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McWilliams, Ellen. Women and exile in contemporary Irish fiction

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McWilliams, Ellen. *Women and exile in contemporary Irish fiction*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 ISBN: 9780230285767

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For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Irish people left Ireland in large numbers, settling all over the world but often still considering Ireland "home" and thinking of themselves as exiles, not merely emigrants. While Ireland remained alive to them and to their descendants, they did not figure as much in the popular imagination in Ireland itself until fairly recently. Indeed, as Ellen McWilliams notes in this excellent book, the shame associated with emigration resulted in a notable silence about this diaspora at home in Ireland until quite late in the last century. At the beginning of the Celtic Tiger years, just when the annual net loss of population stopped for a time, some Irish writers and critics began to turn their attention to the Irish who had left and to examine what that history might mean to Ireland. Former president Mary Robinson's famous gesture of leaving a light burning in the presidential residence in acknowledgement of and welcome to members of the diaspora symbolized this new interest in the Irish abroad. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the silence about Irish *women* emigrants was especially profound; the dominant figure of the Irish emigrant was a man, off to work in England or America, and the most memorable construction of the exile was also a man, James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, determined to escape the nets of country, family, and religion, all represented as female. The Irish woman is the one from whom one escapes, it seemed, not the one who escapes.

In *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, McWilliams sets out to explore the place of women in Irish emigrant history through examining literature that focuses on Irish female emigrants. As she says in the introduction, her book addresses a notable lacuna in critical studies in arguing that "contemporary Irish writing shows a sustained interest in recovering the story of the Irish woman emigrant, a story that until relatively recently was underrepresented in both historical accounts and literary representations of emigration" (2). McWilliams chooses the term "exile" rather than "emigrant" for her study for many reasons, most importantly her commitment to analyzing "how representations of women and exile in contemporary Irish fiction depart from, as well as appropriate and adapt, the set of meanings associated with exile in

relation to formidable forebears and a largely male-centred Irish literary tradition" (12). After the introduction and a chapter that both lays out the critical issues and places this work in the overlapping fields of diasporic, Irish, and feminist cultural studies, McWilliams organizes her discussion into six main chapters, each focused on two works by a single writer: Julia O'Faolain's *No Country for Young Men* and *The Irish Signorina*; Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* and *The Light of Evening*; John McGahern's *The Leavetaking* and *Amongst Women*; William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey* and *The Story of Lucy Gault*; Colm Tóibín's *The South* and *Brooklyn*; and Anne Enright's *What Are You Like?* and *The Gathering*. Although most of these novels have been the subjects of considerable critical analysis, they have not previously been examined from this specific standpoint. In bringing these texts together and focusing closely on what they individually and collectively suggest about the experience of exile for Irish women, McWilliams makes a major contribution to the study of contemporary Irish fiction as well as to the study of the Irish diaspora.

McWilliams's readings of the fiction are insightful, nuanced, and persuasive. Although this is certainly a scholarly book and McWilliams shows a broad and deep understanding of an enormous range of scholarly and theoretical texts, her writing is so direct and clear and her arguments so carefully made that I think this work will be of interest to and readable by many people outside the field of literary study, especially those interested in the Irish diaspora (there are about 70 million of us in that diaspora worldwide, to use the standard estimate from the mid 1990s); those who have read one or more of these novels or seen a film adaptation (*Felicia's Journey* came out in 1999; filming of *Brooklyn* was going on in Enniscorthy when I was there in April of this year); and those interested in women's history. My one quibble with the book is that McWilliams sometimes repeats herself, and evidently knows that--there are quite a few sentences that include a phrase like "as previously mentioned." However, that is a very minor quibble and overshadowed by the book's many strengths. To eliminate the repetition, McWilliams would have to reorganize, but the book's organization is one of its strengths, in my opinion, as it makes possible different reading options, including reading just the chapter on the one writer in whom one is most interested and still getting a clear understanding of the shape of the overall argument.

My parents both left Ireland for America in the early 1950s; we all--my parents and their four children--returned to Ireland for the first time in 1969. I say "return" deliberately, even though it was my first trip to Ireland, because in our house we spoke always of Ireland as "home." Although I understood that my parents were part of a huge wave of emigration in the 1950s, I did not fully realize until reading McWilliams's book that the odd silence that surrounded their departures from Dublin--no "Irish wakes" for them, and particularly not for my mother, who seems to have slipped fairly quietly out of Ireland--were part of a public "culture of silence" about emigration in that time. And although I have read all the novels McWilliams discusses here, until reading her book I had not recognized that they share themes connected with Irish women and exile. In short, McWilliams gave me a new way of thinking about this fiction, which is exactly what we hope for when we begin reading a scholarly work but all too seldom find.