

Heidi Hansson, ed. *New Contexts: Re-Framing Nineteenth Century Irish Women's Prose*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2007. 224 pp \$48.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85918-416-5.



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Nineteenth-century Irish women writers have long been doubly invisible: Irish women writers are, in general, comparatively underresearched, while the nineteenth century, in Ireland, produced mostly minor authors and texts until just before the turn of the century. Those Irish authors who did write in the nineteenth century often produced exceedingly odd works, had truncated careers, or left Ireland to make their marks on the English-language literary scene, which was always elsewhere. Indeed, many of the nineteenth-century "Irish" writers we study and teach wrote works which have little to do with Ireland, and are only studied and taught today because our definitions of literary value have changed to include works of scholarly interest which do not necessarily hold any (traditional) aesthetic appeal.

A new anthology edited by Heidi Hansson, *New Contexts: Re-framing Nineteenth-Century Irish Women's Prose*, seeks to make the nineteenth-century Irish women's literary tradition visible, and excludes from its purview those writers and works which have already been recov-

ered and written about, such as Sydney Owenson, Maria Edgeworth, Emily Lawless, and the more well-known works of Edith Somerville and Martin Ross. Instead, the collection focuses on such little-known writers as Elizabeth Hamilton, Lady Blessington, Selina Bunbury, M. E. Francis, Mrs. Hungerford, and George Egerton, none of whom are canonical and at least a few of whom did not think of themselves as Irish, or primarily as Irish.

Hansson's introduction explores a number of potential frames through which to read this heretofore invisible writing: the most useful of these, and the one which all of the contributors' essays employ, is the exploration of "dialogic strategies" in nineteenth-century Irish women's writing. As Hansson notes, "[W]hen nineteenth-century women's writing techniques interact or collide with the themes of the work, the result is often that a message is both transmitted and retracted" (p. 11), an insight explored most cogently in Margaret Kelleher's excellent "'Factual Fictions': Representations of the Land Agitation in Nineteenth-Century Women's Fiction." Kelleher

notes of representations of the land wars by female authors that “[t]his body of writing is especially interesting since it sought the incorporation of contemporaneous and often highly charged political subject matter into the existing modes of sentimental fiction” (p. 78). In addition to exploring this conflict between gender and genre, Kelleher’s essay points to a number of other scholarly questions which would be fruitful for critics to address: the “interconnection of novel writing and journalism in mid to late nineteenth-century Ireland, and among Irish writers in London,” particularly female writers (p. 84); the relationship of domestic fiction to the Irish literary tradition, which has been largely ignored (p. 89); and the notion of audience in relation to Irish literature (p. 90). In referencing the larger Irish literary tradition, however, Kelleher uses a frame which Hansson, in her introduction, has largely dismissed. Hansson argues that “the analysis of nineteenth-century women’s writing ... means a rejection of evaluative criteria emanating from male critical traditions” (p. 2); Kelleher, in her essay, utilizes the work of such theorists of nineteenth-century Irish literature as David Lloyd and Terry Eagleton, applying their theoretical models at the same time that she points out the blind spots in these models—gender and genre—and argues for a revision of the frames through which we view nineteenth-century Irish literature as a whole. If we are to explore the “dialogic” nature of nineteenth-century women’s writing, it is important to show with what texts, writers, institutions, and events these writers were dialoguing, as well as to make visible our own dialogues with the master narrators of the Irish literary tradition, who because of the nature of the field of Irish studies, which has been dominated by work on male authors, inform our feminist approaches whether or not this is acknowledged.

This is especially true given that Hansson argues that the writers under consideration spoke from “the ‘counter-public sphere’ ... a semi- or counter-official position” (p. 8). Moreover, neither

Hansson nor the other essayists discuss the problematics of a nineteenth-century Irish women’s counter-public sphere, given that Ireland was governed, in the nineteenth century, by a competing array of public spheres: in literary terms, by a print culture which extended outside Ireland and was largely centered in London; in political terms, by the Britain of which it simultaneously was and was not a part; in social terms, by an emerging set of nationalist shadow institutions. This goes a long way toward accounting for why so many of the writers considered in this collection did not claim, had trouble claiming, or only intermittently claimed an Irish identity: they were countering, and encountering, a public sphere which itself did not claim, had trouble claiming, or only intermittently claimed an Irish identity.

This is so in part because of the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland of 1801, which incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom, which governed Ireland throughout the nineteenth century, and which had the effect, among many other effects, of abolishing the Irish parliament, destroying the Irish publishing industry, and establishing that the primary audience for Irish literature would be British. As a scholar of the Anglo-Irish Union, particularly its national marriage metaphor, I was especially interested to see how this union and its discursive implications would resonate for the essayists in the collection and for the writers under discussion. I was intrigued by Riana O’Dwyer’s claim about Lady Blessington that she “[r]epresents in one career the cultural consequences of the political union” (p. 54), though this claim could have been more developed, and O’Dwyer could have shown how the Union impacted Blessington’s work as well as her career, if in fact it did. I raised my eyebrows a bit at Heidi Hansson’s claim that “the hierarchical implications of the Union are toned down when the relationship between England and Ireland is presented as equivalent to the bond between husband and wife” (p. 110), though the marriage metaphor was deployed to represent the Anglo-

Irish relationship precisely because, as Louise Olga Fradenburg noted in her *City, Marriage, Tournament: The Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland*, marriage traditionally represents “the simultaneous preservation and suspension of inequality.”[1] Hansson can make the claim that because of the British reforms of the institution of marriage that took place before 1898, when M. E. Francis published *Miss Erin*, Francis could indeed argue that marriage is a less hierarchical relationship, but she compares Francis’s “national tale” to the much earlier work of Sydney Owenson and Maria Edgeworth, ignoring the social, political, and discursive changes that took place, both in the institution of marriage and in the Anglo-Irish relationship, in the intervening years of the nineteenth century.

Of the essays in this collection not yet discussed, I found Jacqueline Belanger’s opening essay, “Improvement is a Nation’s Blessing’: Elizabeth Hamilton’s *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* in Ireland” the most interesting. Belanger makes a fascinating and convincing argument for the inclusion of Elizabeth Hamilton’s text in nineteenth-century Irish women’s literature on the basis of its reception in Ireland, arguing that “the category of ‘Irish literature’ appears open and flexible, not strictly defined by Irishness per se but instead by a shared emphasis on the reforming power of fiction” (p. 23) and that Hamilton “appears to slip effortlessly between British, Scottish, Irish, and indeed, imperial identities, and it is this negotiable sense of national belonging that enabled her to take up a variety of flexible subject positions vis-à-vis her targets for reform” (p. 25). Belanger’s methodology here offers an exciting model for scholars, particularly given the fact that, as Kelleher argues, the notion of “the audience” has been underdeveloped in Irish studies.

On the other hand, Julie Anne Stevens’s concluding essay, “The Art of Politics in Somerville and Ross’s Fiction with an Emphasis on Their Final Collection of Stories, *In Mr. Knox’s Country*,”

as its unwieldy title might indicate, is the weakest essay in the collection. It includes a digression on the reception of Somerville and Ross in Britain which seems completely disconnected from the rest of the essay, the thesis of which I would have trouble, in any case, identifying. The collection as a whole, however, is a valuable addition to the field, if only as a starting point, as it asks a number of interesting questions, identifies a number of useful frames, and brings to our attention the works of a number of overlooked nineteenth-century Irish women writers.

Note

[1]. Louise Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 72.

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