

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Julie A. Eckerle and Naomi McAreavey, eds, *Women's Life Writing and Early Modern Ireland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019). 326pp. ISBN 978 0 8032 9997 9.**

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This volume joins an 'archipelagic' perspective within literary scholarship which challenges the presupposed Anglocentrism of Anglophone writing in early modern England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the Americas. Such a devolutionary approach, to quote one of its leading proponents, John Kerrigan, 'shift[s] power in politics or scholarly analysis from a locus that has been disproportionately endowed with influence and documentation to sites that are dispersed and more skeletally understood'.<sup>1</sup> Fruitful work approaching the topic of life writing in this vein has been undertaken by Kathleen Lynch's study of the circulation of literary materials and models across the Atlantic and the role that spiritual autobiographies played in reconstituting the church and state across colonial cultures, in which autobiographical narratives act as catalysts for community formation.<sup>2</sup> With regard to women's life writing, Sarah Prescott's work on Katherine Phillips takes a devolutionary approach in assessing both Phillips's Welshness but also her role as an interface which is used to challenge a binary of centre and margin inherited from postcolonial theory.<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging the pioneering study of women's writing in early modern Ireland by Marie-Louise Coolahan, the originality of Eckerle and McAreavey's volume lies in its focus on women's life writing, in an excellent contribution to both Irish studies and the history of autobiographical practice.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics, 1603–1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Prescott, 'Archipelagic Coterie Space: Katherine Phillips and Welsh Women's Writing', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 33.2 (2014), 51–76.

To engage in a study of this sort requires an appreciation of the unique relationship between England and Ireland as a settler-colony, and many of the subjects of this collection were to some extent complicit with the colonial project. Yet to characterise such writing wholly as a literature of exile runs the risk of overidentifying these women with their paternity and their husbands instead of examining each woman's perception of her own relationship with Ireland. The contributors to this volume each make cases for how particular female writers expressed this relationship, attending sensitively to the complexities of Irish national identities while acknowledging the fluidities and multiplicities of such identities. To this end, the organisation of the essays by genre instead of by nationality, religion, or time period is an intelligent decision on the part of the editors, one which also expresses the vitality of current life writing scholarship more generally in its expansion from Lejeune's famous definition of autobiography, accepted or challenged so frequently as a prescriptive formalism. Instead, the porosity of life writing is brought to the fore, progressing from more traditionally understood forms of autobiographical writing such as retrospective prose narratives to the peripheral and paratextual, echoing the expansionary work of (among others) Wilfred Prest, Sharon Cadman Seelig, and Adam Smyth.<sup>4</sup>

If this volume can be said to have a weakness, it is only that the attention paid to such less traditional forms of life writing is somewhat underweight, restricted largely to Jason McElligott's chapter on ownership inscriptions and marginalia. The testimony of the curate Thomas Fleetwood is used as illustration for the siege of Athlone in Ruth Connolly's examination of Lady Katherine Ranelagh's physical and rhetorical break with Ireland, but a chapter engaging with the large number of female witness testimonies now made available through the 1641 Depositions Project would have been welcome.

Yet this is a small criticism of a ground-breaking collection of essays which although concentrating largely on epistolary writing, sheds light on the range of purposes to which such letters were directed. Naomi McAreevey draws attention to both the extent of the archive of Elizabeth Butler's correspondence and its role in the First Duchess of Ormonde's assertion of political agency in advancing the family's interests. Amanda E. Herbert uses seven letters penned by Cromwellian settler Eliza Blennerhassett to the Hastings family to show how one individual constructed an archipelagic identity, attempting to retain ties to England while viewing her residence in Ireland as a form of exile. Julie A. Eckerle takes a single addressee, the bishop of Derry William King, as

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<sup>4</sup> Wilfrid Prest 'Legal Autobiography in Early Modern England', in R. Bedford, L. Davies and P. Kelly (eds.), *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 280–94; Sharon Cadman Seelig, *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600–1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

her subject, examining the petitionary letters from women of lesser rank and the means by which they sought to retain a respectful reputation in his eyes,

Three chapters on the Boyle women begin with a chapter by Ann-Maria Walsh, who examines their writing as being rooted in the custodianship propaganda of the New English Protestant planter Richard Boyle, First Earl of Cork. Amelia Zurcher focuses more closely on Lady Ranelagh and Lady Mary Rich, arguing that an appreciation of their identities as members of an Irish-English family is essential to appreciating their literary self-presentation, particularly Rich's rejection of this identity in favour of a 'narrative trajectory toward solitary independence' (p.128). Connolly's chapter on Lady Ranelagh identifies a similar rhetoric of rejection, one directed at Ireland as a whole and, metonymically, her husband. All three chapters are refreshingly free of the tropism toward the more famous male members of the family which usually sees their subjects discussed in terms of their relationship with their brother Robert.

It is the archival research which shines in this volume. Eckerle and McAreavey have supplied two valuable appendices, one of female life writers of or connected to early modern Ireland, and one of pertinent archives. Their purpose is twofold: to highlight underexamined texts themselves, and also those whose Irish context would bear further study. In hoping that these appendices form a generative resource, the editors acknowledge the relative scarcity of the volume's engagement with Gaelic sources, in part a consequence of the poor survival rate of Irish-language materials. It is hoped that *Women's Life Writing and Early Modern Ireland* will encourage further scholarship in this area, while itself serving as a fine contribution to Irish studies and early modern women's literary history.