

Radical Learning: Higher, Adult and Community Education and Votes for Women

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Introduction

21st January 2019 marked one hundred years after the founding of the first Irish parliament since the Act of Union in 1801, Dáil Éireann. Prior to that date, Irish Members of Parliament were elected to Westminster. The previous year, 1918, the right to vote was granted to all men over the age of 21 and to women over the age of thirty with assets to the value of £5, or, indeed, married to men with such riches, in Britain and Ireland. The first opportunity to activate the vote was on the 14th December 1918, and the first woman elected to The House of Commons was Constance Markievicz, born Constance Gore-Booth, in County Sligo, Ireland.

Constance Markievicz was active in the fight for Irish freedom, through the labour movement but particularly in 1916, the catalyst for this phase in the struggle. However, because she was a member of Sinn Féin, the political party with an abstentionist policy which still holds in the present day, she did not take her seat in the House. Incidentally, the first woman to take her seat was Nancy Astor, Viscountess Astor, commonly called Lady Astor, an American citizen, elected in 1919 and who served until 1945 for the Conservative Party.

However, with the establishment of the Irish state, Constance Markievicz readily took the seat in the Dáil, in that first meeting, but only in a manner of speaking. At that time, she was imprisoned in Holloway Prison for her anti-conscription activism. Crucially, in her absence, she was appointed as Minister for Labour. Again,

incidentally, the next appointment of a female minister was a mere fifty-eight years later, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, in 1977.

Writing this article provided me with the opportunity to re-read the history of women in education and the history of women's suffrage with a new lens. I'll look at the background to the campaigns for the education of girls and women, and the ways in which education was divided along traditional gender and class lines, but which nevertheless, laid the foundation for the struggle for votes for women. Then, I will look at the ways in which the vote was used against women's interests, overtly and covertly, until this year, when, finally, the vote, at long last, was used against the some of the last vestiges of the control by the RC Church on the Irish state.

Campaigns for Suffrage

I grew up in Dublin's inner city, an area called The Liberties, close to John Dillon Street. I wasn't very curious about John Dillon, I have to be honest. I just accepted that he was a famous man from the past in the midst of other famous men whose names adorned the streets of Dublin: O'Connell, Parnell, Pearse, Mountjoy. Nevertheless, I was very interested in history. In my school days, history ended in 1916 with the Easter Rising, with a proclamation on the equality of men and women and the commitment to end child poverty and neglect. But there was no account of the messy, complicated politics and social action that followed, including the struggle for votes for women, 1918, the War of Independence, from 1919-1921, the Treaty that divided the people on the island of Ireland (the legacy of which is played out these days with the British Government's dependence on the Democratic Unionist Party in the Brexit negotiations), establishment of the Irish Free State, the civil war and on and on to the final capitulation of the fledgling Irish state to the Roman Catholic Church, which was embedded in the Irish Constitution in 1937. This unholy alliance between religion and the state has had a very long-lasting impact, which again, played out in

Northern Ireland as well as the Republic. But let me go back to John Dillon briefly. As I studied women's history, John Blake Dillon and his son, John Dillon, figured quite prominently in the various aspects leading up to the foundation of the independent Irish state.

John Blake Dillon was given his mother's and father's surname, an assertion of gender equality, at least. Interestingly, he attended Maynooth College for a short time, before he moved on to Trinity College Dublin. He was centrally active in the fight for Irish freedom, particularly immediately following the Irish Potato Famine in the mid-1840s.

Another struggle was initiated in 1866, the campaign for votes for women, by Anna Haslam and her husband, Thomas (Dublin City Council, accessed 2019) alongside other equality measures in the private and public lives of women. However, that struggle was not taught in school, and didn't get much oxygen until women's history emerged in the 1980s, with Women's Studies. In Ireland, the nineteenth century was a maelstrom of social action, from Irish freedom to the extension of the franchise, but it was not a singular struggle, depending on the attitudes the prominent men. One such man was John Dillon, John Blake Dillon's son.

John Dillon was the deputy leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, a party that supported Asquith's liberal government in Westminster from 1906. The campaign for Irish Home Rule was a condition for that support. Simultaneously, the campaigns for votes for women were raging in Ireland as well as Britain. However, John Dillon was no supporter of votes for women and he famously articulated his opposition:

Women's suffrage will, I believe, be the ruin of our Western civilisation. It will destroy the home, challenging the headship of man, laid down by God. (Dillon, 1913).

Thus, the campaign for votes for women was seen as a crusade against God's will, the undermining of men's place at the head of the home, and, perhaps worst for John Dillon as a sophisticated parliamentarian, an attack by hyenas in petticoats – as Mary Wollstonecraft was called - on hard-fought civilisation, whatever he meant.

The politics around property and land ownership also mobilised the population and was part of the campaign for Irish independence. Absentee landlords drained the country of integrity and resources, which, interestingly, also raised awareness about cultural values. This awareness led to the cultural movement which simmered in that era, with sport, drama, poetry, visual art, literature and the Irish language coagulating into a powerful force. Women were a vital part of that social revolution, including Eva Gore-Booth, Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Constance Markievicz, Augusta Gregory and Maud Gonne, well-known artistic and literary people at that time. They were close to poets and artists, including WB Yeats, and Jack B. Yeats, and who were involved in to cultural initiatives, for example, the foundation of the Abbey Theatre. And most of all, they campaigned for votes for women.

The shifts in perspectives in the early part of the 20th Century probably would not have been possible without the expansion of the education of women. Universities reluctantly accepted women from the latter years of the 19th Century, and these women were highly influential in the franchise campaigns. Simultaneously, many working-class women did not have basic education, let alone higher education. But middle- and upper-class women involved in the labour activism, particularly Constance Markievicz, Kathleen Lynn and Madeline French-Mullen, were aware of this inequality. The labour movement played a crucial role in the education of working-class women (Hunnewell, 2017). The movement was driven by James Connolly, James Larkin and Delia Larkin, among others, who saw education as essential in the struggle for workers' rights. Women workers formed trade unions, for example, The Irish Women's Workers' Union, (2019) supported by the education and cultural activities provided by Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the movement. Thus,

in the early years of the 20th Century, women and men, working-class and upper-class, albeit with varying perspectives, worked towards emancipation and democracy.

Education or Indoctrination?

The story of the education of girls and women is complicated. On the one hand, education for working girls was based on a clear curriculum on their socially acceptable roles in life, as domestic servants and wives and mothers. This was despite the number of women employed in the factories that depended on nimble fingers: textiles, confectionary, light engineering.

On the other hand, middle- and upper-class women wanted the opportunity to participate in higher education, to fulfil their talent for science, medicine and arts. The history of girls, women and education is limited by the lack of a specific focus, typically, along with many other disciplines. But there are some scholars who have unearthed hidden stories.

Raftery and Parkes (2007) maintain that, like the story of education in Britain, schools, colleges and universities in Ireland were established by charities, religious orders and various partisan agencies, by-and-large. Their vision of education was different for the different classes, literacy for the working-class and liberal arts for the middle- and upper classes.

However, in 1831, the state took control over the provision with the establishment of a national school system which immediately ran into issues in Ireland for the various Christian denominations, in particular, the Church of Ireland as the religion of the ruling classes, and Roman Catholicism the religion of a smaller population of the aristocracy and better off middle classes, but the main religion of the majority population, the working classes (Raftery, Parkes, 2007).

Primary education, for five or six year olds to about 12, had specific curricula for girls alongside the usual Three Rs - or perhaps that should be the 5 Rs, right and wrong, as

there was a very strong element in primary education for the spiritual and moral development of children - to prepare them for their future place in society. Girls were taught needlework, knitting, caring for children, caring for people who were ill, cooking, housekeeping, and so on. They were also taught that laziness and vanity were female 'foibles', unforgivable bad habits. On the other hand, benevolence, patience, gentleness and politeness were encouraged as positive female dispositions (Harford and Raftery, 2007, p. 42). Thus, girls were inculcated with the traditional views of femininity, and deprived of the more scholarly activities and attitudes. It was perceived that scholarly study would undo all the feminine attributes that the National School imparted, for their roles as wives and mothers. It was also held that too much study would damage women's health, and the term 'blue stocking' was ubiquitous as an insult (Parkes and Harford, 2007). Blue stockings were considered to be frumpy literary women (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911/ 2018), and thus, not fit in with the narrow parameters of what it was to be a desirable woman.

While the discussions for and against women's education were furiously debated, some girls' schools provided for the matriculation examinations so that women could go to university, when the universities were finally opened up to women in the late 1880s, (Parkes and Harford, 2007). Once within the academy, women studied medicine, law and science, in particular. And some of these women had strong presences in the political activities of the early part of the twentieth century. For example, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Dr Kathleen Lynn graduated from The Royal University of Ireland (Documenting Ireland, accessed 2019). Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, who achieved a BA and MA, was a militant suffragette, one of the founders of the Irish Women's Franchise League, and was imprisoned for breaking windows in Dublin Castle, in 1913 (Women's Museum, 2018), where a plaque in her honour was unveiled in 2018, by her granddaughter, Micheline Sheehy-Skeffington, a present day hero. But that's another story.

Kathleen Lynn, who qualified as a medical doctor, was very active in suffrage, labour and emancipation movements in the run-up to 1916. During Easter Week, she was the Chief Medical Officer for the Irish Citizen Army, the army founded in Liberty Hall by James Connolly, among others. She treated the wounded during that time, (RCSI, 2018). Afterwards, with her life partner, Madeleine ffrench-Mullen, she founded Saint Ultan's Hospital for babies and children. At the time, Ireland had a very high rate of infant and maternal mortality. Pregnancy and childbirth was life-threatening for mothers and the infant mortality rate for Dublin in 1911 was 22.3 per 1,000, while in London, it was 15.6 (Crowe, 2011). Lynn and ffrench Mullen initiated a vaccination programme which was eventually taken up by the state, against the express wishes of the Roman Catholic Church, along with the other interventions into the health and well-being of mothers and babies.

In 1922, the vote was extended to all women over the age of 21, in an early constitution which guaranteed equality of citizenship to men and women. But the crusade against equal status for women had begun by this time, in spite of this concession.

Conservative Values and the New State

Women were not fully acknowledged in the maelstrom of those early years. But women workers, along with all women activists, were rendered practically invisible after the foundation of the state, in 1922, with the growing influence of right wing trends and the Roman Catholic Church on political and social life, as well as in the private lives of the newly independent citizens.

Within a very short time in the life of the new state, conservative and centrist political parties dominated, almost completely controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in spite of the vote and in spite of universal education, women's lives were subordinated to the so-called common good, by virtue of the Irish Constitution. Women's place was in the home, as they could not remain in their employment on

marriage (IT Books, 2016) The constitution also inserted itself in their private domain, and women's lives were constrained by the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, with contraception banned in the constitution, along with divorce, again, until the mid-1990s. From the foundation of the state, in 1922 to 1971, regardless of educational attainment and the freedom to vote, women lived second class lives.

The darkest times were the 1930s, 40s and 50s. It was a time when huge numbers of children were taken from their parents and incarcerated in so-called industrial schools. At the same time, countless women were incarcerated in Magdalene homes and their babies forcibly adopted. Books were banned. Films were censored. Art was buried (Inglis, 1998). Decades of oppression, suppression, repression.

While feminist activism continued in the crevices and corners, (IT Books, 2016), this darkness prevailed in spite of widespread education provision and huge voter turnout at national and local elections. This is a salutary lesson. Democracy is fragile and can easily be manipulated by the hidden curriculum which perpetuates class and gender inequality, in education that was controlled almost exclusively by the Roman Catholic Church and the conservative politics. It can be distorted with propaganda, which we clearly see in these days, globally, when people can vote against their own interests with dire consequences. And special interest lobbies can emerge and completely distort nascent emancipatory trends for their own ends. One such lobby emerged in Ireland after all the advances in the status of women in the 1970s, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, SPUC, an influence that was not overturned until 2018.

But first, a brief look at the years after the darkness.

The 1960s dawned with more hope and possibilities, with liberation movements from the USA and Europe, aligning to social conditions in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Free secondary education was introduced in 1967 and adequate grants for Higher Education were introduced in 1969. Girls and women were beginning to question

their place in society, with wider possibilities opening gradually. The Irish Women's Liberation Movement started a conversation with the famous Contraceptives Train in 1971, when women went to Belfast, in Northern Ireland, to buy contraceptives and import them into the Republic of Ireland, which was a criminal offence at that time. This aligned to Ireland's application to join the Common Market. Entry into Europe was contingent on the re-adjustment of the status of women, and a report was commissioned to recommend legal and social actions to shift the secondary status of women. This led to a raft of legislation with regards to employment, pay, domicile, welfare entitlements and many other women's social rights. Personal and private rights, including the right to contraception and divorce were prohibited by the constitution and required legal challenges and referenda, which took some time, as attitudes were slower to change in comparison to the legal measures that were driven by Europe.

The backlash emerged with a shattering explosion, mentioned above, with the campaign to insert an article into the constitution to equate the status of a foetus to an adult woman, on the grounds women were advancing beyond the traditionally acceptable femininity, (O'Reilly, 1992). This culminated in The Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, in 1983. But around this time, women's community education surfaced, spreading like a rhizome throughout the island (Connolly, 2013). People participated in community education for a whole variety of programmes, courses and responses, from women's history, personal development, addiction studies and many other innovative and unique offerings, all with critical feminist pedagogical approaches.

Meanwhile, traditional education still grapples with the feminisation of the field, but without the overt feminist ideals and principles. Nevertheless, a new wave of feminist activism is blooming and this wave is changing hearts and minds. And voting patterns. In 1983, the Eighth Amendment was passed with a two to one majority. In

2018, it was repealed with a two to one majority. And finally, in May 2019, divorce was taken out of the constitution, with an astounding majority of four to one.

Conclusion

The vote has been the pivot of democracy and while it's not perfect, it's probably better than the alternative. However, it's not enough without emancipatory education, which is where the radical traditions of adult and community education come in. The story of the status of women in Ireland since the granting of the vote demonstrates this. The vote is no match for the underlying forces which set the agenda to maintain inequality and injustice. In the past, these forces infiltrated public and private domains through education, media and public discourse. But it's not fundamentally different now, although media and message are easier to manipulate, and education is a site of struggle. In these times of struggle, the lessons of Freirean and feminist pedagogy are vital, now more than ever.

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