

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Second World War and Irish Women: An Oral History* by Mary Muldowney

Review by: Maura Cronin

Source: *Saothar*, Vol. 32 (2007), pp. 103-104

Published by: Irish Labour History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23201452>

Accessed: 30-11-2018 15:36 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Irish Labour History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Saothar*

the red menace card, and the *Standard* newspaper, has the opposite effect to that intended. The last third of the book is little more than a recapitulation of old polemics.

The author takes the threat of a communist takeover of the labour movement in the 1940s quite seriously and describes O'Rahilly, somewhat surprisingly, as a friend of the labour movement. His source is the *Standard* newspaper, which Morrissey omits to mention was so close to the Catholic hierarchy that the bishops discussed buying it, before deciding it was unnecessary as it was performing perfectly well as their mouthpiece already. Morrissey's interpretations of other events can also be a little lopsided. For instance he describes William Martin Murphy in 1913 as an employer 'who prided himself on being fair to his workers'. The blame for the Dublin Lockout is placed squarely on Larkin, who, 'filled with confidence . . . directed his attention to subduing the commercial empire of William Martin Murphy'. The author omits any reference to the establishment of a conciliation body for Dublin that summer, which was achieved while Murphy was out of circulation due to illness, and which he sabotaged by a systematic purge of ITGWU members from the tramway company and *Independent* newspapers. All the contemporary evidence suggests that Larkin was forced by his remaining tramway members to bring them out on strike before they were all sacked. The appalling behaviour of the major established churches - especially the Catholic Church - during the Lockout is also glossed over.

Having said all that, there is much of value in Morrissey's biography of a man who was arguably the most important figure in the Irish labour movement during the War of Independence and the formative years of the modern Irish state. O'Brien identified emotionally, as well as intellectually, with the 1916 rebels. This applied most obviously in the case of James Connolly, an attachment that Larkin strikingly, if cruelly, characterised as living 'in the ghostly mantle of a man who is now dead in the flesh'. O'Brien's internment after the Rising brought him into contact with key figures such as Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins. Without him the anti-conscription strike of 1918 and munitions strike in 1920 would either not have occurred or been much less effective. This role was made possible by O'Brien's achievement, with Tom Foran, in rebuilding the ITGWU after 1916. O'Brien's iron self-discipline, political cunning, vision and strategic judgement, as well as his outstanding ability as an organiser, were vital.

Morrissey is not sparing of O'Brien's ruthlessness on occasion. When he formed an alliance with Sinn Féin on Dublin corporation after the 1920 municipal election, O'Brien insisted on hounding the old unionist Town Clerk Henry Campbell out of office, insisting that he be dismissed rather than allowed to resign. He was equally ruthless in getting rid of ITGWU Assistant Secretary Seamus Hughes, whom he saw as a rival. Today the treatment Hughes received would be seen as constructive dismissal. Morrissey deduces that the strains of rebuilding the union, including the life and death struggle with Larkin for control of the union during an era of major civil unrest and war, desensitised O'Brien, making him cold, calculating and vindictive towards his enemies. At the same time he could

display great kindness, particularly to the families of old comrades. He was certainly forbearing in his treatment of James Connolly's son Roddy, who lacerated him as a reformist, and he regularly helped the family of Tom McPartlin, one of the leaders of the 1913 Lockout, who died suddenly in 1923.

McPartlin's daughter Maureen told Morrissey of O'Brien's long-standing but discreet liaison with a married woman. The woman's identity is not revealed or how long the liaison lasted, but it caused considerable tension within the O'Brien household, especially with his sister Cissie when their mother was dying. However, the two relationships that dominated O'Brien's life were those with Larkin and Connolly. Tom Morrissey is very perceptive in his analysis of them. O'Brien was keenly conscious that 'he was not a leader of men - in the way of the striking personality, physical presence, and the sense of mission and gift of oratory enjoyed by Larkin; or in the ideas, presence and self-belief possessed by Connolly. Rather, he approached social reform as a planner and organiser, a politician always practising the art of the possible'. With experience and success in achieving his objectives came greater self-confidence and a contempt for opponents. But ultimately his fate was remarkably similar to that of William Martin Murphy. Both men prevailed against Larkin in the titanic struggles of 1913 and 1923-4, but it is Larkin whose statue stands in O'Connell Street and who epitomises a radical vision of a better world, not the sanctimonious capitalist, or the calculating union bureaucrat.

Padraig Yeates

Mary Muldowney, **The Second World War and Irish Women: An Oral History** (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2007), pp. x + 238, €55hb, €27.50pb

This book, based on interviews with twenty-seven Dublin- and Belfast-born women, explores the Irish female experience during World War II. Combining personal testimonies with the evidence of contemporary newspapers, official publications, mass observation records and privately held ephemera, it discusses the changes initiated and/or accelerated by the war, as well as the more hidden experiences of 'ordinary women' in two states with contrasting experiences of the conflict, i.e. Northern Ireland and the neutral southern state. The study emphasises that, despite the undoubtedly contrasting official attitudes to the war, the general experience in the two states was in some ways remarkably similar. Both northern and southern governments were tardy in the development of welfare legislation and the provision of housing, both were under-prepared for the practical problems of wartime, and citizens (especially women) in both jurisdictions reacted in similar ways to both change and continuity. At times, indeed, the remembered experience seems so similar that the reader has to check back in order to remember whose testimony is being discussed, and about which community and jurisdiction.

At one level, the war was an obvious source of

opportunity for women, particularly young women. The expansion of the WAAF, ATS, Food Control Committees and Air Raid Warden Service, as well as the war-related creation of employment, provided new opportunities not only to female residents of the United Kingdom but to young women from southern Ireland who were willing to move there. In some cases this accelerated change, 'upsetting the gender contract' by introducing women into male occupational preserves. In most contexts, however, this female ingress was regarded as temporary – i.e. for the duration of the war – and the role assigned to these women was in most cases tailored to their 'natural' domestic role. Moreover, accepted pay differentials between male and female wartime-related employment continued – varying from 30 to almost 80 per cent according to the sector and the work involved. This much we know from previous studies. What Muldowney's work offers is a personal insight (admittedly largely retrospective) into women's own reactions to these combined changes and continuities. For those women who 'joined up' or became involved in war-related work, the motives varied. Some wished to 'stop Hitler'. Others were less conscious of any political or patriotic issues, and headed for Britain because careers like nursing were more accessible than at home, or because they wished to taste the independence of working elsewhere. Some had an adventurous streak and chose service abroad, thus experiencing the combined vulnerability and opportunity of serving in a largely male environment far from home. Still others experienced the side-effects of war by staying at home and 'making do' on reduced resources, either as auxiliaries to their mothers or in their own capacity as housewives and workers (either full- or part-time).

At first one is prompted to wonder if the book is misnamed and whether the war had any role at all in shaping many of the developments and issues discussed – the acceptance (including by women themselves) of the prime female role as home maker and mother, the adulation of women's thrift and capacity for improvisation, even the advertisers' identification of patriotism and beauty. Should the book have been entitled *Irish Women in the 1940s*? But it soon becomes clear that this in itself is a reflection of the realities of the time – an indication that despite its life-changing influences, the war had a minimal effect in some spheres. Women continued to be seen as primarily ministering to the needs of men and many saw themselves thus – particularly the Coleraine hotelier who in 1939 berated Craigavon over the smallness of the butter ration allowed to men who were 'going out to fight for us and also fight for both King and Country'.

The testimony collected and analysed by Mary Muldowney is particularly valuable in opening windows on elusive issues, less accessible in documentary sources: the undermining of individuals' dignity by the public nature of the treatment of contagious skin conditions like scabies; the ways in which status and respectability were manifested (sometimes rousing resentment among the neighbours); the effect of bombing (obviously more relevant to Belfast than to Dublin) in revealing how 'the other half lived' to those more comfortably off people who accommodated displaced families; and the combined enforcement and erosion of

neighbourliness in the conditions of wartime. These and similar issues might, indeed, have been explored even more fully, and the significance of throw-away remarks and incidental references in the personal testimonies discussed in a more comprehensive way so as to make the most of the more 'hidden' evidence. Take, for instance, the previously mentioned Coleraine woman hotelier's letter to Craigavon, in which the 'P.S' [punctuation thus] briefly raised the curtain on the complex combination of deference and condescension in 'traditional' women's attitudes towards men: 'Years ago I read a speech made by Miss Pankhurst I don't know if she is alive yet she was trying to get votes for women and in her speech she said I'd be willing to do six months in gaol to get sense boxed into men's heads'.

Some criticisms may be made. The first – a matter for the publisher rather than the author – is the failure to include the primary material consulted (admittedly comprehensively referenced in endnotes) in the source list at the back of the book. While this may save paper, it makes it difficult for the research-minded reader to identify and follow up primary evidence. The second is the relegation to the endnotes of material that would better be integrated into the text – explanations of the nature of certain diseases, brief biographical details of individuals, further illustrations of points raised. The third, which in some ways repeats what is already stated above, is that certain issues, which the interviewees' testimonies do cover, might have been discussed in more depth and in a more 'leisurely' fashion. That said, however, this is a really valuable and interesting study. It not only explores the world of past experience through the medium of memory, but also discusses the challenge of using such retrospective material, and is a salutary reminder that past and present sometimes merge, that individual experience may be only marginally shaped by major events, and that timely interviewing can preserve a record that would otherwise be irretrievably lost.

Maura Cronin

Simon Prince, **Northern Ireland's '68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles** (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2007), 272pp, €65hb, €24.99pb

One of the loudest cheers I heard in the Bogside during the Free Derry era came in response to the cry: 'Up against the wall, mother-fuckers!' The demand was the last item in the ten-point programme of the Black Panther Party (BPP), enunciated in rich, booming R&B tones in a propaganda film projected against Free Derry Wall in the small hours of a riotous night. The cheer, I think, had as much to do with the daring of the language as with the sentiment of the slogan. But the reaction – and the fact that the film was on show in the open-air freedom of the area at all – did signal the extent to which young Bogsideers felt a connection, even a sense of fellow-feeling, with the Panthers, then under murderous assault by police forces across the US. I recall, too, an AGM of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in St Mary's Hall in Belfast which descended into fractious rowdiness when someone (Michael Farrell, if memory serves), proposed that we send a message