FOREWORD

Models for Movers is a unique collection of Irish migrant women’s oral histories spanning three waves of twentieth-century emigration, skilfully brought together and contextualised by the author, Íde B. O’Carroll. The women’s voices speak to and against the regulated silences surrounding both emigration and Irish women’s lives. They also provide a multi-generational tapestry of experience into which women leaving Ireland today can weave their stories.

The contributors came from rural and urban areas across Ireland and settled mainly in the Boston area. As descriptions of the women’s efforts to create new lives, achieve fulfilment or challenge gender, class and ethnic norms, the narratives include the lows as well as the highs, the experiences of isolation and loneliness, as well as warmth and solidarity. Some highlight the factors that unexpectedly precipitated change in their lives, while others describe their political activism in pursuit of change. Together, these stories suggest movement from being held back to myriad forms of release in journeys marked by diverse configurations of constraint and opportunity. As Fionnuala McKenna’s narrative suggests, migration has the effect of ‘releasing a valve’.

In the quarter of a century since its publication, this book has been taken up in Ireland and abroad by general readers and by academic disciplines ranging from history and literature to sociology and geography, as well as in the interdisciplinary areas of Migration and Diaspora Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, Irish Studies and American Studies. All of the oral histories collected in Models for Movers as well as the supporting research materials [tapes, transcripts, photos etc.] have been deposited in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. This is the primary repository on the history of women in America and the O’Carroll Collection was the Schlesinger’s first holding on Irish women [see oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch00833]. As part of this
archive, the narratives are available to future researchers and are also a resource for exhibitions and media projects. For example, the O’Carroll Collection was used in the 2013 Schlesinger Library exhibition on women immigrants in the USA entitled ‘Stepping Stones for New Americans’ [see https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/exhibit/stepping-stones-new-americans].

Via this archival and publishing project, Ide B. O’Carroll created an opportunity for women who were busy with day-to-day life and perhaps unaware of the significance of their personal journeys to give voice to what they saw as the most significant aspects of their migrant lives. As part of the public record now, these narratives weave often deviating but always vibrant strands into the fabric of Irish history. The narratives articulate Irish womanhood outside the silences and clichés, and challenge the complacency that sustains these. They speak of agency and sometimes victimhood, vision combined with practical concerns, autonomy and working lives, as well as family and motherhood. They highlight the complex economic, social, political and familial conditions of women’s movement. And, in poignant ways, they give voice to the wider emotional impact of migration, revealing the complex ‘emotions and feelings’ [see Rena Cody’s narrative] that are always part of the migration story.

This book is a natural companion to Hasia Diner’s Erin’s Daughters in America [1983], which examines the lives of the nineteenth-century wave of Irish women migrants to the US, and Janet Nolan’s Ourselves Alone: Women’s Emigration from Ireland, 1885–1920 [1986], which addresses the ways in which Irish migrant women to the US encouraged their daughters into professional careers, and teaching in particular. Indeed many of the contributors to Models for Movers note their mothers’ role in spurring action and recognising their potential in life.

Models for Movers is a feminist project and, as such, is upfront in its standpoint. Unlike scholarship that claims ‘objectivity’ while implicitly shaped by particular concerns or agendas, O’Carroll makes the assumptions underpinning the conception of this project clear from the start. Her respect for and deep interest in the personal narratives of the women themselves is evident in how the women participants are introduced and the ways in which she privileges their voices. These voices bring together experiences of and reflections on migration in ways that make explicit and implicit links between the personal and the political.

The reissuing of Models for Movers by Cork University Press, under its Attic imprint, is both important and timely. The renewed attention brought to these narratives invites us to consider the ways in which changing patterns of migration and settlement, as well as shifting gender relations and politics of sexuality, are shaping contemporary Irish women’s migration. Together with her forthcoming companion book Irish Transatlantics, which is based on over sixty interviews with women and men who emigrated to the USA in the 1980s/1990s and are now living in Ireland, or America, Íde B. O’Carroll has compiled a rich and textured account of mobility between Ireland and the USA from the 1920s into the 2000s.

**FOREWORD**

BREDA GRAY, PhD

University of Limerick, Ireland

Author, Women and the Irish Diaspora, Routledge, 2004
project clear from the start. Her respect for and deep interest in
the personal narratives of the women themselves is evident in how
the women participants are introduced and the ways in which she
privileges their voices. These voices bring together experiences of
and reflections on migration in ways that make explicit and
implicit links between the personal and the political.

The reissuing of Models for Movers by Cork University Press,
under its Attic imprint, is both important and timely. The renewed
attention brought to these narratives invites us to consider the ways
in which changing patterns of migration and settlement, as well
as shifting gender relations and politics of sexuality, are shaping
contemporary Irish women's migration. Together with her
forthcoming companion book Irish Transatlanties, which is based
on over sixty interviews with women and men who emigrated to
the USA in the 1980s/1990s and are now living in Ireland, or
America, Íde B. O'Carroll has compiled a rich and textured account
of mobility between Ireland and the USA from the 1920s into
the 2000s.

BREDA GRAY, PhD
University of Limerick, Ireland

Author, Women and the Irish Diaspora, Routledge, 2004