BRAVE AND BOLD: the life and times of Marie Muldowney Woods

By Marie Muldowney Woods

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Reviewed by Joan Burton

The author of this book Marie Muldowney Woods sadly died soon after the launch of this book by Sabina Higgins.

The early chapters are a personal account of growing up in a socially backward environment of the fifties and sixties and it gives an invaluable account of life in rural Ireland of that time.

The second part of the book moves forward a gear as Marie goes to England to work in nursing, meets her future husband Paul and gets more directly involved in activism and politics. This period marked the decline of the stifling conservatism of the long era of Conservative rule and the new excitement of change brought about by the Beatles and the election of a Labour Government in 1964.

When she and Paul moved to Croydon she developed a deep interest in politics. While Harold Wilson's first Government did initiate many valuable social and liberal reforms, she became disillusioned by his later drift to a more conservative outlook. This led to vicious internecine strife that paved the way for the arrival of the Thatcher era.

Despite her misgivings with Labour, she does acknowledge the advances made by Barbara Castle as a Minister in legislating for equal pay, pension reforms and the payment of child benefit directly to mothers.

She decided against joining Labour as she was repelled by many of the reactionary elements she encountered at meetings. Instead, she joined the Communist Party of Great Britian in 1974 and stayed with it for her remaining 4 years in the UK until her return to Ireland.

She found those years to be a radical and stimulating time for her even though the CP also experienced persistent internal strife.

There is a fascinating section on her involvement with the Women's Liberation Movement that developed from reading authors such as Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer. Greer's book The Female Eunuch was a particular source of inspiration as were the women involved with the anti-slavery movement in the US.

Marie got involved directly in the various campaigns, marches and Hyde Park speeches. She had her own five minute stump speech emphasising equal opportunities, equal pay, women's mental health and the right to be full members of society that on one occasion her speech provoked a violent reaction from some older men.

In 1978 she returned to Ireland with considerable reluctance and quickly became conscious that her native country was way behind the curve as regards women's rights. She secured employment with REHAB, a long -standing organisation devoted to the employment of people with disabilities. One of her initiatives there was to promote the unionisation of the staff and she became chair of the ITGWU branch. In that role she became aware of political rivalries between different groups on the left and she remarks on rampant petty disputes that were so destructive of political advance for the left at the time.

At this time, she opted to join the Labour Party in her local area and luckily the people she met were left minded soulmates. Her Labour Party involvement was to continue for 4 decades helped by the fact that Labour was the first Irish party to establish a Women's Section.

The chapter on The Labour Women's National Council (LWNC) and its efforts to highlight policies and campaigns to advance the rights and representation of women in Ireland is one of the most interesting sections of the book. Labour was in the forefront of issues such as access to contraception, the right to divorce and opposition to the reactionary Eight Amendment. Nonetheless, women were poorly represented in the Parliamentary Party and local authorities.

Marie also became an advisor to Labour Health Minister Barry Desmond. In that role she was appointed to bodies such as the Health Education Bureau. She gives here a valuable account of public policy reaction to the AIDS epidemic and its role in facilitating the initial liberalisation of the sake of condoms.

I found this book to be an engaging account of one individual's personal and political journey and the regular distressing conflicts that political engagement created for family and personal life.

In recent years there has been a marked decline in individual political commitment and this has created a trend towards an excessive professionalisation of politics. That cannot be healthy for democracy as it causes a damaging isolation between rulers and the public.

I found this book to be a valuable antidote to this trend by leaving us with the story of one woman's dedicated effort to advance social progress through political action.

Joan Burton is a former Labour TD, Minister and Tanaiste.