

Dorothy Macardle, by Leeann Lane, Dublin, UCD Press, 2019, 268 pp., €25 (paperback), ISBN 9781910820414

One of the greatest difficulties faced by a biographer is the destruction of valuable letters and papers, often by surviving relatives keen to protect the privacy and reputation of the deceased.

When Dorothy Macardle's brother burned most of her personal papers shortly after her death in 1958, he deprived us of valuable insights into the character and motivations of a woman who had a prominent role in the shaping of our nascent state. It is to Leeann Lane's great credit

that she has constructed this rich account of Macardle's life without recourse to them. Lane, a lecturer in the School of History and Geography in Dublin City University whose primary focus is modern Irish history, has particular expertise in nineteenth and twentieth-century gender and women's history. In *Rosamond Jacob: Third Person Singular* (University College Dublin Press, 2010) she provided an engaging and informative account of the life of this conflicted Irish writer and activist. She has found a similarly rewarding subject in Macardle, a "complex and passionate activist" (3), and an exact contemporary of Jacob's since they were

born and died within two years of each other.

Born in 1889, into a wealthy Dundalk-based brewing family, Macardle was the daughter of an English protestant mother who regarded the Irish as "they" (15) and a Home Rule supporting

Catholic father. Across seven themed chapters, Lane anchors her life in a broad and fascinating examination of the role of women in the emergence of the Irish Republic, while keeping the chronology intact. Primary sources include a series of revelatory radio interviews recorded in the mid-1950s, and Macardle's surviving prison diary, which gives sharp insights into her interior life. Macardle, who was teaching in England during the rising of 1916, came late to republicanism. On her return to Ireland, she joined the teaching staff at Alexandra College, her alma mater, and immersed herself in the literary and theatrical world of Dublin. Her republicanism was rooted in cultural nationalism. She joined Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan, befriended Constance Markievicz, and lived in Maud Gonne's house on Stephen's Green

for a time.

Macardle's incarceration for republican activism in 1922 ensured her dismissal from Alexandra College and became the pivotal experience of her life. In her prison diary, she expresses astonishment at her trajectory from "the meekest prig of a child, accepting an English mother's orthodoxies and deep loyalties as my own" (15) to republican prisoner, and, briefly, hunger striker. A republican "convert" (23), she became, in her own estimation, "zealous to the point of fanaticism" (23). Yet her paltry republican credentials, her outspoken atheism and her lack of family support contributed to her status as a "hermit" and "exile" within

the prison community (38). She struggled to find acceptance among fellow republican women

who often thought her haughty. In positioning Macardle as an unorthodox republican, Lane provides an excellent, authoritative account from a feminist perspective of the hugely significant

role of republican women in the formation of the state.

After her release in May 1923, Macardle, who was less militant than fellow prisoners, chose "activism through words and propaganda" (59). In *Tragedies of Kerry* (1924) and a series of propaganda pieces, she provided an anti-treaty account of the Civil War and exposed the brutal, gendered treatment of women prisoners by the ruling pro-treaty government. She took

a job as a researcher with Sinn Féin and, in 1925, was commissioned by Éamon de Valera to write *The Irish Republic* (1937), an authorised account of the foundation of the new Irish state

from a republican perspective. Macardle's skill as a propagandist and emergence as a close but

far from deferential ally of de Valera ensured that she became, as Lane puts it, "centrally located within the republican political elite" (100). As an exceptionally effective Director of Publicity for Fianna Fáil, she positioned the party as inclusive, transcendent and concerned with the future of all citizens of Ireland.

An ardent feminist and outspoken atheist, Macardle broke with de Valera on issues pertaining to the role and rights of women in the new state. She was uncomfortable with the way in which patriarchal Catholicism pervaded public policy, condemning women to hearth and home and undermining the revolutionary ideals of equality and inclusivity. This ideological divergence reached its zenith with the passing of the Conditions of Employment Act of 1936 and the drafting of the Constitution of 1937. Publicly, Macardle insisted these were

"no doubt framed with excellent intentions" (224), but she supported campaigns for equal pay and the lifting of restrictions on employment opportunities. They differed too on Ireland's neutral stance during the war of 1939–45, although Macardle did acknowledge that this was a matter of personal conviction. An internationalist at heart, she feared that Ireland would be excluded from the internationalist wave that would prevent future wars. She was, Lane writes,

"an Irish republican who was also profoundly concerned about the political development of Europe and the world as a whole, in particular the defeat of fascism" (205).

During the war, Macardle deployed her considerable skills as "a propagandist, unrepentant and unashamed" (9) in her role as broadcaster and scriptwriter with the BBC in London.

Afterwards, she wrote *Children of Europe* (1949), a highly-researched account of the effect of

war and displacement on children. An accomplished novelist, she regarded her literary work as

central to her sense of self. She used fiction as a feminist forum to critique and condemn the control of women and advocate for causes such as the humane treatment of refugees. Lane provides a lively and insightful analysis of Macardle's later Gothic novels with their "feminist

societal critique" (227) and problematising of "the ideal of the nurturing mother centrally located within the domestic space of the home" (228). Since Macardle never married, she provides the perfect conduit for Lane's exploration of the position of a single, heterosexual woman in a society dominated by the ideology of separate spheres. A member of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenaries, Lane is particularly skilful at establishing the wider cultural and

political context of Macardle's fascinating life as an influential political propagandist, social commentator and "one of Ireland's foremost female polemicists" (3).

Eleanor Fitzsimons

Independent Scholar