Modernism
5
Producers and Consumers
of Popular Culture, 1900–60

Introduction

The last two sections have been informed by the empiricist approach of the historian and they focused on the process of cultural transfer during two defining historical junctures. By contrast, this section uses the methodology of the literary and cultural scholar to engage in analysis of women’s engagement with the cultural movement referred to as ‘modernism’ and with the popular cultural forms produced and read by women. Combining cultural history and textual analysis, it examines the role of women as cultural producers and consumers and the popularity and marketing of Irish women’s writing in the USA.

Traditional literary histories identify two main trends in Irish culture in this period. Avant garde modernism, often but not always conducted in exile, dominates the literary landscape in retrospect in the figures of James Joyce, W. B. Yeats and, eventually, Samuel Beckett. This manifestation of the avant garde which has become a touchstone of Irish cultural achievement in the twenty-first century was very much at odds with the mainstream of Irish culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Where the mainstream was aware of it, it tended to dislike and frequently censor it. In contrast to this experimental and internationalist modernism, critical histories and anthologies have identified a muted, saddened realism as the predominant tone of this period, particularly in the Irish Free State and later the Republic. This construction of cultural and literary history has been challenged in the early twenty-first century from across the spectrum of critical practices.1

As chapter four demonstrated, the influence of consumer culture was often denounced as an attack on national and religious identity, and the attractions of consumerism and modernity were rightly, if imperfectly, understood as powerful factors in female emigration. Despite this, as the analysis of the advertising campaigns for rural electrification has shown, the state itself participated in and promulgated the discourses of consumerism and modern advertising to achieve certain goals. In short, there were considerable inconsistencies and tensions in the hegemony of Catholic nationalism. This period was characterised by a conservative backlash against the forces of social change which had been gaining force since the 1890s. Sexual conservatism, religious orthodoxy, censorship and very high levels of institutionalisation and abuse of those who deviated from rigidly enforced social norms are rightly identified as mainstream in Irish state and society during this period. However, it is important to recognise the persistence of spaces of cultural and sexual dissidence and of occasional political resistance to this resurgent conservatism. The characterisation of these spaces as the preserve of a social elite dramatically simplifies the class politics of culture in the period. Bourgeois women did have privileged access to education, especially second- and increasingly third-level education, greater leisure and mobility, all of them factors in their ability to become cultural producers as writers, dramatists, theatre directors and artists. Women without such resources had, as the previous two sections have demonstrated, social and cultural ambitions and challenges of their own. The relationship between working-class women who challenged social and sexual norms and middle-class women who challenged cultural hegemonies was often characterised by misunderstanding and patronising attitudes.

Brigid McCarthy, author of the groundbreaking *The Female Pen*, expressed concern in an article in 1946 about the impact of Hollywood cinema on ‘Dublin shop-girls’ who assumed that the world on screen, where New York typists wore Schiaparelli evening gowns and lived in glamorous Manhattan apartments, was the world to which they were emigrating.\(^2\) McCarthy was not simply being patronising. Her concern at the way in which Hollywood shaped feminine desire and aspiration and seamlessly fed social dissatisfaction into consumerist aspiration in many ways prefigures the first wave of feminist criticism of popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s. In the context of the 1940s, it also aligned McCarthy with the

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prestigious project of cultural nationalism. Such alignment continued to offer women a route to literary esteem and public participation, as it had done since the eighteenth century (see chapter one), almost always with the proviso that issues of gender were subordinated to those of national importance.

In recent years, a more complex understanding of the processes of cultural negotiation and exchange has replaced the implicit middle-class feminist viewpoint in McCarthy’s concern about the Dublin shop-girls, that working-class girls were simply dupes who ideally could be educated out of their misdirected desires and ideals. The dreams of shop-girls in the cinematic darkness were surprisingly resistant to the regulatory forces which sought to reform them on religious or national principles. Female emigration continued and female migration from rural to urban life escalated, even as the ideal of the contented rural maiden or mother was ever more stridently articulated by church and state in the period from the early 1920s to the late 1950s. Dissent was not a preserve of those classes or persons with access to highly esteemed cultural forms such as the theatre and literary fiction. Traces of the process of cultural excorporation, where those without such access make do and re-make meaning from the forms of mass entertainment available to them, is evident in the cultural lives of ordinary Irish women throughout this period, in the endless condemnation of their adoption of the signifiers of modern womanhood, such as make-up and fashionable dress and the assumptions of advertisers regarding their appetite for such modernity (see chapter four). Miriam Hansen has argued that

We must not forget that these films, along with other mass-cultural exports, were consumed in locally quite specific, and unequally developed, contexts and conditions or that they not only had a levelling impact on indigenous cultures but also challenged prevailing social and sexual arrangements and advanced new possibilities of social identity and cultural styles; and that the films were also changed in that process.

Since Miriam Hansen’s article in 1999, the term ‘vernacular modernism’ has been adapted and reconfigured in film studies, architectural history, folklore, jazz studies and more recently literary studies. Common to all

5 Ibid., pp. 59–77.
these disciplines has been a questioning of the old polarity of modernism and mass culture to suggest a much more fluid relationship between the two. This opens up a productive framework for understanding Irish cultural practices in the period, particularly as it undermines any opposition between the local and global, authentic and alienated, identity and universality. Vernacular modernism offers a way of understanding the quotidian cultural life of Dublin in the first half of the twentieth century, which is true to the sources and makes sense of the distance between everyday culture, in the Raymond Williams sense, and both official culture in the form of Catholic nationalism and the received understanding of literary history.

In the US context, Brooks E. Hefner has built on previous work on jazz as a mode of vernacular modernism to argue for the term’s application to popular genre fiction and ‘ethnic’ literatures. This willingness to read popular texts as part of an aesthetic, political and historical continuum with the modernist experiment is particularly useful when applied in the Irish context, where popular and high culture was subject to equal vigilance from the regulatory forces of church, state and communities united in defense of respectability and ‘purity’. Perhaps more significant than all the regulation and disapproval is the fact that Hollywood films were imported, occasionally hacked to bits by censors, but avidly watched, as described in chapter four. Popular fiction was the subject of similar constraints and popularity and it was avidly written as well as read. The lens of gender puts the role of cinema spectatorship and reading as sites of negotiation of gender roles into focus as an important counterweight to the dominant ideology of church and state. The latter were increasingly uneasy with the patterns of cultural consumption of the masses in this period.

**The appeal of American culture: Melodrama and censorship**

The persistent attraction of emigration for young women and the role of American popular culture and consumer goods in this process has been demonstrated in chapters three and four. The appetite for American popular culture in Ireland was a complex process of cultural exchange, which benefits enormously from Hansen’s understanding of it in terms of ‘modernity’s liberatory impulses’, but also gives specific insight into the more conservative impulses which America also exported, sometimes in

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6 See Maken Umbach and Bernd Huppauf (eds), *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalisation and the Built Environment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) for an exposition of these themes from the point of view of architectural history.


the same films, plays and novels. While official Ireland, in the form of the Catholic Church hierarchy, state commentators and censors, may have deplored it as a craving for foreign, lower-class culture, American fiction and film were immensely popular with Irish readers and film-goers. In the case of fiction, this was not necessarily motivated by deviation from church-prescribed norms. The popularity of American pastoral romance and idealised tales of the antebellum South in Irish libraries may have been influenced by conservative, Catholic Irish-America as well as the success of *Gone With the Wind*. The conflict which this film precipitated between the Irish film censor and the unpopular US Minister, David Gray, is as indicative of US attitudes to the film and its promulgation of a particular construction of American identity and history as of Irish ones to women and the body. Presented with the film for classification in May 1940, James Montgomery, film censor, got busy with his scissors and a prolonged negotiation began with film studios Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) through the film’s distributor in Ireland. This culminated in a rare official intervention on 22 August:

> I had a visit to-day from His Excellency the USA Minister. He showed me a memo commenting on my cuts, and making various concessions and requests. Most of the concessions have already been agreed upon between Mr Neville [MGM] and myself. There are others where I cannot give way. It should be remembered that only one certificate is issued here – and without reducing a film to a nursery standard – family entertainment is the objective of the censorship. An ‘A’ certificate has never been granted.

At the end of this process, Irish audiences were still debarred from seeing the full scene where Rhett carries Scarlett off to bed until 1968. However, the censor appears to have been at the least as preoccupied with the representation of childbirth and the avoidance of pregnancy as with sexuality. He was particularly outraged by Scarlett’s explicit avoidance of a second pregnancy in the film, but also with the representation of her delivery of Melanie’s baby. Montgomery’s notes from May 1940 specify cuts to almost all references to childbirth, even to what he refers to as ‘midwifery requisites’, presumably the hot water, twine, scissors and towels Scarlett requests when she has to deliver Melanie’s baby. Montgomery specified cuts reel by reel, with a record of the distributor’s response in parenthesis:

Reel 4B: midwifery requisites (they offer to give way). Reel 5A: Birth (must come out). Reel 8B: (1) Offers herself (must come out). (2) Speaks of her debasing offer (?). (3) Yankee insults (They agree to this). Reel 9B: Deal with this attempted rape, particularly the C[lose] U[p] of the rough’s face (They agree). Reel 10B: Three passionate and prolonged kisses (They agree). Can-can (out agreed). Reel 11A: About babies and figure (?). Reel 12A: Carries her to bed (modified). Reel 12B: (1) Children (modified). (2) Children (modified).

After the US Minister’s intervention there are some concessions, but Montgomery records his response as ‘I cannot allow Scarlett’s declaration of birth control.’ Montgomery’s continued objection to the scene for which the film is now best remembered continued this preoccupation with Scarlett’s body in terms of its maternal (or non-maternal) function:

This may be of great importance, but it is a scene of strong sexual passion. The tyranny of continuity would almost demand the act of conception to be screened. Why not allow imagination a chance? M.G.M. suggest cutting the kiss and have him simply go over to her and pick her up, and carry her upstairs. The script reads ‘They disappear in darkness at the top of the stairs’. I am prepared to reconsider this cut, and to see it as suggested, but they must ‘disappear in darkness’ and Rhett’s remark must come out.

Following his intervention, the US Minister returned to the censor’s office on 15 September for a reshow.11 Despite concessions, Montgomery still insisted on substantial cuts and Irish cinema goers remained protected from references to hot water and towels. The incident indicates the function of censorship in maintaining the monopoly of Catholic concepts in relation to contraception and the maternal.

In this context it is unsurprising that film melodrama, with its emphasis on sexual and familial narratives, should have caused particular unease. The genre was accurately enough described as ‘women’s films’ and classic Hollywood melodrama had a very strong preoccupation with maternal narrative.12 This, and the influence of MGM, may explain the American Minister’s investment in it as an aspect of American identity. Gone With the Wind flatters Irish sensibilities in making Irish-American characters

11 Ibid.
12 See, for example, Christine Gledhill (ed.), Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women’s Film (London: British Film Institute, 1987) and E. Anne Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
central in a myth of American origins which rewrites history, obscuring the
guilt of slavery and the legacy of racism by displacing racial relations into
the domestic scenes. The Irish, unlike the slaves, are part of the American
family in the film. For the Irish film censor, however, the relationship
between the maternal and the sexual at the heart of the melodrama
seems to have been so powerfully repugnant that it obscured all else. The
extraordinary impact of Gone With the Wind derived from combining the
feminine form of melodrama with an American national epic. The negation
and invisibility of the female body, the power literally to cut it out of the
picture, was a matter of national sovereignty in the Irish context. Despite
this, the appetite of Irish women for such ‘women’s pictures’, romantic
novels and domestic sagas had always been high and demand for popular
fiction in Irish libraries indicates a strong level of interest in British and
American titles throughout the period.\(^\text{13}\)

**Cultural Exchange:**
**Irish Women Writing for Export**

*Nineteenth-century precedents: L. T. Meade and Charlotte Riddell*

While the importation of English and American popular culture orientated
towards women as readers and viewers caused such unease in Ireland, Irish
cultural production also found an audience in the USA, particularly in the
area of women’s fiction. Irish women writers had been extremely successful
internationally in the nineteenth century in popular genres such as mystery,
ghost stories and children’s fiction, as well as in domestic and romantic
narratives. L. T. Meade, who published almost 300 novels between 1866
and 1914, established the girl’s school story. ‘In 1898 Girl’s Realm readers
nominated her as their favourite author.’\(^\text{14}\) As Susan Cahill has analysed,
Meade frequently put stories of ‘wild’, out of place, Irish girls at the heart
of this very English genre and the prevalence of her books in advertising,
publishers’ lists and as school prizes indicated there was very strong
demand for this narrative formula. Having moved from Cork to London
in 1874, Meade became an influential figure in children’s literature, editing
Atalanta, a magazine aimed at girls and young women from 1887 to 1898.
She tended to take a progressive view on gender issues and was a member
of the feminist Pioneer Club.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) See chapter four above.

\(^{14}\) Susan Cahill, ‘Irish Women Writers of Children’s Literature, 1870–1940’ (UCD Irish
handle.net/10197/2486.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Antrim woman and influential periodical editor, Charlotte Riddell, who wrote a mere fifty books, is not as widely recognised as establishing the literary genre of the mystery and ghost story as are her male contemporaries Sheridan Le Fanu and M. R. James. However, at least one of her stories is always in print, usually ‘Hertford O’Donnell’s Warning’ (also known as ‘The Banshee’s Warning’), a tale of an Irish doctor who has emigrated to London and who hears the family banshee cry for the young patient whom he does not realise is his own abandoned illegitimate son.16 Riddell was also an influential editor of women’s serial fiction, taking over the editorship of *St James Magazine* in London from another Irish woman, Mrs S. C. Hall, in 1868. Riddell is now widely credited with making the world of business a respectable topic for fiction and making business people, like George Geith in *George Geith of Geith’s Court*, acceptable as main protagonists in fiction.17 This middle-class preoccupation with the professional class, whether haunted Irish doctors or secretly married businessmen, is rather at odds with the general characterisation of Irish fiction in this period as preoccupied with the worlds of landlords and peasantry. Riddell’s stories of characters who were geographically, economically and socially mobile, but ultimately tied to the past they sought to escape, resonated in an age of mass urbanisation. In effect, her Irish characters in London merely endured an intensification of a more general condition of nineteenth-century, middle-class life.

The association of Irishness with access to a world of storytelling, natural and supernatural, is one which was consolidated in this period and remains an important part of the marketing of Irish fiction internationally in the twenty-first century. The ‘wild Irish girl’ was a recurrent character in popular fiction from inside and outside Ireland. This representation of the Irish woman as close to nature, wilful, but attractive, even glamorous, was often completely at odds with the political project of Sydney Owenson’s original 1806 novel of that name. However, Owenson’s shrewd manipulation of media stereotypes and her self-publicising capacity to play the part of the wild Irish girl beyond the pages of her book was one which was successfully repeated (see chapter one). The image of the charming Irish lady of letters was promoted in conjunction with the ladies’ fiction, offering a paradoxical blend of the exotic and the natural in the mix of English domestic fictions.

In the eighteenth century, the emergence of the novel, and even the dismissal of it as a non-learned form of writing aimed at silly women, facilitated the emergence of writing as the first middle-class professional career available

17 Ibid.
to women, and which offered financial and social independence.\(^{18}\) By the late nineteenth century, writing popular fiction had long been both respectable and lucrative though women writers of it remained the target of satire. For example in Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, the success of Lady Carbury over more worthy (presumably male) writers is attributed to her deployment of her sexuality and feminine social skills as well as her prolific output. Women writers continued to walk a fine line between fame and notoriety, with some able to exploit public prurience about their private lives to promote sensational fiction.

*The modern lady of letters: Katherine Cecil Thurston*

In the opening decade of the twentieth century, Katherine Cecil Thurston, daughter of the mayor of Cork, was one of the most popular authors in the USA and England. *The Masquerader* (published in the UK as *John Chilcote, M.P.* ) was one of the top-selling titles in the USA in both 1904 and 1905, third in 1904 and seventh in 1905, directly behind her novel *The Gambler*, which was the sixth bestselling title in the USA that year and just ahead of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*.\(^{19}\) *Max*, which seems very daring even today in its story of a woman cross-dressing in order to study and work as an artist unfettered by society’s expectations of her as a woman, was fourth in the bestseller lists in 1910. No Irish writing approached this level of success again in the USA until Frank McCourt’s 1996 memoir *Angela’s Ashes* and Sarah Ban Breathnach’s 1995 lifestyle book, *Simple Abundance*, which were numbers one and two respectively in the non-fiction lists in 1997. Both *The Gambler* and *Max* feature Irish characters prominently, with a substantial section of the former set in Ireland.

The international distribution, consumption and adaptation of Thurston’s literary output and persona, combining fiction, dramatisations and film


\(^{19}\) Thurston’s bestseller status appears slightly differently depending on sources. The figures are derived from John Unsworth’s online database at the University of Illinois, which is an evolving resource for the study of popular fiction, derived from *Bowker’s Annual* and *Publisher’s Weekly* and the amalgamated listings used by Project Gutenberg 9 ([http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Bestsellers%2C_American%2C_1900–1922_%20Bookshelf%20](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Bestsellers%2C_American%2C_1900–1922_%20Bookshelf%20)) which are derived from Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900–1999: As Seen Through the Annual Bestseller Lists of Publishers Weekly* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2001). The *New York Times* lists, used by Bowling Green University centenary project, for example, vary slightly, but both sources indicate that Thurston’s work was consistently in the top ten, very popular and high profile.
adaptation, almost as soon as it became available, with avid reporting of her personal life indicates a form of media convergence and celebrity which is normally considered to be a late twentieth-century development. Her Irishness was very much part of the public persona she cultivated. Thurston promoted an image of herself as the lady of letters, dividing her time between the metropolitan world of London society and her Irish country house in the seaside town of Ardmore, County Waterford. The more negative connotations of Irish ‘wildness’ became to some extent attached to her image after her divorce and in the lurid reporting of her mysterious death. Despite her marriage to an ‘English writer’, she was repeatedly referred to in both the London Times and New York Times as an Irish lady of letters. Indeed she was pre-eminent among a gathering described by the Irish Times of 4 May 1910 as ‘Irish women of letters: Corinthian Club Banquet brilliant gathering’, which boasted the presence of the Lord Lieutenant and Lord Chief Justice, and numerous Irish women writers. Thurston was toasted a month later in the same club at a dinner she attended in honour of John McCormack. Thurston’s career indicates not only that Irish women were participants and producers as well as consumers of mass media at the beginning of the twentieth century, but that they were capable of deploying their nationality as an exotic or attractive feature to distinguish them in the international marketplace.

The nation and the marketplace: Dorothy Macardle and Máirín Cregan
A fascinating insight into this is provided by the publication and adaptation of the work of two women, Dorothy Macardle and Máirín Cregan, who were close to the heart of official Ireland and yet active participants in the international Anglophone popular culture that Ireland distrusted. The cover illustrations of the American editions of Macardle’s Uneasy Freehold indicate how these novels, now readable as expressing in a surreptitious way Macardle’s disquiet at the restrictions placed on women in the new Irish state, were marketed as ‘female gothic’ to an international audience. Macardle’s plays were first performed in the 1930s and she combined, not always successfully, these two impulses in her work. Perhaps because the theatre in Ireland was already understood as a political space given the specific ‘national’ project of the Abbey, issues of nationality and gender were much harder to separate. Hence plays tended to have quite different meanings when staged in Ireland and when staged abroad. Macardle’s

fascinating short play, *Ann Kavanagh*, which was first produced in the Abbey Theatre on 6 April 1922, was by 1937 being published in a collection obviously aimed at amateur dramatic societies by Samuel French, which listed offices in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto and London. Perhaps because so many of the American plays included were comedies, there is a warning on page one of *Ann Kavanagh* that the ending is tragic. That this Irish tragedy is also a commercial proposition is indicated by the stern warnings on the cover against staging without a license from the publisher. A five dollar royalty for each amateur performance is listed, ‘professional royalties quoted on application’.22

Plays which opened on the Dublin stage, then as now, made most of their money when they transferred to London or New York, but *Ann Kavanagh* indicates that even the unglamorous arena of US amateur dramatic societies offered modest but long-term rewards to Irish writers whose work appealed to US audiences. The appeal of this particular play was undoubtedly partly rooted in the strength of its structure and the element of suspense (if you had not read the warning that this would turn out to be a tragedy). The stage directions indicate interesting attitudes to class and gender in the export of Irish culture, commanding that “The stage “Paddy” or “Colleen” costume would be wholly inappropriate” and directing ‘that Ann has less of a country accent than the men’. While the latter is entirely consistent with the linguistic evidence that Irish rural women spoke with a less pronounced rural accent than the men during the twentieth century, the play is set in 1798 and the function of the stage direction is to direct the emotional identification of a transatlantic audience rather than verisimilitude.23 The peculiar anxiety about an American audience’s willingness to identify with a protagonist whose only fault is compassion is linked to the plot’s oblique treatment of intra-national struggle. Ann assumes a young man who asks her to hide him is, like her husband, one of the United Irishmen. When she finds out that he is instead the traitor that her husband, Miles, and the other rebels have been hunting, she cannot bring herself to hand him over: ‘he came to me hunted – frightened – like a little child … I couldn’t give him to be killed.’ The consequence of insisting the rebels do not search her home is the death of Miles, whom his comrades assume has himself misled them and is a traitor. His brother, Stephen, who knows the truth and tries to convince the others, as he is convinced himself, that Ann is the traitor, nonetheless obeys orders and takes command of the firing squad which


will kill his innocent brother, all the while blaming Ann. The destruction of filial attachments by conflicted loyalties here – Stephen's to the ‘cause’, Miles to his wife – inevitably brings to mind the outbreak of Civil War in Ireland. In this context, Ann's attempt to avoid violence makes more violence inevitable. While the metaphor might have been obvious to Irish and some Irish-American audiences aware of Macardle's politics, the appeal of the play in amateur theatrical circles must surely have been based on its tragic irony, a quality which became associated with Irish themes and characters in Hollywood films in the same period.

The extent to which nationalist women writers like Macardle and Cregan could be successfully marketed to an international Anglophone audience in the 1940s indicates continuity with the publishing strategies of predecessors from Owenson to Thurston, who were adept in making their Irishness a positive attribute in promoting their aptitude as storytellers. The Irish market, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, was not going to provide a living for any of these writers. It is noteworthy, for example, that Cregan could earn more from one children's story broadcast on BBC radio than from the inclusion of Old John on the Irish national (primary) school curriculum, with all the sales that implied.²⁴ If 1930s international audiences sought out Irish material for its pathos, Ireland also fed the American fashion for pastoralism and rural idylls in the 1940s and 1950s. The popularity of Máirín Cregan's children's stories was enhanced, as Susan Cahill has pointed out, by the association of Ireland with simple rural pleasures and fairy tales, but also by the image of Cregan herself, promoted as a warm-hearted Irish mother.²⁵ Cregan lost out financially when she insisted on undoing a number of changes that her New York publishers, Macmillan, made to the books for their American readers. Her children's books were nonetheless carefully marketed, as her correspondence with the Macmillan children's editor in New York, Doris Patee, makes clear.²⁶ The association of Irishness and Catholicism was crucial in the commercial success of the fiction, with Rathina winning an award from an American National Book Club for Catholic children in 1943, although Cregan worried that children might be put off if this made them think the book was religious in theme.²⁷

Cregan was very much an establishment figure in Ireland, married to the prominent Fianna Fáil politician, James Ryan. Ryan in turn was an important link figure between the old Fianna Fáil ethos of economic

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²⁴ Cregan Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 46,791/3.
²⁵ Cahill, ‘Irish Women Writers of Children’s Literature, 1870–1940’.
²⁶ Cregan Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 46,791/1.
²⁷ Cregan Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 46,792.
austerity and insularism and the economic policy changes which began in the 1950s, associated with Department of Finance official T. K. Whitaker and Taoiseach Seán Lemass. The promotion of Irish writing for children by a major US publishing firm in terms of shared values of family, idealised rural life and spirituality meshed seamlessly with the way in which Bord Fáilte (Irish Tourist Board) promoted Ireland as a tourist destination, a far away magical place that was also home. It is important not to overlook this conservative cultural convergence as an aspect of women’s participation in the production and consumption of culture in this period.

The relationship between external and internal forces in cultural production also needs to be understood in terms of the ongoing necessity to go abroad for artistic training as well as audiences and marketplaces. Modernism exceeded national boundaries even when practised by artists who were very much engaged with ideas of national culture, such as the influential artist, Mainie Jellett. Elizabeth Bowen in her obituary for her friend, Jellett, recalled visiting her in a nursing home in Leeson Street in her last illness: ‘Among other things, we talked about the book she had been reading, which had been in her hands when I came in, and about its author, Dorothy Richardson, a woman unknown personally to both of us, whose strain of genius has not yet been enough recognised by the world.’

This meeting of minds of Irish art and Richardson’s feminist autobiographical novels were embedded in more practical realities. Bowen’s account of Jellett’s training as an artist gives an indication of the international foundation of Irish modernism. Jellett, Bowen tells us, studied with two Dublin women, Celia Harrison and then Miss Manning, and

then, about 1915, went to the Orpen Class in the Metropolitan school of Art in Kildare Street, to study from the life … in 1917, she went to London, to work under Walter Sickert at the Westminster School … In 1919 she left London, to go, in 1920, with her friend Miss Hone to Paris, where they both worked in André Lhote’s studio. It was in 1923 that both Irish women became pupils of Albert Gleizes; and after Mainie returned to live, to paint and to teach in Dublin, yearly visits to France for study with Gleizes, in Paris or at his house in the Rhone Valley, continued up to 1933. During those years, she exhibited paintings in Dublin, London and Paris … In 1922, on a visit to Spain with Miss Hone, she was profoundly impressed by El Greco’s work, as seen in its natural ground of the Spanish landscape. Months in

28 Dorothy Richardson, British writer, 1873–1957. She was an important feminist writer whose autobiographical stream of consciousness novels were hugely influential; Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Obituary of Mainie Jellett’, The Bell, 9, 3 (1944), p. 251.
Lithuania, in 1931, gave a fresh wave of impetus … Her last visit to France was in 1939. War clanged a gate shut between her and the Continent.29

This was obviously a very privileged life, but it was also workaday artistic training. It was not too far removed from the less privileged world of literary aspiration. Just before war ‘clanged its gate shut’, on 6 December 1939 Bowen gave a talk to the Irish Women Writer’s Club on characterisation in fiction. (This was the same Club which would go on to protest against the banning of Maura Laverty’s work.) It is unclear who attended Bowen’s talk. The only published account of the club’s history appears to be that contained in the *Dublin Evening Mail* on the occasion of the club’s silver jubilee in 1958.30 This account mentions that the club was founded by the poet Blanaid Salkeld and lists Patricia Lynch, Kate O’Brien, Winifred Letts, Teresa Deevy, Constantia Maxwell and Maura Laverty among its well-known members. Rosamund Jacob, a member in 1939, commented of Bowen, ‘She has a great stammer but doesn’t seem to mind it.’ These casual references to Richardson and to Bowen’s lectures indicate a relationship between English and Irish modernism, literary and artistic innovation, high modernist aesthetics and modest writing groups. They also indicate a residual but remarkably resilient cultural feminism.

**Conclusion**

Women’s participation in cultural production, consumption and exchange in the first half of the twentieth century indicates that they were neither silent victims of official ideology nor unequivocal upholders of the status quo, but engaged in complex processes of cultural and social negotiation of gender and national identities. It is obvious that all forms of literary criticism necessarily focus on work by those with the educational and economic resources to engage in literary pursuits. This is not an elitist bias, unless it excludes attention to the cultural practice of those without such resources. It is important in analysing women’s writing and reading to resist the false dichotomy inherited from the nineteenth century of literary high culture and popular cultural consumption. A quarter of a century ago, Matthew Arnold was a favourite target of deconstruction in Irish literary studies for his views on Celticism, but the Arnoldian disparagement of the culture of the newly literate masses has not attracted sufficient critique.

30 *Dublin Evening Mail*, 26 November 1958, p. 3.
in the Irish context. Irish literary history has produced and contested canons, shadowed by what Franco Moretti, in a global context, has called ‘the great unread’, that great mass of cultural material which is part of the everyday lives of ordinary people but is invisible in the literary histories and anthologies. The assumption has been that this material is not significant or that it signifies the cultural limitations of the masses. This is a particularly acute issue in relation to women’s reading, where disparagement of silly women reading silly novels is almost as old as the novel form itself.

In part, the attachment of literary scholarship to canonical models has been pragmatic. It is not possible to read everything published in any given era and pre-existing and relatively stable canons are knowable and susceptible to traditional modes of literary analysis, such as postcolonial and historicist criticism. Cultural criticism has become increasingly aware, however, of the extent to which ‘ostensible indicators of permanence — the canon, heritage, homelands — are … constructed by specific constituencies in order to stabilize the unstable, to hold off inevitable flux, and to create ordered, and politically ‘usable’, pasts’. Over several decades, these literary and historical canons have been challenged by analysis from the perspective of gender and especially by attention to the history and writing of Irish women. The resources outlined in the introduction to this volume enable a much more detailed, diverse and enlarged view of the cultural lives of Irish women, from subscribers to eighteenth-century journals to soap opera. Identifying and quantifying this material is insufficient for an understanding of the complex processes of cultural and social change, however. This work has drawn 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 has sought to map 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, shop-girls at the movies and advertising copywriters. Close attention to the cultural practices of Irish women’s writing in the 1930s indicates a dissident milieu which was certainly not brimming with feminist possibility, but which consistently questioned the orthodoxies of church and state and left a record of women making lives and making art in economically and politically difficult circumstances. It also indicates the existence of vernacular dissidence and a degree of continuity between the intellectual and social ferment of the 1890–1922

31 See, for example, Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History.
period and the next wave of social and cultural change in the 1960s, between the first and second waves of feminism. It is not productive, however, to read the period in terms of clearly distinct internal forces of conservatism and external forces of modernisation or a linear and continuous line of feminist history. It is important not to project backward the polarisation of nationalism and feminism that crystallised in the struggles over issues of sexuality, reproduction and religion in the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of vernacular modernism offers a way of thinking about the processes of cultural exchange and excorporation which do not align feminism with a universalising modernity.

Methodologies developed in queer studies and queer theory offer new approaches to the temporality of critical reading practice and to the politics of cultural criticism. Valerie Traub’s work on early modern literature advocates ‘strategic anachronism’ and ‘strategic historicism’ to ‘keep open the question of the relationship of present identities to past cultural formations’. Analysis of the representation, writing, watching and reading practices of Irish women in the literary Dublin of the 1930s reveals the fragmentary traces of dissident aesthetics, different sexualities and lives at odds with the dominant ideology of their day, often invisible to the dominant histories since. The larger context of this book indicates that this was only one end of a broad spectrum of cultural activity in which Irish women negotiated the complexity of their everyday identities. While strategic anachronism and strategic historicism are enabling strategies for literary and cultural analysis, they raise particular problems in an interdisciplinary study of this nature. Historiography is predicated on empirical and archival methodologies which do not aim to fold the present back upon the past, but maintain as objective a standpoint as possible on the historical evidence. Moreover, this case study depends upon the process of uncovering neglected texts and practices and the evidence of their circulation and change. To argue that attention to the cultural production and consumption of women can change our perspective on this era is to assume responsibility for accurately documenting that production and consumption. In challenging the assumptions and limitations of accounts which do not pay such attention, the criterion of accuracy to the sources is of paramount importance. This is not at all incompatible with the acknowledgement that each historical moment reflects differently on the past. At a very basic level, new media, databases and resources have rendered visible hidden cultural practices and abandoned texts. The vernacular modernism of Dublin in the first half of the twentieth century, combining reconfigured relations of

domesticity and intimacy, cultural experiment with traditional forms and imported mass media, is an object of study which yields different insights to literary and historical critique and challenges both. Paying due attention to what shop-girls dreaming in the cinematic darkness actually watched, to what users of public libraries requested and borrowed and to the relationship between Irish writing and global publishing dramatically complicates the cultural history of Ireland and the concept of Irishness.