Chapter 4
Feminist Cultural Projects

The area of feminist culture(s), specifically the kinds of cultural production that emerged during the second-wave women’s movement in Ireland, is one which remains largely under-researched and under-represented. In discussing “culture” here, we intend to address issues of artistic representation, and to examine the ways in which second-wave feminist activism in Ireland constructed a counterculture that critiqued and subverted mainstream values.

It might seem very clear now, as it did to feminist activists at the time, that there was quite a distinct “feminist culture” during this period, that it was vibrant and recognisable throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, ranging from iconic songs to literature, from street theatre to film and video groups, and from visual arts to specific styles in food and clothes. However, arriving at definitions of just what that feminist culture consisted of, is a difficult task – do we focus on what tends to be seen as “high culture” (theatre, visual arts, literature) or concentrate on elements of street or “popular culture” (feminist newspapers, slogans on t-shirts, protest chants)? The division of culture into “high” and “popular” proves impossible during a period where a poem written by an activist is chanted by a crowd at a protest
Further, is it possible to describe the kinds of cultural production associated with the Irish feminist movement as a singular culture, which can be categorised as one whole aspect of the feminist activisms of the period? Is it possible to reflect on this “culture” as a specific space, cut off from other aspects of culture and society? Elements of other alternative movements and cultural forces on the national and international stages – such as folk music, co-operative living, vegetarianism, left-wing ideologies and protest marches – as well as the demands and influences working within the various cultural arenas themselves, intersected with the spaces being opened up to feminist scrutiny in this country, influencing what could be described as “feminist cultures”.

Given that this is such a vast area, this chapter will provide a survey of the general area of cultural production, focusing on some of the cultural work specific to the women’s movement. Clearly, much work has already been done on some aspects of late twentieth-century Irish feminist cultural production, specifically in the realms of literature, film and the visual arts.

For example, in the visual arts in Ireland it is possible to see distinct trends and changes that came about in this field as a direct result of second-wave feminism. Many women artists were activists who belonged to feminist groups, and some established groups and initiatives specifically to promote and collectivise the work of feminist artists during this period. An ad in the first issue of Wicca (1977) states:

Women artists will exhibit their work in the gallery of the Project Arts Centre, 15 May to 9 June. Approx. 20 women – non-professionals, professionals and students working in a variety of mediums – have been selected by a panel to have their work shown. Work by women is frequently rejected by male-run institutions and galleries because they work in “unacceptable” mediums such as ceramics and fabrics and they are not always neutral, intellectual and formal, say the organisers of the exhibition. (BL/F/AP/1498, Attic Press Archive)

The Women Artists Action Group (waag) was formed by Pauline Cummins in 1987. The main aim of the group was to provide a forum for women artists, who had up until this point “reacted [to the feminist movement] alone, in their studios” but without any space for collective action (“Art Beyond Barriers”; waag, National Library of Ireland, Ir. 700: 106). Other artists, such as Louise Walsh and Geraldine O’Reilly, worked within community-based programmes to bring about change. Just as the feminist movement influenced the work of these artists, their work informed and commented upon the changes in Irish society brought about in part by the feminist movement. Installations such as “Sounding the Depths” (Walsh and Cummins, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992) challenged and interrogated representations of the female body, and the way in which women had been positioned in Irish culture and society. Similarly, Rita Duffy’s work in the 1980s – particularly “Mother Ireland and Mother Ulster” (1989) – undermines the colonisation of women by the various hegemonies and state powers on this island.
This kind of work reached the wider culture and society, not only in Ireland but internationally. This movement is reflected in other areas of cultural production that emerged from, or in tandem with, the Irish women’s movement, such as the National Writers’ Workshop, which Eavan Boland facilitated in 1984 and which was aimed at encouraging women’s literary work. Even within areas addressed by scholarly work, such as Irish women’s writing, the effects of these key feminist initiatives tend to be neglected. The absence of scholarly research and writing on the specific theme of cultural production vis-à-vis the Irish women’s movement, is addressed in this chapter. Elements of a second-wave feminist culture represented in the documents surveyed in the Irish Women’s Movement research project, which have not emerged in other studies of cultural production in the period, are revealed.

Graphic Feminisms

The kinds of material held by feminist archives are somewhat different from those found in more traditional archives, which tend to focus on conventional documents. The “documents” in these archives can sometimes run to three-dimensional objects such as badges, signs and whistles, as well as banners and t-shirts – a reminder of the kinds of objects which narrate the cultural histories of activist movements.

A key element of this archival material is what could be described as “graphic feminism” – the posters, flyers, newspapers, cartoons, magazines, graffiti and banners, as well as slogans on t-shirts and badges which played a central role in the activism of this period. Graphic material was a focal point of feminist activism during the period of this study, and is situated at the point where visual culture and activist propaganda meet. Images on posters were direct, vivid and memorable: for example, the image on the cover of the iwm document *Chains – or Change?* mentioned in Chapter 1. Posters in the archives advertise key events such as the first public meeting of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement at the Mansion House in 1971 (mentioned in Chapter One), meetings of the Society for Sexual Liberation in the late 1970s (mentioned in Chapter Six) and a range of other meetings, demos and conferences. Flyers and pamphlets in the archive advertise meetings, but also disseminate booklists of further feminist reading and provide information relating to contraception, abortion and equal pay issues.

Some of the “documents” aim to intervene in graphic images that were already in the public domain – such as advertising and billboards. For example, stickers printed with the words “This is Offensive to Women” and “Sexism” were designed to be stuck across advertisements on hoardings and billboards. Similarly, in almost all of the feminist magazines available, there were reproductions of this kind of billboard advertising defaced by feminist graffiti.
Chains – or Change? The Civil Wrongs of Irishwomen, IWLM manifesto 1971 (BL/F/AP/1518, Attic Press Archive)
The wealth and range of this material is exceptional. Some of these documents are sophisticated, produced by professional photographers, artists, cartoonists and writers, and printed in colour on high-quality paper. Much of this material however, is home-made, produced by local groups and activists using typewriters and reproduced by hand-operated Gestetner copiers, sometimes with line-drawings also done by hand. As many such groups operated on low (or no) budgets, a lot of this material was reproduced on what is now rapidly disintegrating poor-quality paper, as well as on recycled/reused paper. Because of the conditions within which the material was produced, there is a sense of immediacy about many of these documents which advertise meetings and actions. However, the low resolution of reproduced flyers, for example, has rendered them difficult to read over time. The fact that they have been in use means that they are often covered in handwriting – minutes from the meeting, phone numbers of group members, or notes relating to other ongoing actions may cover them – adding to the information pool but also distracting from the main document. These are far from the carefully preserved manuscripts of officialdom. Much of this ephemeral material was not really considered worth keeping, or preserving – items such as flyers, ticket stubs and programmes were frequently kept by accident, or for sentimental reasons.

Furthermore, because this kind of material originates in political activism, which was anti-establishment, these concerns are reflected in the material. Many of the flyers deliberately give no indication as to the group or organisation which produced them; in other words, they could not be traced back to the activist group...
or individuals either by researchers today, or more crucially, by the offices of the state or anti-feminist groups at the time.

As mentioned in the introduction, some of this material cannot be specifically located within the feminist culture of the period, but belongs to counter-cultural movements at work. For example, the cartoons of Arja Kajermo, which were published in *In Dublin* as well as in feminist publications, make reference to the artist’s feminist agenda but also make incisive comment on other sacred cows of Irish society. Cartoons were another feature of the “graphic feminism” of this period. In particular, the range of Spellbound postcards available in independent bookshops and “alternative” shops around the country, were common currency and recognisable to many people both within and outside the reaches of activist feminism.
These cards, produced by a women’s co-operative, inserted feminist ideas and jokes into mainstream circulation, and presented a radical alternative to the versions of Ireland represented in the John Hinde greeting cards then widely available. Some of the cards they produced derived from the slide library of women artists’ work collected by the waag.

The influence of “graphic feminism” internationally is also clear in the production of much of the visual material in these archives. For example, well-known images such as the woman’s symbol, or that of Rosie the Riveter, and slogans such as “Women Hold up Half the Sky” were widely disseminated. Attic Press used the work of an American feminist cartoonist, bülbül, in the Women’s Diary and Guidebook. Similarly, the dissemination of the Radicalesbian (sic) manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman”, discussed in Chapter 6, carried both its textual message and the visual image of two women kissing across international boundaries.

The immediacy of this material has already been mentioned, but its casual and provisional nature deserves attention. Produced in response to the fluid nature of feminist activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s, just as activist feminist groups began to merge into mainstream organisations, so too did this material change. Today, many feminist and other activist groups and projects continue to use logos and graphic material to get their message across. However, created in a context of limited budgets and basic technology, documents from the 1970s and 1980s are
worlds apart from the glossy reports and posters commissioned by women’s groups and centres today, with covers designed by graphic artists or desktop-published in-house using scanned photographs and artwork.

Furthermore, there was a somewhat different attitude to the ownership of material, both textual and graphic, produced in this period when individual authorship, or the design and ownership of an image, was less important than the political impact its widespread use could effect. Earlier feminist groups reproduced imagery and design across international and organisational boundaries without much regard for the ownership or copyright of such graphics. The widespread dissemination of the “woman symbol” is one example of this, but many of the images mentioned above were similarly reproduced, as were cartoons, often without the names of individual artists attached to them. Similarly, feminist articles were frequently reproduced without headings, or the names of authors forgotten – always assuming they were printed on the original documents in the first place. This is indicative of the importance of group identities over individual ownership of material or copyrights, and it also reflects the

bülbül’s cartoons, a feature of many feminist publications of this period, including the IFI/Attic Press Diary Guidebook (reproduced with permission of the artist)
sense of solidarity and common cause fostered and experienced by feminist activists in a variety of countries.

Feminist Newspapers and Magazines

The number of journalists involved in the early days of the Irish women’s movement gives us an indication of the role played by the media in second-wave feminist agendas. The journalism of key figures such as June Levine, Mary Anderson, Mary Maher, Nell McCafferty, Janet Martin, Nuala Fennell and Mary Kenny, among others, both in feminist publications and the mainstream press, were central to the consciousness-raising revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. Rose comments:

The importance of the women’s pages of the national newspapers as a source of inspiration in the struggle to end discrimination has lost ground to the mushrooming pressure groups and politically-inclined women throughout the country who are becoming more and more vociferous in their demands. Recognising this fact, the pioneering “Women First” of the The Irish Times appeared for the last time in October 1974 with the explanation that “there no longer appears to be any justification to confine women’s affairs to a purely women’s section of the newspaper”,

Frontispiece, IFI/Attic Press Diary & Guidebook
and that in future coverage of women’s affairs would be given in the general body of the newspaper. (Rose, 1975: 78–79)

Apart from the column inches covered by feminist and women’s issues in the mainstream press, Irish feminists soon recognised the need to publish their material in magazines and newspapers of their own making, which were not driven by commercial or other mainstream interests. A variety of feminist publications began to appear in this country from the mid-1970s on, some of them with short runs or produced as one-off issues such as *Anima Rising*, the Galway feminist collective newsletter (1978), or *Elektra*, the Trinity College Dublin Women’s Group Magazine (1980). Others were produced from within mainstream publications, such as the *In Dublin Women’s Issue* (November 1978) or addressed feminist issues within the publications of other groups, such as *Quare Times*, a lesbian and gay magazine from the early 1980s. Some of the groups publishing these magazines managed to sustain publication over a number of issues. For example, there were 13 issues of *Wicca* produced by a voluntary editorial group in Dublin with very few resources, financial or otherwise. With only one exception, Belfast’s *Women’s News*, which is now in its 19th year, none of them have survived to the present day.

One of the first magazines to be produced by feminist activists in this period was the *Fownes Street Journal*, published by an offshoot group of the iwl m. This covered key areas of activism ongoing at that time, such as the November 1972 submission to the Commission on the Status of Women, which began:

> The married woman in Ireland who works in the home has no legal or economic identity. She is not entitled to payment or salary, either from her husband or the state. In a society where financial reward is the measure of each member’s contribution, it is significant that the housewife is valued at nothing. (BL/F/AP/1110/1, Attic Press Archive)

It goes on to list key feminist demands, such as those outlined by the iwl m. Articles carried by the *Fownes Street Journal* included pieces about equal rights at work and equal pay, gender stereotyping in schools and the workplace, women’s roles in the home, and the trap of the family romance and romantic love. Many articles were unsigned but in later issues some of the pieces were written by activists such as Ruth Riddick and Ruth Jacob. Advertising in the magazine also tied in with feminist thinking at the time – for example, an ad for jewellery reminded readers “you don’t need to get married to get a ring”. A questionnaire for readers in September 1973 asked questions such as:

- Are you trained to do any other work besides what you are doing at the moment? Do you belong to any of the active groups in your area?
- Where do you stand on the big issues affecting women? (e.g. Contraception/Abortion/Divorce/Equal Pay for Equal Work/Equal Taxation/Equal Educational Opportunity/Day Care Centres/Mixed Schools)
- Do you think the name of each writer should appear with each article?
Women's News, 19 September 1986, issue co-produced in Cork and Belfast (Women's News Collection)
These questions address key Irish feminist concerns of the early 1970s. The Fownes Street Journal was very simply produced typewritten pages were reproduced in black and white, and there were few illustrations or photographs. Later magazines and newspapers from the feminist movement developed from this early project in feminist journalism, which showed Irish feminists the importance of making their ideas readily available to their constituent groups and beyond.
In 1975, *Banshee* was set up by members of Irishwomen United (iwu) who “felt it was necessary to start producing a feminist paper as soon as possible” (report from the editorial committee, May 1976, AP 1142/10). Like the *Fownes Street Journal*, *Banshee* focused primarily on the main campaigns iwu were involved in. Crucially, the production of *Banshee* reveals the level at which feminist ideas and theoretical perspectives were worked out within the activist movement of the period. The 1976 editorial committee commented that its content:

reflected an awareness of the oppression of women in its many forms – cultural, social, economic, political, and physical. However, in the absence of a coherent ideological base, specifying the causes of that oppression, the analytical content of the magazine is as diverse as the various tendencies within the movement. (BL/F/AP/1142/10, Attic Press Archive)

After publication of *Banshee* 1, and in response to criticism from outside the editorial group about the way in which articles were solicited from individuals, the editors endeavoured to publish articles written collectively or coming out of workshops on the issue involved. This underlines the suspicion with which individual opinion, as opposed to ideas and policies arrived at collectively, was regarded by feminists at that time. The editorial group, which seemed to range between five and nine women over the course of the newspaper, agreed to either outline iwu policy on the issues in question, or to state clearly that they had no policy on that issue – which is possibly one of the reasons why their editorial meetings “never lasted less than four hours, and on a couple of occasions lasted six hours” (BL/F/AP/1142/10, Attic Press Archive). As a result of this high level of consultation and discussion, *Banshee* reflects the issues and agendas of importance to those involved in feminist activism in Ireland 1975–1976, such as the family, reproductive rights, socialist feminist and class activism, and lesbian feminist issues, to name just a few.

In 1977, *Wicca* was set up to fill the void left following the demise of *Banshee*; but unlike either of the earlier magazines discussed above, *Wicca* was not linked to any particular feminist organisation. This is reflected in an editorial in issue 8:

*Wicca* is the only voice of feminism being heard in the 26 counties. We have not up to now had a solid permanent women’s movement to support us. In actual fact we have had very little support. Naturally this isolation shows in the magazine. (BL/F/AP/1498, Attic Press Archive)

The editorial group of *Wicca* again reflects the collectivist principles of *Banshee*, with over 40 women listed as being involved in the magazine’s production over its lifetime, and the fluidity of this group is also reflected in the way in which members come and go over the issues. Members of the editorial groups who produced *Wicca* included Geraldine Moane, Wendy Wells, Carmel Ruane, Brigid Ruane, Oonagh Mac Namara, Miriam McQuaid, Mary Phelan, Joni Sheerin (later Crone), Mary MacNamara, Anne Marie Walker, Ethel Galvin, Doreen McGouran, Róisín Boyd, Clodagh Boyd, Ann O’Brien, Sandra Stephen, Kate O’Brien, Anne Speed, Liz
Advertisements in Fownes Street Journal, November 1972 (BL/F/AP/1492, Attic Press Archive)
Cover of Wicca (BL/F/AP/1498, Attic Press Archive)
Holmes, Sarah O’Hara, Deirdre Cullen, Orla Rylands, Jean O’Keefe and Nora Greany. In *Wicca* 8, the editorial group describe this membership:

*Wicca* is an open collective of about 12 permanent members. There is a floating membership and involvement of about 20 women …. There are no qualifications for joining the collective other than being a woman committed to the general principles of feminism. (BL/F/AP/1498, Attic Press Archive)

Key issues given voice in *Wicca* include the Armagh Prison campaigns, the Contraception Action Campaign (cap), equal pay, strikes, trade unions, abortion, the Carnsore Point protests, women in prisons, lesbian sexuality, disabilities and prostitution, as well as articles on women’s rights internationally.

Unlike its predecessors, a concerted effort was made by the *Wicca* team to deal with cultural matters relevant to feminists – they interviewed the film critic Laura Mulvey following her paper in Dublin, focused on women in the Irish music scene, and reviewed publications such as *The Wall Reader* (Boland, 1979) and feminist writing by Adrienne Rich, among others. The final issue of *Wicca*, number 13, focused solely on feminist fiction, poetry and music, and included an article by Mary Dorcey on writing.

Today, the available collections of feminist periodicals are an important record of feminist theory and activism in the 1970s and 1980s, and provide us with valuable insights into the ways in which feminist issues were raised and discussed during the period. Furthermore, the way in which many of these publications were produced are a good example of the decision-making and working methods of some of the activist groups in Ireland at that time. The editorials in many of their magazines are open about the methods of production, and the decision-making processes involved in selecting articles. Feminist activists involved in these magazines worked to demystify the skills and techniques involved in journalism. They illustrated that anyone could learn to publish a magazine; provided opportunities to women who wanted to write, create artwork or take photographs to publish their material; and worked together to learn the skills of magazine production. Much of this knowledge would later be put to work by some of the same women in the fields of literature, art, photography, television and radio production, and publishing.

**Feminist Publishing**

Over the past 30 years, feminist writing in and about Ireland has grown exponentially. These texts have placed Irish feminist issues in a global context in the fields of literature, sociology, the arts, politics and the law, among others. In particular, feminist publications and books have reached many constituencies that otherwise may have remained unaffected by feminist ideas. Frequently, feminist ideas have tended to focus on political lobbying, or been confined to the woman-centred...
activities of specific activist groups. However, feminist publications in the public domain also have an important part to play in consciousness raising.

Anne Crilly, a member of the Derry Film and Video Co-Op, gives an indication of the dearth of published material in this field:

Sometimes I think women, particularly in Ireland, forget that it was only just over fifteen years ago that there was hardly any books out on women in Ireland. I mean there has been a massive explosion in women’s studies and books on women in Ireland in the last fifteen years, but when I was researching *Mother Ireland* in maybe the period 1983–85, there was only a couple of books. There was Margaret MacCurtain’s book, *Women and Irish Society*. There was another book came out about women and Irish art by Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin. And there was also Margaret Ward’s book, *Cumann na mBan, Unmanageable Revolutionaries*. That was it, you know, that was the total. And now so much has been done. (Thompson, 1998)

A key factor in the development of feminist writing specific to Ireland was the establishment of feminist publishing projects at the end of the 1970s. Pioneers in feminist publishing in Ireland in the late 1970s and early 1980s include Catherine Rose, Janet Martin and others involved at Arlen House; Róisín Conroy and Mary Doran of Irish Feminist Information (ifi) and Attic Press; and later editors at Attic, Mary Paul Keane, Ailbhe Smyth, and Gráinne Healy.

Arlen House was the first feminist publishing house in Ireland. Established in 1975 in Galway by Catherine Rose, one of its early publications was Janet Martin’s *Essential Guide for Women* (1977). The impact of this radical initiative in Irish publishing history was palpable, and as Rose comments:
A selection of Arlen House titles
[There’s] no harm in reminding ourselves that we had to hold our breath in 1977 when *The Essential Guide* was first published. Legal opinion at the time was that publisher and author were risking the then statutory fine and imprisonment for the publication of material which could be seen to advise the use of contraception or abortion. (*In the Cauldron: Arlen House List of New Books for Autumn 1980* (BL/F/AP 419/52, Attic Press Archive)

On her move to Dublin in 1978, Rose was joined by others interested in this project, and with the help of Eavan Boland, Margaret McCurtain, Janet Martin and Terry Prone, Arlen House became firmly established as an independent publishing house with a strong interest in feminism. An ad in *Wicca 5* sends out a call:

> Artists, high on creative energy, low on sexist attitudes: you might like to work part-time with us. We’re an all-female feminist company and we need people who can illustrate books, design jackets. Experience with layouts and paste-ups a help. Write with details to: Janet Martin. (BL/F/AP/1498, Attic Press Archive)

The main focus of the press was women’s writing, and thus Arlen House became the champion of out-of-print work by Irish women writers such as Kate O’Brien, Janet McNeill, Nora Hoult and Anna Parnell, as well as new poetry collections by Eavan Boland, Rita Ann Higgins and Mary Rose Callaghan, among others.

Also in 1978, Irish Feminist Information (ifi) was set up by Róisín Conroy and Mary Doran. In what could be seen as a direct result of the production of the kinds of materials outlined in the “Graphic Feminism” section above, they wanted to set up a publishing and distribution service for activist groups. The idea was to provide a service to facilitate the growing number of feminist and left-wing groups who wanted a wider forum for their printed material. ifi would set up a distribution network for the material countrywide, through independent bookshops, co-ops and healthfood shops, and send out the material to women’s groups and individuals. Their main interest was in women’s material and other political material that had little or no attraction to existing publishing houses or bookshops.

They also wanted to provide flyers and leaflets themselves with information for feminists, and began by putting together a list of feminist groups and services, with a particular focus on health services for women. Conroy and Doran pooled their own finances, got a small bank loan, and initially published a women’s calendar in poster form, which they later developed into the *ifi Women’s Diary and Guidebook*. The diaries were an immediate hit. Many women talk about their surprise at seeing a menstruation chart printed on the inside cover of the diary – putting this kind of information into the public domain was a first for ifi. Similar kinds of publications produced by ifi during this period included the *Books Upstairs Women’s Health Catalogue* (1982), which provided listings of material specific to an Irish context and focused on the area of “self-help” remedies, which they pointed out “will be particularly of use to women who are at present more isolated from existing health and welfare agencies” (BL/F/AP/170/4, Attic Press Archive). The relevance of this kind of information is highlighted by June Levine
in *Sisters* (1982), who discusses her experience of getting pregnant while on the pill:

Many general practitioners in Ireland dispense contraceptive advice, mainly the pill, without having any special training. Some drugs prescribed for ailments do interact with the pill. Many Irish women, myself included, came by this information only when it was published in the first edition of the *Irish Women’s Diary*, produced in 1980 … They printed a chart from *Spare Rib*. Drugs which can interact with the pill are certain antibiotics and some of the drugs which act on the nervous system. At the time I became pregnant I was taking prescribed antibiotics and “nerve pills”. (Levine, 1982: 97–8)

The fact that this kind of information was not available in the public domain before IFI distributed the diary underlines the secrecy and taboos surrounding the area of women’s health up to this time.

In addition to publishing, IFI was also at the centre of support and development for other feminist initiatives ongoing in the early 1980s in Dublin, such as *Wicca*, mentioned above, the Women’s Centre in Dame Street and the Women Against
Sexist Education group. They also became involved in a training initiative by setting up the Women in Community Publishing courses, with the assistance of the Women in Publishing group.11 Having secured state funding from AnCo,12 this course was set up to train a group of women in community publishing skills. Both the skills offered by the course and the high levels of unemployment at that time, are reflected in the numbers of women who applied – 85 applicants competed for 12 places on the course (BL/F/AP/305/1–4, Attic Press Archive). Members of wip advised the Women in Community Publishing course in the planning stages of the course, participated as ongoing consultants, and supported them in carving out a new niche in publishing. Patricia Kelleher describes the course aims:

It was an attempt to deprofessionalise publishing and to co-operate with the state without being co-opted. It was inspired by an awareness that even though the project was small and insignificant in itself, it was connected up to a bigger process of change engaged in by many women’s groups and people seeking alternatives. It was political, ideological, but above all practical. (BL/F/AP/305/1–4, Attic Press Archive)13

Participants on the courses produced programmes for women’s conferences, flyers and leaflets. Furthermore, several key booklets in terms of Irish social change and social history were produced either during the courses or as a direct result of course projects, such as If You Can Talk … You Can Write (produced with kl ear), Singled Out: Single Mothers in Ireland (produced with Cherish), the Missing Pieces (1984–1985) booklets, which reclaimed important figures in Irish women’s history, and the facsimile pack Did Your Granny Have a Hammer? (1985) on the Irish women’s suffrage movement.

Having built up a base for their business, both financially and in terms of skilled personnel, IFI began to think about expanding its project, and mooted the idea of establishing a feminist publishing house. Gathering together a group of fellow-activists, Conroy and Doran suggested a business venture where they would each buy a share in this new publishing house, to be run by Conroy. Thus, 1984 saw the founding of Attic Press, Ireland’s only feminist publishing house, and a landmark in activism and publishing for several generations of Irish feminists. The novels and social texts published by Attic made feminist ideas accessible to new generations of Irish feminists, and for the first time, culturally specific feminist material was available to Irish women on a wider scale than heretofore. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Attic Press published contemporary works by writers such as Nell McCafferty, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, Eithne Strong, Evelyn Conlon, Ronit Lentin and many others. A Women’s Studies list was also established by the press in the 1990s, which produced key texts in the field of feminist education, such as The Irish Women’s Studies Reader (Smyth, ed., 1993), as well as focusing on feminist recovery projects such as such as Daisy Swanton’s Emerging from the Shadows (1994). Attic also published important social histories, such as June Levine and Lyn Madden’s Lyn: A Story of Prostitution (1989), Ursula Barry’s Lifting the Lid (1986) and the lip pamphlets series.
A History of the Irish Suffrage Movement
1876-1922

Did your granny have a hammer???

Mary had a little bag,
And in it was a hammer,
For Mary was a suffragette,
For votes she used to clamour.
She broke a pane of glass one day,
Like any naughty boy,
A constable came along,
And now she’s in Mountjoy.

1985 pack was produced by Attic Press.
Attic Press titles
Attic Press titles
It continued to publish the *Women’s Diary and Guidebook*, which was popular with many women, including those who did not necessarily consider themselves to be feminist. The importance of these groundbreaking publishing houses in Ireland should not be underestimated. They provided a vital link between the ideologies and theories of feminist groups and the wider reading public, and it is clear that the availability of feminist texts disseminated radical social ideas throughout Irish culture and society. In terms of the work of individual writers, the fact that their work was published not only encouraged women’s cultural production in this and other areas, but could also be said to have wrought changes in mainstream publishing, as houses began to realise the viability of publishing work by women writers.

On the whole, in more recent times the kind of feminist material entering the public domain tends to be dominated by academic material of one kind or another. While there are some exceptions, the general tendency has been to remove feminist ideas from the public domain and to render them inaccessible to all but academic readers, which could possibly be seen as an element of the backlash against feminist ideas in the mainstream and evidence of a new kind of activism in academe.

**Conclusion**

The work of Irish feminist cultural projects in the 1970s and 1980s exemplifies the wider aims of Irish feminist activism in the period. Artists and activists worked against the marginalisation of women, and opposed the closed nature of many cultural arenas by working in collective and interdisciplinary ways. Focusing on issues such as gender, sexualities, race and national identities, these women raised awareness of feminist issues in the Irish cultural arena, and generally, in the public domain. By creating fissures in traditional notions of gender roles, and of Irishness, they were central to the reshaping of Irish identities which has taken place over the past 30 years.

If anything, this exploration of the available material relating to second-wave cultural projects in Ireland illustrates the need for further research and writing in this field, in which a full-length study has yet to emerge. In terms of feminist publishing in Ireland, for instance, some of the key questions yet to be explored include the precise effect of the availability of material on sex, gender and radical social politics; the impact these texts had on key groups and individuals working in feminist and community politics in the 1980s; and the long-term effects of the production of these publications. Apart from the dearth of scholarly research, autobiographies and memoirs written by activists and artists involved in this period have yet to emerge on any scale; these may further illuminate areas such as the changes wrought by feminist ideas in the arena of cultural representation, and the perceived impact of this during the period itself. Furthermore, as work continues
to emerge internationally relating to feminist activism and politics during the
1970s and 1980s, there is room for comparative studies on the effect of interna-
tional feminisms on Irish activist and cultural spheres.

Notes

1 The work of writers such as Evelyn Conlan and Mary Dorsey has been particularly associated
with the emergence of Irish feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s.

2 Examples include, Fogarty (2002); Fogarty (1999); Boyle Haberstroh (1996); Meaney (1991);
Smyth (1997); St. Peter (2000); and Wills (1993). At the time of writing, at least four other scholars
– Patricia Coughlan, Anne Owens-Weeks, Rebecca Pelan and Tina O’Toole – are engaged in full-
length historical and/or contemporary monographs in the field of Irish women’s writing.

3 For example, Farley (2000); Meaney (2004); and Pettit (2000).


5 Eco-awareness was also a feature of early feminist activism.

6 Gillespie (2003) has recently documented articles published by this group of journalists.

7 File BL/F/AP/1492, Attic Press Archive, contains various feminist newsletters (1973–1988),
including: Fowes Street Journal 1–2, and Rebel Sister 5 (May 1976). File BL/F/AP/1498 contains Wicca
1–4 and 7–13. File BL/F/AP/1517 contains copies of Bread and Roses (UCD Women’s Liberation
Group Magazine) 1, 3–6.

8 File BL/F/AP1174, Attic Press Archive: file of publications from IWU (1975). Includes editorial
reports and notes on the distribution of Banshee; and the IWU newsletter no. 2. File BL/F/AP/1182
relates to IWU’s distribution of Banshee after a decision was made by the Censorship Board to ban
this feminist publication. This file contains 23 items concerning the issue, including two reports
from the editorial board.

9 Titles mentioned by Crilly, which were published by Arlen House include: McCurtain and Ó
Corrón (1978) and Ni Chuileanáin (1985). The Arlen Press imprint has recently been revived.

10 Files BL/F/AP/219–224 contain material in relation to the establishment of the Irish Feminist
Information (ifi) premises at 48 Fleet Street, Dublin.

11 The Women in Publishing (WIP) group had been set up in 1982 by some of the Arlen House
team, Mary Paul Keane, (Wolfhound Press), and Sarah O’Hara (IPA), and they organised workshops
on production, editing, and marketing.

12 Now FÁS, a government agency set up to facilitate training in industry in the 1960s.

13 The Attic Press Archive contains several files in relation to Women in Community Publishing
Course and Group, Women’s Community Publishing Co-operative and Women’s Community Press

14 June Levine’s (1982) Sisters: The Personal Story of an Irish Feminist is one such example.