

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes
*Female Education in Ireland 1700–1900:
Minerva or Madonna.*

Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007. 182 pp.

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This is the first book to provide a general overview of the education of girls and women in Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The four chapters focus respectively on teaching and learning in charitable, elementary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. Judith Harford, the author of a specialized work on women and higher education, contributes to two chapters.

A number of themes emerge here that are common to the historical literature of other European countries and North America: an ambivalence about female education in general that translated into structural impediments at more advanced levels; and a gendered curriculum, both academic and practical, that was the subject of much debate—the “special sphere” argument. Peculiar to the Irish context, however, was the Catholic-Protestant divide that was accentuated by ethno-political considerations. It wasn’t just that schools were organized along sectarian lines, which they were, but rather that Protestant educational initiatives were usually to the forefront and often compelled the Catholic Church to reconsider its more conservative stance on female education, at least in some respects.

Religious rivalry was intense in the provision of education for the poor, especially in the nineteenth century when Protestant organizations established schools to proselytize “papists.” Catholics responded with their own network of orphanages and reformatories, with the Sisters of Mercy playing a leading role. The great fear was that poor girls would turn to vice for a living; the institutions provided a rudimentary education emphasizing moral indoctrination and the mastery of work habits required of domestic servants. We now know from the *States of Fear* television documentary of 1999 and subsequent revelations, of the horrendous abuse of institutionalized children at the hands of religious congregations in the twentieth century. The authors

do not explore this theme in the earlier century, perhaps because oral testimony is missing and congregation archives remain inaccessible.

The education of girls in primary schools (or in the National System, as it was called) forms the subject of my favourite chapter in the book. There is an excellent account of the gendered curriculum and its obsession with needlework, and readings that warned against creaking shoes, rustling garments, and female foibles such as vanity. We learn that towards the end of the nineteenth century cooking instruction was introduced at a growing number of girls' schools in the hope that "if Irish cookery were better, Irish husbands would be more sober." Even with the advantage of over a century of hindsight, it's not clear if these twin objectives were ever realized.

The chapter on secondary education gives deserving attention to the pioneering work of Isabella Tod and Anne Jellicoe in establishing schools for bourgeois Protestant girls in Belfast and Dublin. The nuns felt compelled to follow suit since they feared that ambitious Catholic families might send their daughters to Protestant institutions. Schools on both sides of the religious divide were private and fee-paying, but some public monies became available to those whose students achieved success in the examinations organized under the Intermediate Education Act of 1878. The authors provide a perceptive analysis of the impact of these competitive exams on how female abilities were perceived; girls were able to demonstrate academic excellence, often to the dismay of the "appropriate sphere" people.

A similar development enabled women to make a breakthrough in higher education. The existing universities, Trinity and the Queen's Colleges, were closed to them. The Royal University, founded in 1879, was an examining body that provided no instruction, but its exams were open equally to males and females. Protestant and Catholic girls' secondary schools began to offer advanced courses to prepare students for these exams. The Dominican and Loreto nuns played a key role among Catholic congregations here, although they had to overcome the misgivings of their bishops who thought it inappropriate for women to compete with men academically. But compete they did and success in Royal University exams pried open the gates of higher learning. In 1883 women were admitted to classes at the Queen's College; Belfast and other universities later followed the lead. There was still much debate about the potential negative effects of too much education—a loss of virtue, or femininity, for example—arguments that were not unique to Ireland. The idea of separate women's colleges was also hotly debated, but it lost out ultimately to coeducation.

The book ends rather abruptly. While the appendix contains a number of interesting archival artifacts, there is no concluding chapter providing a theoretical or thematic analysis. The subtitle, *Minerva or Madonna*, therefore goes unexamined, which is a pity as it could well have served as a creative springboard to such an analysis. This is a minor criticism, however, and I wish to emphasize that this is a fine piece of historical writing and most worthy of our attention.