

‘She said she was in the family way’: Pregnancy and infancy in modern Ireland

Review Number:

1499

Publish date:

Thursday, 24 October, 2013

Editor:

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ISBN:

9781905165650

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£40.00

Pages:

268pp.

Publisher:

Institute of Historical Research

Publisher url:

<http://www.history.ac.uk/publications/family-way>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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The collection of essays in *‘She said she was in the family way’: Pregnancy and infancy in modern Ireland* is a welcome addition to our knowledge of Irish women’s lives. Its use of a variety of sources in original and revealing ways, its rigorous scholarly presentations and its overall knowledge of the field is truly of benefit to all those interested in Irish history. Particular commendation must go to Elaine Farrell for editing such an impressive collection. From her ‘Introduction’ to each of the individual chapters, the breadth of knowledge the authors display is indeed impressive. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the detailed and extensive footnotes which lead the interested scholar to more revealing sources.

This volume is of great benefit not just to those in women’s history but to those in Irish history in general. What I particularly appreciate is the way in which this volume challenges and expands our knowledge of Irish women’s lives. I would like to focus this review on these two aspects – the ways in which these articles broaden our knowledge of women’s lives and hence Irish women’s social history, and the manner in which the evidence presented here confronts some of the commonplace assumptions in Irish history.

One of the big questions that this collection deals with is: how sexually active were the Irish? This is not a question for just social historians but for political historians as well, particularly as we move into the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is a question wrapped up in the process of modernization. Current wisdom holds that the change in the land-holding patterns of Ireland which emphasized land consolidation rather

than fragmentation was a key element in modernization and that the growth of the Irish economy was only possible because of the chastity of Irish daughters. As Tom Inglis points out: 'The economic strategy of a farmer intent on improving his standard of living could be ruined by the transgressive action of his daughters'.⁽¹⁾ Thus, chastity was deemed to be the order of the day. This collection, however, argues otherwise. What this speaks to is the discrepancy between ideology and reality, be it in the post-Famine era or the era of the Irish Free State. My own work in this latter period demonstrates how politicians wished to legislatively implement the ideology of purity, hence giving the lie to the idea that the Irish Free State was virtuous and pure.⁽²⁾

What this collection does brilliantly is to challenge the commonplace assumption in Irish history of the chasteness and therefore moral superiority of the population of Ireland. This is particularly true of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, especially with establishment of the Irish Free State. The mantra of politicians in the Free State period was that one of the unique characteristics of Ireland was that it was pure and chaste. This was important because it was one of the justifications for independence and what distinguished Ireland from other countries, especially the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the United States. What this collection demonstrates in a very convincing manner is that there was a great deal of sexual activity in modern Ireland. Outlawing contraception, banning abortions and censoring certain lewd newspapers did not seem to help at all. Infanticide – when all else failed – was the answer to sexual activity outside of marriage.

The issue of contraception raises some very interesting issues on the question of Irish moral superiority. On the one hand, the discussions about outlawing birth control seem to indicate that there was some demand for it. The high levels of prostitution and venereal disease in 19th-century Ireland seem to undermine the claim that Ireland was a pure nation. However, the two articles on birth control by Ann Daly and Sandra McAvoy also come at this discussion from a slightly different perspective. In a very well written analysis of the Dublin medical press, 1850–1900, Daly demonstrates very clearly how issues of middle-class respectability contributed to the discussion on birth control. One of the points she makes is that the resistance to birth control was '... linked to the middle class ideals upheld by the medical profession' (p. 16). In this article we are given insights into how the doctors struggled to define medicine as a 'prestigious and reputable profession' using its opposition to birth control as one of the items upon which to stake this claim.

The noted historian Sandra McAvoy, who has done outstanding work on issues of sexuality and reproductive rights, traces the events that helped prepare the way for censorship and the prohibition of sales of contraceptives. McAvoy traces the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland's quest to have the sale of contraceptives declared unethical and the work of social activists to strengthen obscene definitions of birth control. Both these movements operated within the shadow the Roman Catholic Church and the individuals who were active in these campaigns smoothed the way for the Catholic Church to undertake a definite campaign against contraception and for censorship.

The evidence provided in the sections on infanticide, and the evidence given in the sections on child abuse and baby farming, leads us to question the assumption that women fitted easily into a tradition which saw them primarily if not solely as lovely mothers. What these sections demonstrate is that not all women were cut out to be mothers or looked forward to the birth of their sometimes 16th child. That is certainly one area in which the reality conflicts with the ideology of domesticity or the image of the 'angel in the home.' In fact the term 'baby farming' – a term which denoted nurses who took in a number of illegitimate babies in return for pay – was not used in Ireland. The failure to use the term baby farming, Sarah-Anne Buckley points out, '... appear[s] to be related to attitudes surrounding childhood, Irish women and the image of Ireland as a place where cruelty to children did not occur'. Buckley even unearths an editorial in *The Irish Times* which claimed that, 'baby farming' while it may happen in England, did not happen in Ireland (p. 148).

Another general theme that is clear in a number of these articles is the fear of the stigma that illegitimacy conferred not only on the pregnant woman but indeed her entire family. As the distinguished historian, James Kelly, argues: '... Infanticide was ... a product first and foremost, of a code of sexual morality that aspired to interdict sexual activity by women outside marriage by idealizing virtue and by imposing severe

social and legal sanctions on those who transgressed' (p. 191). It thus becomes comprehensible why mothers, sisters and other relatives often became involved in the crime of infanticide. Kelly's article on infanticide from 1680 to 1920 highlights the importance of the fear of being stigmatized and the role it played in contributing to infanticide. While the promulgation of a strict moral code was supposed to make the Irish more reticent to engage in sexual activity, it also had the effect on encouraging infanticide so that no one would know of the sexual transgressions which did occur.⁽³⁾

The article by Elaine Farrell on infanticide and class status in Ireland is a good example on the way in which class impacted gender. She states that 'infanticide and concealment of birth were generally regarded as offences committed by the lower classes ...' (p. 206), but she then goes on to cite an example of a middle-class woman who committed infanticide and was caught. She discusses the reasons why this was so and explains how this was the exception rather than the rule. Among these reasons was the fact that middle-class women often had less freedom and, perhaps more importantly, they had resources at their disposal that working-class women did not have. For example, middle- and upper-class families with pregnant daughters could often pressurize the putative father with the promise of large dowries. Abortions or abortifacients could also have been more available. Thus it was not necessarily a question of sexual morality and class but rather a question of means and opportunity.

The importance of class is also evident in Julie Anne Bergin's article on the lying-in hospitals in Dublin. Lying-in hospitals promoted themselves as 'safe places for poor women great with child' (p. 95). Unfortunately, they were also rampant with infection and disease which sometime resulted in death. For example, Bergin makes it clear that both the Rotunda and the Coombe concealed the numbers of maternal deaths. They hid their mortality rates by transferring patients to gynecological wards after eight days. Clearly, during the early years of lying-in hospitals, women were safer giving birth at home than in such institutions. Middle-class women, while always under the threat of maternal death, were better off at home than in the Rotunda or the Coombe and hence had an obvious advantage.

The question of purity and its reverse, the accusation that numbers of women became pregnant outside of marriage and then took the boat to England, is a theme which runs through Jennifer Redmond's well researched article on unmarried mothers in Britain from the 1920s to the 1940s. The accusation was that pregnant Irish women escaped to England to avoid the shame and stigma of being unmarried and pregnant in the Republic. The exact numbers are difficult to establish but as Redmond argues: 'The concern appeared to stem from a fear that Ireland's reputation as not only a moral but an exemplary Catholic country was being tarnished by the number of unmarried pregnant Irish women coming to the attention of the British Catholic hierarchy, charitable organizations and health authorities' (p. 183).

As I noted, this collection of essays also expands our knowledge of women's lives. These articles build on Catriona Clear's groundbreaking social history of Ireland from 1850–1922.⁽⁴⁾ A number of these articles add to the discussion which Clear inaugurated about women's lives as mothers. A sterling example of this is Rosemary Raughter's article based primarily on the spiritual journal of Elizabeth Bennis. As she notes in the title of this article, she examines pregnancy, childbirth and parenting. It is a fascinating glimpse of the life of a non-elite Methodist woman who revealed much about herself, her feelings and her trials on her spiritual path. It is also a useful juxtaposition to Clodagh Tait's more theoretical article entitled 'Some sources for the study of infant and maternal mortality in later 17th Century Ireland'. Tait demonstrates how to use sources such as parish registers effectively, to 'look at issues such as rates of infant and child mortality, pre- and post-marital pregnancy levels, maternal mortality and, indeed deaths of fathers' (p. 5). Raughter's article works nicely to give us the particulars of one woman who experienced childbirth ten times in 17 years.

From a historiographical point of view, Raughter's article adds yet another voice to challenge Lawrence Stone's contention that affective relations between parents and children were relatively weak in the modern period. On the contrary, we read of her 'heavy heart' at the death of first and only son, exclaiming that 'The loss of my child is ever before me' (p. 83). When yet another child died, she proclaimed that she could not pray. This estrangement from her god did not last and she continued her dual roles as faithful Methodist and loving parent.

Other articles which engage with social history directly and demonstrate what we can learn from various sources concern the role of the mother as healer and the material culture of the cradle. Emma O'Toole's article on the role of mothers and medicinal care provides a fascinating insight. O'Toole, working on family papers, argues that mothers played 'an active' role in children's health in the 18th and early 19th centuries (p. 117). Mothers made the medicine, often traded cures with their contemporaries and availed of the growing number of cookbooks that were becoming available during this time period.

Elaine Murray's article very interestingly uses the history of the cradle '... as a means of exploring attitudes toward infants in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (p. 129). Cradles came in a variety of shapes and were inundated with various blankets, coverings and the like. Murray makes the point that the use of the cradles marks the point 'of turning an infant's sleeping practice from a social to a solitary affair' (p. 129). What I found particularly interesting was that cradles came to be the receptacle of prayers, chants, holy water and crosses, all to protect the child. Stories of changelings and the abduction of children by fairies also surround the cradle.

Anne O'Connor picks up on this point, among others, in her article entitled 'Beyond cradle and grave: Irish folklore about the spirits of unbaptized infants and the spirits of women who murdered babies'. O'Connor analyses the folklore surrounding the issue, raised in the previous articles, in a manner which helps tie them together. In relating folklore to issues of infanticide, the author speaks of the legend of the damned wherein the spirits of the women who have murdered their child return. She also notes the return of the spirits of unbaptized children who returns from the dead to accompany their mothers' souls to heaven in the legends of the blessed.

In conclusion, one point I would like to emphasise is that Irish women's history has pushed the boundaries of social and political history through its work on sexuality. It has demonstrated that sexuality is indeed political and that consigning issues like pregnancy, childbirth and infanticide to the purview of women's issues is simply inadequate. The emphasis on these issues reflected the concerns of government and society, especially in relation to purity and chastity. The facts of the matter contradict the image which male Irish authorities wanted to portray.

Certain very interesting sub-themes run through this text. One which stands out to me is the lack of value placed on women and children by a patriarchal society. In all these instances, for example, there is very little mention of the 'father'. Moreover, it seems the Roman Catholic Church and local officials reveal an attitude bordering on contempt for mothers and children. Pregnancy and infancy in modern Ireland were, in fact, dangerous states of being, made even more so by the misogyny running rampant through this society.

Notes

1. Tom Inglis, 'Origins and legacies of Irish prudery: sexuality and social control in modern Ireland', *Eire-Ireland*, 40, 3 and 4 (2005), 9–37, 17. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for example, 'Virtuous mothers and dutiful wives: the politics of sexuality in the Irish Free State', in *Gender and Power in Irish History*, ed. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Dublin, 2009), pp. 100–14. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For a general discussion of infanticide in the 20th century, see Cliona Ratigan, *What Else Could I Do? Single Mothers and Infanticide, Ireland 1900–1950* (Dublin, 2012). For a discussion of a

particular case in the 20th century, see Tom Inglis, *Truth, Power and Lies- Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies* (Dublin, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Caitriona Clear, *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850–1922* (Manchester, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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