



Irish Women's Emigration to America: Models for Movers

Íde B. O'Carroll

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Models for Movers: Irish Women's Emigration to America is a unique collection of Irish women's oral histories spanning three waves of twentieth-century emigration to America in the 1920s, 1950s and 1980s. By combining a critical analysis of conditions for women in Ireland with women's own accounts of life at the time, the author Íde B. O'Carroll highlights the sheer necessity of emigration. If survival in Ireland was a tough proposition, especially for women, a place where patriarchs in families, church and state controlled women's lives, where education and paid work was limited, then America provided a lifeline to a relative freedom, and crucially, an opportunity to earn an independent income. After reading *Models for Movers*, we begin to appreciate just how far Irish society has come.

The oral histories detail how each woman created an independent life for herself in America, often in the face of multiple challenges there. As active agents, often supporting one another to leave, these Irish women are role models because they inspire us all to have the courage act. Whether it's Nora Joyce talking about life on the Aran Islands in the 1920s, or Terry Ryan describing inner-city Dublin in the 1950s and her battle with TB, or Lena Deevy's tales about working in Ballymun in the 1980s, these Irish women recount stories of scarcity and scant opportunities in Ireland at the time.

In America, they carved out new lives and possibilities for themselves in a place that enabled them to thrive and enriched the quality of their lives. Nora Joyce (1920s) followed in the footsteps of countless other Irish women in America by working in domestic service until she had managed to save enough money to buy a house, marry and start her own family. Largely self-educated during spells in TB hospitals, Terry Ryan (1950s) nonetheless found work as a secretary in America. She graduated with a degree from Northeastern University shortly before her husband and the father of her two children became its president. On the pretext of 'taking a rest,' Sister Lena Deevy (1980s) applied to and later graduated from Harvard Graduate School of Education. She became one of Boston's most respected Irish leaders.

Many Irish women emigrants aided one another to get to America in a system established originally in the nineteenth century - female chain migration. Aunts, sisters and cousins sent back the fare, firm in the belief that a life in America was far superior to what might be available to women at home in Ireland. This system of support continued into the twentieth century during the three waves of emigration recounted in the book: 1920s, 1950s and 1980s.

In her analysis, O'Carroll uses many examples to argue her case about the continuous control over women's lives exerted by the combined forces of church and state in Ireland, including during the crafting of the Irish Constitution, the unavailability of contraception and the failure to introduce the Mother and Child health care scheme and divorce.

However, at the heart of this book are the women's oral histories, the descriptions of ordinary/extraordinary women, an approach that brings to life the reality of women's lives in both places, in their own words. The approach was considered 'ground-breaking' at the time because of the absence of women from the story of Irish emigration. In fact, the Models for Movers tapes, photographs and papers formed the first holding on Irish women at the Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, the premier repository on the history of women in America.

In a time of renewed global migration, these oral histories provide a rich multigenerational tapestry of experience into which women leaving Ireland today, often for places other than America, can weave their stories.

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