

Still in search of liberty
Nicholas Allen
NUI Galway

A Review of

Karen Steele, *Women, Press and Politics During the Irish Revival* (Syracuse UP, 2007), ISBN10 0815631170, 273pp

Karen Steele's study of Irish women's contribution to radical newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries combines two strands of recent study in what is becoming less and less of a 'literary' revival. The first strand is the recovery of women's agency as writers and activists. Margaret Ward and Marjorie Howes are two critics whose work informs Steele's wide ranging concerns for the impact of gender in literature and politics. The second is a general historical reconsideration of the aesthetic cultures that surrounded Yeats, Russell, Gregory et al. Notable here is Frank Shovlin's bright account of literary periodicals and their audiences, a study that dovetails well with Steele's work. Beyond these printed works are the as yet unpublished dissertations that Steele has used to good affect. Her account of Alice Milligan proceeds from Catherine Morris's formative investigation into that Belfast writer's fraught social and cultural situation.

Steele constructs her narrative from a series of chapters that combine readings of literary works, periodicals and individual biographies. These last are the book's strongpoint. The chapters on Constance Markievicz and Delia Larkin are especially illuminating. Both figures, one well known, one not, come to life in Steele's words. Their involvement in a series of publications and movements is engaging and occasionally entertaining, as in Markievicz's gardening columns, subversive parodies of the *bourgeois* desire for tamed utopias. If I have one criticism of the book and its construction in this regard it is that the Irish location for these women and their movements sometimes limits the broader sense of their connections and achievements. Victorian and Edwardian England makes brief appearance in the introductory chapter, and the economic as well as the cultural profiles of the individuals studied are attended to with care. But there is a persisting sense of other presences, in Ireland and beyond, that might take the scholarship to undiscovered territory. The question of readership, for example, is largely ignored bar some very useful circulation numbers later in the book. Steele may be right in contradicting Francis Jones' extravagant claim that Arthur Griffith's *United Irishman* was the best read paper on the island, but the international infiltration of these publications through reading rooms and between subscribers cannot be estimated. It would have been fascinating to try and trace the circulation of these radical newspapers through Ireland into Britain

and beyond. It may be that these women contributed something individual to the wider feminist cause (Markievicz famously was the first woman to be elected to the British House of Commons and there is brief, intriguing reference to readers' letters from the Falkland Islands and Seattle in the *Irish Citizen*). This possibility remains speculative in Steele's book, which is a pity given the rich field of source materials and historical context at her disposal.

Steele is stronger in her subtle weave of editorials and essays into the cultures of revolutionary Ireland. This strategy offers consistently provocative perspectives, such as the case of Alice Milligan's ironic femininity, pitched in contrast to a young Yeats' quivering masculinity. The reading of Milligan's story 'The Little Green Slippers' is also fascinating. Set in 1798, its beautiful young Protestant protagonist attends the garrison ball under protest, dreaming all the while of her rebel lover on the run. The 1798 rebellion was a rich source for novelistic setting throughout the nineteenth century. That literary tradition does not feature here, but Steele does show how romance and revolution often run together. Helena Molony's strategic editing of *Bean na hEireann* is another revelation, the tripartite question of the relationship between feminism, socialism and nationalism a continuing concern that continued into the next decade with George Russell's *Irish Homestead*, given one mention here despite its close attendance to the question of women in the new nation. Steele is revealing in her reading of the advertisements that attend each publication, the mixed message of a modernity clothed in traditional garments, all made in Ireland. Perhaps most encouraging of all for future study in this area is the impact of the formation of the independent state in 1922 (and the following civil war, invisible here). Markievicz's critique of the Free State and its male leadership gives political contour to the Yeatsian vocabulary of shrillness associated with these women. Markievicz's dismissal of Moore's melodies as tunes fit for a lap dog shows a polemical gift that might satisfy further attention.

Steele's achievement is to give a cast of individual characters their separate intellectual life in context of a literary and social history that has annexed women as subsidiary players. Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington is a case in point, her militant feminism a counterpoint to the pacifism of her husband, murdered in the Easter Rising. The study of all this book's subjects suggests the question of women in Irish history is a source of ongoing critique, of the uncovered subjects and the discipline that shapes their image. The gift of the literary scholar is to transgress many of the institutional conventions that bind still much of Irish historiography. In this context, *Women, Press and Politics During the Irish Revival* is an impressive contribution to the creation of an Ireland still in search of liberty.