

Caitriona Clear: 'Women, farm and family c.1850-1922':

NB this is a rough draft – relevant figures etc will be shown on powerpoint/handouts at the conference.

A conference paper should throw out a few questions and I am going to build the paper around a few figures and facts that we have from the period 1850-1922 in order to explore and perhaps explode some of the assumptions that underpin our examination of rural Irish women's status and capacity in that period.

Trying to come at an evaluation of women's lives in the past is very difficult and when rural women are in question it is almost impossible, because so few of them left memoirs or personal testimonies and also because all over Europe, the number and variety of positive and negative depictions of them by contemporary commentators – admiring their strength and health, deploring their prematurely aged appearance – clouds our perceptions. All attempts to synthesise the body of research on European rural women after c. 1848 fall into a kind of on the one hand, on the other hand, balancing act – Anderson & Zinsser, Bonnie Smith, Deborah Simonton, Michelle Perrot, Rafaella Sarti. Historians of rural life in general and of rural women in particular kind of start out on the back foot, reacting to Edward Shorter's highly influential thesis that rural life was barbaric and oppressive of women and that only industrialization and urbanization set them free to enjoy sex and family life. A counterpoint to this was Martine Segalen's study of Norman and Breton women through the folklore which argued convincingly that the songs and proverbs which seemed to denigrate and subordinate rural women suggested instead a fear of, and respect for them. Joan Scott and Louise Tilly's argument that industrialization far from freeing women, bound them to factory and shop timetables making it difficult for them to combine family life and paid work, has been questioned by Evans among others, Berlanstein and Honeyman & Goodman wonder if we can even talk about a pre-industrial rural or post-industrial past as it applies to women. Joanna Bourke's famous study of rural women in Ireland at a crucial period of change 1890-1914 argued (in 1993) that women's loss of economic power on the farm was compensated for by increased power in the household and in household work. It was a bold thesis that got a lukewarm reception from feminist historians (myself included) who didn't find it a convincing one, but it was a very well-documented and courageous attempt to

address questions of agency. Around the same time, however, Tessie Liu's study of what she calls 'Le Patrimoine Magique' – the stock of beliefs, proverbs and stories in rural life in 19c France – warned against using 'bargaining models' to explain women's position in the household. (i.e the idea that if 'he' had one kind of power 'she' had another) Indeed, she suggested that we reject 'hollow subjectivity, a sense of person-in-her-own-right that floats without a social context'. In other words, girls and women lived and worked with, and within, beliefs they held themselves, about their place in the world and the family and the farm. Power, she suggests, was often exercised by women in emotional realms, when they highlighted their self-sacrifice and altruism for the family. Such power, of course, is as immeasurable as it is, or was, powerful so in a way while this is a tantalizing idea, we are back where we started.

So how can we evaluate rural women's lives without seesawing speculatively all the time? I think the only answer is by looking at the statistical evidence of where women were and what they were doing. We are certain of a number of things about rural life in Ireland between 1850 and 1922. We know that people began to postpone marriage and more often than before, to forego it altogether. We know that there were more single men and women in the Irish population on the eve of the First World War than in any other western European country. We know that once people married, even in their late 20s or early 30s, they did not appear to limit their family size in rural areas anyway. (Cormac O Gráda has suggested that some urban people began to do this from the early 20c on).

We might sometimes forget, however, that these trends were slow to take off and that for much of the nineteenth century, early and almost universal marriage was still the norm in rural Ireland – the populations of Kerry and Mayo, for example, rose between 1851 and 1881. As well-informed a man as Sir Charles Cameron, the Chief Medical Officer of Ireland, scoffed in 1874 at the idea that the Irish population was in irreversible decline. So people did not necessarily recognise these trends as they were happening. And even in the parts of the country where permanent celibacy and late marriage prevailed and became the norm for both men and women, this did not mean social isolation or loneliness for either sex. Despite the gloomy warnings of George Russell, Filson Young, Horace Plunkett and other voices in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, urban and rural Ireland was lively and packed with people in the

years leading up to the First World War. The entire west of the country, after all, was designated 'congested' with youth and liveliness as well as deprivation and economic depression, and in country towns in Munster and Leinster the sheer number, say, of organizations and societies which drew on the rural hinterland for its bicycling membership, to say nothing of the number and variety of the retail outlets which depended on rural as well as urban customers, testify to a numerous and active rural population. (Would the political and cultural revolutions have happened as they did so rapidly and completely between 1890 and 1914 without all these single people to make up the membership of organization and devote their time to activity?) It is true that at this stage later marriage was becoming the norm in rural as well as urban areas (more on the geographical breakdown and change over time later), and that emigration was removing quite a lot of the population but meanwhile single people, male and female, were living and moving and breathing and often doing a lot more than that in the prime of their lives. And almost all of them were living in family units, rather than on their own. Irish family life did not appear to be in crisis.

Thinking of the early marriage/late marriage transition, or the universal marriage/permanent celibacy trend, made me wonder which way of life was 'better' for women – early marriage or late marriage, married life or permanent singlehood. This is a difficult question not only to answer but even to ask, because there is no consensus about what is 'good' or 'bad' for women at any given time – and of course, what can be 'good' for one group of women can be 'bad' for another – a cheap supply of unmarried servants can be of tremendous advantage to married upper-middle-class women for example. A good place to start is by examining some of the assumptions that underpin our evaluations of rural women's lives. I am going to concentrate today on two related areas – marriage/family life and work. Now rural of course does not always mean agricultural, but for the purposes of this paper I'm going to assume it does. And while 'rural' technically applies to everybody from the big house to the mud-walled cabin, I am going to concentrate on farming/small farming and labouring people who had to work for a living whether inside the house/farm or outside it.

Marriage/Family Life/Work

A generation of historians interpreted the late marriage/permanent singlehood patterns as having been bad for the country as a whole (falling population) and particularly hard on women, leading to their low social status. After all, the argument ran, if women weren't needed even for their basic biological function their importance cannot have been very high. I myself in the 1980s in my background research on Irish women when I was writing about the nuns, fell into this assumption. But I was in good company with many of the makers of modern Irish social history from Kenneth Connell to David Fitzpatrick, Robert Kennedy, Sean Connolly and Joe Lee. And even some of the pioneers of women's history - Joe Lee, again, Mary Daly, Mary Cullen, Jenny Beale, and others - were inclined to see post-Famine or nineteenth-century Irish women as rejects of the marriage market. What we were all trying to do from the late 1970s was to delve deep into Irish social history to find reasons for Irish women's persistent low social and political status in the late twentieth century. Even so, our assumption that women were prevented from marrying, that they would always have married given a chance, shows how constrained we were by the ideology of the 1970s which held that the sexually compatible and companionate marriage was the lynchpin of society.

Then along came Timothy Guinnane in 1997 and his thesis on the Vanishing Irish (borrowing his title from a 1950s book but dealing with the period I'm talking about) which was one of the first to attempt a regional breakdown of late marriage and permanent celibacy. He showed, convincingly, that these social phenomena were initiated and continued to be most marked in the rich and prosperous agricultural regions of the country - that is, among people who could have afforded to marry and who weren't tied to dowry transfers. He demonstrated that late marriage and permanent singlehood were every bit as likely to occur among Protestants as among Catholics, thus questioning Connell's popular argument about the influence of a celibate clergy turning people off marriage. Most intriguingly of all, however, Guinnane suggested that people's reasons for postponing marriage (often permanently) were quite complex. He identified what he called 'marriage substitutes' in the lives of permanently single men in particular- a strong and active family life with extended family, plenty of nieces and nephews (because the marrying sibling would have had, don't forget, a big family), friends locally, remunerative work, reasonably high status. The lonely bachelor on the hillside was a mid to late 20c

phenomenon, if indeed he ever existed in the way he was portrayed in song and story (Curtin and Varley). But what about the rural spinster? Before assuming that she was an overworked aunt, a put-upon daughter or 'an old maid in a garret' we have to look at some facts.

1. Demographics. MAP, TABLES. Where were single women in their late 30s early 40s most likely to be situated? (why I chose this age bracket – women could still marry, 35-44, and some did. Permanent celibacy often as result of postponed rather than foregone marriage, so it is more realistic to look at the age group when it was still a possibility) Two maps, 1881 and 1911. Powerpoint and handouts. So what do these maps tell us? Areas where there was the most off-farm employment were the most likely to have women who did not marry. Explain Meath, Kildare, Wexford, Louth, Co. Dublin – and of course the north-east. Now, it could be argued that single women from other parts of the country flocked to Dublin, for example, and that women from outlying rural areas in Ulster flocked to the textile mills not only of Belfast but of the ancillary towns in Co Down and the shirt factories in Derry but there is no evidence of in-migration to Meath and Kildare and Wexford. (And most mill-workers in the north-east were urban dwellers – even in Derry, townswomen did the factory work while rural women did the putting out work and might not even have been counted in the census as gainfully occupied). In Co. Dublin, the highest percentage of single women was in the Kingstown-Rathdown area, the most affluent part of the county. Moving to Leinster and Munster, then to Connacht. In 1881 these women would have been born just after the Famine, in 1911, they would have been born in the turbulent 1870s. When we relate all this to emigration the picture is intensified – although there was a steady trickle from all counties throughout the half-century, female emigration from the west – Mayo and Kerry – didn't really take off until the 1880s 90s. So we can't say for the earlier period that all the women who didn't marry emigrated, in these areas. What this map suggests to me, at any rate, is that there is a relationship between economic/urban development and postponed or foregone marriage, for women anyway. Male patterns are broadly similar.

2. So what kinds of work were women doing? Joanna Bourke shows that the need for female labour on the farm remained steady throughout this period, but that female labouring – freelance work – had died down. Most female farm work was done by ‘assisting relatives’ or farmers’ wives (deemed economically ‘engaged in home duties’) or indeed, female farmers. The kind of freelance female agricultural labouring that is mentioned in the folklore and in local history accounts – binders on east Tipperary farms in the 1880s, potato pickers on Kilkenny farms who walked out from the city for a week’s work in the 1900s, poultry pluckers in north Cork – all seem to have been married women supplementing family earnings with occasional if intensive farm work. Paid agricultural labouring for women was usually part-time and not very well-paid, but it would have been as important to supplement the family income up to the 1880s and 90s as the freelance textile and garment work undertaken by countrywomen in parts of Ulster and in the hinterland of the other cities (more so in Ulster of course). We mustn’t forget that many ‘domestic servants’ were in fact farm servants as well, if in rural areas, and worked on the farm as well as the house, often complaining bitterly about their workload, diet and accommodation in the folklore accounts. (O Gráda comments that there was nobody as self-pitying as the Irish agric worker in the nineteenth century). But this was also true of boys and indeed the ‘servant boy’ on the middling farms throughout the country was as familiar a figure as the servant girl. What about actual farming itself? Female farmers in their own right you can see from the figures there, rose as a percentage of all farmers, between 1851 and 1911, but not evenly, as you can see – there were more of them in 1891 than in 1911. TABLES Given that most female farmers were widows, this suggests that the big age gap between male farmer and wife which contributed to the high number of widows in 1891 might not have continued to the same extent in the succeeding thirty years, i.e. that farm marriages initiated in the 1870s and 80s, for example, mightn’t have had as big age gaps as earlier marriages. But looking at the regional breakdown very roughly and very quickly, while in 1891 there seems to be a connection between good land and a high percentage of female farmers, this is not necessarily so in 1911, when Connacht has a higher percentage of female farmers than Munster or Ulster – though not by much, and mainly on the good

land of Galway and Roscommon. We could be looking here, countrywide, at a higher proportion than previously not of widowed, but of single women farmers who for one reason or another inherited and didn't marry. By the way, farmers' wives, after 1881 were not counted as economically active, but if the farmer was a woman, her daughter-in-law was counted as an 'assisting relative' so in that particular house there was no female 'engaged in home duties' as far as the census was concerned. Female farmers more likely in pasture rather than tillage farming – labour and management of same easier to manage. Throughout Europe, Sarti and Simonton show, divisions of labour were fairly strictly maintained on the farm – countries as far apart as Portugal, Finland – but these divisions of labour were more likely to be breached as the farm grew smaller. However, it does not seem that women ever habitually ploughed, or sold beasts at a fair, and this would have been true of Ireland too. Lack of work in Ireland led to migration and permanent emigration, but there was migration within Ireland too. Particularly in the mini-boom of 1880s-1910 or thereabouts, when towns expanded and situations vacant columns in newspapers overflowed onto the next page and light railways brought goods and services to hitherto remote parts of the country, girls and women were much in demand in retail establishments, institutions and sweatshops. The number of female drapers in their own right (not drapers' wives) increased by 40% between 1891 and 1911 and the mushrooming of 'monster houses' or department stores not only in cities but in country towns, drew in girls from the rural hinterland and sold to rural customers – the mother of the author Maura Lavery for example, had her besotted husband sell his farm and buy her a drapery shop in a Kildare town to sell to farmers' wives in the early years of the century. Advertisements even for apprentices to the dressmaking or printing and even for male apprentices e.g. to coachmaking, often specified country girls or country boys. This was because of a belief (whether it was true or not) that rural people were healthier, physically stronger, more deferential and respectful, and a certainty that they were less likely to have disreputable friends and family close to hand.

For those girls lucky enough to be able to stay on at school till their mid-teens, there was always teaching. National teaching was the great career opportunity for working class and small farming girls and boys in this era. It was hard

work and very demanding but it was comparatively well-paid and from the 1870s, pensionable. And female teachers did not have to retire on marriage. Yet many female teachers postponed marriage until their late 20s early 30s. This may have been because their earnings were helping to support parents or younger siblings at home, but it might also have been because of a desire for a period, however brief, of economic independence. In Ireland as elsewhere, however, not all female teachers married or wanted to marry. Nursing was also becoming a popular occupation for women at this time, though following the apprenticeship model the training often cost parents a certain amount, as did teaching. Still, the nurse, whether she was in a hospital or working in the community for the Poor Law or for one of a number of voluntary organizations, was an embodiment of female authority that was if anything even more powerful than the teacher. The religious life also attracted farmers' daughters particularly as time went on.

3.A word, before we pass on, about female emigration because even though it isn't the focus of this paper it has to come into the story. Some authoritative and conflicting accounts of Irish female emigration to America and Australia stress, variously, opportunity and necessity, pull and push. Robert Kennedy's pessimistic diagnosis was that girls were undervalued in the Irish rural family and that this led to their being ousted from the home to be of more economic benefit elsewhere. Kerby Miller Donald Akenson and David Fitzpatrick believe that they emigrated in order to find husbands they couldn't get in Ireland. Such a narrow view of women's aspirations and expectations was challenged by the work of Hasia Diner and Janet Nolan – each in different ways. Women emigrated to earn money and to get work sometimes returning to marry their sweethearts at home, sometimes sending money home to bring them out, sometimes marrying men they met in the New World, sometimes remaining single, a long-lasting phenomenon which was pathologized by John A O'Brien in the 1950s. Instead of seeing their going away as a flight from a country where nobody wanted to marry them, couldn't we see both the emigration *from* and the non-marrying *in* as part of the same phenomenon – women as well as men postponing or refusing marriage until they reached a certain standard of living? This would also explain their frequent non-

marriage in the countries they went to – they were staying single until they satisfied themselves as to the conditions.

By the way, girls as young as 17 and 18 emigrated from Ireland not necessarily in family groups, sometimes with female friends, siblings or cousins – with peer groups anyway. Sometimes they were going to an older relation, sometimes they weren't. Whatever the case, they were believed to be capable of looking after themselves far away from the parental authority. It should be noted that within Ireland too, rural servant girls were not tied to their employers in the same way as, e.g. *Mägde* in rural Saxony, who could be fined for leaving their service. I haven't come across any court cases taken by employers against runaway or defaulting servants – even though farmers e.g. in Meath complained that they couldn't get dairymaids due to competition from the towns, which was probably because of the wages they were paying. Girls and young women in Ireland therefore could have enjoyed a freedom of movement that some rural girls in other countries did not have. Whether this was because they were undervalued at home, or trusted to operate away from it (could both be true?) it operated, one could argue, to their advantage.

4. With the number of urban jobs opening up for women of all social classes in the 1880s and 90s (we now know this was a temporary phenomenon, but they didn't know that at the time) and the ongoing demand for farm servants, it made sense for Irish girls and women not to rush into marriage. And the regional evidence above would suggest that late marriage and no marriage were often a result of women's own choices, insofar as they had choices, or a by-product of the path they freely took in life. This path sometimes led them away from home and sometimes rooted them more firmly in the familiar, helping to rear a sibling's children. Nowhere in the folklore or in any of the secondary accounts, however, have I come across a song or ballad that laments the single state, though there are plenty that lament early or loveless marriage – *Sorry The Day I Was Married*, *I Wish That I Never Was Wed*, and *Fuigfidh Mise an Baile Seo* being three of these. The only lament for single life I have come across is *If I Died An Old Maid in the Garret*, which was written by an Englishman, Martin Parker, with no Irish connections whatsoever, though it was a huge hit for *Sweeney's Men* here in the 1960s and

was also sung by the Clancy Brothers. A line from *Fuigfidh Mise* – ‘*Pósadh ró-óg mé mar gheall ar na puntaí*’ (I was married too young because of money) is an explicit rejection of early mercenary marriage. (historians have a fixed idea that early marriages must be for love and late ones mercenary but the opposite is often the case). Charles Kickham’s hugely popular *Knocknagow*, 1870, commented adversely on the made match, as did many other commentators on rural life, many of them quoted by K.H.Connell as evidence that the made match was a bad thing – but the very fact that it was being noticed and commented upon shows that there was a popular groundswell against it. Popular ballads which poked fun at it appeared in the 1880s and 90s – Percy French’s *McBreen’s Heifer*, *The Darling Girl from Clare*. It is true that the mercenary made match continued into the 20c, but it was much derided and criticised, and it is not far-fetched to suggest suggest that a very modern refusal to engage in it was one of the reasons for postponed or foregone marriage in the period under question.

#### Conclusion:

While early marriage continued for longer than we usually think, in parts of Ireland in the nineteenth century, once economic alternatives presented themselves, many (nb not all) rural women and men opted to postpone and sometimes to forego it altogether. I say *not all* because it is important to remember that there were rural communities where early marriage persisted - usually where there was either strong continued demand for agricultural labourers (South Tipperary) or some form of supplementary off-farm employment in mines (Kilkenny, north Tipperary) or in mental hospitals (the farmer/hospital attendant) or waterways and canals. (Lusmagh, King’s Co). What makes these communities different from those of the pre-Famine era however, is that marriage while it was often early when it took place ,wasn’t as universal – singledom was on the rise, and emigration took a lot of people out of the community. (Powerpoint Larkins born 1885-1897 and Clears (b.1879-1890 if time – early marrying in the former, late in the latter,but in both, emigration of from a third to a half of all the offspring, and permanent singleness of at least one).

Taking the country as a whole, the average age at marriage for women in Ireland in 1911 was 29, a statistic that has generated much hand-wringing and lamentation. But later marriage brings several advantages to the woman concerned, to the community and to the marriage in general. Is it outlandish to imagine that women themselves would have been aware of these advantages and adjusted their marital expectations accordingly?

- (i) The woman getting married in her late 20s or early 30s had some money saved, (else why wait), a dowry coming to her, a job she didn't want to give up, skills built up from these jobs, whether these were skills from domestic service, shop work, numeracy, literacy. She often, moreover, had some authority and leverage, not only because of the savings or dowry she was bringing to the marriage, but because of her experience either working outside the home place, or helping to run the farm at home. A lot of the Irish humour I heard growing up was about farmers' demands for strong rather than attractive women as wives and bestial standards of beauty for women e.g 'beef to the heels like a Mullingar heifer'. It might have been partly women's rejection of this kind of objectification that led to their reluctance to marry. The older she was, the more likely she was to be able to enter into the marriage on her own terms. On the other hand – she might have valued herself as a worker too and revelled in her husband's pride in her strength and vitality. But this does not take from the point about working experience and authority – it adds to it.
- (ii) A later age at marriage meant a shorter childbearing period and a smaller family. Less wear and tear on the woman herself, less work of childrearing, fewer mouths to feed and greater economic security for the completed family. Still enough time for 4 or even 6 children to help with the farm, for company etc and as insurance in case childhood illness snatched away one or two. (Examples) NB would the smaller family have been understood as an advantage by women themselves at the time? We can see looking back that it was advantageous for the family economically and even perhaps emotionally, but we can't assume that people postponed marriage with this in mind.
- (iii) Health risks of older childbearing have, according to most recent research, been greatly exaggerated and often based on studies of poorly-nourished

people. 19c Irish rural people were for the most part well-nourished and healthy (among the healthiest in Europe acc to Cormac O Gráda, even in the impoverished west).

Permanent singlehood or celibacy also held advantages for women –not least the avoidance of pregnancy and childbirth and of the worries and often heartbreak of child rearing. Reflecting on the privations and hardships of Irish rural life (even prosperous rural life) 1850 to 1922, I am inclined to believe that Guinnane’s thesis about marriage substitutes for men applies even more strongly to women, and that it is easy to understand how they would have actively chosen the single life, particularly if they had a means of support – even if this single life was lived with a married sister or brother on his or her family farm. There is no certainty that her status would have been low, and where family bonds were warm and people were reasonable, she could have had a contented and settled life.

One thing is certain – rural women’s lives changed quite significantly between 1850 and 1918-22 all over Europe. Irish women’s lives were not exceptional. But we have to avoid assumptions in evaluating why they acted as they did – and try to infer reasons for their actions based on life as they understood it at the time and not as we see it looking back.