

Landscape, Space, and Gender

Their Role in the Construction of Female Identity in

by *Sighe Bhreathnach-Lynch*

Se basant sur les questions qui mettent en relation les paysages, l'espace et les sexes en art, cet article examine comment les nationalistes, dans un effort concerté pour affirmer leur masculinité comme caractéristique essentielle du Gael, ont marqué le concept de l'Irlandaise idéale.

This paper explores how issues centring on landscape, space, and gender intersected with the construction of a new Irish post-colonial identity. In the decades following political independence in 1922 the image of Ireland and the Irish projected by successive governments was that of a bleak but beautiful countryside, peopled exclusively by



Figure 1: Paul Henry, "The Potato Diggers," oil on canvas, c.1912
Collection, National Gallery of Ireland

a sturdy Gaelic-speaking, Catholic people. This construct provided an instantly recognizable and different identity from its former ruler Britain, which was perceived as urban, English-speaking, and Protestant. The determination to be different in every way was further reinforced by projecting the Irish female as chaste, unsophisticated, even unworldly, whose sole role within the new state was that of mother and homemaker. Structures to support this stereotype were instigated in legislation, in the formation of a new constitution, and in Roman Catholic church law. By fixing the position and role of women, as well as defining the very nature of womanhood, the new state could maintain a patriarchy already firmly in place during centuries of British rule.

In the visual arts, this image of Ireland and the Irish was sustained by numerous paintings of the west of Ireland, now promoted as the "real" Ireland. Many of them included women, set against a backdrop of the landscape of the West, dressed in peasant costume (Figure 1). This kind of representation helped to anchor Irish women to a rural identity while at the same time reinforce the supposed links between the female, nature, and nurturing. Intersecting with that model was the Virgin Mary as signifier of moral purity and sexual innocence. This article examines one important aspect of these ideological discourses surrounding Irish female identity: the concerted effort by more zealous nationalists to assert masculinity as the essential characteristic of the "Gael" (the new Irishman) and how this impacted on the construct of the ideal Irish woman (see Nash).

With the coming into being of the Irish Free State in 1922, the idea of creating an Irish identity, separate and different from that of its erstwhile rule became an imperative (see Brown 79–101). So-called "true" Irishness now became exclusively linked to the idea of an ancient and noble pre-conquest past, with a single Gaelic tradition, culture, and language. At the same time there was a move towards a more masculine national identity. The conquered, now free, needed to assert their strength and prowess; thus the Celt (characterized in the science of ethnography in the nineteenth century as a feminine people) metamorphosed into the manly Gael and the land chosen as worthy of the Gael was the western seaboard, a corner of Ireland perceived by writers, artists, and nationalists as the cradle of Irish civilization.

What was so special about this part of the countryside and why did it exercise such a hold on people's political and cultural aspirations? Geographically it is a place of extraordinary wild beauty, a landscape of rugged mountains below which, stretching to the edge of the Atlantic, lies flat bog-land and coastal fields. Those who lived there

Newly-Independent Ireland

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spoke Irish, dressed in distinctive costume, and pursued a lifestyle which appeared to be untouched by wars, political upheavals, or the less attractive aspects of urban industrialization. These factors gave the location a sense of timelessness and an ongoing continuity with the Celtic past.

This place was to become the locus of what the Irish painter Charles Lamb termed “the national essence” (qtd. in McConkey 63). Among the many painters who came to this part of Ireland from 1910 onward seeking spirituality and authenticity were Paul Henry, Charles Lamb, James Humbert Craig, and Sean Keating. Henry and Craig were especially interested in the landscape itself and carefully transcribed in paint its bleak beauty. It was their kind of landscape painting, in particular that of Henry, which was to become the archetypal Irish landscape.

Sean Keating’s painting entitled *The Race of the Gael* (Figure 2) perfectly encapsulates that new breed of Irishmen “worthy of the soil.” They are sturdy, pragmatic peasants whose very masculinity symbolically asserts the new Gaelic ideal. These men are seen to flourish in this

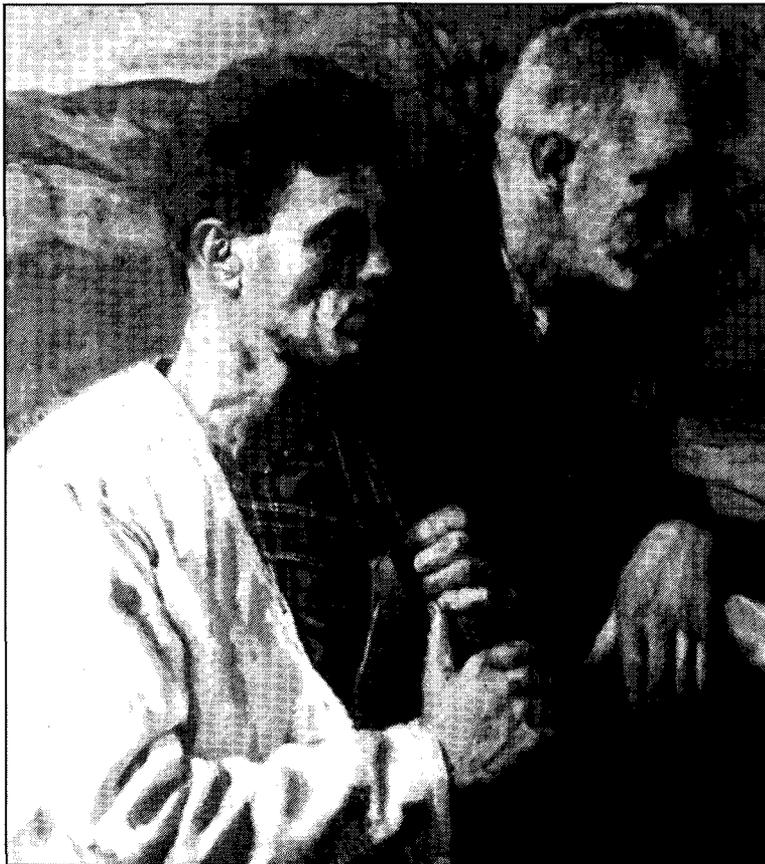


Figure 2: Sean Keating, “The Race of the Gael,” oil on canvas, c.1939
Courtesy of Justin and Michael Keating

sparse but invigorating place. More significantly, however, they embody the repossession of the land, historically perceived as an object to be possessed and allegorically identified with a woman. The representation of that land as female, therefore, was to assert male domination at a political level. But it also articulated another kind of domination; the patriarchal belief in a symbiotic relationship between woman and nature in which woman is defined as the passive and voiceless embodiment of nature.

Both the political and the patriarchal come together in the design chosen for the new Irish Free State currency notes, in circulation from September 1928 (Figure 3).¹ This image was based on a portrait of his wife by Sir John Lavery. A friend (perhaps even lover) of one of those negotiating the Treaty for independence, Michael Collins, Hazel Lavery had been involved in mediating between the Irish delegation and the British on a social and personal level. Here in the guise of Cathleen ní Houlihan she represents Ireland as a pretty peasant woman, set in a landscape evoking the west of Ireland. On one level the notes serve as a constant reminder that this beautiful land of Ireland has finally been reoccupied by her own fellow countrymen [my italics]. At the same time the representation visually articulates the new nationalist construct of Ireland. Her rural dress, the antithesis of contemporary fashions (associated with England and elsewhere), proclaims the new state as an anti-urban entity. When the costume is considered in conjunction with the passive pose and gentle, submissive expression of the figure, images of the Virgin Mary are recalled. Thus, post-colonial Ireland is projected as a place of the spiritual rather than temporal. The empty landscape behind denotes an anti-industrial location while at the same time suggesting that this is a place outside “real” time. But also embedded in this allegorical image of Ireland are notions of the appropriate role of actual “flesh and blood” Irish women in the new state. The passivity and meekness of the figure on the currency notes portray the female role as a subordinate one. So it was to prove.

Jean Baudrillard has defined hyper-reality as the simulations of the real which ultimately become more real than the real itself. In the case of newly-independent Ireland, self-conscious Gaelic masculinity assumed a hyper-masculinity. To render it wholly authentic it, in turn, relied on the construction of a hyper-femininity; that hyper-femininity of necessity being deferential to its masculine equivalent. While Irish men were encouraged to be strong, virile, and active in the affairs of the country, Irish women were encouraged, first and foremost, to be mothers whose duty is to inculcate their children (especially their sons) with love of country, of Gaelic traditions, and

of freedom. The central meaning of a woman's existence was through her family; her space confined solely to the domestic sphere.

The homosocial bonding of nationalism required the exclusion of women from the body politic and structures were put in place to create a legal basis for this strategy. In 1925 a Civil Service Amendment Act, followed two years later by a Juries bill, sought to curtail and restrict the role of women in Irish public life. Examinations for positions in the civil service were limited on the basis of sex which effectively prevented women from moving ahead in their careers. A decade later a ban was introduced to prevent married women from remaining in the service. The Juries bill virtually ensured that there would be no women jurors. A Matrimonial Act (1925) outlawed divorce and a Censorship Act (1929) denied women access to birth control information. From 1934 the sale and importation of contraceptives was prohibited and the new 1937 Constitution made it clear that a woman's place was in the home. Article 41, section 2 stated "the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved."² The image of the peasant woman in her rural habitat as painted by Keating, Lamb, and others provided a suitable



Figure 3: John Lavery, *Lady Lavery as Kathleen ní Houlihan*
 Courtesy of the Central Bank of Ireland

iconography for this "domestically" enshrined woman. What should be noted, however, is the artists producing this kind of imagery, with one or two notable exceptions, were not specifically commissioned to do so. Rather their view of Ireland and its people, with its roots in nineteenth-century romantic ideas about primitive places and people, usefully coincided with the new political order and helped to create a kind of corporate visual identity.

One artist, Sean Keating, whose artistic vision was shaped and informed not only by earlier ideas but also his own passionate belief in a nationalist Gaelic Ireland, produced a large number of paintings of the western seaboard and its people. One such painting is *The Fisherman and His Wife* (Figure 4). With its emphasis on rural family life and fixed gender roles it perfectly encapsulates official ideology. Set in the landscape of the West, the male is presented as a simple fisherman, the provider of the family. The female dressed in a Macroom cloak, the cloak traditionally worn only by married women, represents the homemaker and mother. The ideological message of the painting is unambiguous. Indeed so much so that it was used by the Free State government. A school reader, published early in the 1930s by the Educational Company of Ireland for the Department of Education, and aimed at second-level students, included this image as its frontispiece (*The New Standard Irish Readers Intermediate Book*). Ironically the very students it was intended for, were from families who saw education as a means of escape from this rural Ireland. The frontispiece might project an idyllic pastoral life but the reality was economic stagnation and lack of opportunity. Although a good number of these paintings depicted young peasant women, increasingly there was a move towards the portrayal of older women. Catherine Nash, in her exploration of issues of geography and gender, argues that this shift reflects two things; firstly the demographic structure of Irish rural society with its ever-increasing depopulation of the young in search of work and secondly the nature of the construct of femininity by Church and State which denied women's autonomous sexuality for an idealization of what she terms "asexual motherhood" (47).

Of all the visual artists who were painting in the early decades of independence, Paul Henry came increasingly to be regarded as the "unofficial" artist of the new state and reproductions of his paintings were used on posters to advertise Ireland abroad. Postcards and calendars also helped to project an image of Ireland which had retained "an ancient pastoral distinctiveness" (Brown 98). Although rooted in an essentially romantic vision of Ireland, Henry's imagery accorded neatly with the views of Michael Collins, a leading member of the first Free State government who believed that Irish civilization was surviving in its purest form in the West. Collins declared:

To-day it is only in those places that any native beauty and grace in Irish life survive.... In the island of Achill, impoverished as the people are, hard as their

lives are, difficult as the struggle for existence is, the outward aspect is a pageant. One may see processions of young women riding down on the island ponies to collect sand from the seashore, or gathering in the turf, dressed in their shawls and in their brilliantly-coloured skirts made of material spun, woven and dyed by themselves as it has been spun, woven and dyed, for a thousand years.... It is only in such places that one gets a glimpse of what Ireland may become again. (Collins 119)

Collins' myopic vision failed to recognize that the vast majority of Irish women would not have known how to dye, spin or weave, let alone wish to do so. The fashion ideas of elsewhere, brought to them via popular publications and the cinema, were more in keeping with their tastes! Yet the reality of fact did not influence the standard representation of Irish women in art.

Although Henry began by painting the activities of the peasantry, gradually his images became "pure" landscapes in which no human intrudes. The only references to the people who actually inhabited and worked the land, are in the turf stacks (turf was dug in the bogs, dried out, and then used to heat and cook) and in the depiction of traditional



Figure 4: Sean Keating, "Aran Fisherman and his Wife" Collection, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin

thatched cottages.³ The cottage came to symbolize the idealization of the rural family, as well as the chosen lifestyle of the new Ireland; one noted for its simplicity and frugality. It was in this environment that the Gael would be born and flourish, generation after generation. The role of women as begetters and preservers of the race was central to this vision. The cottage and its space signified both the role of women and their virtual imprisonment within the domestic sphere. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the cottage takes the place of real women in Henry's paintings and becomes a metaphor for the banishment of women from the public arena and the site of power.

The role of landscape, space, and gender in the construction of female identity in newly-independent Ireland I believe is a pivotal one. The identification of the landscape as feminine but repossessed by the manly Gael symbolically allowed for the continuity of patriarchy. The landscape of the West was used as a source of positive identification on the part of the Irish male but served to anchor the Irish female to a nurturing role through her supposed identification with nature. The imaging of women as peasants in this gendered landscape further reinforced a "natural" affinity between women and nature. The role of the Virgin as exemplar spiritually validated the disempowerment of the Irish female. The importance of these kinds of images produced in these first decades of independence, is that, witting, or unwitting, they were active agents in articulating and disseminating the attitudes and aspirations of a patriarchal society. In their proliferation they offered what seemed a stable, permanent, and "natural" construct for the Irish female. In reality, they masked the injustices towards women by depriving them of an active public role, and allowing them a voice in determining the future of their own country.

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¹For a more detailed account of the history of this design see McCoolle 139–142, 147.

²Prior to independence nationalist feminist women had believed that their role would not be solely confined to the home. For an account of the opposition by feminists to the legislation which controlled every area of women's lives, see Valiulis.

³For a history of the development of the thatched cottage and an analysis its ideological meanings see Kennedy.

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EIMEAR O'NEILL

Mamo

My grandmother was gently worn.
 I never thought of her as aged.
 She won a disco competition
 at the Fountainbleu Hotel Miami at 96,
 and I mean *won*.... They didn't
 just give it to her because
 she was cute and 96.

Not bad for a wild scut from Belfast,
 toes missing from childhood in the linen mills,
 who could kick her height
 (well it was only 5 feet)
 til two years before she died.
 One hundred and one,
 just tired,
 and gently worn.

Eimear O'Neill is a psychotherapist and community educator who publishes, teaches, and trains in anti-violence work and short-term psychotherapy.

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