

Megan Sullivan: *Women in Northern Ireland: Cultural Studies and Material Conditions*.

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Sullivan's stated aim in this book is to provide a materialist analysis of contemporary cultural production by women from Northern Ireland. In particular, she examines films and theatre productions by women in order to illustrate the particular material concerns and conditions of women in Northern Ireland. However, the introduction quickly makes it clear that, despite the inclusive title, this book examines the experiences and cultural productions of women whose politics, or the politics of their cultural production, can be broadly classified as nationalist and/or Republican. Although there is plenty of material to justify this, no argument is presented for the exclusion of Unionist and loyalist women as a means to looking at the material concerns that are particular to women in Northern Ireland.

Sullivan's theoretical approach to the texts discussed draws on Spivak as well as local feminists such as Monica McWilliams and Eileen Evason. In the introduction (which provides the inevitable historical contextualization for readers), Sullivan emphasizes the centrality to her thesis of the specificity of women's experiences and needs, and how the war in Northern Ireland has shaped these concerns. She points to the Unionist/nationalist schism within women's politics in Northern Ireland and argues that a materialist approach is essential for understanding women's positions(s) in Northern Ireland. In particular, Sullivan singles out prison as *the* state apparatus which underscores the material conditions of women in Northern Ireland. In her consideration of the centrality of the prison, Sullivan begins by discussing the incarceration of Róisín McAliskey, privileging McAliskey's own analysis of the impact of the prison, as a state apparatus, on herself as a woman. The psychological isolation to which McAliskey was subjected is highlighted as a tool through which (deviant) women are disciplined, desexed and dehumanized by the state.

The discussion of McAliskey's incarceration in Britain serves as a backdrop to the discussion of film and theatre in the next chapters of the book. Sullivan's choice of texts is both welcome and interesting. In particular, she examines the work of the acclaimed Charabanc Theatre Company, a collective and cross-community women's theatre group, which enjoyed success in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. It was within the Charabanc group that the playwright Marie Jones, now enjoying West End success with *'Stones in their Pockets'*, developed her skills. Ironically, Charabanc's aim was to produce theatre by women and for women, actors and audience alike: Jones's current play has been staged with two male actors.

In addition to a close discussion of the Charabanc, Sullivan examines film productions by women directors including *Anne Devlin* and *Maeve* (Pat Murphy), *Mother Ireland* and *Hush-A-Bye-Baby* (Derry Women's Film Co-Operative), and *The Visit* (Orla Walsh). Along with the play *Give Them Stones*, by Mary Beckett, these texts are closely analyzed for their examination and presentation of the impact of the war on women and material conditions in Northern Ireland. Sullivan's critiques of her chosen texts are thorough and detailed. However, it is not always apparent that the texts chosen can bear the weight of the critical reading that Sullivan is developing from them. At times, she depends too heavily on the work of others in order to move her analysis forward, which (rightly or wrongly) suggests a lack of confidence in the author's own readings of the texts. For example, in her analysis of *Maeve*, Sullivan tentatively suggests that the doorman at the Republican club 'does not appear to be a member of the Northern Ireland security forces, but is probably a Republican' (p. 75). There really should be no doubt that a Republican club would have a Republican doorman.

Sullivan's analysis of how the texts illustrate women's position in Northern Ireland and the impact and curtailing effect of the war, and the omnipresence of the prison as a state institution, is sympathetic and engaging. It is clear that her political and feminist approach to nationalist and Republican women in Northern Ireland is heartfelt and her theoretical arguments in the opening chapters for a materialist approach to understanding nationalist and Republican women in Northern Ireland are convincing.

However, there are a number of errors in this book, which detract from the aims and focus of the book. Some of these are minor but others are more serious and suggest a lack of familiarity with Northern Irish politics and history: for example, Anne Maguire is referred to as a member of the 'Birmingham Eight' who is still 'working to prove her innocence' (p. 38).

The analysis Sullivan presents is convincing and engaging, and the texts are well chosen. However, the errors of fact will annoy the informed reader, while the level of analysis, with sometimes scanty excerpts, will make this a difficult reading for those unfamiliar with the texts. The overall impact is to detract from Sullivan's argument for the centrality of material conditions and state apparatuses, especially the prison, in understanding the position(s) of nationalist and Republican women in Northern Ireland. This is reinforced by a conclusion that examines the possible impact of recent changes to Northern Ireland's governance and economy for the material conditions of women, but which neglects the future of women's cultural production in the 'new' Northern Ireland.

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