

EDITED BY

D. A. J. MACPHERSON AND MARY J. HICKMAN

# Women and Irish diaspora identities

Theories, concepts  
and new perspectives

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Edited by D. A. J. MacPherson and Mary J. Hickman

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## Abbreviations

ANIA	Americans for a New Irish Agenda
AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CICA	Council of Irish Counties Associations
CWL	Catholic Women's League
FLOL	Female Loyal Orange Lodge
GLA	Greater London Authority
GLC	Greater London Council
ILGO	Irish Lesbian and Gay Organisation
INO	Irish Nurses Organisation
IRA	Irish Republican Army
LOBA	Ladies' Orange Benevolent Association
LOL	Loyal Orange Lodge
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PFI	Pregnant from Ireland
STDF	Stepney Tenants' Defence League
UCM	Union of Catholic Mothers
UCW	Union of Catholic Women

## Notes on contributors

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(Routledge, 2001) and articles and chapters on a wide range of aspects of Irish emigration and settlement abroad. She has also made substantial contributions to policy and co-authored the widely cited report for the Commission for Racial Equality, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain* (1997) (with Mary J. Hickman). Her report *Irish Emigrants and Irish Communities Abroad* was produced for the Irish Government Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants (2002). Her current research focuses on multi-generational Irish identities in England, Newfoundland and Australasia, and her particular interests lie in comparing trajectories of whiteness and Irishness, exploring English/Irish hybridities and examining linkages between genealogies and citizenship.

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## INTRODUCTION

# **Irish diaspora studies and women: theories, concepts and new perspectives**

*D. A. J. MacPherson and Mary J. Hickman*

Popular usage of the term 'Irish diaspora' has grown in parallel with the proliferation of academic studies that apply the term to any number of migrant or ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> In an Irish context, during the 1990s President Mary Robinson was at the forefront of public discussion in which the 'Irish abroad' became the 'Irish diaspora'. Robinson's conception of an Irish diaspora embraced a diverse notion of national identity which, according to one of the contributors to this volume, embraced a re-imagining of 'belonging and identity based on diversity, multiple affiliations and multi-located identifications'.<sup>2</sup> As Robinson's successor as President, Mary McAleese introduced a gender dimension to debate about the Irish diaspora, talking in broad terms about the 'global Irish family'.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this book is to capture how scholars have begun to explore the nature of women's experience of the Irish diaspora and how this relates to recent theoretical debate about diaspora.<sup>4</sup>

While no longer one of Donald Akenson's 'great unknowns' of Irish migration history, and despite increasing scholarly attention,<sup>5</sup> women's experiences remain marginal in many general accounts of migration and diaspora. To take but one recent study of the Irish abroad, John Belchem's book on Irish-Catholics in Liverpool exemplifies this trend.<sup>6</sup> While briefly mentioning women, Belchem does not engage in a sustained analysis of their communal, social, religious and political activities in the city. Equally, little has been done to integrate women into the emerging scholarship on diaspora, transnationalism and Irish migration, including recent surveys in *Irish Economic and Social History* and *Immigrants and Minorities*.<sup>7</sup> This book aims to redress this scholarly imbalance by comparing Irish women's experience across the globe, setting this research in the context of recent theoretical developments in the study of diaspora. It is an interdisciplinary collection, featuring articles by scholars of Irish women and the diaspora in geography, history and sociology from across Britain and Ireland.

This book demonstrates the important role played by women in the construction of Irish diasporic identities, comparing Irish women's experience in Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. It represents an important reassessment of historians' periodisation of the Irish diaspora, with a number of contributors assessing Irish women's experience during the early-mid and late part of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> This book builds on the engagement of women social scientists with the Irish diaspora and brings a significant collection of historical writings about women's experiences and identifications into this cross-disciplinary conversation. Importantly, it shifts discussion about women and the Irish diaspora away from the United States, and reasserts the importance of Britain for Irish women's migration, especially in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a number of contributors to this book consider how Irish women engage in the public life of the migrant community and thereby help to construct a diasporic identity, a significantly under-researched aspect in Irish diaspora studies.<sup>10</sup> We hope that this book will stimulate more interest in a conversation between other locations of the Irish diaspora and the dominant story about the USA and in the process bring into view the complexity and heterogeneity of Irish diasporan locations and experiences. Given its empirical and theoretical scope, then, this volume makes a significant contribution to the historical and contemporary analysis of Irish women and the diaspora. In addition to advancing theoretical considerations of Irish women and the diaspora, this book also contributes to the broader field of Irish feminist studies in the contributors' examination of identity, subjectivity and women's engagement with Irish public life in the diaspora. This introduction surveys the development of Irish diaspora studies, placing it in the context of recent work on gender, migration and Irish women and providing an indication of how the contributors to this book deepen our understanding of diaspora, boundaries and hybridity.

### **Historians and social scientists' use of the term 'diaspora' in Irish studies**

In 2003, Kevin Kenny outlined some of the problems with the adoption of the term 'diaspora' in Irish ethnic and migration studies.<sup>11</sup> Surveying the broadening out of its definition from classical dispersion and exile from homeland to encompass any type of migration or ethnic identity, Kenny called for a more precise usage of the term that focused on exploring the transnational connections between migrants and the 'home' country and placing this in a comparative framework with other ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> Kenny attached particular analytical value to exploring the notion of an Irish 'diasporic sensibility', in which the Irish abroad considered themselves to be connected through some measure of common, shared identity, providing examples of Irish nationalist political and trade union activity which demonstrated such a relationship between migrant

community and home.<sup>13</sup> Kenny's critique of the term 'diaspora' is largely based on the recent broadening of the traditional usage of the concept by one school of thought within diaspora studies (see Breda Grey's chapter in this book) and he largely ignores the diasporic research and theories that have stemmed from cultural studies and anthropology.<sup>14</sup>

Other historians have echoed Kenny's skeptical and cautious use of the term 'diaspora'. Drawing together three leading historians of Irish migration, a 'symposium' in the journal *Irish Economic and Social History* examined how Irish emigration could be explored through the analytical framework of diaspora. Don MacRaild echoed many of Kenny's concerns, arguing that historians should concentrate on finding evidence to demonstrate the existence of networks of communication that facilitated and maintained a diasporic consciousness among Irish migrants.<sup>15</sup> Enda Delaney discussed the need to avoid any labelling of the Irish diaspora as a unitary identity, emphasising the necessity in recognising the diversity of Irishness abroad and its complex, 'ambiguous' relationship with the notion of homeland.<sup>16</sup>

Such an approach, focused on mentalities and a multiplicity of Irish identities indicates ways in which historians can engage with broader theoretical discussions of diaspora. Cultural anthropologists have argued since the 1990s that the term diaspora captures the way in which people can live their lives in many different locations, be they physical or imagined, and in doing so experience a sense of identity and subjectivity that is also multiple and hybrid. In their recent book *Diaspora and Hybridity*, Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk argue that it is more helpful to think of diaspora less as a group of people and more as a process through which migrants can connect places of residence to 'intimate or material connections to other places'.<sup>17</sup> They demonstrate how the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy are important to an understanding of diaspora that stresses the multiple belongings of identity, where it is possible to be *from* one place but *of* many others.<sup>18</sup> Avtar Brah's concept of 'diaspora space' captures the hybrid nature of diasporic identity that connects these multiple locations. Brah suggests that in the process of the encounter and mixing of different migrant identities with those of the long-term settled, a place of settlement such as Britain becomes a diaspora space in which 'the genealogies of dispersion' are intertwined with 'those of "staying put"'.<sup>19</sup>

In an Irish context, Mary Hickman has called for the more traditional comparative migration studies advocated by some of the historians discussed above to be integrated with the theoretical approaches of sociology, cultural studies and anthropology, which have produced what she describes as the 'post-modern concept of diaspora'.<sup>20</sup> Marc Scully has taken up such an approach, using empirical research on Irish identities in England to explore how theories of diaspora and transnationalism can be used to explain the constitution of individual identities.<sup>21</sup> Hickman has also advocated the salience of diaspora space as a concept for the revisiting of national (re)formations. This entails a

re-examination of national (re)formations in order to scrutinise the impact of the presence of particular diasporas, and the confluence of many diasporas, on formative moments or processes in the (re)configuration of specific nation states. The lens of diaspora space can access the ways in which the discourses, practices, hierarchies and identities of present day societies are layered on those of previous immigrations, prior encounters and the new social relations they inaugurated.<sup>22</sup>

This book aims to explore the place of Irish women in the diaspora using both theoretical and empirical perspectives. In particular, it reflects on the gendered nature of diasporic identity and how Irish women are situated in the complex nexus of identities between Ireland and the diasporan Irish.

### **Gender, migration and diaspora: theoretical approaches**

Research on women, diaspora and diasporic identity is, though, still relatively underdeveloped. Much scholarly literature has appeared in the last thirty years exploring women's experience of migration and settlement.<sup>23</sup> Few, however, have focused on the gendered nature of diaspora or the experience women have had in developing a sense of diasporic identity. Instead, many valuable studies have examined how women's migration has been shaped by work and family. In particular, much research has concentrated on how women have become migratory in order to exploit the gendered nature of various labour markets, working in 'feminised domains' such as domestic and care work and aspects of the service industries.<sup>24</sup> Other studies argue that women's migration was largely shaped by family and family networks, further limiting the study of migrant women to private concerns of the home and to work that was largely considered gendered and unproductive.<sup>25</sup> When the concept of diaspora has been added to these types of study, the focus has tended to remain on a gendered definition of work and family.<sup>26</sup> While an important collection of interdisciplinary essays, edited by Marlou Schrover and Eileen Janes Yeo, has recently demonstrated the need to explore the more public aspects of women's migration, through associational culture, politics, citizenship and other areas, they too recognise the limitations of gendered readings of diaspora.<sup>27</sup> Yeo's essay, especially, captures how, in order to understand women's role in diaspora, it is necessary to focus attention on the family home as a site for the formation of ideas about 'homeland', a key component of some diasporic identities.<sup>28</sup>

Research on Irish women's experience of diaspora stands out, however, as leading the debate about the gendered nature of diaspora. The work of Bronwen Walter and Breda Gray, both contributors to this book, has demonstrated how concepts of diaspora can throw light on Irish women's lives abroad, from work on Irish women's 'invisibility' in Britain, to the gendered narratives of identity experienced by women in the Irish diaspora. In her book *Outsiders Inside* (2001), Walter argues that Avtar Brah's concept of 'diaspora space' is vital to understanding the complex identities and sense of belonging experienced by Irish

women living in Britain and the United States, where they 'may be perceived as outsiders in their cultural affiliation as "Irish", and to patriarchal societies as women, but considered insiders as "white" people'.<sup>29</sup> Breda Gray has problematised notions of diaspora, using the concept to explore and subvert ideas about a unified Irish identity, either at home or abroad. She examines the lived experience of Irish women's lives in both Britain and Ireland and concludes that diasporic identities function in both countries. In Ireland, women's identities were shaped by the experience of family and friends in Britain. Echoing Gilroy's notion of 'double consciousness', Gray suggests that those who moved to the UK, through a process of 'displacement and hybridisation', experienced a diasporic identity that shifted constantly between the two countries. Moreover, these women's sense of belonging was shaped by the desire and possibility of returning to the 'homeland', demonstrating their 'roots' in Ireland and the 'routes' travelled between Ireland and Britain.<sup>30</sup> Louise Ryan's research has also been fundamental to expanding our understanding of Irish women's experiences of living in Britain across the length of the twentieth century. Although not engaging directly with concepts of diaspora, Ryan's important work does draw upon a number of theoretical perspectives, such as social network theory.<sup>31</sup>

Walter, Gray and Ryan, then, all indicate ways in which sociological, anthropological and cultural theories can be applied to the experience of Irish women in Britain, providing a necessary comparative framework, which is explored further in this book. Most recently, they have been involved in the first special edition of a journal devoted to Irish women and diaspora. While recognising the continued resonance of Akenson's characterisation of the absence of women in studies of the Irish diaspora, this volume of *Irish Studies Review* took as its point of departure post-'Celtic Tiger' Ireland and the renewed forms of migration that have occurred in recent years.<sup>32</sup> *Women and Irish Diaspora Identities* builds significantly on this research, having grown out of a symposium organised in conjunction with the John Hume Institute for Global Irish Studies at University College Dublin in 2010.<sup>33</sup> This event brought together some of the leading authorities on Irish women and diaspora with emerging historians in this area. The discussions that emerged from this symposium are reflected in this volume, especially the emphasis on how theoretical perspectives can inform our understanding of Irish women's migratory and diasporic experiences.

## Overview and organisation of the book

This book is divided into three parts. The first groups together the chapters by Daly and Gray which introduce the key historiographical concepts and theoretical discussions of Irish women and diaspora. The second part explores case studies of Irish women in Britain, focusing on the 'medical diaspora', the role of religion in shaping a diasporic identity, and public displays of Irishness, discussed in chapters by Ryan, Wildman, Redmond and Hickman. The final part examines



Irish women's experience of diaspora in the British world, combining the chapters by Walter, Kehoe and MacPherson in an examination of Canada, Scotland and New Zealand.

Mary Daly opens the volume by surveying Irish female migrants and the Irish female diaspora since the famine. Daly considers the gendered nature of migration and the role women played in the construction of diasporic identities, through their work in the home, in the Catholic Church and in the under-researched arena of ethnic political organisations, suggesting many directions for future research. Focusing in particular on the migrant decision, Daly indicates important ways in which the Irish diaspora can be seen as gendered. Moreover, she argues that women's role in the articulation of diasporic identities could be fruitfully explored if scholars paid greater attention to associational culture, in which women played a key part in creating hybrid identities that connected different Irish diaspora locations.

Following Daly's historical framework, the chapter by Breda Gray provides an important theoretical exploration of the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora, considering how these ideas may be used as conceptual frameworks for the study of Irish women's migration. Gray makes a key distinction between the two terms, arguing that transnationalism may be used as a lens through which to frame questions about networks that transcend a national level, while diaspora, in the three approaches she identifies, is always about the politics of belonging, in particular diasporic notions of homeland. Drawing on Brubaker's recent theoretical work, Gray argues that diasporas are more a 'category of practice' than bounded groups. This chapter places her earlier research on Irish women in Britain and the Republic of Ireland during the 1990s in the context of the more recent theories of diaspora articulated by Sudesh Mishra that emphasise the de-territorialised and de-centered nature of diasporic subjectivities.<sup>34</sup> Gray explores how transnationalism and diaspora may be gendered, examining the heteronormative and nationalist framing of diaspora and how this may be challenged. To demonstrate the centrality of gender in diaspora as a 'category of practice' Gray draws on her own past research to offer examples of how nationalist heterosexual norms act on Irish women's aspirations and shape their lives in the diaspora. She also points to how the theoretical potential offered by diaspora can be identified in practice by focusing on where boundary erosion and hybridity occurs across the scales of nation-state, women's bodies and women's lives.

In Part 2, Louise Ryan develops this book's theoretical engagement and applies it to a case study of interviews with Irish nurses who arrived in Britain between the 1940s and 1980s, exploring in particular these women's relationship with Catholicism and how this shaped a diasporic Irishness. Ryan examines the sociological concept of boundaries and how it may be applied to Irish women's experience of religion in postwar Britain. She argues that religion was a key site on which Irish women in Britain negotiated their identity, functioning as a 'bright' and 'blurry' boundary which both helped their integration in their new