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**Lab Coats and Lace: the Lives and Legacies of  
Inspiring Irish Women Scientists and Pioneers, edited  
by Mary Mulvihill.**

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**REVIEW**

This book is a collection of biographies of Irish scientific heroines. These are presented in two major sections. The first focuses on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and is comprised of two sections, each containing three biographies, entitled, 'Amateurs, pioneers and campaigning educators' and 'From geology and mathematics to astronomy and physics'. The second part is divided into stories of 'Women in medicine' (two) and of 'Professionals and Professors' (five). A 'Foreword' by Dr Aileen Fyfe, a historian of science from the National University of Ireland, Galway, frames the volume with the optimistic appraisal, that, although 'Science and engineering remain among the many professions still dominated by men...there is nothing now to stop a woman who wants to pursue those career paths' (p.1). I shall return to this appraisal later in this review, after I have considered the provenance and features of this publication.

This is a sponsored product, with the Department of Education and Science, Discover Science & Engineering, the Institute of Physics in Ireland and Biotrin having contributed to its publication. The publisher is an Irish organisation- [Women in Technology and Science \(WITS\)](#)- which is described as 'promoting women in technology and science in Ireland' since its inauguration in 1990. As well as launching specific projects to encourage women's entries into



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these fields and producing reports on related issues, WITS had published an earlier volume of biographies of Irish 'women scientists and pioneers', *Stars, Shells and Bluebells*, in 1997 which was also edited by the science writer and broadcaster who edited this collection, Mary Mulvihill.

The book is didactic in structure. The cover blurb indicates its suitability for 'the general reader, second-level science teachers and students, and anyone interested in the history of science and in women's studies'. The notes for many of the chapters contain lists of other sources on their subjects and most chapters end with a section on 'Associated places'—linking these women to a specific location or set of locations in Ireland. Although the text is black and white, there is at least one photograph or image of each woman whose life story is told, as well as many other photographs and images.

Many of the stories in this volume are fascinating. A few of these women are celebrated international figures in the history of science, including most notably Dame Kathleen Lonsdale, the X-ray crystallographer, whose other activities including peace activism and campaigning for prison reform are described in one of the chapters. However, the book includes biographies of some less well-known figures and many of the stories are engaging tales of remarkable lives.

These kinds of publication are fairly rare now and it is only through the concerted sponsorship of the organisations previously mentioned and the campaigns around women and science that they are produced. They have merit because they identify and document women's achievements in specific fields and they become markers for subsequent generations. The under-representation of women's accomplishments in science and technology makes a book like this an important intervention.

Although I appreciated this book for the reasons outlined above, my relish was tempered by some critical questions. For example, I was disquieted by Dr Fyfe's positive gloss on the progress that women have made in science and technology, which did not register ongoing gender inequalities and disparities in these fields. If she were correct in her assessment, would there be any need to 'inspire' women with tales of achievement such as those recounted in this volume? The collection also made me ponder the readership and impact of such a book. Who actually reads them? Does the readership extend beyond those who are already convinced that there *should be* more women in science and technology? What impact do such stories have on young readers? What does 'inspiration' involve? Is this really what this text will evoke?

While I lauded this project in many respects, I wondered about the form and style of the stories. They reminded me a little bit of the lives of the saints texts I read as a Catholic school girl. I was curious about the invoking of particular codes of femininity through the title. The volume also left me pondering the nationalistic framing of this project. Although there was great

variety in the political orientation of the subjects portrayed, the recurring identification of these women with *Irish* achievement is one which slightly troubled me, in that it resonates with contemporary tropes of scientific achievement as a marker of global power and influence and of the successful modern state.

Documenting and celebrating the scientific and technological achievement of 'women worthies' (Harding 1986:30) was an important strand of second-wave feminism. In addition, developing institutions that would support women in making inroads into these fields and provide outlets (in the form of publishers) to circulate their stories were other achievements of this movement. Nevertheless, it seems important not to be complacent about the modes and legacies of this movement. There may still be a need for inspirational stories about women and science. Despite this, perhaps we also need further critical reflection about how such stories work and about what they do and don't do in the early twenty-first century.

#### **REFERENCES**

Sandra Harding (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.