Romantic Revolutionary Irishwomen: Women, Young Ireland and 1848

JAN CANNAVAN

> You cannot kindle up a fire,
> Then bid it not to blaze;
> You cannot stop a woman's lyre,
> At woman's fitting lays –
>
> 'Mary' of the *Nation*.

The participation of women in Irish nationalist movements in the nineteenth century is an important, if still largely unexplored, arena for research in gender studies. Allied to it is the question of the extent to which a feminist agenda can be detected in the ideologies of Irish nationalism throughout the nineteenth century. This article will examine the participation of women in the movement in the 1840s which, after the example of such continental movements as 'Young Italy', came to be called 'Young Ireland' – a label first affixed to it derisively by its enemies, but later taken up proudly by its members.[1]

This article will examine prose pieces and some poems written by women, together with the responses to them by men, in the Young Ireland newspaper the *Nation*, published between 1843 and the paper's suppression in July 1848, as well as female contributions, published between February and May 1848, to John Mitchel's more militant paper, the *United Irishman*. Though primarily concerned with nationalism, these women writers were also concerned about gender issues. Indeed, as time went on, their call for proper citizenship rights for women increased. Their polemics draw on the rhetoric both of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism. They also implicitly engage with the key paradigms of 'equality' and 'difference' which have been at the heart of modern feminist debate.[2]

The notion of equality in the gender debate derives from Mary Wollstonecraft and considers women and men to be the same in all significant respects, apart from obvious physical dissimilarities.[3] Observed differences, such as women's

1 Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Totowa, NJ, 1987), pp. 56–7. The movement's links with continental Europe were significant to a degree. The revolutionary French government, for example, had designed the Irish national flag that is still in use today, the tri-color of green, white and orange modelled on the French flag. See P. Beresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (New York, 1972), p. 116. 2 For a concise discussion of these terms and a summary of the debate see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York, 1992). 3 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792; New York, 1974).

tendency to be more nurturing than men, are seen by equality feminists as social constructs and as factors in women's oppression. So-called 'difference feminists', on the other hand, influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow as well as by some nineteenth-century feminists, acknowledge and value gender-based behavioural differences, though most of them see such differences as deriving from psychological conditioning rather than biology.[4] For difference feminists, women's nurturing tendency makes them morally superior to men. In recent times Joan Scott has attempted to reconcile these two paradigms by positing the existence of a multiplicity of differences, instead of the single division of gender.[5]

I

Young Ireland theorised its nation's rights using the two discourses of Enlightenment and Romanticism. It had inherited the former from the United Irishmen, who based their claims on the ideas of the American and especially the French revolutions. These ideas included the desire for a democratic state with strong individual liberties, although Young Ireland supported a stronger component of social welfare than the United States. Another Enlightenment idea cherished by Young Ireland was that of complete secularism; it adhered to the dictum of Theobald Wolfe Tone, the United Irish leader, who had aspired 'To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter.'[6] From the wave of revolutionary fervour sweeping Europe in the 1840s came the new ideas of Romanticism to augment and modify the earlier Enlightenment ideals. Influenced by poetry and art, these ideas stressed the primacy of emotion over rationality.

A synthesis, or at least a co-existence, of Enlightenment and Romantic paradigms shaped the discussion of women's rights, as well as national rights, in Ireland. Debates about women's proper role in the national struggle took place in a large number of articles, letters to the editor, and even in a male/female poetry exchange in the columns of nationalist newspapers. It is possible to trace over the five-year period between 1843 and 1848 the development both of women's calls for rights and duties and men's ambivalent reactions to such calls.[7]

4 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA, 1982); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, 1978). For a discussion of nineteenth-century difference feminism, see Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach' in *Signs*, xiv, 1 (1988), pp. 119–57. 5 Joan W. Scott, 'Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: or the Uses of Post-structuralist Theory for Feminism' in *Feminist Studies*, xiv, 1 (1988), pp. 33–50. 6 Quoted in T. A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own* (New York, 1970), p. 117. 7 I do not mean to imply here that nationalist women in Ireland moved in a linear progression from 'duties' arguments to those based on 'rights'. Discussions about

At least fifteen women writers contributed to the *Nation*, nearly all of them using pseudonyms. The three most important were 'Eva', 'Speranza' and 'Mary'. 'Eva' was Mary Anne (or Mary Eva) Kelly whose family had strong republican sympathies. When her fiancé, Kevin O'Doherty, was convicted of taking part in revolutionary activities and was offered a lenient sentence in exchange for an expression of remorse, she urged him to refuse. She waited six years to marry him until his sentence of transportation to Van Diemen's Land was commuted. 'Speranza' was Jane Francesca Elgee, later Lady Wilde, mother of Oscar Wilde. She came from an upper middle-class Protestant family which disapproved of her nationalism. She had a singular talent for languages and contributed translations to the *Nation* of poetry in Russian, Turkish, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese and Swedish, as well as Latin and Greek. 'Mary' was Ellen Mary Patrick Downing. A militant and prolific writer, she left the *Nation* for the *United Irishman* when it broke away in 1848 in order to pursue a more military strategy. She is believed to have been involved romantically with Joseph Brennan, a fellow Young Irelander, but entered a convent in 1849 and turned her literary talents to religious poetry.[8]

The earliest contribution on the subject of gender appeared in the *Nation* in December 1843 in an extract from *Mrs Reid's Plea for Women* entitled 'Domestic Duties of Woman'. This short piece, serving as a space filler at the end of a long report of a speech by Daniel O'Connell, confers only duties on women and no rights. Women, who are conflated with mothers in the piece, are said to hold as their highest duty the moral and intellectual education of their children.[9] The subject's next appearance is in October 1844, with an unsigned article called 'The Mission of Women'. This piece also stresses duties to the detriment of rights, but in the ten months since the first article was published the scope of these responsibilities has widened somewhat: now the Romantic 'ethic of care'[10] not only demands that women educate their children's moral and intellectual faculties but requires, in addition, the inculcation of patriotism. Furthermore, the article asserts that '*active* patriotism is a duty bearing equally upon man and woman'.[11] Of course, the author assures his audience that this equal duty will be expressed in each sex's separate sphere; the man will act in the public sphere, but 'the world says that "women are not to *meddle* in politics"; and if by this is meant meddling *publicly*, the world is right. This is not a woman's sphere … a woman's sphere is her home.'[12]

By the time of the next article, January 1847, women's rights have finally entered the equation. This time 'A Limerick Girl' writes a letter to the editor asking whether women are eligible to join the Irish Confederation, a nationalist club. She says that she 'cannot feel too grateful to those who would give us *our*

women's duties in the home continued throughout the period studied; however, rights-based demands became more frequent and more strongly argued over time. **8** See Anne Colman's discussion of the myths surrounding the biography of Ellen Mary Patrick Downing, in her essay eralier in this volume. **9** *Nation*, 19 October 1844. **10** Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York, 1993), p. 210. **11** *Nation*, 19 October 1844. **12** Ibid.

proper position in society'.[13] The 'Limerick Girl' is not yet demanding rights, but she is beginning to define a 'proper position' for herself in the public sphere. The editor answers, in a rather cavalier fashion, that 'of course, the ladies are admissible'.[14]

In subsequent years a number of the male Young Irelanders showed themselves to be decidedly nervous about a new assertiveness among nationalist women. 'Mary', the *Nation's* most martial poet, became involved in a poetic duet, or, more correctly perhaps, a poetic duel in April 1847 with 'Shamrock', a prolific male poet and medical student. He began by addressing her 'in a voice of such tender warning':[15]

> Since that hour the girl no longer played with childhood's simple toys,
> But each day, with impulse stronger, sought for high and holy joys;
> But thou knowest the woe that slumbers music's shining waves beneath,
> And how oft the poet's numbers from a bleeding bosom breathe ...
> Fly then, dear, from passion's pages, turn from proud and gloomy song.[16]

In the following issue 'Mary' replied:

> You cannot kindle up a fire,
> Then bid it not to blaze:
> You cannot stop a woman's lyre,
> At woman's fitting lays ...
> War! – 'tis eternal war below
> With head, or heart, or sword –
> Too much of battle strife I know
> To shudder at the word –
> Nor shall I hold that year the worst,
> Whate'er its tools may be,
> Which rends in twain a chain accursed,
> And sets a people free.[17]

The editor's judgement on this debate is instructive. Duffy comes down solidly on 'Mary''s side, writing that she has 'a pure and noble passion, worthy of her womanhood and her genius' and that 'Shamrock' should not be frightened or disgusted by a strong, militant woman.[18] In a later correspondence with the editor, 'Mary' reveals the Romantic nature of her poetic sensibility: 'I like poetry wild with war, or hot with love, or all glowing with scenery, but would rather write one little song that a child or peasant might sing and feel than a very miracle-poem of abstraction and profundity.'[19] This privileging of emotion and simplicity

13 Ibid., 30 January 1847. My emphasis. **14** Ibid. **15** Ibid., 10 April 1847. **16** Ibid. **17** Ibid., 17 April 1847. **18** Ibid. **19** T. F. O'Sullivan, *The Young Irelanders* (Tralee, 1944), p. 116.

over abstract reason made Romantic poetry a attractive vehicle for nationalist writers keen to rouse the people to commitment and action.

In June 1847, two months after this poetry exchange, 'An Irish Mother' finally combines an Enlightenment-inspired demand for rights with a Romantic appeal to the image of a maternal care for the child/nation. She laments the condition of 'our sex, or rather its shackled condition … all tinged with that mistrust of their own powers, so natural in this country, where women rarely speak on politics, however much they may think on the subject'.[20] She calls women 'rational beings' and demands a promised essay from the paper on 'Female Education'.[21] At the same time as she is demanding rights, the 'Irish Mother' is also using a nurturing discourse for the beneficial effects of a hoped-for new national government which shall 'cherish and protect [its] children'.[22] And women, she goes on, have similarly maternal duties to perform in the public sphere: 'to encourage the hopeful, stimulate the lagging, reprove the indifferent, and heap scorn upon the treacherous'.[23] Her argument thus skilfully raises the question of how men can keep real women/mothers out of the public forum when they envisage the effects of a benevolent government as being akin to those of a surrogate mother.

During the months leading up to the brief and abortive rebellion in July 1848, female *Nation* writers were actively pursuing their newly-found collective demand for women's rights. They had now largely dropped the Romantic care-giver imagery and spoke almost entirely in a language of 'rights'. Thus 'Eva' argues vehemently for equality in her article, 'To the Women of Ireland': 'What is virtue in man is virtue also in woman. Virtue is of no sex. A coward woman is as base as a coward man. It is not unfeminine to take sword or gun, if sword and gun are required.'[24] She finishes on a defiant note, 'Circumstances have hitherto moulded us. We shall now mould circumstances.'[25]

Two months later, 'Mary', writing in the *United Irishman*, also titled an article 'To the Women of Ireland'. Her piece is an argument against the equation of feminine virtue with pacifism. She goes on to argue for rebellion on the basis of a just war stance; she reminds her readers that famine and landlord abuses are killing thousands and contends that far less suffering and death will result from a war to establish a just society. 'The woman who would seek to avert that war is a traitor to humanity and her sex … Remember, I beseech you, that to preserve this peace which you prize so dearly, millions must perish by famine and disease.' She bemoans the fact that 'a horror of blood-letting appears to be regarded as the feminine virtue in Ireland'.[26]

Male writers in the *Nation* had mixed reactions to female militancy, reactions which, like women's contributions, tended to change with the political situation. Prior to mid 1847, when armed insurrection did not seem like an immediate possibility, women were editorially discouraged from composing martial verse,

20 *Nation*, 12 June 1847. **21** Ibid. **22** Ibid. **23** Ibid. **24** Ibid., 25 March 1848. **25** Ibid. **26** *United Irishman*, Dublin, 13 May 1848.

though this did not always succeed; 'Speranza' and 'Eva', at least, had many warlike poems accepted and praised. More typical though was the case of a poem which was rejected with the sarcastic comment: 'We beg our fair correspondent, "An Irish Girl", will not bruise her tender fingers on the cords of the war-harp – leave it for rude masculine hands. She possesses fancy and wit; but she would do well to keep them to enliven her conversation and her correspondence.'[27] Sarcasm, as such, was not reserved for female writers: rejected efforts were regularly ridiculed in each issue's 'Answers to Correspondents' column. However, male poets were criticised for their writing itself, while the critique of women extended to their very suitability as writers. When a female poet whose work had been rejected because of its 'deficient rhymes' wrote pointing out that many other *Nation* poets did not rhyme well, she was told that she had forgotten 'that strong thoughts, noble, tender, natural or witty, whose truth is at once felt and acknowledged, may dispense with the niceties of rhyme, with a freedom that is not allowable in the pretty and graceful commonplaces of a lady'.[28]

As the political situation became more difficult, male leaders were forced to address the issue of women's revolutionary fervour. On the one hand, they wanted to encourage women's active participation at a time when every nationalist was needed while, on the other, they still wanted to keep women in their own sphere. An editorial in October 1847 thus declares: 'One woman, with the intellect and devotion of Madame Roland, might organise [women] into an unseen but irresistible league.'[29] 'Unseen' is the operative term here, of course. When women's ideas of their place in the national movement contradicted this notion, they were often chastised, as was a female correspondent in May 1848, in a reply which effectively sought to deny the possibility of collective political action to women:

> We have received, in a feminine hand, a most seditious proposal for the formation of a Ladies' Society, to talk treason, and defy the Gagging Act. The intention is excellent, but the plan is unnecessary. Every drawing-room should be a lady's society for 'advocating the case of the country, and putting to shame the slaves who are content with it;' and, as for talking sedition, and acting it, the men must do that.[30]

In spite of this, however, at least some of the male Young Ireland leaders did positively support women's militant activity. John Mitchel encouraged women in their manufacture of arms in a *United Irishman* editorial: 'No lady is too delicate for the culinary preparation of casting bullets. No hand is too white to make up cartridges.'[31] Through this 'culinary' image Mitchel sought to convince Irishwomen that aiding the war effort would be an extension of their domestic duties into the public sphere, rather than an alien activity. Thomas Devin Reilly, another

27 *Nation*, 8 April 1843. **28** Ibid., 4 January 1845. **29** Ibid., 9 October 1847. **30** Ibid., 13 May 1848. **31** Quoted in Rebecca O'Conner, *Jenny Mitchel: Young Irelander* (Tucson, 1985), p. 67.

Young Ireland leader, devised a military plan for an insurrection in which he delegated to women the task of throwing 'bricks, pots, heavy furniture, and boiling water' from windows onto attacking British troops.[32]

II

As well as contributing militant prose and poetry to the *Nation* and the *United Irishman*, women also had some part in the sometimes violent public incidents which effectively ended the Young Ireland movement in 1848, though they came from a different position in society than the middle-class women writers of the nationalist papers. Margaret Ward has argued in her study of Irish nationalism and feminism that because women had no leadership roles in either constitutional or physical-force nationalism they had less to lose than men by being uncompromising.[33] How far such a view has a bearing on the events of 1848, however, is not clear. On 27 May 1848, the day of John Mitchel's penal transportation, the only disturbance came from 'a group of women on a prominence [who] threw stones and sticks at the sabred dragoons. They were directed by a leader of Amazon stature'.[34]

Militant action by women was also significant in the one small insurrection which actually took place in Ireland in 1848, on 26 July in the Co. Tipperary village of Ballingarry. According to the Reverend P. Fitzgerald, an eyewitness to the skirmish who published his recollections in 1861, the Young Irish leader William Smith O'Brien arrived at the village of Ballingarry, 'attended indeed by a considerable multitude, but consisting chiefly of women and children, and not having in the entire procession more than fifty men capable of carrying arms'.[35] Fitzgerald pointed out the preponderance of women and children in order to illustrate his view that the rebellion was futile from the start; the fact remained, nonetheless, that women were prepared to engage in armed activity. The insurgents were eventually routed by an R.I.C. force that was superior in numbers and weaponry and many fighters were arrested, among them at least one woman, Miss Eliza Power.[36]

The participation of women in the Ballingarry incident has not received the attention of historians until now. Silences like these are, of course, a common occurrence in the history of women – particularly when the erased women were acting in ways perceived as 'unfeminine'. A wealth of archival evidence on women's revolutionary activity throughout Irish history has barely begun to be studied by historians; this lack makes it impossible as yet to test the relevance to Irishwomen of theories about women and war which are being developed and

32 Ibid., p. 82. **33** Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1983), p. 37. **34** O'Conner, *Jenny Mitchel*, p. 82. **35** P. Fitzgerald, *Personal Recollections of the Insurrection at Ballingarry in July, 1848* (Dublin, 1861), p. 14. **36** O'Sullivan, *The Young Irelanders*, p. 662.

debated by feminist theorists and historians. It is probable that hypotheses of female pacifism, which are largely based on secondary historical works that have excluded women, may have to be rethought as more revolutionary women are rediscovered. Finding these female 'missing pieces'[37] is such a vital prelude to relevant theory that feminist historians, such as Joan Scott, who argue that the usefulness of 'her-story', the recovery of as many missing women as possible, has run its course because enough women have been studied to make theorising possible, miss many possible theoretical building blocks.[38] This is not to argue against the need for theory, but to rescue the project of her-story from the status of a poor relation to theorising, especially in countries like Ireland where much basic research still needs to be done.[39]

Even though research into the lives of the Young Ireland women is in its infancy, some tentative conclusions may be drawn from this essay. It is clear that nationalist women posed a challenge to the prevailing gender norms when they demanded a public role in the revolutionary movement; and that, as time went by, more specifically feminist demands, for education, for example, or the right for their voices to be heard or for equality of opportunity, began to creep into their thought and writing. By 1850 'Speranza' was arguing for married women's right to employment and independence:

> The more independent of each other each member of the household is, the greater the chance of happiness. If every wife had a definite employment, she would be less given to those little jealousies and watchings and pryings that fill up the time of vacant minds ... The lifework should be the first; and the lifework need not hinder the beautiful ministrations of Love.[40]

Speranza sought not only economic opportunity for women but their right to prioritise career over family as well. Women's growing interest in gender-based rights during the course of the nationalist revival of the 1840s is not coincidental; rather, their increase in public activity on behalf of the nation empowered them to make other demands as well. Although women were certainly not treated as equals by the men of Young Ireland, the most politically radical male leaders began to take women's participation much more seriously over time.

The other major issue raised in this essay is the often sophisticated interplay of 'equality' and 'difference' arguments in the writings of Young Ireland women. Both types were utilised throughout the existence of the *Nation*, though female correspondents began to place more stress on equality in the later years. The perceived differences between middle-class nationalist Irish women and men in

37 I am indebted for this term to the women of Irish Feminist Information Publications in their book *Missing Pieces: Women in Irish History* (Dublin, 1983). **38** Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), p. 20. **39** Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, 'An Agenda for Women's History in Ireland, 1500–1900' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxviii, 109 (1992), p. 2. **40** Undated journal entry, quoted in Terence de Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde: Sir William and Lady Wilde* (London, 1967), p. 148.

the 1840s seemed to be less significant to the former when compared with their shared national identity with the latter. Thus for a time the Irish/British difference partially eclipsed the gender divide, allowing politicised middle-class Irishwomen to claim greater equality with men on the basis of the Irish component in their identity. In addition, Young Ireland also briefly provided an opportunity for rural peasant women to become engaged both politically and militarily, as at Ballingarry.[41] These peasant women appear to have been less conflicted about taking part in militant activity along with their men than middle-class women perhaps because rural peasant families had fewer gender-based labour distinctions in comparison with middle-class urban society.

Feminists who privilege sexual difference often fail to understand women's interest in nationalist or socialist causes, because they understand women's interests to be entirely gender-related. This can lead to sweeping generalisations about women without historical specificity. This essay reveals the existence of complex and intriguing debates about women's rights during a time of intense political agitation. As historians examine in more detail the writings and events of this period, differences, not only between women and men, but also among women over such issues as class, gender and nationalism will prove central to an understanding of women and men's political activities.

41 Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class*, pp. 98–9.