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Rosamond Jacob: third person singular

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St Deiniol’s Library. She writes without reference to the growing literature on Irish historical memory and commemoration. Had she made use of this stimulating work, understanding the intended purpose and rejection of the statue in Dublin would make more sense. Overall, the collection is a bit uneven, and inclusion of topics like Gladstone and Parnell or Gladstone and the land question would have strengthened the outcome.

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Rosamond Jacob: third person singular, by Leeann Lane, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2010, 334 pp., €30.00, ISBN 9781906359546

The life of Rosamond Jacob spans the years 1888–1960, with the diary she began at the age of nine capturing much of the turbulent atmosphere of the pre- and post-revolutionary period. While, as Leeann Lane points out, the diaries have previously been mined as a source of information on the leading players in Ireland’s suffrage and nationalist campaigns, this publication centres on the cultural and political aspirations and experiences of the diarist herself. Lane argues that the ‘alternative lens’ provided by her exploration of a ‘life more ordinary’ can significantly enrich our understanding of the past, and her study of this middle-class radical demonstrates the myriad ways in which gender, class, religion – and personality – intersect in the life of an individual.

The book’s main focus is on the early decades of the twentieth century when Jacob began to engage with cultural and political campaigns, both in her home town of Waterford and, increasingly, in Dublin itself, moving there permanently in 1919. The diaries which Lane draws on thus provide insights into the various organisations which emerged, declined and re-formed in support of nationalist and feminist causes during these turbulent years. Jacob’s early interest in Irish language and culture were reflected in her membership of the local branch of the Gaelic League where the under-representation of women clearly provoked a growing sense of the importance of gender divisions. Although not formally signing up to membership of any suffrage organisation, her views on the subject were clear, with Lane describing her attendance at meetings and engagement in debates as ‘a form of activism by stealth’ (51). Like many politicised women of the period, Jacob felt the need to prioritise one cause over the other, while ideologically embracing both. As her nationalist passion intensified, she explained her non-membership of suffrage societies as ‘partly because I was a Separatist and partly because they did nothing but import English speakers’ (55). Her growing anti-Englishness found a more direct outlet in the Waterford branch of Cumann na mBan and, following the 1916 Rising, in the newly reconstituted Sinn Féin.

Describing herself as ‘an outsider and looker-on’, Jacob’s participation in virtually all of the exciting events of the period was confined to the ‘fringes’ of the action, even when living in Dublin – ‘a place of cultural ferment and possibilities’ (48) – and surrounded by those whose place in history was already secure. However, her interactions with leading activists such as Markievicz (disdainfully referred to as ‘Madame’) and Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, who Lane describes as a ‘galvanising influence’ on her life, together with her passion for gender equality and Irish independence – and a range of other left-wing
causes – reveals the connections, overlaps and diversities of interests embraced by many women of the period. Moreover, from a ‘childhood and adolescence full of intellectual curiosity and creativity’ to the ‘disappointment and loneliness of her later years’ (23), the picture of Jacob that emerges from Lane’s analysis reminds us of the hopes and dreams, the everyday concerns and emotional impulses of the individual that underlie more prominent collective political ideologies.

Of course, as Lane reminds us, Jacob is herself responsible for that picture, and the identity she has constructed is interesting, revealing – and often irritating. Constrained by family responsibilities and financial considerations, and frustrated by lack of success in her literary endeavours, she presents herself as unconventional and misunderstood. Her views on sex, marriage and children were certainly far removed from those of historical discourse, her nonconformity particularly evident during her affair with Frank Ryan. Jacob’s diary records the intensity of her passion for the twenty-four-year-old republican activist (she was forty when their affair began). Despite her well-aired views on gender equality, Ryan was the one in control of the relationship and her frankness and openness strongly contrasts with his Catholic guilt and his reticence – ‘I sometimes feel that as he wants me physically he doesn’t want me to talk to – the shyness & the sense of sin he seems to get, & I helpless to prevent it’ (187). With Ryan refusing to acknowledge her in public, and her roommate – Dorothy McArdle – objecting to his night-time visits, the emotional and practical difficulties of this episode support Lane’s contention that ‘the wider perceptions and ramifications of the affair are interesting for what they say about women who did not fit neatly into the dominant domestic paradigm of wife and mother’ (5).

Indeed, this account clearly demonstrates how the complexities of personality defy simple categorisation. Socially awkward, forthright, judgemental and, apparently, lacking physical attraction, at best ambivalent about children, she never married and was strongly opposed to ‘the feminine view of love’ with its notions of female passivity and obedience. At the same time, she had frequent romantic crushes on the male heroes of the republican struggle and was sexually active into middle age. Neither were her political creeds straightforward – her ambiguity about Ryan’s violent republicanism, at odds with her membership of the International League for Peace and Freedom, was just one example of several inconsistencies and contradictions in her ideological stances.

In probing and contextualising her life, Lane also draws on Jacob’s literary endeavours which reflect her political principles and in which she plays out contemporary debates. But her work found little favour with publishers and the disappointment of these failures undoubtedly contributed to her general sense of alienation and ‘otherness’. Embracing Irish Socialist Republicanism in the 1930s, in the later decades of her life she became increasingly occupied with philanthropic and family concerns, with Lane describing this period as ‘more commemoration than activism’.

The interweaving of public and private concerns is well handled by Lane, and her analysis does, as she suggests, offer ‘an important alternative angle on what it meant to be a woman, a republican supporter and a human being in Ireland in the period’ (306). While her ‘ordinariness’ is open to question, this study of Jacob’s life is a timely reminder of the need to ‘think outside the box’ when considering those who peopled the past.

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