

**‘If my brother sold the farm in the future I’d probably be the first one trying to buy it back off him’: an exploration of the relationship between non-inheritors and land in Irish farming families.**

## **Introduction**

In most discussions academic or otherwise about succession non-inheriting farm offspring are usually ignored or only treated of according to what share of the inheritance they might look for in the future. However, this disregards the powerful role they play in the handing on of the farm from one generation to the next in the support they give to it. Importantly, it also discounts the powerful relationship they develop with the farm they grew up on and the ties they construct to this homeplace, for example with regard to the memories it generates and so on. How they frame the farm in terms of its importance to the family and themselves and their identity is a crucial component of their desire to see the farm retained within this unit. The responsibilities farm youth feel towards the farm and their attitudes are usually differentiated according to gender even among non-inheritors. This is an important group to consider not only because of the part they play in succession strategies but also because it gives insight into the continued reluctance to sell land in Ireland out of families. Furthermore, it is a significant group to study as it represents the majority of children who grew up in the farming family environment but who have rarely been studied as a distinct cohort.

This paper firstly, looks at how the farm is framed and then proceeds to look at different components of this relationship between the group and the holding and how this plays a part in the retention of the farm within the family. Lastly, it examines the role non-inheritors play in the succession strategy and how they contribute to the land being kept.

## **Background**

This paper is based on PhD research carried out with a cohort of university students who grew up in Irish farming families that do not intend to take up farming on a full-time basis. This is set against the context of the continued norm of patrilineal, impartible inheritance

where both genders appear to accept their role in this process. While the cohort focused on individuals who are likely to be given the farm and those who will not it is the latter group who are concentrated on in this paper. The research is based on a series of thirty semi-structured interviews with students aged between 18-33 years of age. The cohort is comprised of undergraduates and postgraduates from a range of farm types such as dairy and livestock and operations where farming is a full-time and part-time enterprise. All members of the cohort had assisted on the farm growing up either as ‘workers’ who regularly undertook specialised tasks and were regarded as essential to the farm’s everyday operations or as ‘helpers’ who acted as an emergency pool of labour or undertook less skilled chores. This paper is part of a wider study on the nature of belonging in the farming community and its impact on young people’s transition to adulthood. The views and attitudes of seventeen members of the cohort (ten female and seven male) who fit into the category of non-inheritors are represented in this work. For illustrative purposes two participants-one male and one female have been chosen as exemplars of the wider cohort and extensive use of quotes and stories from their interviews.

## **Biographies**

**Bridget** She is twenty three, comes from a dairy farm in the Mid-West of Ireland and is a postgraduate student. All her siblings are university educated with some having returned to farming and others working in health care and teaching. The farm has been in her family since at least her paternal grandfather’s time. She helped on the farm growing up but had little active interest in it. Her younger brother will succeed to the farm, which she is pleased with. In order to keep the holding in the family she would consider buying it from him were he to choose to sell it in the future. She would like to return home to live after she finishes in university.

**James** He is twenty four, comes from a dairy and cattle farm in the Mid-West of Ireland and is an undergraduate student. His sister moved away a long time ago and one brother works part-time at home on the farm. He hated most work on the farm growing up and is deeply relieved that his older brother will take over the land in the future. His family have an extensive historical connection to the farm and to preserve this he would be willing to run the

farm in the event of his brother's future incapacity. He would like to live somewhere in rural Ireland but not near his homeplace.

### **Attitudes to Succession**

A general reluctance and aversion to the idea of selling the land permeates Irish family farming culture with only .2% of agricultural land coming onto the market in 2010 (Savills, 2011). Almost all of the participants view the retention of the farm within the family as being of paramount importance. This urge to keep the land was present even where the individual had no desire, to own the land, to become a farmer or even to move home again and, yet, on a fundamental personal level the idea of the farm being disposed of is abhorrent to them. It is also not linked to gender even if how this attachment might be manifested differs in how it is imagined and put into practice. The idea of selling the land is rarely countenanced in any kind of active sense by either males or females regardless of whether they had worked on the farm extensively growing up or participated sporadically. In addition, there appeared to be few internal disputes over this issue of succession between family members. For almost all participants who fall into this category, alternatives such as leasing the land out or as in Bridget's case buying the farm from her brother rather than see it be sold to someone else would be considered preferable to letting it go out of the family. This is demonstrated in the following comment:

If he sold it in the future I'd probably be the first one trying to buy it back off him.

### **The Framing of the Farm**

How the farm is framed by the participants is a crucial part of their relationship with this institution. The farm is an integral part of how the family presents itself to the outside world and how it selects the building blocks of its identity construction. In this way the two narratives of the farm and the family become intertwined, so one does not make full sense without the other. The impact of this is seen not only in the working relationship a family has with the farm but also through its use as an important identification marker especially in the local community. Non-inheriting offspring use this as well as those who will succeed and

their parents with all the family easily pinpointed as belonging to a particular farm and its corresponding historical rootedness. This makes it more difficult for individuals to countenance the idea of the farm being sold as it would be tantamount to a partial rejection of their own identity and their association with a particular landholding with all the symbolic meaning this entails for the family. It continues to be an important part of their life world, even as they gradually build a life away from it, with most participants speaking of returning to the homeplace on a frequent basis.

For the vast majority the farm is framed through an emotive lens rather than in business or economic terms. This is vitally important to the construction of the relationship between non-inheritors and the farm as it increases the impossibility of imagining the farm as something capable of being sold. Although it is obviously significant as a means of providing at least part, if not all, of the family's income that does imply the group sees it in business terms. Most of the participants were anxious to appear avoiding greedy or pushing for any part of the farm to be sold in order to gain access to financial capital. Inherent in this is the attitude that while it is available to the farmer as an income-generating asset normatively speaking it is not regarded as theirs to do what they wish with. Rather they hold it in trust for their ancestors and those who will come after them. Furthermore, when its meaning for the family and its history are considered it becomes more difficult to (re)imagine it as a saleable asset that could, for example, fund a life elsewhere. If Bridget's brother who will succeed to the farm were to ever sell it, it would be tantamount to a betrayal of the faith placed in him that he will keep it intact. Nevertheless, a few participants used the word 'asset' to describe the farm, which by implication becomes something of monetary value capable of being bought and sold. However, this was said in a tentative almost embarrassed manner and was usually contradicted by other statements made about their relationship and attitude towards it. Thus, James mentioned how fantastic it was for the family to have the farm as an 'asset' to fall back on but, then, refuted this by refusing to ever contemplate the sale of the land. Furthermore, this emotive conceptualisation is a vital part of the indivisibility of the practical life of the farm from perceptions around its symbolic centrality to the idea of home and family.

## **Continued Sense of Ownership**

A significant element of the relationship between this group and the land is a continued sense of ownership of the farm and their careful positioning as permanently connected to the farm, irrespective of their spatial distancing from the farm. In this way even after they have moved away they still feel invested in it and are determined to see it preserved into the future. The participants' proprietorial attitude was demonstrated in two ways. Firstly, it was shown through the fact that almost the entire group despite protesting their ignorance still had relatively detailed knowledge of and interest in what was happening on the farm. James, for example, professed to be glad to have escaped this life and, yet, he knew a great deal about the plans his father and brother have for expanding the farm in the future. Secondly, it was demonstrated in the pronouns used to describe the farm and the type of agriculture practiced there, i.e. whether it was dairy, tillage, etc. Most of the participants used words, such as *we* and *our*, to speak about the farm. Bridget employed this language to speak about the farm:

It's a dairy farm just [a] dairy farm *we* keep no other animals.

## **The Role of Memories**

A strong feature of why non-inheritors want to see the farm retained is because of its capacity to act as a repository of memories. As part of this a perceptible link back to an individual's own past and the broader familial one is offered. These memories can be loosely divided into three different kinds: personal, parental and historical. Personal ones originate in the individual's own childhood and are connected to either playing or working outside on the farm rather than in the house. The second set of memories, which emerged as important were parental ones and came across as cautionary tales<sup>1</sup> about the hardships and limited choices

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<sup>1</sup> Cautionary tales are stories that help to shape actors' identities through providing a set of boundaries around the expectations available to them. These cautionary tales are almost like family fairy tales, in the manner of Cinderella or Rapunzel that are retold within the family and carry subtle messages about the dire outcome of particular actions. They appear to be constructed by mothers rather than fathers. They usually involve something negative happening either to the teller or another individual such as a neighbour or parent. If they pursue a particular path and entertain inappropriate hopes around succession or a desire to step outside the normative, established life path and movement into adulthood, these are the probable consequences. They serve as both

parents had encountered with regard to a lack of educational opportunities and in some cases their resultant entry into farming. These recollections were a way of adding import and understanding to the sacrifices of parents and perhaps meaning too, to the fact that the family has chosen to stay and fight in the face of financial pressures or unfeasibly small-sized holdings. An example of this kind of story appeared in James' narrative where he told a tale of how his father was taken out of school at the age of twelve to run the farm when his own father became ill. Although his father is fond of the farm and of agriculture, James felt it was unfairly foisted on him and as a result deeply resented his father's childhood experiences. Although it pushed him towards education as a kind of oppositional alternative it also ensured that James was willing to take on the farm in the future if it meant it could be retained within the family. In this way his father's sacrifices in protecting the farm would not have been in vain.

Historical memories stretching back before their parents to earlier generations were also meaningful. These played an important role in the development of some participants' attachment to the farm as it created a deeper embeddedness in the fabric of the farm. Not all participants had an in-depth knowledge of their family past but for the most part, they were aware of the intergenerational nature of the connection between their family and the landholding. These historical memories are centred on the achievements of, for example, their grandfathers in shaping the physical landscape of the farm, notably the buildings located in the farmyard. These were Bridget's comments on the subject when asked whether she had been aware of the history of the farm growing up:

Oh absolutely yeah definitely “and this is where [...] your grandfather used keep horses”, and we still have you know our grandfather's hay

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admonitions and catalysts for how actors set their goals and align their paths, past, present and future, within certain frameworks and construct their own personal identity. In addition, they delimit the boundaries of their relationship with both the specific farm they come from and their place within the farming culture in terms of, for example, what is an acceptable level of participation in both the public and private performance of farming work. This also holds true for promoting or restricting ambitions with regard to succeeding to the family's landholding or the need to engage with education in order to avoid being trapped on the farm in the future.

barn and things like that, even though you know it wouldn't be the best hay barn in the world but oh very much so we knew exactly where everything was long ago and where everything is now.

Through these memories the family's history and the history of the farm were presented as a unified entity so that one becomes a means of preserving the other. This contributed to a reluctance to countenance the loss of the farm from the family because of the consequences for the family narrative both in relation to its past and future. Through calling to mind these historical and parental memories the distance of the farm from commodity status, which can be bought and sold is further reinforced. The farm is framed as something beyond financial measure; for what price can be placed on one's family and intangibles like pride and endurance?

If the farm were to be sold then they would relinquish access to personal memories, betraying a vital part of the self and their childhoods. Likewise, more historical memories, which engender a feeling of rootedness and a greater sense of place in both its spatial and emotional meanings, would also be threatened. By retaining ownership of the land within the family, the farm can continue to act as a memory aid for individuals capable of triggering recollections of their childhoods. Even where life paths take them away from their birth culture and birth place this part of their narrative is merely dormant rather than dissipated or diluted irrevocably and can be accessed when they return home. Bridget hinted at this idea when she said she would hate to see the farm being sold because she and her siblings would lose an important part of themselves:

I feel like if we were ever to sell something it'd, we'd be losing a part of you know our growing up and all the fields we ran in and things like that.

### **The Importance of the Family's Intergenerational Relationship with the Farm**

One of the most common reasons put forward by participants for holding onto the farm is the intergenerational relationship their family have with it. This sentiment is often connected to a desire to see the work their fathers put into the farm and the life they led, symbolically and practically protected through retaining the land. For the vast majority of participants the farm takes on a permanency and a promise of constancy often not found elsewhere in their life as

they move towards adulthood. Their informal attachments are anchored in a temporal continuum that in many cases locates actors in a framework incorporating past, present and future generations. The narrative around not only the past connection of the family to the farm but also its maintenance into the future partially stems from this concept. This goes deep to the very heart of many of the participants' identities and world views. All participants showed a strong consciousness of the intergenerational aspect of farming whether their own situation reflected this or not. Indeed, some specifically linked the probable sale of the farm to the fact that it had not been in the family for long enough to generate a deep connection or that the chain of ownership had in some way been ruptured by their parents not having grown up elsewhere.

Some participants who do not view themselves to be the likely successor would, nonetheless, accept the farm to protect this lineage. If they did so it would be in the hope that one of their children or a niece or nephew would be interested in farming and would take it on in the future. This attitude is shown in James' hypothetical agreement to take the farm should his brother not be in a position to continue on. He would do this in the anticipation that one of his own, as yet unborn children would want it. Through this he seeks to present himself as one component of an interconnected whole who would, therefore, be reluctant to disrupt this continuum. This desire to preserve the family's connection to the farm is largely detached from personal feelings towards it with even those who resented their work on it in childhood usually looking for it to be retained. Individuals who theoretically could take on the farm in this manner often position this as a custodial relationship with the farm. Their future expectations usually revolve around the idea that it would revert to a more productive status upon the arrival of a more committed and interested individual.

### **Gender and Relationships with the Land**

There are nuances to the act and meaning of assuming formal ownership of the farm, which tend to lead to gendered engagements with it in the future. It is possible in ways to separate the farmer in the productive and cultural sense of the word, and the landholder who takes it so that the title to the farm is retained in the family. Male 'workers' who are unlikely to succeed indicated they would actively run the farm if they were to take it over. For example, James

did not consider the possibility of leasing the farm out should he be given the holding but rather thought about what type of farming would minimise the ensuing disruption to his life. The expectations which accompany the differentiated socialisation of a family's offspring have an impact not only on the likelihood of gaining formal ownership of the farm, but also the depth of any corresponding association with it. Most male participants were aware that even where they were unlikely to take on the farm that this was a potential duty, which they largely eluded because this was dependent on their parents' wishes and/or the presence of appropriate alternatives. Even where they were pushed to pursue their education this was sometimes accompanied by an underlying possibility that they could be called on to return to the farm in some capacity, irrespective of their current status as non-inheritors. By contrast most female participants spoke of parents encouraging them towards achieving both financial and personal independence through the vehicle of education. This positioning, which usually took them permanently away from the farm created a mindset of it being normatively customary and acceptable for them to pull away from the homeplace in this manner.

In most cases female participants saw the merit and appropriateness of sons being given the farm, which seems to be linked to a mental disconnect between their upbringing on the farm and the stated wish, or even the possibility, of owning the farm. Women were often glad and proud that their brothers would inherit and felt it was right they should do so because of the effort they put into the farm. Furthermore, they felt the support they received in their education, regardless of whether their brothers had had equal access to this resource, was deemed to be sufficient compensation for their absence from negotiations around the disposition of their parents' estate. Even in circumstances where there appeared to be little chance of a financial settlement in lieu of a share of the farm, individuals spoke of their brothers assuming ownership of the farm without any tone of disquiet. Bridget referred more than once to her parents' material poverty, so it is doubtful if they would be able to gift her a substantial sum of money in their will. Yet for her this does not lead to the conclusion that she should stand to inherit at least a portion of the farm. Despite this marginalisation from active participation in discussions or decisions about the farm by virtue of their gender and their movement away from the homeplace they usually feel a strong sense of emotional connection to their homeplace and wish to see formal ownership of the farm retained in the family. The extent of this can be seen from Bridget's willingness to buy the farm from her

brother rather than countenance it being sold to outsiders. This strength of feeling is, one would imagine, underestimated and in a way dismissed because of their apparent detachment from their background.

### **The Natural Successor**

Throughout the narratives particular siblings were clearly identified as the ‘farmer’ who stands out as having the most interest and passion for farming among the family’s offspring. They become the natural successor in part because they are regarded as being the most likely to keep the farm going in the future. These individuals are often seen as suitable because they are ambitious and keen to modernise the farm and/or maintain the standards set by earlier generations. The majority of non-successors would be happy for their sibling to take over the farm partially because the ‘farmer’ is often seen as having this personally intense attachment that they do not possess. For instance, despite the negativity surrounding the future of farming James felt his brother always wanted to be one because of his innate passion for it. James recalled a childhood story about his then four year old brother’s attempts to follow his father’s tractor to the mart<sup>2</sup> in his own toy one and his dismay at being prevented from doing so. He told this as a means of demonstrating his brother’s commitment to the farm from early childhood. If his brother was so enthusiastic about farming when he was small, then, in James’ opinion this shows the merit and suitability of his claim to succeed to the farm. There is an element here of having to prove an intrinsic commitment to the farm and through this attests to their worthiness and resolve to honour and carry the work of previous generations into the future. Through this steadfastness the farm is secured as a physical space and an ideological one where past and present representations of not only the self but the family can be manifested. This application of the ‘farmer’ label allows non-succeeding participants, male and female to personally detach themselves from the debate about succession. However, it should not be assumed that this indicates these non-succeeding actors are indifferent to the farm’s future but rather that their concerns are assuaged by the presence of this individual.

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<sup>2</sup> This is where live cattle and sheep are usually sold.

For some individuals, the presence of the ‘farmer’ also allowed a measure of personal reprieve from the potential burden of taking care of the farm as a successor had already been found. In addition, this provided reassurances for the safety of their own continued informal attachment to the farm. Through their sibling’s retention of the farm they still have access to it as, for instance, their homeplace, which connects them to their childhood memories and as marker of identification and source of familial pride. Thus, non-succeeding actors’ attitudes to a succeeding sibling are largely based on a combination of two elements. Firstly, there is an appreciation of the broader family picture, as shown through the approving link they made between these individuals and their capacity to safeguard the farm. Secondly, it has personal implications in enabling them to avoid formal ownership and the impact this would have on the choices they make about their future lives. This sense of escape was undoubtedly of more relevance to male participants since their female counterparts are less likely to be expected to become farmers or to be actively concerned about preserving the farm.

### **Their Role in Succession**

Although almost no attention has been directly paid to the role of non-succeeding offspring in the handing over of the farm to the next generation this research demonstrates that they play a significant part in it. Simply because this group are willing to acquiesce to the decisions made about succession especially where the ‘farmer’ is present does not mean that they are completely absent from or neutral figures in the process. Traditional patterns of succession are facilitated by family offspring who will not be given the land through the implicit or explicit support they give to the strategy, which has been devised. They show this through their urgent desire to have the chain of belonging continue into the next generation-even where they might have chafed against their upbringing and the impact it had on them. Secondly, the harmonious continuity of the farm can only be guaranteed with the cooperation of non-succeeding offspring since they must, to a certain extent, give up on the idea of claiming an equal share of their parents’ estate. Furthermore, they can offer ongoing moral and practical support through, for example, helping on the farm or refraining from actively acting on any dissatisfaction they might feel about the contents of the will. From this can be seen the importance of creating a deep sense of belonging amongst all members of the family and not only the one who is likely to succeed. The possibility of other siblings viewing the

farm as an asset to be potentially sold to benefit them is reduced through the establishment of these emotional ties. This places emphasis on the significance of creating informal proprietorial attachments and in particular shaping relationships with the farm, which position it as an essential part of the broader family narrative and not solely a revenue generating asset. This conceptualisation of belonging means that participants such as Bridget stress the importance of retaining the farm within the family rather than selling it. This is highlighted in her comments:

I'd rather the land just lay fallow<sup>3</sup> and nobody farm [it]. As long as it's there at least you can do something with it in time.

For her this is linked to the idea that if the farm is sold then all the sacrifices that had ensured its survival up until now would have been in vain. The farm here has meaning beyond its capacity to provide an income. It is a representation of the family's past; both personal and historical and their stubborn unwillingness to yield to the challenges they encountered in terms of the harsh physical conditions and gruelling workload her father dealt with. It also provides a measure of security against unknown misfortunes as mentioned by Bridget in her interview:

I suppose it's an integral kind of Irish thing [...] that one person could sell you know a piece of land [...] it's very upsetting. I suppose maybe it's just an Irish cultural thing in that when you have land you have money. So it's a very secure kind of thing and I remember growing up, and you know we weren't in any ways wealthy or anything like that, and we did you know have to go without a lot of things and my mother just saying to my dad "you know sell land, sell a field or something like that", and he was like "no, no, no we'll never sell a field!".

It is the responsibility of her brother, the 'farmer', to preserve this legacy, but as a non-succeeding sibling she facilitates and eases this handover of the farm from one generation to

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<sup>3</sup> By this she means leaving the land idle rather than cultivating it.

the next through not viewing the farm as something she can legitimately take a share of or agitate to be sold.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to explore the relationship between non-inheritors and the farm they grew up and touched upon the part they play in familial succession strategies. It showed how despite their movement away from the farm as they move into adulthood and towards professional careers they still retain deep links to their homeplace. These connections are based not on the financial importance of the farm but largely on its emotive meanings. Without these boundaries they would probably be more likely to look for at least part of the farm to be sold in order to help them build their own lives. In addition, the farm remains personally important as a cornerstone of their identity and a repository of memories. The farm is located within an intergenerational spectrum stretching from the past into the future that helps to locate individuals within a framework greater than their own lives. The responses to the farm are in some ways gendered but the base attitudes are the same with both males and females equally anxious to see it kept within the family. It is on an active level where this can differ as some sons even where they might be positioned as non-inheritors could potentially have to return while their female counterparts are more likely to be encouraged to see their movement away from the farm as a definite and permanent departure. Regardless of this, they still play an important role in ensuring the farm is passed on to the next generation through the support they give to it and in not looking to have any of the land sold for their own benefit. It is their continued positioning within the family narrative with regard to the farm, albeit in an informal proprietorial sense that partially underpins their enduring relationship with the farm and their continued desire to see the links between the family and the farm maintained:

It's a legacy, whereas I might not like it-whereas I might resent it to kingdom come, hopefully you know maybe someday I might have a child who will love it, and it can be carried on whereas it's a blip in the system [his distaste at the role of farmer he could be forced to take on] you know it's a fault. It's a pothole on the road but the road goes on,

(James).

