

Dorothy Macardle: A biography which gives her the literary treatment she has long deserved

Book review: Leeann Lane does justice to the activist who has been unfairly underestimated

Diarmaid Ferriter

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A great irony lies at the heart of the life and legacy of Dorothy Macardle. A fiercely independent and talented woman, who decried inequality between the sexes, she is chiefly remembered as the keeper of the reputation of a man: Eamon de Valera. In 1937, her book *The Irish Republic* was published; a large-scale history of the Irish revolution commissioned by de Valera. It came in the midst of the history wars prompted by the divisions over the Anglo-Irish Treaty that led to civil war, and unashamedly promoted the anti-Treaty position and therefore de Valera's stance. It was much more than that - a decade of research underpinned it - but given her bias, the political polarisation of the era and de Valera's visage gracing the cover, it became primarily associated with his contested stature. It was, however, just one of Macardle's many endeavours; she was a teacher, political and social activist, journalist, playwright and novelist.

Leeann Lane deserves great credit for the originality and insightfulness of this biography; she has done justice to a complex and interesting career with a balanced analysis of Macardle's words and deeds and has a confident grasp not just of the thundering political feuds that bordered her life, but also the subtleties and nuances of Macardle's private thoughts. Lane proves her contention that Macardle "had a strong political influence in her own right" and that her gender, despite the ethos of her era, "did little to hinder the realisation of her intellectual aims". Making the biographer's task more complicated, and therefore Lane's achievement more noteworthy, is that Macardle's brother destroyed most of her papers on her death in 1958, and the biographer is left working with the fragments that survived.

Comfortable stock

Macardle was from comfortable stock, born in Dundalk in 1889 to an English Protestant, imperialist mother and an Irish Catholic father who owned a brewery established by his father and was a home rule supporting loyal subject of the British establishment, later knighted. She was schooled at Alexandra College, graduated with a first class BA from the NUI in 1912 and qualified as a teacher in 1914. Haughty and full of intellectual confidence, she had the education to transcend the pervasive idea of a woman's place, worked as a teacher in Stratford upon Avon and had her first play staged in London in 1917 before securing a lectureship in Alexandra College.

Her own and her family's activities reflected the multiple allegiances of that era; two of her brothers served in the British army, one dying at the Battle of the Somme, while she moved in theatrical circles, joined Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan and became active in publicising the republican cause. Erskine Childers was a particular influence along with de Valera, and she ended up living in Maud Gonne's house for a period.

Her arrest and imprisonment in November 1922 was a turning point. Fired from her academic job, she was now pursuing a path completely at odds with her background, and her politics put great strain on her personal and family relationships. On one level her embrace of militancy seemed total; she began "to hone a literary record of the moral failings of those who seemed stronger as actionalists" than herself, nonetheless hoping to be more republican than I came in".

Thankfully, Macardle's intense prison diary survived the destruction of her papers and Lane has done justice to it. Macardle struggled to connect with other prisoners, few of whom appreciated her literary or political views. In an "exile", she ironically found their minds smaller "than that of my English friends" and she spent her future as a teacher, a depression compounded when lectures, notes and a book she was almost

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the house where she had resided. But the prison experience- the endurance of something for a cause- also found its way in to numerous future fiction writings.

Republican women

The republican women incarcerated in Mountjoy and Kilmainham and the North Dublin Union during the civil war were far from united; the faction she identified with “think the military should serve” while the more extreme “think it should command”. Macardle resented what she regarded as counter-productive aggression and was scared when Mary MacSwiney went on hunger strike, wondering if all prisoners must “in loyalty hunger strike too?” She did briefly bear the hunger strike cross and the mental torments of hunger strikers featured heavily in her future writings.

This book is also strong on the themes of gendered violence- “her accounts of gendered violence against republican women had strong undertones of sexual aggression and assault” - and attitudes to republican women who endured great harshness, cruelty and appalling conditions, some of them suffering from the health effects for the rest of their lives. She was also apt to portray soldiers and officials of the Free State as morally reprehensible, sentiments that worked their way in to *Tragedies of Kerry* (1924), her account of civil war atrocities. But she was also well capable of reinforcing gender roles through her propaganda, defining women according to their male relatives from whom they “inherited the task and the tradition”.

She differed from her contemporaries, however, in identifying as an atheist and had harsh words privately for those devoted to Catholicism, recording in 1922 that there was “a quaint childlikeness in it. A fantastical exactitude about the imaginable other world which would also shut the like of me outside”.

Propaganda

Lane argues that imprisonment was a central step in her development as a propagandist; she constructed “a rigid binary of honour and integrity versus compromise and betrayal”. After her release this became her overwhelming focus; in her own words, she had “an unlimited belief in the value of propaganda for the cause”, first as a salaried Sinn Féin researcher and then when tasked with writing what became *The Irish Republic* which de Valera asked her to take on in 1925. In embracing this task she increasingly came to see him as “the voice of authority and righteousness.” Her writing range extended to a variety of forms; she employed the literary tropes of the cultural revival and the use of the gothic form by invoking ghostly figures from history as seen in *Earth Bound* (1924).

Lane carefully dissects the commercially successful *The Irish Republic* and despite Macardle’s contention that the book contained “undisputable facts”, concludes that in contrasting republican morality with the violence and brutality of British and Free State soldiers “her binary was deeply flawed” and that she was “a politician and propagandist before she was a historian”. She was selective in the documents she used, parroted de Valera’s own dubious reasons for not attending the Treaty negotiations and suggested his “fatal flaw” was his strength of principle.

Macardle championed de Valera’s Fianna Fáil from its inception, in stark contrast to Mary MacSwiney, who was subsequently to castigate her “child like consistency in a game of make believe”. She did not want, like de Valera, to get stuck in “militaristic reductionism”, but if there was obsequiousness apparent in her devotion to de Valera it was by no means absolute. She resigned as the party’s director of publicity when FF members took the oath of allegiance to the Crown in 1927, wiring to tell him “I can have nothing to do with asking Irish men and women to take that oath”. But as she demonstrated in her propagandist articles for the Irish Press in the 1930s, she was to remain a FF flag waver. Privately, however, she had deep reservations about some aspects of the de Valera project, telling her friend and fellow activist Rosamund Jacob that excessive Catholic “qualities” because he was “smothered by” his religious convictions.

An internationalist

She also had grave doubts about de Valera’s insistence on Irish neutrality during the Second World War, writing “only with ignorance or indifference”. Internationalist in her approach to literature and culture, she was a member of the Irish Society for the Study of International Affairs. She had been in Geneva with de Valera in 1925 and set a subsequent novel there, *The Seed was Kind* (1944). She moved to London for the

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with refugees and recorded BBC broadcasts; she publicly defended Ireland’s right to be neutral but was firmly anti-Nazi. Her book *Children of Europe* (1949) addressed themes of displacement, harm done to children (“appears immeasurable”) and the need for international solidarity. In preparing this book she visited Prague in 1946, spoke to child psychologists and chided Ireland: “we cannot shut our hearts against Europe’s need”. Her last novel *Dark Enchantment* (1953) also drew attention to the scars of warfare.

Her travels alone across war-torn Europe were indicative of her independence and commitment to research and her belief in self-reliance was central to her stern criticism of gender inequality. She unambiguously insisted in 1935 on the need for “equal pay for equal work, permitting no discrimination against any person in the manner of payment on the sole ground of sex”; it was a “grievous disappointment” to her that Irish legislators did not share her perspective. She publicly opposed the Conditions of Employment Act in 1935, which allowed for the control and restriction of women working in all industries. This was also personal: “I shall never forge the dread of the future that closed in on me...for a girl who was not expected to earn her living”. She also saw the 1937 constitution as an “invasion” of the rights of women, but tackled de Valera privately rather than publicly on this, as their personal friendship remained deep.

Lane sees her novels of the 1940s and 1950s as ones that “fall into the category of feminist societal critique”. In *The Seed was Kind*, the mother Sybil “sought an outlet in bridge, dress and personal relationships” and after Sybil’s husband dies she “felt all set for adventure”. She returned to the theme of abdication of maternal responsibility repeatedly (her relationship with her own mother was ruptured by her life choices) and also pointedly dwelt on the maternal feelings of unmarried mothers.

For someone engaged in such a wide range of political activism and writing over five decades, when hostility to assertive, gifted women was so palpable, Macardle has been unjustifiably neglected and underestimated. This book provides her with the biographic and literary treatment she has long deserved.

Diarmaid Ferriter is Professor of Modern Irish History at UCD and an Irish Times Columnist. His latest book is The Border (Profile Books).

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