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Elva Johnston

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE FIELD DAY ANTHOLOGY AND THE INVENTION OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN

The publication of the long awaited fourth and fifth volumes of the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing would seem to mark the moment when female voices are accepted and celebrated in ‘mainstream’ history and literature. Women and their traditions are given space and expert elucidation in a period that ranges from the early Middle Ages to the present; hidden Irelands, linguistic, cultural and sexual are revealed; voices compete and converse in a variety of traditions. These volumes are an invention and discovery of a host of Irelands.

The task of reviewing these two volumes is formidable because the required expertise goes well beyond the competence of any single individual. Fortunately, my task is more modest. As a historian of early medieval Ireland, I propose to examine those contributions that impinge on my own field. My focus will be on the first part of Volume IV, ‘Medieval to Modern, 600–1900’ (pp.1–457), especially on the sections dealing with early medieval Ireland. These contributions, and some relevant texts elsewhere, make up a relatively small proportion of the two volumes. Taken as a unit, however, they are the largest modern collection of early medieval texts in translation relating to Irish women. As such they are important: they present a substantial body of material together and in accessible format for the first time. This early medieval anthology can be considered in its own right, but it does interact with the wider Field Day project and I will make observations on this interaction. I will
also examine the material’s significance for what might broadly be described as the study of women in Ireland, their history and their writings.

From the outset the volumes make a key distinction and this is pinpointed in their subheading: *Irish women’s writings and traditions*. The difference between these writings and traditions is generally that between those women who wrote themselves and those who did not. In the second category there is a further fundamental division between those whose voices are recorded at first hand, the case with many of the women featured in the oral traditions, and those who appear solely in the work of male writers at a far remove. The latter situation holds true for the early medieval Irish material. Now this is a characteristic of early medieval writing everywhere for, due to the predominance of a clerical literate elite, literacy was largely a male activity. Thus, women are most often represented through the lenses of male and clerical authorship with all that this implies. Most obviously it implies that scholars deal with highly ideological representations of women but not with the direct perceptions of women themselves. This is a crucial distinction to which I will return. Still, it is worth noting that if the editors had decided to use female authorship as the determining criterion for inclusion within the volumes, there would have been no early medieval Irish contribution, with the possible exception of the famous lament of Caillech Béirre (pp.111–15) included in *Field Day IV*. This in itself throws a telling light over the culture of early medieval Ireland, a culture that was elitist, hierarchical and deeply conservative.

*Field Day* Volume IV serves its readers well in providing snapshots of female representations from that culture. Its scope is broad, both thematically and linguistically. Besides Irish and Latin, the editors consider writings in Norman French and Old Norse. Moreover, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, the general editor of the
section ‘Medieval to Modern, 600–1900’, remarks that she had wished to get away from the overly romanticised view of medieval Irish women, largely a product of the Gaelic revival, and replace it with one true to the complex and heterogeneous sources (p.1). In this she and her fellow editors are largely successful. There are no sentiments such as those expressed by Helena Concannon in her Daughters of Banba, first published in 1922, where she evoked Gaelic princesses clad ‘in their blonde, blossom-like, foam-bright beauty’. Instead, the approach is far more rigorous. The contributors must be congratulated for avoiding the easy option of a Celtic soft-focus.

But not all dangers are wholly avoided. Another common misapprehension is that before its Christianisation early Ireland was a paradise of Celtic matriarchy. While this belief, a product of wish-fulfilment rather than of scholarship, is eschewed, Christianity provides an alarmingly easy target. A hard-hearted Christian patriarchy is just as misleading as a misty Celtic matriarchy. For example, Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s otherwise excellent introduction to the legal material gives Christianity an overly hard time (esp. pp.6–7). In fact there is no real reason to believe that early Christians were more patriarchal than their pagan counterparts and some evidence to the contrary. It is too often forgotten that Christianity appealed to many as a radical and liberating creed, especially in its earliest centuries. Here was one religion that powerfully asserted the equality of all believers before God, regardless of race, class or gender. The reality may have turned out differently for many, but not all Christians were merciless patriarchs.

A deep distrust of Christianity runs through some sections. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha can trace a direct line from the Church Fathers to the Magdalen Laundries (p.45) without taking into account the passage of a millennium and a half,
a period of time that saw enormous changes in religion and society. In a similar spirit, she asserts that the model of the female religious life was structured around an imitation of Mary rather than a direct imitation of Christ because the latter was deemed inappropriate for women (p.3, p.47). This is simply not true. The Marian model is not used to any great extent in the Lives of Irish female saints with the exception of the remarkable Brigit. On the other hand, all Christians were expected to take Christ as their model, for he was the saviour of all people, not just men. This very point is made by the Irish female saint Canir in a medieval account of a verbal duel between her and St Senán, the abbot of Scattery Island.

Ni messa Crist, ar ni lugha thainic do thathcreic ban inás do thathcreic fher. Ni lugha roces ardaigh ban inás ardaigh fher. [Christ is no worse than you, for he came to redeem women no less than to redeem men. He did not suffer less for the sake of women than for the sake of men].

Unfortunately this sentiment, an echo of the more radical and less misogynist strand of Christianity, is not represented.

The other major strand of Christianity, one that was misogynist as well as deeply distrustful of sexuality in all its forms, is constantly highlighted. It is the major focus of Ní Dhonnchadha’s section ‘Mary, Eve and the Church, c. 600–1800’ (pp.45–165). This rich and representative selection of poetical and prose texts is a neat literary counterpoint to Ó Corráin’s miscellany of legal material (pp 6–44). The juxtaposition of these two sections shows very clearly to what extent the languages of law and literature were intertwined. Thus, Ó Corráin chooses literary narratives to elucidate legal points (pp.35–41) and Ní Dhonnchadha excerpts from Irish Canon
Law (pp.99–102). Both editors skilfully use male-authored texts to underline the generally circumscribed positions of women in early medieval Irish society. These texts are socially aware, ideological and prescriptive.

The religious focus of many of the early medieval texts is balanced by ‘Gormlaith and her Sisters, c. 750–1800’ (pp.166–249), which emphasises the socio-political world and the roles of aristocratic women. The aristocratic emphasis is not surprising; the elitism of early medieval Irish society was such that non-aristocrats, male and female, are rarely visible. The editor, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, takes on a formidable task here. Most texts that survive from the early medieval period were written by clerics and it is often hard to identify an authentically secular voice, for secular content does not guarantee a distinctive secular ideology. This problem is somewhat ameliorated by the close link between aristocratic and ecclesiastical interests. However, the distinction between the two remains very uncertain, especially for the period before c. 1000.

Despite these drawbacks, Ní Dhonnchadha openly sets out to depict a part of Irish society that was not in thrall to a Christian world-view and one where she can explore ‘the diverse ways in which proactive sexuality was constructed and gendered’ (p.166). This raises at least two important issues. Firstly, the so-called Christian world-view is nowhere defined and the unsatisfactory assumption seems to be that it is simply the ideology of misogynist clerics. Secondly, the thorny question of genuine female input into the texts needs to be resolved. Ni Dhonnchadha interestingly suggests a solution. She points out that literary texts, in particular, operated within a patronage driven environment that was undoubtedly aristocratic and often secular. Furthermore, the intended audiences of these texts would have included both men and women. As a result, Ní Dhonnchadha convincingly argues
that we should consider the large stake of women as readers, recipients and patrons, especially from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards (p.4, p.166). For example, in ‘Courts and Coteries I, 900–1600’ (pp.293–340), this allows her to seriously consider bardic poetry as a source for female aspirations. The approach works extremely well; the division between the Christian world of clerics and the non-Christian world of their secular counterparts does not. Christianity, however localised and distinctive, was the dominant force in early medieval Irish society.

This dominance did not and could not exclude native traditions. The local fusion of Christian and native is considered by Máire Herbert in ‘Society and Myth, c. 700–1300’ (pp.250–72). This is a short but coherent and effective contribution, centring on the links between women, the landscape, sovereignty and death. It is an excellent example of how local traditions and native imagery were incorporated into the chameleon Christian culture of early medieval Ireland. This imagery, as Herbert ably demonstrates, was highly gendered. Women were apparently in positions of power. When examined more closely it turns out that their power was otherworldly, symbolic and moreover, one that served to reinforce the much less empowering gender stereotypes that existed in the ‘real’ world. Herbert’s contribution is mirrored and continued in Máirín Nic Eoin’s ‘Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300–1900’ (pp.273–92). Nic Eoin takes the image of female sovereignty, which was so prominent in Herbert’s section, and shows how it acquired specific political meanings that proved remarkably durable and highly flexible. Female sovereignty became the personification of Ireland, a personification that meant very different things at different times.

One of the strengths of these two sections is that themes of continuity are not highlighted at the expense of change. Herbert’s early medieval Ireland is shown to be
a unique culture in its own right and not merely the generator of gendered imagery that survived up to the modern era and into the English language. This vital acknowledgement of differences, in particular those between early medieval and modern experiences and texts, is sometimes blurred. Throughout ‘Medieval to Modern’ there is a tendency to treat modern survivals of earlier imagery as an addendum. This creates a myth of false continuity and denies the huge cultural gulf that divides the modern island from early medieval Ireland. An image may survive but its context can be radically transformed, not once but many times over. Pearse’s ‘áille na háille’ (p.291) is worlds apart from early Ireland’s female representatives of sovereignty. In the end, the sections that work best are those that deal in centuries rather than millennia.

Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha’s ‘Irish Medical Writing, 1400–1600’ (pp 341–55), follows the former approach. Like Herbert she deals with a relatively self-contained body of writing. Thus, Nic Dhonnchadha takes a discrete genre of Irish medical texts and, while recognising the existence of early medieval native approaches, she shows how these were superseded by ones that owed their inspiration to Classical and Arabic medical traditions. These fascinating writings were produced by an exclusively male profession; female amateur practitioners existed only on the fringes and even there were few in number. It could be argued that actual female bodies lie behind these medical writings and this, presumably, accounts for their inclusion within Field Day IV. Still, one might justifiably ask to what extent the anatomised female body of these texts was in any sense real.

This sense of anatomisation is not simply medical and raises broad questions. Prominent among them is a point I raised earlier, the distinction that needs to be made between writings by women and female images constructed by men. This is
central to the entire ‘Medieval to Modern’ project and is also a crux in the relationship between the medieval sections and the anthology as a whole. The chronological-cum-thematic organisation of the fourth and fifth volumes of Field Day affirms continuity. Underneath they are deeply riven. For instance, apart from ‘Medieval to Modern’, the anthology is replete with the voices of women. This dichotomy between female voice and male representation is reinforced by the modern addenda to some of the medieval contributions. The decision in ‘Medieval to Modern’ to focus on representations of women and the male construction of femininity is generally ignored once it becomes possible to view being female and the formation of female sexual identity through the writings of actual women. This, of course, is one of the main reasons for the existence of Field Day IV and V. It was clearly and justifiably felt that the voices of women needed to be picked out from a patriarchal clamour. Nevertheless, it seems to me, that the differing organising principles behind ‘Medieval to Modern’ and later sections jar.

The feeling is reinforced by the lack of links made between female images constructed by men and the actual lives of women. This is a pity because there are several possible bridges between writings and traditions, bridges that could enhance depictions of the heterogeneity of female experiences over time. Despite this, opportunities are missed. A good example is the career of the famous Aífe, daughter of Diarmait mac Murchadha and the wife of Strongbow. Aífe plays a central role in many traditions, medieval and modern. Her life is caught up with narratives of gender, identity and colonialism, for she is a part of many contested ‘stories’ of Ireland. Aífe’s significance is perceptively discussed by Ní Dhonchadhá (p.167) and she includes Gerald of Wales’ memorable image of her in the anthology (p.197). Aífe was clearly a well-known figure in her lifetime, even if she was still unburdened
by the freight of later perceptions. Yet, a reader of ‘Medieval to Modern’ would have no idea that she was also powerful in her own right; she was not merely the pawn of competing men and competing cultures. Aífe was a wealthy woman at a time when poverty was the norm. We possess charters of property confirmation from Aífe and her sister Derbforgaill. These are tucked away in Mary O’Dowd’s ‘Property, Work and Home: Women and the Economy, c. 1170–1850’ (pp. 472–73) in Volume V. Hundreds of pages and an entire volume separate the representation of Aífe from her reality. As a result the sense of her as an empowered woman, capable of choice, is severely diluted. Here was an opportunity to compare representation with reality and a chance to look at a living woman as well as anatomised fragments.

It could be argued that the fourth and fifth volumes of Field Day are necessarily fragmentary, especially in those sections that deal with earlier periods. From the bare trickle of ‘Medieval to Modern’, the voices of women flood into an ocean. On the other hand Field Day unabashedly calls itself an Anthology of Irish Writing. And, this is no ordinary anthology because Field Day ambitiously sets out to establish a canon of female representation and writing. Canon-making, at all times, is a fraught business, particularly as modern intellectual environments are often hostile to such undertakings. The days of straightforwardly proclaiming the Great Tradition are gone. Where do Field Day IV and V stand in this context?

The answer is bound up with major methodological issues. From the historian’s viewpoint this includes the whole notion of a separate ‘women’s history’. While women’s history is relatively recent as an academic discipline it does have an ancient past, with roots stretching deep into Classical antiquity. Furthermore, women’s history flourished in the Middle Ages, the starting point for Field Day. A good Continental example is Christine de Pizan’s The book of the City of Ladies
dating from the fifteenth century. An Irish representative is the earlier, but male-authored, *Banshenchas*, a text that strangely enough is not included in the anthology. These and similar texts show that in spite or, perhaps, because of the patriarchal structures of literacy there was a niche for female writing and writing about real women. Yet this niche could potentially reinforce the mainstream by upholding the status quo. Even now, one of women’s history’s drawbacks is that it sometimes treats women in isolation from men and says very little about the significance of sexual roles in social life and their central importance in the process of historical change. To a great extent *Field Day* is part of this tradition. However, since the 1980s this tradition has been vigorously challenged and often superseded by approaches which draw on the histories of sexuality and gender. It is no longer enough to have a ‘her’ story focused solely on the lives of individual women. Indeed, it cannot be assumed that categories such as men and women are transparent and uncontested. These are obvious enough points to anyone familiar with the disciplines involved. Still, they are worth repeating because they explain why *Field Day* appears so methodologically conservative. The two volumes are very much the product of the great debates about sexuality and gender that have convulsed Irish society since the 1970s. They certainly offer interesting insights into these debates but they are firmly books of the twentieth century.

It is ironic then that, in some respects, the most modern sections of *Field Day* are the medieval ones. This is because the editors of these sections are dealing with a culture that has only the most tenuous connections, if any, with modern Ireland. Their excellent selections of female representations are not the product of the painful modernisation of twentieth century Ireland. The contributors to ‘Medieval to
Modern’ must be commended for creating their own anthology, one that will stand the test of time.
1 Angela Bourke et al (eds), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volume IV: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002); *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volume V: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).

2 A true trailblazer is R. Thurneysen et al (eds), *Studies in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939).


6 If anything, Aife’s role became more prominent over time. A recent useful discussion is John McCafferty, “‘Precedent Covenants’ Daniel Maelise’s Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife and the Writers of Irish History”, in Judith Devlin, Howard B. Clarke (eds), *European Encounters: Essays in Memory of Albert Lovett* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003), pp.270–81; a good example to what extent she has entered popular consciousness is Morgan Llywelyn, Michael Scott, *Ireland: a Graphic History* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1995), chapter 5.

7 This popular text is readily available in translation. An example is Rosalind Brown-Grant, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (London: Penguin, 1999).