).


33 See chapter one, p. 33.

34 Ursula Young, *A History of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland … Compiled from Various Authors and Intended Chiefly for the Young Ladies Educated at the Ursuline Convents* (2 vols; Cork: W. Fergusson, 1815); *A Sketch of Irish History Compiled by Way of Question and Answer, for the Use of Schools* (Cork: J. Geary, 1815); *Questions on the History of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Intended Chiefly for the Young Ladies Educated at the Ursuline Convent* (Cork: J. Geary, 1815). See also *A System of Chronology Facilitated by the Mnemonics for the Use of the Young Ladies Educated at the Ursuline Convent* (Cork: 1841).


36 Ibid.
in Cork, therefore, had a French base but was clearly adapted to meet Irish circumstances.

Another model that the Ursulines adopted for Irish Catholic use was that of the conduct book. In the 1820s, Mother Borgia McCarthy penned the *Ursuline Manual* ‘for the spiritual good and formation to piety of the Young Ladies’ educated in the Cork convent. The volume provided a daily guide for prayer and religious practice. In addition, the introduction advised girls on their wider conduct in life. Cautioning girls to take care when choosing their companions and avoid reading novels, romances and attending the theatre, the *Manual* presented a message that would have been familiar to the readers of advice books written by Protestant women writers. Yet, like the latter, there was a tension between McCarthy’s encouragement of intellectual activity and the passivity of her advice on the girls’ behaviour. She presented St Catherine of Alexandra as a model for young girls to emulate ‘in the use to be made of mental acquirements’. The patron saint of girls’ education would never, according to McCarthy, have made ‘an ostentatious show’ of her learning. The ideal young woman might be educated but she did not boast in public about it.

The French ethos of the Ursuline convent and school in Cork is evident from the significant number of French books still to be found in the convent archive. In addition to the *Ursuline Manual*, McCarthy and her colleagues also translated a number of French religious texts into English. It is possible to identify at least fifteen books produced by nuns attached to the Cork convent from 1812 through to 1860. Some related to the rule and regulations of the Ursuline Order and were addressed to young novices as they entered the convent. Other texts were, however, written for the laity and provided spiritual guidance as well as advice on conduct and behaviour.

The commercial possibilities of some of these texts, in the booming market of conduct and devotional books for girls, were recognised by Irish and English publishers. By the end of the nineteenth century, ten editions of the *Ursuline Manual* had been printed in Dublin, fourteen in North America and two in London. *The Month of Mary: A Series of Meditations on the Life and Virtues of the Holy Mother of God, Particularly Adapted for the Month of May. By a Member of the Ursuline Community, Blackrock, Cork* had appeared in six editions by 1853. The Dublin publisher was Richard Coyne.

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37 *The Ursuline Manual, or, a Collection of Prayers, Spiritual Exercises, etc. Interspersed With the Various Instructions Necessary for Forming Youth to the Practice of Solid Piety: Originally Arranged for the Young Ladies Educated at the Ursuline Convent, Cork* (Cork: 1825; London: Keating and Brown, 1825, 1827, 1830; Dublin: R. Coyne, 1835, 1846).
39 The original title, *Meditations for the Month of Mary, On the Life and Virtues of*
described as the ‘printer and bookseller to the College of Maynooth’. The Ursuline publications clearly formed part of the burgeoning number of Irish printed books sponsored or approved by the Catholic hierarchy in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

The pedagogical example set by the Ursuline community in Cork was followed by others. Nuns who taught in the Ursuline convent in Waterford penned books on botany and architecture for use in their school in the early nineteenth century. When the newly established Loreto Order opened its boarding school for girls in Rathfarnham on the outskirts of Dublin in 1822, it too placed great emphasis on the academic strength of its curriculum. The students were taught English, arithmetic, the ‘natural sciences’, geography, history, French, Italian, Spanish, painting and needlework. There were also masters instructing in the usual female ‘accomplishments’ including music, dancing, riding and drawing. As in Cork, the pupils took regular exams which were assessed by external examiners. The teachers also looked to French convent schools for their curriculum and pedagogical direction. Among the books authored by teachers in the school were a history of France and religious texts, some of which were translations from French originals.

the Holy Mother of God: Adapted for the Use Both of Religious Persons and Seculars, indicates that it was intended for use by the laity. The sixth edition was printed in Cork by J. O’Brien in 1853. See also Spiritual Consolation, or A Treatise on Interior Peace. Translated from the French of Père Lomber. Interspersed with Various Instructions Necessary for the Promoting the Practice of Solid Piety. Translated By the Author of the “Ursuline Manual” (Dublin: Richard Coyne, 1835); The Spirit of Prayer. A New Manual of Catholic Devotion with the Epistles and Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals Throughout the Year. By a Member of the Ursuline Community, Cork (Cork: J. O’Brien, 1850); The Catholic Offering: Counsels to the Young on Their Leaving School and Entering into the World. By a Member of the Ursuline Community, Blackrock, Cork (Dublin: James Duffy, 1859).

On Coyne see entry in DIB by C. J. Woods. See also the correspondence between Mother Borgia McCarthy and the London publisher George Keating in the Ursuline Archive, Blackrock, Cork.


New Public Images for Women:
The Educated Lady

If it is possible to discern the influence of the Enlightenment on educational developments in Ireland, can we also identify how these developments impacted on the changing public image or construction of the Irish woman? Most obviously, the expansion in girls’ education opened up the profession of teaching for women. While private tutoring or employment as a governess had been available for much of the eighteenth century to women of a certain class but with little or no family income, the role of a teacher/manager of a commercial school brought women more into the public world. They were compelled to advertise their premises in newspapers and were among the small number of women listed in urban trade directories in Belfast and Dublin. Some ran their premises in conjunction with a spouse who looked after a complementary school for boys while single or widowed women often had sisters or daughters as assistants.45

The nun as a public figure is also more in evidence during this period. In 1777, despite the resistance of their patron, Nano Nagle, the nuns in the Ursuline convent in Cork donned the full habit of their French order – a visual sign of the new image.46 And by the 1820s, the habited nun must have been a familiar figure in Irish society as the number of female religious working outside the strict rules of cloister increased. It is worth noting in this context that Mary Aikenhead and Mary Teresa Ball both had portraits of themselves dressed in their full habit, a very public display of the new Irish nun.47

As the graduates of the new education began to emerge in the early nineteenth century, the educated lay woman and the woman reader gained a new recognition, particularly in the urban communities of Belfast and Dublin. The ‘literary lady’ no longer required quite such vigorous defending as was the case in the eighteenth century. When in 1828, Isabella McCracken, niece of Mary Ann, finished her secondary education in Coleraine with laudatory comments from her teacher, she continued her reading and her studies by herself. She attended a lecture course on moral philosophy in the newly opened Belfast Institution and made extensive lecture notes. McCracken also kept a list of the books that she read which amounted to over 250 volumes in the years 1829–46. McCracken’s reading was wide-ranging

46 Entry in annals for 1777 in Ursuline Archive, Blackrock, Cork.
47 The portrait of Mary Aikenhead (1845) is by N. J. Crowley and is in St Vincent’s Hospital, Dublin. Mary Frances Ball had her portrait painted by J. P. Haverty in 1834. The original is in Rathfarnham Abbey, Dublin.
and included works on Greek and Roman history as well as the latest novels by contemporary writers. In August and September 1831, for example, McCracken noted that she had read translations of work by Diogenes Laertius, Demosthenes, Isaeus, Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle. Later in the decade her reading included more fiction. In the three years from 1837 to 1839, McCracken recorded that she had read among other works Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* and Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe.*

McCracken was also a member of the Linenhall Library, which from its foundation in 1788 admitted a small number of women, including McCracken’s aunt, Mary Ann. Other public libraries were increasingly available, at least to some women. Sydney Owenson recalled in her memoirs that when she lived as a young woman with her father in Kilkenny, she was given access to the diocesan library in the town where she ‘took the opportunity of fluttering over a quantity of genuine old Irish books; which study engendered a state for Irish antiquity, which never afterwards slumbered’. Later, the antiquarian and founding member of the Royal Irish Academy, Joseph Cooper Walker, took a scholarly interest in Owenson’s use of Irish history in her novels. He advised Owenson to consult the Academy’s library assuring her that any ‘of the members could get you access…, where you might pass two or three hours with pleasure and advantage’. The advanced study undertaken by Isabella McCracken after she left school was not unique. Antiquarian studies attracted a number of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Charlotte Brooke was the first to publish the results of her research and translation work on Irish poetry. Other women, such as the Countess of Moira, pursued their antiquarian studies in a more private fashion, but she, like the bluestocking women of the mid-eighteenth century, maintained a correspondence with a number of writers and scholars, including Walter Scott. Sydney Owenson also made use of letters to connect with scholars for advice about her historical novels although, like the Countess of Moira, she read and researched widely herself. In 1811 she began research for her novel *O’Donnell* and wrote of having being lent by a ‘good old Irishman … 20,000 volumes of old Irish books to make extracts from … I am just going to work pell mell, looking like a little conjurer, with all my blacklettered books about me.’

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50 Ibid., p. 315.

51 Ibid., p. 515. For the Countess of Moira, see Granard Papers in PRONI, T3765.
The antiquarian interests of Brooke, Owenson, Lady Moira and Maria Edgeworth were, of course, part of a wider revival of antiquarianism in late eighteenth-century Ireland. The Royal Irish Academy was established in 1782 and its founding members included the most well-known historians and antiquarians of the time. Women were not admitted as members of the Academy, although it is worth noting that among the founding members were strong supporters of women’s education. They included R. L. Edgeworth, who wrote texts on education with his daughter Maria, Daniel Beaufort whose daughters, Lucia and Harriet, were not only well educated but also later became authors of antiquarian and botanical texts and Joseph Cooper Walker, who offered practical support to Sydney Owenson and Charlotte Brooke in their antiquarian and historical research.

Charlotte Brooke famously applied for the post of housekeeper of the Academy in 1787. She withdrew her application when she realised that she did not have sufficient support among the members, one of whom advised her to seek employment as a governess. Lesa Ní Mhunghaile has, however, recently pointed out that Brooke’s application had divided the members of the Academy, many of whom were sympathetic to her and were impressed by her scholarship and knowledge of Gaelic poetry. It was members of the Academy who first suggested to Brooke that she publish a book based on her transcriptions and translations of Irish poetry and, according to Ní Mhunghaile, founding members including Walker, Charles Vallancey, Charles O’Conor and Sylvester O’Halloran all offered support and advice to Brooke when she was compiling *Reliques of Irish Poetry*. Walker and others also successfully solicited subscriptions for the publication of the volume while another member of the Academy, Daniel Beaufort, negotiated on Brooke’s behalf with booksellers. Among the 278 subscribers to *Reliques of Irish Poetry* were thirty members of the Academy. In her preface to the volume, Brooke acknowledged, in particular, the support that she received from Walker.

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55 Ní Mhunghaile, ‘Anglo-Irish Antiquarianism in County Longford in the 1780s’, pp. 245–47.
The Royal Irish Academy initiated a series of essay competitions in the early nineteenth century in which women were permitted to participate. The first woman to have her prize essay published in the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy in 1815 was Harriet Kiernan. Her contribution was entitled ‘Essay on the Influence of Fictitious History on Modern Manners’. The essay developed the familiar argument that novel-reading introduced readers to low moral standards. It concluded with a sentiment that would have received support from men like Daniel Beaufort and Joseph Cooper Walker, that the ‘youth, of both sexes’ should be given a ‘virtuous and religious education’ which would ‘enlarge and elevate the mind’. In 1828, Beaufort’s daughter, Lucia, was the second woman to have her essay published in the Transactions. Entitled ‘An Essay upon the State of Architecture and Antiquities, Previous to the Landing of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland’, the text was a wide-ranging survey of Irish antiquities and was accompanied by fifteen drawings penned by Beaufort.

Women were not elected as full members until the twentieth century, but the Academy admitted four women as honorary members before 1845. Three were women who had achieved international recognition for their research or contributions to the advancement of knowledge: Princess Ekaterina Daskova (1791), who had visited Ireland in 1779 and had been appointed Director of the Imperial Academy of Arts and Sciences and president of the Russian Academy by Empress Catherine the Great; the Scottish scientist, Mary Somerville (1834); and the British astronomer, Caroline Herschel (1838). The fourth female honorary member was Maria Edgeworth who was elected in 1842. Although this might not appear as a very impressive record, the Royal Society in London did not elect its first honorary female member until 1945. Daskova was nominated as a member of the American Philosophical

59 The authors are grateful to Siobhan Fitzpatrick, the librarian in the RIA for this information.
60 In 1781, Daskova was elected as a member of the American Philosophical Society. In 1835, Herschel and Somerville were elected honorary members of the Royal Astronomical Society. Herschel was also awarded the gold medal of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1846. See also Georgina Ferry, ‘The Exception and the Rule: Women and the Royal Society 1945–2010’, consulted online at http://rsnr.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/early/2010/06/30/rsnr.2010.0043.full (accessed 8 March 2011); Richard Holmes, ‘The Royal Society’s Lost Women Scientists’, The Observer, 21 November 2010, consulted online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/nov/21/royal-society-lost-
Society in 1789 but the next female members were not appointed to that organisation until 1869.61

There was, therefore, some recognition of the woman scholar, scientist, writer and antiquarian by the Irish intellectual elite through the Royal Irish Academy in the early nineteenth century. When Sir William Rowan Hamilton became president in 1838, he asked Maria Edgeworth for advice on how to promote the literary activities of the Academy and invited her to contribute an article on the topic for the Transactions. Edgeworth declined the invitation but she did make some suggestions to Rowan Hamilton on ways in which the Academy could take the lead in literary matters in Ireland. Among Edgeworth’s proposals was the admission of women to the evening discussions in the Academy. Her intention appears to have been to endeavour to widen out the social circle of the Academy and make its discussions available to a larger audience. As Clare O’Halloran notes, Edgeworth wrote to Rowan Hamilton that she had in mind the social events that accompanied meetings of the Royal Society in London and which helped to make science a fashionable topic of conversation in the city. Rowan Hamilton’s response to Edgeworth’s proposal revealed some of the limits of the Irish male intellectual’s attitude to the female intellectual. While admitting that the Academy ‘ungallantly’ omitted women from its activities, he listed a number of practical objections to the idea that they be admitted as visitors. There was not enough space in the Academy’s rooms to accommodate women and, as there was a waiting list for men to be admitted as members, it would not be possible to add to the numbers by permitting women to attend. Rowan Hamilton also reminded Edgeworth that the Academy was disimilar to other societies as it was also a corporation run by the members. When the Academy’s business was being discussed, the male visitors were asked to leave but Rowan Hamilton thought it would not be possible to ask the ladies to leave in the same manner.62

While Rowan Hamilton was clearly struggling to find reasons why women should not be admitted as visitors to the Academy, he did note that other learned societies in Dublin were more open to women members. Edgeworth’s suggestion was probably also prompted by the increased access that women had to public lectures and more widely to public spaces in the early nineteenth century. Women had attended public lectures in Dublin in

61 Mary Somerville was among the three women elected in 1869. The authors are grateful to Charles B. Greifenstein, Manuscripts Librarian at the American Philosophical Society for this information.

62 Clare O’Halloran, “‘Better Without the Ladies’”: The Royal Irish Academy and the Admission of Women Members’, History Ireland, 19, 6 (November/December 2011), p. 43; correspondence between Edgeworth and Rowan Hamilton, RIA MS 24 F 23.
the eighteenth century but the choice of public lectures available widened in
the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Dublin, in January 1820, for
example, there were public lectures on steam engines, metallurgy and the
ageology of Ireland. In June, ladies and gentlemen could attend lectures on
the natural history of Greenland and in August Mr Donovan advertised a
series of lectures on pharmacy in Apothecaries Hall while Edward Whyte,
son of the schoolteacher Samuel, announced his annual course of lectures at
the English and Classical Academy in Grafton Street.63 Women in Dublin
could register for conversational classes in French as well as benefitting from
a choice of dancing and riding classes. In addition, Mrs Richards offered
‘to teach an elegant and perspicacious running hand’ in four to six lessons.64
Also in January 1820, ladies and gentlemen were invited to view a number
of exhibitions in Dublin including a ‘panorama of the magnificent scenery
of the frozen regions’ in ‘Marshall’s Splendid New Pavillon’ in Lower
Abbey Street.65 In Belfast, at the same time, women could attend lectures
on a range of subjects including natural history, zoology and chemistry.
From the 1830s, the meetings of the Belfast Natural History Society were
open to women.66

At a less public level, Maria Edgeworth seems to have regretted the
absence of a literary salon in the Dublin of the 1830s. Rowan Hamilton was
clearly horrified at her suggestion that the Academy take on this role, not
least because ‘the giving or attending such soirées would … draw me off too
much from science … and private study.’ The death of the Countess of Moira
in 1807 had brought to an end the only significant salon in the city.67 Sydney
Owenson, like Maria Edgeworth, critically compared the socio-intellectual
life of Dublin with that of London. She too attempted to fill the gap with
her own salon when she and her husband moved into their house in Kildare
Street in the 1820s. Rowan Hamilton also revealed to Maria Edgeworth in
1838 that Lady Morgan had proposed a plan ‘for Dublin, by which the late
provost and I were to have had the honour of being associated with her, in
giving, all three weekly parties; but the hint was thrown away.’68 ‘The provost
in question was Bartholomew Lloyd who was also president of the Academy
and had died suddenly in 1837. Morgan’s proposal suggests that she shared

63 Freeman’s Journal, 13, 21, 28 January 1820; 9 June 1820; 2, 26 August 1820.
64 Freeman’s Journal, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20 January 1820.
65 Freeman’s Journal, 2 August 1820. See also Kevin Rockett and Emer Rockett, Magic
Lantern, Panorama and Moving Picture Shows in Ireland, 1786–1909 (Dublin: Four
66 Townsend, ‘The Intellectual and Cultural Interests of Women in Ireland, c.1740–
67 DIB entry on Elizabeth Hastings, Countess of Moira, by Rosemary Richey.
68 RIA MS F 23 3, Sir William Rowan Hamilton to Maria Edgeworth, 12 January 1838.
Edgeworth’s vision of a meeting of intellectual men with like-minded women in a social setting.

The Public Image of the Woman Writer

Edgeworth and Owenson were, of course two of the most well-known women of their generation. The editors of *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* noted the increase in the number of published female authors in the forty years from 1780 to 1820 and the corresponding decrease in the use of pseudonyms by women writers. The woman writer had become an acceptable social figure. Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson each constructed a public image as an Irish woman writer although they differed in their emphasis and presentation.

Maria Edgeworth’s first novel, *Castle Rackrent*, appeared in 1800 and was followed by a series of novels over the next twelve years which established Edgeworth’s reputation as one of the outstanding novelists of her time. Apart from her novels, Edgeworth wrote didactic texts on education and the rearing of children and her first published work, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1798), supported the notion of the educated woman. Her last novel, *Helen*, also presented a strong argument in favour of women’s education.

Following her father’s death in 1817, Edgeworth developed a ‘literary social presence’ in London. She had a wide circle of literary acquaintances including Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth who visited her in her home in Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford. Edgeworth also engaged with the public world of literary discourse as her work was reviewed, mostly favourably, in the most prominent periodicals of early nineteenth-century Britain. As she gained a public reputation as a writer, she created a role as a literary patron, offering advice and support to other writers, particularly women. Although Edgeworth was from a landed Anglo-Irish background, she dealt with her publishers in a professional manner and astutely negotiated the terms of her contracts. According to W. J. McCormack, she was ‘the most commercially successful novelist of her age’.

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69 Rolf Loeber et al., *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. lxiii. A similar trend is noted for women poets by Anne Coleman, *A Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Irish Women Poets* (Galway: Kenny’s Bookshop, 1996). The majority of the published Irish women poets of the nineteenth century were born after 1830 and did not begin their publishing careers until the late 1840s or later. Only a small number established a public reputation in the early decades of the century.

70 See *ODNB* entry by W. J. McCormack and the *DIB* entry by Edwina Keown.

Edgeworth cultivated an image of a ‘literary lady’ who engaged with the literary worlds of London and to a lesser extent of Dublin and Ireland. Her public image was similar to that of the English bluestocking women and her correspondence with Rowan Hamilton suggests that she would have liked to have emulated the London salons of the group in Dublin. Many of Edgeworth’s publications fitted into the socially conservative agenda of the bluestocking women. Edgeworth baulked at the idea of being described as a writer of novels, preferring to refer to her novel Belinda as a ‘moral tale’ rather than a novel because ‘so much folly, error and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination.’ Edgeworth’s Letters for Literary Ladies also rehearsed much of the discussion on women’s education that would have been familiar to women writers linked to the bluestocking movement. Like More’s Strictures on Modern Education, the two-volume Practical Education that Edgeworth wrote with her father, Richard Love Edgeworth, critiqued Rousseau’s theories on the education of children.

Sydney Owenson’s public image as an Irish woman writer was in sharp contrast to that of Edgeworth. Unlike the latter, Owenson embraced the idea of being designated as an Irish novelist and she hoped to emulate the commercial success of English women novelists such as Fanny Burney. Owenson, however, also looked to French women writers for suitable models. She was particularly taken by Germaine De Staël, whose public image as a writer of French national stories Owenson tried to adapt to an Irish setting.

Owenson’s third novel, The Wild Irish Girl, was a commercial success. Seven editions appeared within a two-year period from 1805 to 1807. The novel confirmed Owenson’s public image as the Irish woman novelist. As

72 Cited in ODNB entry by W. J. McCormack.
Julia Donovan has detailed, Owenson fostered her public identification with the main female character in the novel, Glorvina, a well-read young Irish woman who was also an accomplished harpist, singer and dancer. Owenson ‘acted out the role of Glorvina in her own life signing off on her letters as “Glorvina” and attending parties where she donned ancient Celtic costume’. The wild Irish girl, and the image that it created, was so popular that shopkeepers in Dublin advertised ‘Glorvina’ mantles and scarlet cloaks while fashionable women wore Glorvina bodkins.

Owenson and Edgeworth also in different ways espoused the right of women to literature and engaged with the emerging feminist writings. In the writings of both authors, women were usually the central characters. Owenson more consciously than Edgeworth related her writing to early European feminism. Her novel, *Woman, or Ida of Athens* which was published in 1809 was inspired by de Staël’s *Corine ou l’Italie* (1807). Owenson’s stated aim in the novel was ‘to delineate the character of woman in the perfection of its natural state’. This theme was developed further in Owenson’s last book, *Woman and her Master* which argued that men and women had complementary characteristics but that of superior intelligence was allotted to women.

Edgeworth and Owenson both cultivated public profiles as writers in different ways. Other women authors were more hesitant about emerging into the public world of print. The Quaker Mary Leadbeater was fifty years of age before she published a book of poetry in her own name in 1808, although she had been writing since she was a teenager. As Nini Rodgers suggests, it is likely that Leadbeater circulated her poems and extracts from her journal among family and friends long before she became a published author. Between 1811 and 1823, Leadbeater published a series of books in dialogue format that provide advice on household management and virtuous behaviour to Irish peasants. The first, *Cottage Dialogues* was a commercial success with four editions appearing between 1811 and 1813. Leadbeater’s fame as a woman writer was, however, posthumous and

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77 Julie Donovan, *Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan and the Politics of Style*, p. 3.
78 Ibid., p. 72.
79 It was published in London by Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme.
82 Leadbeater’s first volume of poetry: *Extracts and Original Anecdotes for the Improvement of Youth* had been published anonymously in 1794 (Dublin: R. M. Jackson).
developed following the publication of her ‘Annals of Ballitore’ by her niece, Elizabeth Shackleton.84

Another woman who, like Leadbeater, slowly emerged as a public writer was Anna Doyle Wheeler. Born in County Tipperary in 1785, Wheeler was privately educated and by her teenage years was reading widely in French philosophy and political thought. According to her daughter, Rosina, Doyle Wheeler ‘tainted by the ... poison of Mrs Wollstonecraft’s book supported the French Revolution’.85 Following her separation from her husband, Doyle Wheeler lived in France for some time and befriended social reformers there. She also became a close friend to Irishman William Thompson and collaborated with him when he authored *An Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* which appeared in 1825. Thompson acknowledged in an introductory letter to the text that he had been strongly influenced by his discussions with Doyle Wheeler on the status of women. The *Appeal* fused together the demands of eighteenth-century writers for the better education for women with the call of British and French radical writers for institutional reform of church and state. It was not, however, until the late 1820s that Wheeler developed an independent public profile through public lectures in London on women's rights.86

The Philanthropic Woman and Protestant Evangelicalism

Despite the women writers’ championing of women as heroines and intellectuals, a far more acceptable public role for women remained that of the philanthropist and carer of the poor, particularly indigent women and children. As David Garrioch has argued, ‘philanthropy was central to the Enlightenment’s definition of itself. Those two key elements of behaviour that were such central characteristics of the enlightened individual, sensibility and sociability, were both inextricably linked with philanthropy.’87 English historians have documented the extent to which evangelical Protestantism created a new public role for wealthy women in the middle decades of the

84 The Leadbeater Papers. The Annals of Ballitore With a Memoir of the Author (2 vols; London: Bell and Daldy, 1862). See also entry in *DIB* by Maureen E Mulvihill.


eighteenth century. Some, like Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, had links with women in Ireland and were the means through which a small network of Irish women became enthusiastic supporters of evangelical religion.\(^8\) As with their English counterparts, women from landed families established small charitable projects on their family estates while others developed a more public profile through their involvement in projects that had the support of the Irish parliament.\(^8\) In the 1790s, *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine* presented the wealthy woman philanthropist as an ideal public role model for other women as it published as its frontispiece engravings of Irish women associated with charity work. In March 1794, for example, the magazine printed an engraving of Lady Fitzgibbon, the wife of the Lord Chancellor, seated at a spinning wheel alongside a text that praised her public and private work for the indigent.\(^9\) In February 1796, the cover engraving was of Elizabeth Latouche who had a public profile as a supporter of charity projects, particularly on her family estate at Delgany.\(^9\)

The expansion of Protestant missionary work in the first half of the nineteenth century also extended the public work of women as they joined a myriad of voluntary organisations contributing to Sunday school teaching, the temperance movement and evangelical societies distributing bibles and other religious tracts. As David Hempton and Myrtle Hill note, ‘women gave their time, commitment and local knowledge to the furtherance of these causes, and the result was a growing professionalism and a considerable broadening of physical and spiritual horizons.’\(^9\)

The opening of public space to the woman philanthropist led indirectly to a widening of women’s participation in Irish political life. The consumer market and, more particularly, the country of origin of manufactured goods were inextricably linked to the demand for parliamentary reform and projects to improve the Irish economy. In public discourse, commentators linked the wealthy woman consumer of Parisian fashions and other imported luxury goods with Irish poverty. From the middle decades of the eighteenth century, aristocratic women associated with the court at Dublin Castle constructed a more positive image of the woman consumer


\(^9\) *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine*, March 1794.

\(^9\) *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine*, February 1796.

who rejected foreign manufactured goods in favour of buying Irish. The prototype of the virtuous woman consumer was enhanced in the 1770s when Irish women were urged to imitate the ‘American ladies’ who had led the boycott against the purchase of imported British goods. The woman consumer who shunned the latest imported fashions in favour of often less flattering home-manufactured clothes was a politically important construct that prevailed into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{93}

The Catholic Lay Woman and Irish Patriotism

The Protestant evangelical woman pioneered the role of the publicly active woman in Ireland. Gradually, however, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Catholic lay women also began to emerge into the public sphere as sponsors of schools, orphanages and other institutions for the poor. The trend began in urban centres where women, such as Nano Nagle and Teresa Mulally, became involved in teaching poor children.\textsuperscript{94}

Like her Protestant counterpart, the Catholic lay woman frequently entered the public sphere as a fund-raiser. In the 1760s, Teresa Mulally, for example, pioneered a fund-raising scheme in the parish where her school was based. The format of the account established by Mulally allowed for subscriptions to be paid on a weekly, monthly, quarterly or annual basis. This enabled Mulally to look for contributions from parishioners from varied economic backgrounds: from wealthy Catholic families as well as from women traders in inner-city Dublin.\textsuperscript{95}

The role of the Catholic lay woman as fund-raiser was enhanced in the early decades of the nineteenth century as more Catholic charitable institutions were established. Newspapers such as the \textit{Freeman’s Journal} also began to list the donors, male and female, who had contributed to particular funds.\textsuperscript{96} The egalitarian parish-based funding scheme that


\textsuperscript{94} See entry by Noreen Giffney on Nagle in \textit{DIB}. See also \textit{ODNB} entry by Rosemary Raughter, and T. J. Walsh, \textit{Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters} (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1959).


\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Freeman’s Journal} regularly printed notices of Catholic charities in which women were
Mulally used was also adapted by the Catholic Association founded by Daniel O’Connell in 1824. Although women were not admitted as members of the Association, there were no gender restrictions on the collection of the Association’s Catholic Rent and contributions from women were welcome from the start. The Association also encouraged women to form separate female committees locally to contribute to a ‘Ladies’ Catholic Rent’. A clever method of encouraging donations was to follow the model of the charity organisations and print the names of those who made the largest donations in the newspapers. Newspapers that were supportive of O’Connell, such as the Freeman’s Journal and The Pilot, published long lists of individual donations including those made by women. Although most contributions came from well-off business and merchant families, the published lists also included donations made by household servants. The Catholic Association thus, perhaps unintentionally, drew more Irish women of all economic classes into the public sphere. Among the papers of the Catholic Association in the Dublin Diocesan Library is an undated printed address to the ladies of the County Dublin parishes of Rathfarnham, Bohernabreena and Swords, urging them to contribute to this fund. Nineteen women are listed as donors, including two female servants. It is the earliest known Irish political circular specifically addressed to women and is striking evidence of the way in which fund-raising for the Catholic Association widened women’s political involvement.

It is impossible to assess the exact contribution of women to the Catholic Rent but a statistical analysis of the printed names suggests that women represented between ten and fifteen per cent of the total.

In addition to fund-raising, large numbers of women attended the public meetings of the Catholic Association. The gallery in meeting places (which was often the local Catholic church) was reserved for women attendees.

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98 Initially, donations of ten shillings or over were listed but over time the names of those who made smaller subscriptions were also printed.

99 See, for example, Freeman’s Journal, August 1828; The Pilot, 5 December 1828.

100 Papers of the Catholic Association, Dublin Diocesan Library.

101 See, for example, The Times, 25 October 1828; Thomas Wyse, Historical Sketch of the
As one report of the Leinster provincial meeting in a Kilkenny chapel in 1828 noted, ‘there were women without end in the gallery.’ A separate female space was also regularly provided at the dinners organised by the Association following the major town rallies.

The leadership of the Catholic Association sanctioned the public participation of women in its campaign for a number of reasons. Firstly, and perhaps, most importantly, it recognised the value of women as fund-raisers. Secondly, in his speeches, O’Connell presented the movement that he led as more than a political organisation. It represented the moral force of the Irish people, which included men, women and children. The visible presence of women at the meetings of the Catholic Association endorsed that view. There was also a significant charitable dimension to the Catholic Association which facilitated the involvement of women. The funds accumulated through the rent were managed like a charity and used for a variety of philanthropic causes. The Association, for example, sponsored schools for the poor as well as a ‘seminary for young Catholic girls’ and made regular donations to the Catholic Book Society formed to disseminate Catholic texts among the poor. Thus the work that the women did on behalf of the Association could be presented as philanthropic rather than as involvement in a political organisation that might be perceived as men’s business.

A third reason why women were welcome as supporters of the Catholic Association relates to the influence of British radicalism on the political ideas of Daniel O’Connell. Like other radicals, O’Connell had voiced his support in theory for the equality of men and women. As a young law student in London in 1796, he had read Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). He noted in his journal his concurrence with Wollstonecraft’s views on the status of women but that he had not yet decided ‘what portion of power in the government of the world ought to be entrusted to the female

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Like many of his contemporaries, O’Connell’s views on women were rooted in his belief in the special characteristics of what he referred to as the ‘better and softer sex’. In one of his longest speeches on female qualities, O’Connell spoke of his own relatives: his granddaughters, daughters, mother and his late wife in affectionate terms that stressed their familiar rather than their public role. Women, he claimed, had ‘a purity which stripped them of vice, and made celestial all the tender affections which so peculiarly belong to them. Oh, they watched over our childhood – soothed the cares of youth and the sorrows of manhood – cheered and supported old age, and even smoothed the dreary path which leads to the grave.’

The particular characteristics that O’Connell associated with women did not preclude their participation in public life. In fact, O’Connell’s utilisation of moral force as a political instrument could be said to have enhanced women’s political role. A good example of this is O’Connell’s defence of women’s right to petition parliament for the abolition of slavery in terms which stressed their moral authority: ‘if ever the female had the right to interfere, it was upon that occasion.’ O’Connell also argued that the strength of the anti-slavery movement lay in the fact that it was a ‘complete expression of public opinion.… [The petitions] were signed by persons in every grade, and of every age, and of every class; and both sexes united in demanding, that slavery should be put to an end.’ O’Connell used very similar rhetoric in Ireland. Like the anti-slavery movement, he argued that Catholic Emancipation was a morally just demand and that the campaign to

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107 The Times, 25 November 1841. See also his acknowledgement of the address from women in Kilkenny in October 1840 (Freeman’s Journal, 16 October 1840).


achieve it transcended quotidian politics, which made it an appropriate cause for women to support. Nonetheless, O’Connell did not endorse women’s participation in more routine political affairs.

The ambiguity of O’Connell’s attitude to women in the public sphere was evident during the 1840s campaign to repeal the Act of Union. In some ways, women’s role in the Loyal National Repeal Association (LNRA), founded by O’Connell in April 1840, represented an advance on their work for the Catholic Association.110 Women were once again valued as fund-raisers and, as before, the names of subscribers and collectors of large sums of money were published in the newspapers.111 Unlike in the earlier campaign, however, women were admitted as members of the LNRA and were permitted to sit in the main hall as well as in the gallery.112

Two months after the establishment of the LNRA, the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London met in London in June 1840. The British organisers of the convention objected to the presence of women among the American delegates but O’Connell famously defended the right of the women to attend. He repeated his belief that the ‘mind has no sex’ and after some initial hesitation, wrote in favour of the women delegates being admitted to an ‘equal share and right of discussion’.113 O’Connell was, however, careful to guard against establishing any more general rights for women that might be applied in England or in his own organisations in Ireland. He pointed out that the customs concerning the status of women at public meetings in England and North America were different. While in England women did not sit on the platform, they did do so in the United States and, therefore, the London convention should respect this practice.114

O’Connell was uncharacteristically silent on Ireland in his letter to the American women, perhaps because he was aware that women in Ireland had

110 Mary Ray, the daughter of the secretary of the Association, was the first woman to recruit twenty Repealers and she was enrolled as the first female member of the Association (see Freeman’s Journal, 5 January 1841). The authors are grateful to Dr Jackie Hill for this reference.

111 Based on a selective analysis of names listed in Freeman’s Journal.

112 Freeman’s Journal, 2 October 1840.


taken a more prominent role in political agitation than they had in England. The debate on the American delegation at the anti-slavery convention had, however, revealed the level of opposition to women’s engagement with public agitation in England. It may have been for this reason that O’Connell thought it necessary to set limits to the involvement of women in the Repeal campaign. In December 1840, he asserted that while women were welcome to attend meetings of the LNRA, it was a breach of rules to address them directly from the platform: ‘although we are most happy in being cheered and honoured by their presence amongst us, still they are not considered to be present.’

The involvement of women in the public world of politics was not a new development in the 1820s. Women from all social backgrounds had participated in a variety of ways in Irish political life since the 1770s. What was new in the 1820s, however, was the incremental rise in the number of women who participated in public and often overtly political events. It is not possible to estimate precisely the numbers of women who were engaged in various ways in O’Connell’s campaigns, but given the widespread popularity of the campaigns led by O’Connell it must have involved hundreds of thousands of women. Even those who could not read could participate in the political debate, as measures were taken in the 1820s and again in the 1840s for public readings of the proceedings of the Dublin meetings.

If a more intense politicisation of women can be detected in Ireland during the O’Connellite era, to what extent is this manifest in the views expressed by women? Although it is possible to explain the participation of women in the Catholic Association as an extension of their involvement in charity organisations, it is clear from the statements of the women that they were politically aware and knowledgeable about the specific demands of the Catholic Emancipation and Repeal campaigns. The letters that accompanied the group subscriptions sent in by women usually included an explicit identification of the women with the political causes of Emancipation and Repeal and the absence of any apology for their participation, as women, in public affairs. In one of the earliest printed letters in 1824, Emily McNevin, on behalf of a group of women in Loughrea, wrote of her ‘enthusiastic zeal for civil and religious liberty’ and explained that O’Connell had convinced her and the other women that ‘our cause is the cause of justice’. In 1840, other women defended their support for repeal of the union through reference...

115 Freeman’s Journal, 22 December 1840.  
116 See O’Dowd, A History of Women in Ireland, 1500–1800, pp. 43–70.  
117 See the painting by George Mulvany entitled Reading the Nation. Prominent in the picture of a group of people listening to the reading of the newspaper are two young women.  
118 The Times, 31 December 1824.
to Irish history and the role of women in it. The women in Limerick, for example, recalled ‘the noble example shown by the women of Limerick in 1691’ while in Kilkenny it was noted that in ‘the struggle for national independence the women were not inactive’. The latter group also justified their involvement in political affairs by recalling that ‘it was one of our sex who brought the tyrant upon Erin’s green valleys; it is, therefore, the more specially our duty to tender our humble aid to burst the tyrant chain’.119

In October 1840, O’Connell visited the Ursuline Convent in Waterford city where an address was read to him by one of the girls. It asserted unequivocally the identification of the convent girls with the cause of Repeal: ‘We are all Repealers here. Are we not? Yes; a thousand times yes. We are devoted to you, and unworthy of the high name of Irish girls would we be could any power on earth make us flinch from your standard…’120 Like the Irish history taught at the Cork convent, the French model of an Ursuline education was being adopted to suit the circumstances in Ireland in the 1840s.

**Conclusion**

The historiography on the history of women in Ireland traditionally identifies the last decades of the nineteenth century as a time of advancement for women in intellectual and political life.121 Yet, in the fifty years before the Great Famine, the figures for female literacy grew rapidly, more women received a structured education and it became respectable for women to hold strong political views and express those views in public venues. In some respects, it could be argued that women were freer to participate in mainstream political movements in the pre-Famine period than they were later in the century. O’Connell may have set limits to women’s participation in the Repeal movement in later years, but he never banned women from attending public meetings as the Irish Parliamentary Party was to do in the early twentieth century. Political rhetoric in the early nineteenth century encouraged women to become involved in political campaigning, but at the end of the century it was concerned to set limits to female engagement

119 *Freeman’s Journal*, 16 October 1840. This was a reference to Derbfhorgaill (c.1108–93), queen-consort of Bréifne who allegedly eloped with Diarmait Mac Murchada, the Leinster lord who was believed to be responsible for bringing the first Norman soldiers to Ireland. See the entry by Máire Ni Mhaonaigh in DIB.

120 *Freeman’s Journal*, 31 October 1840.

with public life. The advancements made by women in the first half of the nineteenth century are documented in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, which charts a two-fold increase in entries between 1800 and 1850 as women philanthropists, foundresses of religious community, educators, writers, artists, antiquarians and scholars gained public recognition and respectability.

There was a class dimension to the public advancement of women at this time. The women who appeared in publicly visible roles were nearly all from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, although their religious affiliation was clearly more diverse. Women in rural Ireland, particularly among the small tenant and labouring classes had neither the leisure nor the means to read books and newspapers. The O'Connellite campaigns were strongest, particularly among female supporters, in the towns and cities. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that education only made an impact on the lives of middle- and upper-class women. The acquisition of literacy skills through private and state-funded schools widened the employment opportunities of young rural as well as urban women and gave them a means through which to exercise some control over their lives. Kerby Miller et al have pointed to the ‘strong positive correlation between literacy and emigration’ and the rise in female emigration as more women learnt to read and write. Young women in the early decades of the nineteenth century could read for themselves the literate culture associated with emigration in the form of letters, shipping advertisements as well as newspaper reports on the new world. As, the next section makes clear, the single Irish female emigrant represented a significant proportion of the Irish-American community in the 1820s and 1830s. Literacy, female agency and emigration are thus inextricably linked.

There is little tangible evidence that Irish women believed that women were treated more equitably in North America than they were in Ireland. The second section in this volume indicates, however, that many had absorbed the popular view of America as a land of liberty and freedom and, by osmosis, the rhetoric associated with the proto-feminism of Enlightenment thought. When women wrote of their desire to travel to the land of ‘happiness’ and of ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’, they were, although they may not have known it, revealing the influence of the Enlightenment on their use of language and, by extension, their mode of thought.

