

# **Irish Women in business: businesswomen, philanthropist, or social entrepreneur?**

## **Introduction**

The material for this paper arises in the context of a study which is currently underway, the emphasis of which is on uncovering the history of Irish women business owners and managers in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland. During the course of the research the business archives and literature of the era (from the formation of the State through to the 1960s) are being examined with a view to profiling female business activity. An examination of the census data in the relevant period has also been undertaken. While not completed, the study is throwing up some interesting cases around how women demonstrate entrepreneurial tendencies both within and outside the domain of the firm. In uncovering the history of Irish business women it has become apparent that for some women, their entrepreneurial endeavours are clearly sited in philanthropy and/or social enterprise.

The paper will be presented in two stages. The first will examine the growing body of women's history literature and seeks to establish the antecedents of female business activity. It will also explore the literature on entrepreneurship and discuss its relevance to women's history. The second stage will present case evidence of a range of Irish females who actively displayed entrepreneurial tendencies in the development of organisations with philanthropic and social objectives at their core.

## **WOMEN'S BUSINESS HISTORY**

History taught in school traditionally concerned itself with politics, economics and the governance of states and nations. Battles and wars feature strongly and the key players were monarchs, generals, politicians. There was little presented on the lives of ordinary people, either male or female. However, this began to change in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the growth of interest in social history and it is notable that the early stage of women's history was fuelled by this growth. Social history, as outlined by Laura Lee Downs has as its basis in macro structural forms of analysis, i.e. it examines social and economic structures as determinants of

individual behaviour (Downs, 2004). The work in this area began to shed light on the ordinary lives of people in historical times and saw a move away from the emphasis on elites. It also saw the recovery of other non elite histories i.e. the history of workers both men and women, of agriculture and industrial production. It led to the development of a substantive body of work in the area of labour history.

Downs attributes the development of women's history to historians working in the early 20<sup>th</sup> such as Ivy Pinchbeck in the UK, Mary Beard in the US and Leon Abensour in France. Their work laid the foundations for women's history as a discipline and contributed significantly to ensuring that a host of hidden histories, including women's were investigated. Pinchbeck's work, published in 1930 entitled "Women's work and the Industrial revolution" was key in debunking the notion that women only commenced work as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. In particular, she also portrayed a less than rosy view of a perceived golden age pre the Industrial Revolution and demonstrated the reality of the monotonous and laborious task that sustaining a living and keeping family together was for women at that time. These early women historians showed clearly that women were active participants in history, not passive recipients as had been the perception here to fore and the writings emerging from women's history do indicate that women's economic activity throughout the ages was varied and straddles both public and private spheres. There is little doubt that women contributed in many ways to the family economy; what changed over time was the manifestation of this. In pre-industrial society there was little demarcation between the family business and the family home as the centre of activity for both was essentially the same.

At the turn of the century in Ireland, women undoubtedly contributed to the family economy. What is more explicit and easily accessed is their contribution through paid labour and work by Whelan re-affirms activities of this nature. (Whelan, 2000) More difficult to uncover is the history of female entrepreneurs who engaged in business as owner/ managers. In grappling with this issue it is important to define what is meant by entrepreneurship.

### ***Defining Entrepreneurship***

What is entrepreneurship? How does one define entrepreneurial activity and what is the definitive descriptor of an entrepreneur? These terms are ingrained in our

business vocabulary and the benefits of entrepreneurship are lauded by politicians, policy makers, academics and the business community the world over. Despite its usage in common parlance and its central role in the economic process an examination of the literature reveals that entrepreneurship is difficult to define and its meaning can alter depending on the context in which it is used. Amatori writing about entrepreneurship refers to it as an elusive phenomenon and notes that this contributes to confusion in the language around entrepreneurship which is evident in the academic writing on the topic (Amatori, 2006). The issue becomes even more complex when gender is considered as a variable in defining entrepreneurship.

The recognised founding father of entrepreneurship is Richard Cantillon, an Irish economist writing in 18<sup>th</sup> Century France, who uses the term entrepreneur to describe one who pursues profitable exchanges even when faced with uncertain market conditions. He also is credited with suggesting that the entrepreneur is likely to be both a risk-taker, an innovator and of key importance in the development of the economy. Despite its emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century until that the concept of entrepreneurship gained recognition by main stream economists; (Deakins, 2009). This was when what is known as the Austrian School of writers emerged. These writers were some of the first to identify the entrepreneur as crucial to economic activity and it is their theories that now underpin much of the current theory on the entrepreneur.

Joseph Schumpeter, the founding father of the Austrian school and is attributed as having a very significant influence on perceptions of entrepreneurship. He argues that the entrepreneur was an agent of great change, and coined the term "creative destruction" to describe a phenomenon that "replaced old forms of economic transaction with new forms in capitalist economies" (Jones, 2006). The entrepreneur is an agent of great change, breaks away from known methods of operation and it is in the disruption of the competitive equilibrium that new process, products, innovations, and organisations emerge. Schumpeter's work had a major impact on the shaping of thinking about entrepreneurship and implicit in his theoretical framework is the association of entrepreneurship with growth orientated business ideals. His analysis left little room for the "more common low level" entrepreneurship in wholesale and retail trades (Casson, 2006).

Since the late 1950s the academic study of entrepreneurship has mushroomed, with research informed among others by economic, management, organisational behaviour, psychological and business history perspectives.

There has been a strong focus on entrepreneurship in terms of personality traits. Research has focused on the traits existing in the entrepreneur including a need for independence, a propensity for risk-taking, self-efficacy and a need for achievement (Delmar, 2002)

However more recently the field has evolved to focus more on behaviour approaches which seek to separate the personality of entrepreneur from his/her actions and behaviours; to ask the question, as Gartner quite appropriately puts it, quoting Yeats, 'How can we tell the dancer from the dance?' (Gartner, 1989). Stevenson sees entrepreneurship as a process by "which individuals, either on their own or inside organisations pursue opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control (Stevenson, 1990). According to Casson the insights from various economic perspectives on entrepreneurship can be "synthesised by identifying an entrepreneurial function that is common to all approaches – the exercise of judgement in decision making"(Casson, 2006).

Another development in the field has been to dissociate the idea of entrepreneurship from the exclusive domain of the commercial. Entrepreneurs can occur in all walks of life and the definition cannot be confined to the idea of starting a business. Steyaert and Katz in 2004 reflect upon the implications of "how to conceive entrepreneurship when considered as a societal rather than an economic phenomenon ". One of the implications of doing so is that entrepreneurship becomes associated with everyday activities "rather than actions of elitist groups of entrepreneurs"(Steyaert, 2004).

Such developments move away from traditional definitions of the entrepreneur such as that adopted by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ) for statistical collection for, and as such broadens the realm of entrepreneurship to include motivations which are not purely economic or commercial in nature- The OECD, sees entrepreneurship in more economic terms and defines it as follows for statistic gathering purposes: 'Entrepreneurs are those persons (business owners) who seek to generate value, through the creation or

expansion of economic activity, by identifying and exploiting new products, processes or markets.’ (Ahmad, 2007)

### ***Entrepreneurship – implications for women’s history***

For scholars working in the area of female entrepreneurship a consistent criticism is that entrepreneurship has become too readily identified with wealth creation and the growth of firms. Consequently this narrow focus excludes a range of activities, participants, organisations and achievements that are clearly entrepreneurial and have significant economic and societal benefits. Issues of definition has implications also for business historians and Kay observes that there is little consensus in business history as to what entrepreneurship actually entails. However, it is clear from the business history literature that historical entrepreneurship has been overly influenced by the Schumpeterian concept of entrepreneurs as “agents of great change”(Kay, 2009). Recent work from historians focusing on women’s labour and business activities has clearly demonstrated the gendered nature of the rational philosophy and challenges the exclusive nature of business and entrepreneurship

According to Gamber “there is a glaring absence of women in the historiography of 20th Century business and industry despite the fact that women have run businesses and engaged in various trades for centuries”. She notes that at least 10% of people engaged in business in urban areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are women. This tendency for women to run business reflects an age old tradition that was observable in Europe. She notes entrepreneurial endeavours include diverse activities such as selling of feminine finery, purveyors of food and lodging, keepers of houses of ill repute, proprietors of grocery and variety stores, dealers of books and newspapers, apothecaries, tobacconists, and jewellers, midwives, healers and fortune tellers, even silversmiths and lady embalmers” (Gamber, 1998).

Gamber outlines some of the reasons for the absence of females in the business histories. Firstly it would appear that scholars have unconsciously or otherwise, accepted the notion of ‘business as a school of manhood’ and this is one reason why it is so difficult to see women as the owners of business concerns. The depiction of some women as enterprising, as innovative, as successful as their male counterparts leaves a portrait of exceptional women that unintentionally reinforce the

notion that business is a masculine concern where there are exceptions, but these exceptions prove the rule. Secondly to understand female contributions requires studying the history of small business, indeed the history of very small business which until recently has not been to the forefront for consideration by business historians. Finally those who have examined the workings of small business tend to embrace a relatively rigid definition of business, one that centres on the traditional idea of a firm, that of a tangible physical site of production. This overlooks the variety of entrepreneurial females. Female enterprise lies at what Gamber describes as “at the murky boundaries of public and private, profit seeking and philanthropic, wage labour and entrepreneurship, legitimate and illegitimate enterprise”. This defies easy categorization and makes the economic contributions difficult to assess. However, by ignoring them, there are unintended consequences – it leads to the exclusion of women, and perhaps of racial and ethnic minorities as well from the domain of business history.

Gamber observes that “the business historians’ penchant for viewing their subjects as rational economic actors, guided only by the search for greater efficiency and more substantial profits, and sealed within the self contained world of the firm, offers few clues for understanding the experiences of businesswomen – or business men”.

Angel Kwolek-Folland, charted the history of women in business in the United States, and writing in 1998 articulated the issue succinctly, noting that the presence of “women’s organised economic activity challenges the assumptions of business history, forcing us to rethink the nature of economic activity, when change occurred; and the legal, social and economic meanings of such concepts as entrepreneurship”. (Kwolek-Folland, 1998) . She notes that business historians themselves are in tune with the shortcomings of their approach, quoting Louis Galambos's call in 1991 that in order to incorporate business history into the main stream it has to be responsive to issues being raised by historians in other fields. He rises what he considers two “myths” which underpin much of the research undertaken by business historians: the myth of rationalisations and the myth of corporate hegemony. The myth of rationalisation refers to the belief that businesses and business people are removed from human emotions that afflict the rest of the population, and the myth of corporate hegemony concerns the noting that business development takes place in a political

vacuum. These myths combine, according to Galambos to obscure the interplay and workings of power.

Kwolek-Folland points out that women's history deals with issues of how sex, gender, ethnicity, race and class have shaped the lives of both women and men. In contrast business history usually "assumes white, male and middle class as the neutral and for the most part, un-interrogated standard."

Kay also critiques the traditional focus of business history in relation to entrepreneurship and concludes that it has left us with an extreme "typology of industrialists and innovators" and the implication that anything outside of this is not really entrepreneurship (Kay, 2009).

Kay finds that there is little consensus in the broad field of business history as to what entrepreneurial activity actually entails. In the course of her own study on 19<sup>th</sup> century female entrepreneurship in London, she resists classifying female entrepreneurs and talks about it being reductionist and simplistic to do so. For her, types or typologies are "deliberate simplifications and abstraction". Essentially, women, no more than men are not a homogenous group. Her resistance to typologies is founded on the fact that they relegate females to a subgroup which by definition is outside of a main type of entrepreneurship. This main type of entrepreneurship "defines the norm as masculine and large scale". Membership of the subgroup implies a failure to make the grade of real business worthiness and this in turn demeans the lived experience of female entrepreneurs and the real business experience of many in enterprise.

She also notes that there are two contrasting entities contained in the word entrepreneur. At the simplest level it can be simply a descriptive term for a person engaged in owning and managing a business. However historians and academics have ascribed conceptual meaning to the term. Schumpeter, as noted earlier defined the entrepreneur as the agent for changing an economy from a stable state to being progressive and expanding, putting the entrepreneur at the centre of economic growth. At the other end of the spectrum Habakkuk's reduced the entrepreneur to a more passive player, who responded to the economic forces within industries. Irrespective of which school of thought researchers subscribe too, in both cases the entrepreneur is given conceptual importance which Kay believes "has tended to

overwhelm the descriptive dimension of the term entrepreneur in business history”. For Kay the result is that “we are left with a typology based on extreme innovators and industrialist, the natural extension of which being that anything else is not really entrepreneurship”.

It is interesting to note that an analysis of current research on female entrepreneurship reflects similar issues as raised by those who study female entrepreneurship in a historical context. Using discourse analysis informed by a Foucauldian framework, Ahl analysed 81 texts on female entrepreneurship published from 1982 to 2000 and found that the current research articles constructed the female entrepreneur as something less than her male counterpart (Ahl, 2003). Common assumptions implicit in the research paradigm on female entrepreneurship today include the following:

- a) An assumption that entrepreneurship is a good thing leading to economic growth, which Ahl maintains excludes alternative reasons for participating in entrepreneurship. It also portrays women as lesser participants as since their business on average do not perform as well as males on growth performance standard
- b) An assumption that entrepreneurship is a neutral concept, something that Gamber, Fay and Kwolek- Folland also comment on.
- c) An assumption that men and women are different and that stable characteristics exist that affect behaviour. Research studies are set up to look for these differences and if not found it is assumed that research rigour was not applied.
- d) An assumption of the division between a public and private sphere of life, which is applied predominantly to female entrepreneurs.
- e) An assumption that entrepreneurship has a predominantly individualistic focus

Ahl’s argument is that even though the research would appear to celebrate female entrepreneurship it is done in such a way that it reinforces women’s secondary position in society.

The literature on entrepreneurship in the context of business history is important as the perspective the researcher adopts in turn shapes the subjects chosen for analysis. The next section of this paper will present a number of cases of women who made significant contributions to Irish social, cultural and economic life in the



20<sup>th</sup> century, exhibiting very entrepreneurial tendencies, but whose names would not necessarily spring to mind if compiling a Hall of Fame of Irish entrepreneurs. Using published sources, including biographies and data gleaned from the websites of the organisations in question the story of remarkable organisations and their founding female entrepreneurs (Mitchell, 1997, Hayden, 1994).

## **IRISH FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS**

### ***Muriel Gahan***

Muriel Gahan was born in 1897. Her father was Frederick Townsend Gahan; a civil engineer was working with the Congested District Board by the time Muriel was born. He worked with the Board until its demise in 1923; thereafter he worked with the newly formed Land Commission. Her mother was an English woman, Winifred Mary Waters. Initially the family lived in Donegal, moving to Castlebar in 1900, following Mr Gahan's transfer by the CDB western region dictated by the needs of the region required more resources.

Muriel's happy childhood in Castlebar was marked by a growing appreciation of the beauty and reality of the West of Ireland, which had a lasting impression on her. She was not removed from the poverty of the area, and witnessed it first hand as her father often took herself and her siblings on field trips with him and these excursions undoubtedly informed her later work. Educated in her early years by governesses, she went to Boarding school to St. Winifred's in Bangor, north Wales's in 1910, moving to Alexandra College Dublin in 1913, when the family moved to Dublin, where she remained until 1916.

On leaving school she worked for a short time during the First World War in Grubbs munitions factory in Rathmines. Shortly afterwards she went to work in Wales looking after the child of a family friend. In 1919 following the death of her younger brother she returned home, relocating to Castlebar with her mother. She remained in Castlebar from 1919 to 1926, remained relatively unaffected by the major political events occurring during that time. Following the retirement of her father from the Land Commission in 1926 the family returned to Dublin.

Having led a life of leisure for the past number of years, Muriel was keen to turn her hand to something and took up work with a company called "The Modern Decorator",

a firm of painters/decorators managed by a woman, Ms. Ivy Hutton who had a policy of employing only women. This experience led to her introduction to Ms. Lucy Franks, honorary secretary of the Society of United Irishwomen (UI) by her close friend Livie Hughes. Muriel helped to set up the UI stand for the 1929 Spring show at the RDS in Dublin. The stand entitled 'Countryside Workers' was selling women's work, including products from basket makers, knitters, spinners and weavers. This was an eye opener for Muriel and awoken her interest in what was to become her life's work. Following this experience she joined the UI which subsequently became the Irish Countrywomen's Association in 1935. The Society of United Irishwomen had been founded in 1910, had its roots in the co-operative movement, and a key objective was to promote cooperation among rural women for social, industrial and betterment of quality of life. Closely aligned with the Horace Plunkett's cooperative movement it was also staunchly welcomed by AE Russell, who writing in 1910 stated that "in the interests of home life we welcome evidences of Irishwomen's interest in social movements and their determination to play their part worthily in the national life"(Summerfield, 1978).

One of Muriel's first tasks for the United Irishwomen was to find a weaver on one of her visits to the West who would be prepared to demonstrate his/her skill at the 1930 Spring Show. Out of this experience emerged the ideas of setting up a depot in Dublin which would showcase and sell on the work of craft workers. The depot was realised as a non profit private company, "The Country Workers" which operated a shop, the "Country Shop" at 23 St. Stephens Green for 48 years from 1930 to 1978. There were 5 directors, Muriel Gahan, Olivia (Livie) Hughes, Vida Lentaigne, Lucy Franks and Paddy Somerville-Large who put much the initial capital to get the venture going. Muriel was Managing Director, a position she retained for the entire duration of the business.

It's objectives were threefold: to help people in the poor districts in the West by encouraging and supporting home industries; to encourage individual craft workers and to support the work of the United Irishwomen Society. These were amended in 1967 with the emphasis placed, on people in small farm areas rather than the West only, but the reality was that the company took a national view in its operation of the business. The focus on the Western seaboard emerged because there were fewer UI guilds in that region and therefore support for these craft workers was badly

needed. The business existed primarily for its suppliers, was non profit and in the co-operative spirit from which it was born, it redistributed money to the country craft workers as well as the staff. A chance remark of Lucy Franks when she initially heard the idea and said "Why not serve lunches and teas as well?" led to the shop incorporating a restaurant and tea room, an inspired idea which proved very profitable over the years. It became a favourite spot for lunch in the city for both Dubliners and country people alike and was immortalised by the poet Patrick Kavanagh in his poem Untitled -The bluebells are withered now under the beech trees.

As Managing Director, a key aspect of Muriel's role was to locate craft workers and to offer them an outlet via the Country Shop. In doing so she was highly committed to high standards and over the next six decades was instrumental in preserving indigenous craft and elevating it to internationally renowned standards. On her first trip to the Aran Islands she sourced knitters and contributed in bring the work of Aran knitters to a wider marketplace than heretofore. She not only provided a commercial outlet for the knitters, but also worked to ensure that as the fame of the sweaters expanded that the quality remained true to the traditional designs. By 1947 the Country Shop had 80 knitters on their books. She also had a rule whereby no Aran sweater was ever sold in the shop that had not been knitted in the Aran Islands. Another passion was homespun craft and in 1935 she set up the Irish Homespun Society, an organisation that was dedicated to preserving Ireland's homespun tradition which was in danger of becoming extinct. By this stage, the Country Shop which began life in the basement took over the ground floor of 23 St. Stephen's Green and inaugurated a Gallery space for holding exhibitions for homespun craft. However, it was not big enough to host the kind of events Muriel had in mind and utilizing her contacts, i.e. Evelyn Glesson of Dun Emer Guilds, she became aware of and applied for funding for the new association from a trust fund based in Donegal, where the majority of remaining spinners and weavers resided. Among the aims of the society, which was subscription based was to lobby, exhibit, support and promote homespun product.

Another venture in which Muriel was highly involved in was the formation of the Country Markets. This was a totally independent registered co-operative society created jointly by the Irish Homespun Society and the ICA in August 1946. The

object of the society was to organize the sale of local produce and craft, operated along co-operative lines. Livie Hughes actively led the Fethard Country Market in the early years and within 2 years of trading the market turned over £1,800.

Over the lifetime of Country Workers Ltd, Muriel is credited with supporting and developing Irish pottery, offering encouragement and putting orders the way of Paddy Pearce, father of Stephen Pearce, potter, Greens in Youghal, Terrybaun Pottery in Mayo. Others craft workers include chair maker John Surlis, basket makers the Quinlan brothers from Waterford, the Wynne Sisters who ran the Avoca Woollen mills (which incidentally to-day has become Avoca Handweavers). She was exacting and demanded high standards and getting on the suppliers list was not guaranteed unless the quality was maintained. In effect, the Country Workers carried out an enterprise development role and contributed to making Irish craft work a sustainable business.

Over the time span of the company's life, Muriel dedicated herself to the promotion of Irish craft – in doing so, she became an expert lobbyist and networker, who was very adept at using these networks to help achieve the company's prime objective. She had an outward focus, believed strongly in the education and training of craft workers which brought her into contact with the Vocation Educational Committee (VEC) and the National College of Art and Design. She also understood the value of marketing and the growing contribution that tourism could make to the craft business. She worked with ICA and was instrumental in securing funding from the Kellogg Foundation and getting the residential school An Grianan off the ground in 1954. She used her growing public profile to the good of the organisations she was involved with and in the mid 50s there was a wider recognition of what she was achieving. She was invited onto the founding committee of the Arts Council in 1952, she was also appointed to the council of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland and played an active role in founding the Crafts Council of Ireland which was established in October 1971 and incorporated in 1976. She also was very supportive of the foundation of the Credit Union of Ireland and Country Markets contributed a donation to assist in getting the movement of the ground.

Country Markets ceased operation in 1978. A number of factors contributed to its closure. Still profitable, however, it had a retinue of loyal staff who were either at or

nearing retirement age – Muriel herself was 81 at this point. Staffing and the attraction of personnel who had the commitment and drive to pursue the goals of the company was an issue. Arguably, so too was its marketing and positioning of its offering old fashioned and not responding to changing market conditions. Changes in traffic flows and social patterns were impacting on the restaurant business. Ultimately, a failure in succession planning was a key contributor to its closure, which was much lamented by the wider public.

### ***Lady Valerie Goulding***

Born in the UK in 1918 to Walter Monckton and Mary Colyer Fergusson, Valerie was reared in London. Following service in the War, her father resumed his career as a barrister and politician and worked extremely hard. Valerie was educated initially at home by a governess and at fifteen was sent to a modern girls' school, Downe House near Newbury. On completing school she learned shorthand and typing at Pitman's and began to work for her father. This led to her having a ringside seat at one of the most turbulent times in the history of the modern monarchy in Britain as her father was advocate to King Edward during the time of his decision to abdicate the throne. Valerie often acted as a messenger, carrying letters from her father on behalf of King Edward to Downing Street. While Valerie remembers her teens and early 20s as a time of great fun, she had developed a strong work ethic, based primarily on her father's admonishment, who told her she could go to as many parties as she liked but she should always get up and go to work in the morning. She joined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. On a visit to Dublin in 1939 she met Sir Basil Golding and they married quickly. They spent the war in the UK where Basil was in the RAF and Valerie was involved in the Red Cross and in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. Her three children were born during the war period also.

On return to Dublin, the young family moved to Enniskerry and Valerie found herself more conscious of the poverty around her. She began to work in the City Centre, volunteering at a soup kitchen a couple of days a week. Her experience convinced her that she had to be able to contribute more than just washing up. At the end of the 40s she met a woman who would significantly influence the direction that she would take. Kathleen O'Rourke was a remedial gymnast. By the time Valerie met her she had set up the Irish branch of the League of Health and Beauty. The League of

Health and Beauty was the brainchild of another Irish woman, Mary Baggot Stack, then living in London who developed the Baggot Stack system which was developed to provide exercise classes to women in an effort to improve health. Kathleen O'Rourke was responsible for setting up the first antenatal classes in Dublin. With Kathleen's encouragement, Lady Goulding enrolled to study physiotherapy. However, over time, Lady Goulding, conscious of the polio outbreak of the time from her visits to hospitals, was aware that there was little or no aftercare physical therapy available to sufferers and the idea to start a small centre for polio rehabilitation was born. Valerie left the Dublin School of Physiotherapy and devoted her energy to establish the centre. It began life as the Dublin Remedial Clinic, eventually becoming the Central Remedial Clinic which today operates as Ireland's national, non residential centre for the treatment of people with physical disabilities.

The two women, Kathleen and Valerie realised that to make the centre a reality it had to have support from the medical establishment and they set up a meeting with Dr. Boyd Dunlap. He was an orthopaedic surgeon and very au fait with the problems children faced after they left hospital. His views concurred with theirs and he lend his support from the outset. The Centre began life at the end of 1950/ early 1951 in the upstairs apartment of Kathleen O'Rourke on Upper Pembroke Street in the city centre. Volunteers collected the children from their homes, carried them up three flights of stairs to the sitting room in order to receive their treatment. At this early stage, Valerie took care of the organising of the logistics and Kathleen focused on the physiotherapy. The children were referred by doctors, but Dr. Dunlop would also make an assessment and Kathleen would put on place the programme of care.

The key priority was to establish a new clinic, a suitable venue to conduct the work that had been commenced in the city centre and to this priority Valerie threw her not inconsiderable skills and talents to. According to her biographer, Jacqueline Hayden from the outset her approach was business like. She also had the benefit of having a wide circle of well to do acquaintances and friends and she lost no time in getting some of them involved. Funding was a key challenge and she assembled a small central committee to arrange funding. Consisting of Nora Fitzgerald, Geraldine Cruess-Callaghan, and William Martin Murphy, the committee were able to use their extensive business and social contacts to get the fundraising campaign off the ground. Valerie also mobilised influential working class groups and worked with the

traders of Moore Street and the cattle dealers at Hanlon's Corner to garner both interest and funds. Fundraising events were both large and small, and Valerie never lacked either imagination or ambition when raising money. She believed in the power of publicity and was successful in getting it – in this instance her title and her social circle worked to her advantage. Early in 1952 she travelled to the US on a fundraising and fact-finding mission, the first of a number of visits stateside to further the cause of the clinic. The initial trip was probably of more benefit medically in informing the Clinic as to the best kind of care and therapies emerging, but over time did yield financial yields also. However, it was a chance meeting in a Dublin restaurant which provided the bulk of the funds for the first premises, a Major Beaumont, on meeting and listening to Valerie became a key donor and by 1954, the Clinic had opened a state of the art premises in Prospect Hall, Goatstown, Co. Dublin. This was a large two storey building with seventeen rooms and a garden. The clinic also acquired a donation of a van. Key to making the clinic work was to acquire the best of clinicians, who were well qualified and well paid. In autumn of 1956 a school was started at the Clinic with the support of the Department of Education who funded the teacher.

Not content to rest on her laurels, Valerie now turned her attention to improving the facilities at the clinic. Key to her vision was the facilities on offer would be best in class and the next project entailed getting a hydrotherapy pool which was achieved by the late 50's. Training workshops followed and as the Clinic's reputation grew, and the demand for services and the numbers seeking treatment were continuously growing. It became apparent in the mid 60s that the Clinic had out grown its facilities and there was a need for a new premise. Once more, utilising her contacts, this time an introduction via her father to George Ansley of Ansbacher Bank led to Valerie securing £100,000 and by 1968 the new clinic was opened in Clontarf, where it still resides today.

The thrust of Valerie's work throughout the 70s lay in fundraising – she initiated many events that today are commonplace, and used “celebrities” to further the cause of the clinic. She brought Jimmy Saville to Dublin regularly to do sponsored walks; Bing Crosby spoke at a dinner for her, Princess Grace of Monaco featured at a fund raising ball. She continued to visit the States at regular intervals and in a calculated gamble got Charles Haughey, politician involved in her fundraising committee in the

1970s following his fall from grace after the Arms Trial. However, times were changing and increasingly the Clinic was becoming integrated into the Irish health service provision and in 1976 was taken in under the Department of Health. Valerie operated as managing director and Chairperson from the Clinic's inception in 1951 to 1954, but from the late 70s the nature of her role changed and she became less involved operationally. In that time the Clinic evolved from a voluntary service to becoming the national centre of excellence for providing service and training to people with disability. As her involvement in the Clinic lessened, Lady Goulding went on to pursue other interests and served time as a Senator. She died in 2003 aged 84.

### ***The list goes on***

There are many other instances of females engaging in enterprise activities outside the domain of the firm in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. Another noteworthy subject is Nora Herlihy, who in conjunction with Sean Forde and Seamus Mac Eoin was instrumental in founding the Credit Union of Ireland. Nora was a teacher by profession ((Culloty, 1990). Born in Cork, she trained and worked in Dublin in the 1950s. Working in inner city Dublin, she experienced through the classroom the vicious cycle of poverty that was a reality for the children she taught. One of the issues that she identified as core to the cycle of poverty she witnessed was poor money management. On undertaking an evening course in UCD, she became familiar with the co-operative movement and ideals. This led to her association with T O'Hogain, and Séamus P. MacEoin. Initially she formed the Dublin Central Co-operative Society Ltd (DCCS) with Tomas O'Hogain on March 6th 1954. The objective of the Society was to create employment through workers co-operatives. Working with the National Co-Operative Council the DCCS became a co-operative information service.

As part of the work within the DCCS Nora became involved in a sub group that was looking at the concept of credit unions. It is interesting to note that Muriel Gahan was a member of this sub group alongside Sean Forde, and Séamus P. MacEoin. Together with Sean and Seamus, Nora went on to set up the Credit Union Extension Service and out of this emerged the Credit Union movement in Ireland. The first two unions were formed under Nora's guidance, namely one in Dun Laoghaire and one



on Donore Avenue on the South Circular road. She became secretary of the Irish League of Credit Unions which was formed in 1960 and her legacy to the movement which now has 2.9million members with savings approaching €12 billion is undisputed.

Patricia Farrell, a mother of three boys discovered in 1955 that she could not get an education for her son Brian who had Down's Syndrome. At this time in Ireland the only option available to a child with this condition was full time residential care. Living in Meath, Patricia took action and placed an advertisement in the national press seeking like minded parents to form an association to address this issue. From the initial meeting held in the Mansion House in Dublin City centre a small day school was established for children with special needs, the first of its kind in the country. This became the foundation of St. Michaels House, which today provides services, educational, clinical, medical and social services to people with intellectual disabilities in the greater Dublin region. ([www.smh.ie](http://www.smh.ie)).

It is also worth focusing attention on the enterprising women who co-founded and co-organised many of the initiatives of Muriel Gahan and Lady Goulding. In the case of Kathleen O'Rourke, she was already operating very entrepreneurially before she encountered Lady Goulding. She was a trained physiotherapist and had founded the Irish branch of the League of Health and Beauty. Olivia Hughes, friend and director of Country Workers was the prime mover in establishing the Country Markets and was also instrumental in setting up the National Council for the Blind. She in turn was very ably supported by Mrs. Hannah Leahy, whose daughter Alice went on to found Trust, a non political, voluntary organisation that has been working with the homeless in Dublin for the past 35 years.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The cases outlined above demonstrate that in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, women were active participants in the public social and economic life of the country and a number of implications for research on women's business activity are evident in these stories.

In terms of methodology and the conceptual frameworks utilised, a broad based definition of entrepreneurship is more inclusive of female activities and allows an

examination of activity external to the firm to be undertaken. Definitions that look at behaviours, that consider the entrepreneurs in the role of decisions maker in relation to the management of resources as suggested by Casson can move the debate beyond the traditional interpretation of the entrepreneur as an individual engaging in profit seeking, commercial activity. This has implications for males as well as females and acknowledges the role of entrepreneurship in a not for profit context.

In terms of the history of Irish women's business activity, it is interesting to note that the two main subjects of this paper had biographies written about them in the 1990s. Ireland in 1990 had just elected its first female president and during her term of office considerable focus was attached to the achievement of women, past and present. These biographies arise out of a conceptual framework that Lerner entitles "compensatory history" which seeks to record the achievements of notable women (Lerner, 1981). While welcome in so far as they ensure that the contributions of these women are duly acknowledged, we are still some way removed from an overall history of women in business, which moves us on from viewing the female entrepreneur as an exception to the rule. Indeed a more in-depth analysis of the footnotes and archival material referenced in the biographies give a tantalising glimpse of significant female entrepreneurial activity in Ireland in the 1930s, 40s and 50s – the all female owned and run Modern Decorators, the League of Fitness, the Wynne Sister of Avoca Woollen Mills, the retailing endeavours of the Misses Reids, Roebuck Industries and numerous examples of community and cooperative enterprises in arts and craft. What emerges is a story of active female enterprise that straddles both profit and not for profit ventures and which is largely untold.

Thirdly, it is obvious that these cases do not conform to a homogenous classification of "female entrepreneurs". The backgrounds, motivations, personal experience and stories of the females highlighted here are different, and cannot be neatly summarised as typical of female entrepreneurship. While it might be tempting to cast Gahan and Goulding in the mould of "Anglo Irish" philanthropic women, following in the footsteps of Lady Aberdeen and Lady Hart to reduce their histories to this fails to acknowledge the many differences of their experience and their achievements. (Helland, 2007). Equally, others mentioned here, Herlihy, Farrell, O'Rourke, Hughes, etc do not easily fit a recognisable typology.

Fourthly, reading the data available on the female subjects for this paper, one is immediately struck by the business-like approach taken by these women to addressing issues that were core to their business. The Country Workers company was run as a business, albeit a not for profit business. The innovation of running a restaurant and tea shop with which was originally conceived as a crafts depot contributed significantly to the viability of the company and was a forerunner for a retail business model which is quite common in Dublin today – i.e. Avoca Hand weavers, Kilkenny Design. Lady Goulding has been widely lauded as a champion fundraiser and her biographer noted from the outset how business like her approach to setting up the Central Remedial Clinic was.

Fifthly, the cases provide evidence of entrepreneurial endeavour not being a solo or individual pursuit, as is sometimes portrayed in the literature. Both Gahan and Goulding were supported staunchly and derived their motivation from the ideas and skills of others - namely Olivia Hughes and Kathleen O'Rourke. There is no doubt that without the input of these other women, neither venture would have been successfully launched.

Finally the cases underline the importance of networks in developing an enterprise. Muriel Gahan was adept at moving between her associations with the Irish Homespun Association, the ICA, and the Arts Council to further enhance her overall objectives for the indigenous craft movement in Ireland. Lady Goulding used her social and political connections unashamedly and was quite uninhibited about using her peerage as a means of raising funds, particularly in the US. In both instances, the ability to network provided significant input into the development of the organisations.

In conclusion the collective, yet largely hidden history of these women demonstrates their strong entrepreneurial characteristics - an ability to identify gaps in a market and/or provision of services, marshal resources and plan to create lasting organisations. Key organisations still operating in Ireland today – the National Crafts Council, the Central Remedial Clinic, St. Michael's House, the Credit Union Movement, the National Council for the Blind, the League of Fitness owe their existence to the endeavours of highly enterprising, competent and committed Irish females.

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