At home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916

by Lucy McDiarmid
On Monday morning 24 April 1916, Catherine Byrne jumped through a window on the side of the GPO on O'Connell Street to join the Irish revolution; Mairead Ní Cheallaigh served breakfast to Patrick and Willie Pearse, their last home-cooked meal, and then went out to set up an emergency hospital with members of Cumann na mBan; Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh persuaded Thomas MacDonagh to let her into the garrison at Jacob's Biscuit Factory; and Elsie Mahaffy, daughter of the Provost of Trinity, was in her bedroom ‘completing her toilet’ when her sister came in to tell her that ‘the Sinn Féiners had risen.’

At Home in the Revolution derives its material from women’s own accounts of the Easter Rising, interpreted broadly to include also the Howth gun-running and events that took place over the summer of 1916 in Ireland. These eye-witness narratives -- diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, and official witness statements -- were written by nationalists and unionists, Catholics and Protestants, women who felt completely at home in the garrisons, cooking for the men and treating their wounds, and women who stayed at home during the Rising.

The book’s focus is on the kind of episode usually ignored by traditional historians: cooking with bayonets, arguing with priests, resisting sexual harassment, soothing a female prostitute, doing sixteen-hand reels in Kilmainham Gaol, or disagreeing with Prime Minister Asquith about the effect of the Rising on Dublin’s architecture. The women’s ‘small behaviours’, to use Erving Goffman’s term, reveal social change in process, not the official history of manifestos and legislation, but the unofficial history of access to a door or a leap through a window; they show how issues of gender were negotiated in a time of revolution.

This book is also available on JSTOR. For more information, institutions can visit Books at JSTOR or contact participation@jstor.org.

You can buy the e-book here.

Reviews:

‘There’s a particular pleasure in the well-told anecdote. But in historical scholarship, “well-told” also involves finding the larger meaning of the individual episode. At this, Lucy McDiarmid [...] clearly excels’. James Clyde Sellman for Colloquy, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences alumni magazine of Harvard University.

‘This work is an exemplar of how to do and write women's history. Although bookshelves may be groaning with the weight of 1916-themed books this is one book no one interested in the 1916 Rising can be without’. Mary McAuliffe for History Ireland.

‘Few books published for the centenary of 1916 will be as original, as entertaining, as thoroughly researched or as well written as this analysis of women's words, ideas and actions during the Easter Rising’. Angela Bourke for the Irish Times. Read the full review here.
In the torrent of history books published to mark the 1916 centenary, a small number will stand out as worthy of repeated reprint. Lucy McDiarmid’s At Home In The Revolution is one of those books. Its concept is innovative, its substance is enlightening and surprising, and its style and production are a joy to read and hold. Eoin Ó Broin for the Sunday Business Post. Read the full review here.

The book is at once a political study of shifting gender relations as well as a thoroughly researched, vivid, emotional, and often comic look at forgotten stories of the Rising that will entertain as much as it will enlighten. Adam Farley for Irish America Magazine. Read the full review here.

Public Talks:

Lucy McDiarmid will be speaking about At home in the revolution at a series of public talks. Find her provisional schedule here below:

2017

3 February, 12.15-2pm: ‘Fairies, Rebels, and the Boundaries of the House in 1916’, Boston College, USA

2016

21 February, 7-8pm: interview with Susan Cahill for ‘Talking History’, Newstalk 106-108fm

28 February, 12.30-2pm: ‘Waking the Feminists’ event at Fordham University, New York

10 March, 7pm: ‘1916 Women’ event at Farmleigh, Dublin

12 March, 3pm: ‘Jumping into the GPO: women’s access to the Rising’, Kilkenny Castle

14 March, 6pm: ‘Women and the Rising; Lucy McDiarmid in conversation with Patricia Coughlan’, Farmgate Cafe - English Market Princes Street, Cork

19 March: talk at County Library in Ballinamore, Leitrim

22 March, 7.30pm: Pádraig de Brún lecture, National University of Ireland Galway

28 March, 11am: ‘Jumping into the GPO: How women entered male space in 1916’, DIT Aungier Street

28 March, 5pm: ‘Dublin, Easter 1916: What was it like?’, Trinity College Dublin

2 April, 10am-5pm: Taste of the Yeats Summer School, Glucksman Ireland House, New York University


25-29 July: International Association for the Study of Irish Literature Annual Conference, University College Cork


1 October, 11.45am: "the first time I saw a whole salmon cooked": Encounters with the wealthy in Gort and the GPO', Lady Gregory Autumn Gathering, Gort


About the authors

Lucy McDiarmid
Lucy McDiarmid's scholarly interest in cultural politics, especially quirky, colourful, suggestive episodes, is exemplified by The Irish Art of Controversy (2005) and Poets and the Peacock Dinner: the literary history of a meal (2014). She is a past president of the American Conference for Irish Studies and a former fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation and of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library.

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However most women worked in the home. There was a great deal of work to do as most homes were largely self-sufficient. The woman made the family's clothes and prepared food such as grinding grain to flour to make bread. Meanwhile in 1916 Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to Congress (The House of Representatives). Then in 1922 Rebecca Latimer Felton became the first woman US senator. Then in 1925 Nellie Tayloe Ross became the first woman governor of a US state (Wyoming). In the mid 20th century most married women did not work outside the home (except in wartime). However in the 1950s and 1960s it became much more common for them to do so - at least part-time. New technology in the home made it easier for women to do paid work. It does draw its roots from the American Revolution and the French Revolution, but, you know, if you look at it now and what is the importance of the centenary we have today, it is to discuss if these rights they enumerate are present in our society today. Maire Comerford of Cumann na mBan, the women's revolutionary group, has written that it was little wonder that there was a counter-revolution because – and she was talking about de Valera – those who ended up coming into power weren’t of the same caliber. She didn’t mean caliber in a moral sense but in leadership ability as the people who had put together the Proclamation. Socialist leader James Connolly...