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ways in which gender history throws into sharp relief the power structure of a particular society. From witches to witness statements, from motherhood to abortion, from cities to safaris, the exploration of gender leads to an examination of power in a more complex and exciting narrative – ‘a kind of madness’.

For organizing the WHAI conference and the earliest stages of this volume, I would like to thank Aoife O’Driscoll, formerly a postgraduate student and researcher at the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies, Trinity College. I am indebted to Laura Carpenter, Catherine KilBride and Louise McCaul for their assistance in the production of this book and to my colleagues in the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies. I am grateful for the support of Trinity College. I would also like to thank my daughter, Caitlin Valiulis, for discussing with me the nature of gender in Irish history.

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NOTE

1. See, for example, Gerda Lerner, ‘Reconceptualizing Differences Among Women’, *Journal of Women’s History* (Winter 1990), pp.106–19.
2. Joan Hoff, ‘The Impact and Implications of Women’s History’, in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O’Dowd (eds), *Women and Irish History. Essays in Honour of Margaret MacCurtain* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997), p.33.
3. Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1990), p.20. I believe this discussion of patriarchy remains to this day one of the best and most inclusive. It documents the shift from private to public patriarchy and then looks at six aspects of society in which patriarchy manifests itself.
4. For a discussion of the use of the term patriarchy in women’s history, see Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). The ‘Book Forum’ of the *Journal of Women’s History* (Summer, 2006), pp.130–154 provides an interesting response to Bennett’s views.

CHAPTER TWO

Thoughts on Gender History

MARY O’DOWD AND PHIL KILROY

GENDER HISTORY, IRISH HISTORY AND THE MADNESS OF THE MUSES

Fervent desire is a gift of the Muses, a kind of madness that takes over, igniting and transforming the subject. According to Plato, it ‘seizes a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression ... But if any man comes to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet [we might substitute ‘good historian by discipline’], then shall he and his works of sanity ... be brought to naught.’¹

In her contribution to the 2004 debate on the future of women’s history published in the *Journal of Women’s History*, Joan Scott used the language of erotica to describe the desire for knowledge that is at the core of all intellectual investigation, including feminist criticism. She recalled the passion of the first generation of women historians in the United States as they pursued a desire to learn more concerning the history of women, a desire aroused as much by the search for knowledge about women as it was by the excitement of the intellectual enquiry involved. ‘Passion’, as Scott notes, ‘thrives on the pursuit of the not-yet-known’.² To insist on a definition of women’s history that focuses solely on women, Scott suggested, is to deny the intellectual passion, excitement and potential of feminist critique. Feminist history exists in a parasitical relationship with the discipline of history. It critiques history from the ‘perspective of gender and power’.³ It destabilizes or ‘defamiliarizes’ concepts and ideas hitherto taken for granted by historians. The form that the critique of feminist historians will take in the future depends, according to Scott, on the direction of the discipline. The priority is the desire and passion for knowledge, not the formation of

boundaries or the conservation of what are currently established as traditional ways of writing women's and gender history.⁴

Coming almost ten years after her challenging article on using gender as a tool of analysis, Scott's summoning of the madness of the Muses, may, at first reading, induce despair rather than desire among historians of women.⁵ Having struggled to come to terms with her advocacy in 1985 of post-structuralism, feminist historians were urged by Scott in 2004 to engage in a continuous process of thinking about the unthinkable: 'the passionate pursuit of the not-yet-known'. Gender, she acknowledges, is not the only category of analysis and is itself being 'defamiliarized' by a new generation of scholars interested in queer theory, ethnic and post-colonial studies.⁶

There are also, however, common themes that can be traced throughout Scott's writing in relation to feminism and feminist politics. In 1985 she presented gender analysis as a 'useful' or 'good way to think about history'.⁷ In 2004, she urged feminist scholars to continue that quest to think about history in interesting ways. Scott's aim is not, however, to engage in a restless chase of new or innovative ideas for their own sake, or to reduce historical analysis to an intellectual game, but to develop methodologies that advance the feminist project. The goal is not just to destabilize interpretations of the past from the perspective of gender but ultimately to destabilize patriarchy in the present.⁸

In 1985 Scott had proposed gender analysis as a way around the continuing dilemma of women's history: how to widen the perspective of 'mainstream' history to incorporate the findings of the accumulated research on women's history. Scott defined gender as a social construct that can vary in different cultures, social groups and over time. She pointed to several ways in which thinking about gender could be useful to historians. The first involves comparing men's and women's experiences in the past, an approach that had led to the development of the field of men's studies and the history of masculinity but had not, in Scott's view, done much to change the way in which history was written. An alternative definition of gender defines it as an essential component in social relationships: a 'primary way of signifying relationships of power'.⁹ Hierarchies of difference, subordination and dominance, exclusion and inclusion are frequently based on gender. Metaphorically and literally, gender is used to define difference and establish power relationships. The organization of society is often implicitly rooted in concepts of gender that are perceived as normative but, Scott notes, often vary over time and in different cultures. Used in

this sense, gender as a category of analysis should form part of the critical apparatus of all historians and not just that of women. High politics, for example, is often dismissed as having little relevance for women's history because for much of historic time, women were excluded from participating in it. Scott's argument is, however, that the exclusion of women not only makes high politics a gendered concept but should lead the historian to query the implication of that notion. 'What is the relationship between laws about women and the power of the state?'¹⁰ In modern states where universal suffrage has been achieved, gender remains central to the formation of political ideas and concepts. A classic example of this is the welfare state which was constructed around an image of the family in which the man was the head of household and wage earner and his wife, the child-carer and home-maker. Concepts of gender are also used metaphorically to legitimate political power and to describe relations between states.

Scott's 1985 article aroused considerable debate, partly because of its proposal that historians utilize theories of post-structuralism and partly because it implicitly suggested that gender analysis offered feminist historians a more sophisticated critical apparatus than focusing exclusively on the history of women. Despite the criticisms, however, Scott's advocacy of an innovative 'way to think about history' was timely. A younger generation of American scholars was attracted by the intellectual appeal of gender history, if not necessarily by Scott's wider feminist agenda, while some of the most influential of the first generation of academic women historians seem to have quietly agreed with Scott that women's history writing had lost its critical excitement: 'stories designed to celebrate women's agency began to seem predictable and repetitious, more information gathering to prove a point that has already been made ... the situation of women as wounded subjects does not inspire either creative politics or history'.¹¹ Many writers of women's history were clearly looking for new intellectual stimulation and found it in gender history. The 1990s and early 2000s have witnessed a steady accumulation of American history monographs that use gender as a core tool of analysis. Some studies integrate comparative studies of men and women while others, although focusing on women's experiences, use gender analysis to explore wider issues about the structure of political or economic organizations or to examine how gender metaphors are embedded in political, diplomatic and social discourse. As Kathryn Kish Sklar noted in 2003, the renewed vitality of American women's and gender history has meant that the boundary between women's history and wider interpretations of

American history are increasingly blurred. Gender analysis is now, for example, perceived as essential to understanding the history of the welfare state and the evolution of concepts of citizenship. Developing the metaphor of the 'mainstream', Kish Sklar suggests that 2001 was the 'moment when U.S. history jumped out of its old riverbed into a new one where it was reconfigured by U.S. women's history'.¹²

How do we apply this to Irish history? Has Irish women's history begun to reshape the narrative of Irish history? Where is the gift of the Muses in Irish historiography? A survey of the current state of research and writing on women's history in Ireland includes much to celebrate and welcome. Although operating in a much smaller academic community than in the US, the achievements have been, nonetheless, impressive. Since the publication in 1978 of *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*, edited by Margaret MacCurtain and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Dublin: Women's Press, 1978) (usually recognized as the initiation of the academic study of Irish women's history), there has been a steady accumulation of articles and monographs on the activities of women in the Irish past. An academic infrastructure for the study of women's history has been created. An association of researchers with regular conferences, postgraduate seminars, large funded collaborative research projects, undergraduate courses, an MA programme, a small community of doctoral students and a reasonably high profile at international conferences are all indicators that the study of women in the past has been accepted into the Irish academy. The accumulated research on women's history has also made at least a limited impact on the writing of Irish history. Few general surveys of Irish history completely ignore women as was the case in the past, and some of the most recent overviews of twentieth-century Ireland give credit to women as agents of change.¹³

This steady trickle of research results into the 'mainstream' may be sufficient or all that can be expected given the small size of the university history community on the island of Ireland and the handful of historians of women in full-time academic employment. Yet, in terms of intellectual excitement, it could be argued that Irish women's history, like American women's history in the 1980s, has lost some of its ability to excite or stimulate passion. We can and should continue to accumulate information about women in the Irish past but should we also pause to ask to what purpose? The intellectual rationale for most studies of Irish women's history is the dearth of literature on the topic. It might legitimately be queried if this continues to be a sufficient reason? Is there a danger in this approach that we will begin to tell stories that

'seem predictable and repetitious – more information gathering to prove a point that has already been made'?¹⁴

Historians of women in Ireland have been slow to take up the challenge of Scott's advocacy of gender as a category of analysis. There are understandable reasons for this reluctance. Irish historiography, even more than its British counterpart with which it shares a common empirical emphasis, has always been suspicious of theoretical approaches. Scott's reliance on the difficult and, at times, inaccessible, language of post-structuralism did little to win her converts among Irish women historians. Moreover, her self-conscious political agenda as a 'feminist historian' sits uncomfortably in an historiographical tradition that was constructed in opposition to the labelling of historians as 'nationalist' or 'unionist'. In the 1980s and 1990s, historians of women in Ireland were enthused by the discovery of women in the Irish past and the application of the gender/women's history debate to an Irish context seemed, at best, premature and, at worst, part of the generational conflict among American women historians that had no direct parallel in Ireland.

Gender, of course, has not been totally ignored by Irish historians and a number of collections of essays have pointed to the potential of it as a category of analysis although the emphasis, as among British historians, has tended to be on examining the relative experiences of men and women with initial forays into the history of Irish masculinity.¹⁵ There has, however, been no sustained debate on the value of gender as a category of analysis in Irish history. The conference call for papers for the 2006 Women's History Association of Ireland (WHAI) conference on gender history in Trinity College Dublin elicited a very limited response among the more traditional Irish historians. The papers presented to the conference did, however, underline the potential of gender history at an international level, as this volume indicates.

Compiling lists of topics to be researched can be a lazy way of analyzing the state of research in an academic field. Rather than lists of unresearched topics on Irish gender history what we perhaps need is the initiation of a discussion among historians of women in Ireland as to the value of gender as a category of analysis. Is it an 'interesting way' to look at Irish history? Many of the themes and issues that have benefited from gender analysis in US history also have a relevance for the study of Irish history. Republican ideology, the structure of the labour market, ideas about the family, concepts of masculinity and femininity are all perceived as more complex and more relevant by historians when they incorporate gender analysis into their writing.

Scott's thesis that political metaphors that are gender based reflect attitudes to gender in society also merits interrogation in an Irish context. This is not to suggest that we passively follow the American model but rather to debate if it is worth exploring some of the conceptual frameworks now being developed by American historians of women and gender within an Irish perspective. A possible forum for such a debate could be the new email list being developed by the WHAI.

Irish historians of women can bemoan the lack of gender awareness of a new generation of doctoral students (and often, their supervisors) but perhaps, too, we need to demonstrate more explicitly that gender analysis is among the gifts of the Muses and can be used to bring the 'kind of madness that takes over, igniting and transforming the subject' of Irish history.

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THE GENESIS OF WOMEN'S HISTORY/GENDER HISTORY

Discussing the genesis of the History of Women is rather like describing how over the centuries a world landscape or garden, or series of gardens, have been rendered visible. They were always there. Skilled and persistent gardening has enabled them to come into view. The landscape of a woman's life, of women's lives, the context of their lives, the history, geography, the society and culture in a given time and place, all serve to create the fuller picture. Whatever has emerged in the course of research is placed in a certain way, a certain place and space, in harmony or in polarity, to other plants and growths. Then the gardeners sit back and exchange commentaries and reflections, hear dialogues and reactions. New aspects of the landscape emerge and the process of gardening is enriched and expanded.

There was nothing idyllic in the creation of such gardens, such landscapes. Over centuries women have striven to find their space and growth in the cosmic garden, but it was barred to them (as it was to other disadvantaged groups of race, colour, class and creed) as by divine decree. Yet the conviction that the garden gates should be open to them was always alive, and over centuries grew, first in individuals, then groups of women, and finally they began to knock on the door of the Academy. Yet it is hardly more than a century since women were formally admitted to the garden of history, and Academy gardeners

were challenged by the arrival of the women on their sacred soil.

On that land no History of Women existed on the curriculum, nor were there women on the gardening team. Changes in the wider field of history shook (de)fences and what had appeared as empty, as mere scrubland, and certainly of no interest to the Academy, proved to be an astonishingly rich land, awaiting discovery. Hardly knowing the extent of what they did, new methods of research were introduced, and these crossed the permissive frontier of history. Leading historians, women and men, shifted the focus of the past away from major figures in public life to determining influences on the actions and choices of individuals. Research was turned on the history of class and power structures in society, on occupational groups, on women, on ethnic, racial and religious minorities. Sometimes whole communities or societies, sometimes simply crowds, were the subject of enquiry.

So over the last hundred years, history broke its own boundaries and moved confidently into further areas of research, into social, economic, cultural and religious fields. Gradually a new consciousness emerged around the History of Women which led to centres for Women's Studies in Universities and an explosion of feminist studies at all levels and in all areas of life and history. This has reached all aspects of women's lives, past and present, in all countries and cultures, among all races and classes, in all religions, in all social and political contexts, including historical and current slavery. Arising from this focus on women, new and important studies of children emerged. Coupled with the Human Rights movement, the history of women has a powerful position from which to lobby the conscience of the world. First it was the History of Women in the First World, and then in recent decades the Global History of Women, and the inherent tensions within both fields, complex and demanding. So the garden has expanded, is expanding and new spaces are continually being plotted.

The results of careful gardening are elegant. But gardeners get their hands dirty. So the world of Women's History/Gender History has been achieved in the face of immense struggle and opposition from within the Academy, everywhere, evidenced in the struggle for space, funding and appointments. Dominant structures often see such developments as undermining long held vested interests and positions of power. Some gardeners have felt displaced, even cast out, and wish the new designers would go away.

Gardening is a very practical art. Gardeners can never not garden, otherwise the wilderness reappears. The ground needs continual turning, fertilizing and new planting. So in the field of history there are

serious questions to address, beyond the metaphors. For example, in recent times many Centres for Women's Studies have been renamed Centres for Gender Studies/Equality Studies:

- Has this brought the issue and place of women in society more into public consciousness?
- Has it expanded the influence, skills and position of women in our world?
- Are such Centres better positioned to effect changes in attitudes between women and men in the Academy?
- Have in-depth studies of men and women led to radical, innovative changes in gender equality perceptions and actions?
- Has the change advanced the essential task of rigorous research and writing on women?
- Do such Centres consistently and critically address the basic question: why is the actual position of women in society, at all levels and in all fields, still so imbalanced?
- At present over 15,000 women are (December 2007)¹⁶ enrolled in honours degree programmes in Ireland, compared with just 5,000 men. What models can Centres for Women's Studies/Gender Studies/Equality Studies offer these women so that they can take their place as our decision-makers in the near future?

By addressing such issues, new and different landscapes/gardens could emerge in the field of history, with truly pioneering and imaginative designs, with possibilities for growth now and in future generations.

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Notes

1. Joan W. Scott, 'Feminism's History', *Journal of Women's History*, 16, 2 (2004), p.15.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.24, 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.23-7.
5. Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', in Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.28-50. The essay was originally presented as a paper to the American Historical Association in 1985 and published in *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986). The article was revised for publication in the 1988 collection of essays by Scott.
6. Scott, 'Feminism's History', p.21.
7. Introduction to Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p.10.
8. Scott, 'Feminism's History', pp.23-4.

9. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p.42.
10. *Ibid.*, p.49.
11. Scott, 'Feminism's History', p.22.
12. Kathryn Kish Sklar's contribution to the debate in 'Considering the State of U.S. Women's History', *Journal of Women's History*, 15, 1 (2003), pp.147-51 (p.147). See also Kathi Kern, 'Productive Collaborations: the Benefits of Cultural Analysis to the Past, Present, and Future of Women's History', *Journal of Women's History*, 16, 4 (2004), pp.34-40.
13. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland* (London: Profile Press, 2004); R.F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change from 1970* (Oxford: Penguin Press, 2007).
14. Scott, 'Feminism's History', p.22.
15. See, for example, Margaret H. Kelleher and James H. Murphy (eds), *Gender Perspectives in 19th Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997); Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Nancy Curtin and Marilyn Cohen (eds), *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1999). For more recent studies that incorporate gender in the relative and comparative sense see Mary E. Daly, *The Slow Failure. Population Decline and Independent Ireland* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Caitriona Clear's new book on *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) also incorporates a comparison of the lives of men and women.
16. Caroline Madden, 'Out of reach. Women in Business', *Irish Times*, Innovation, Dec. 2007, p.22.