

Academic Event Report

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Symposium: Women and the Family in Ireland, 1550-1950

Venue: University of Hertfordshire

Date: 7th June 2019

On June 7th 2019, members and supporters of the Women's History Network gathered at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, to present and gauge current research efforts in Irish women's history. The leading organisers, Dr Leanne Calvert, Research Fellow and Lecturer in History at the University of Hertfordshire, and Dr Maeve O'Riordan, Lecturer in the School of History at University College Cork, opened the symposium with an overview of the day's purpose. Considering the surge of research conducted in the area of Irish women's history in recent years, the importance of continuing this work was emphasised and encouraged. As the organisers pointed out, before the 1990s, there had been little to no acknowledgement of the potential and impact of women on the island of Ireland. In its efforts to continue the corrective work done in this respect over the best part of the last three decades, this symposium was a dedicated effort to network, trade and further promote research in Irish women's history from 1550-1950.

The symposium presentations were organised into panels by common themes: "Material Culture", "Institutions", "Law", "Political and Revolutionary Families", "Death and the Supernatural" and "New Family Relationships". These panels poignantly revealed elements of the obstacles faced by Irish women, both past and present. The impact that patriarchal society had (and continues to have) on women has evolved and changed throughout the centuries. The experience of Irish women has been no different in this respect. Thus, research presented at this symposium exploring the experience of women in Ireland is in keeping with the Oxford English Dictionary definition of crisis: "a time of intense difficulty or danger."

The first panel focused upon material culture. Although the communal aspect of charity,

trading supplies and upskilling was of course discussed, the overarching theme was the harsh realities faced by women. Eliza McKee (Queen's University Belfast) discussed the efforts of women to clothe their families in post-famine Ulster, 1850-1914. In contrast, Dr. Emma O'Toole (Irish Heritage Trust) provided a pre-famine Ireland account of similar issues, but detailed the crisis of women who were reluctant in, or ill-prepared for, motherhood. For example, O'Toole discussed how mothers who would not make clothes for their impending babies, an exercise that was perceived as crucial to the homemaking or nesting process, were forced to do so by other women within the community. Throughout the panel, there were consistent comparisons made between male and female dressmakers, with the former affording financial independence that their female counterparts did not.

In an appropriate transition, the second panel focused upon the lack of freedom for women, in a wider social sense, in the form of institutionalization: by either public or private means. As discussed, the archives relating to women were often neglected by early twentieth-century academics, and Judy Bolger (Trinity College Dublin) detailed the challenges she has faced in her research to acquire more specific death rates and cause of death statistics for pregnant women in the Irish workhouse at the close of the nineteenth century. For attendees, it was difficult not to marvel at the persistence of vague terminology in later records, indicating a continued disregard for the accurate accounting of women's lives, a phenomenon reinforced by Lucy Simpson (University of Liverpool) during her paper on the institutionalisation of 'fallen' women in early twentieth century Ireland.

Moving from the public to the private institutionalisation of women, Bettina Bradbury (Professor Emeritus, York University) introduced a panel on law, dealing with the efforts of families who were financially able to institutionalise women within the home. Such financial means allowed families to avoid the stigma surrounding mental health and thus also avoid a crisis of social standing if the situation was discovered by their community. The care taken by the family, and hardships they faced, was largely recorded in private documents that have provided a hard-sought insight into the reality of these women's experiences and the impact of and on wider society. Emma Dewhirst (University of Liverpool) also showed the value of well-preserved documents. Dewhirst traced the involvement of women and children within the Irish revolutionary period, which is reflective of the growing appreciation in both public and private spheres for the lesser-known women of both pre- and post-Rising Ireland.

Following this discussion, Aisling Shalvey (University of Strasbourg) discussed the invasive research carried out by Free State Ireland into eugenics on Irish children, an invasion of the private by the public which is a continuous theme for women's history in general. In a switch to the role of women in not only births, but deaths, Dr Clodagh Tait (Mary Immaculate College) provided an overview of the intricate and important position of women in the wake tradition. However, the wise woman aspect of this role was contrasted with a talk on the supernatural stigma of witchcraft, a stigma which persisted far longer than is often discussed. Dr Andrew Sneddon's (Ulster University) discussion about early eighteenth-century witches in Ireland was a welcome lesson in the varying perspectives of what constituted witchcraft. The penultimate discussion focused on the loyalty of siblings, displaying the potential positives generated by a time of crisis. However, Dr Maeve O'Riordan's (University College Cork) paper on the use of the term 'unmarried' rather than 'not yet married' demonstrated a poignant point about the 'sacrificial daughter' figure in many elite families, who were seen to better aid their families by staying at home as carer rather than seeking independence for themselves. This same lack of autonomy could also be found in nineteenth-century Irish literature, as argued in my own paper, which discussed selected short stories from George Egerton (1859-1945) and focused upon depictions of forced domestication, particularly regarding motherhood. Ultimately, the marked lack of independence afforded to women in the last five centuries, and the consequential crises they experienced, was a focus throughout the symposium for both historical and literary researchers.

This symposium was inspired by the impending thirtieth anniversary of the research agenda introduced by historians such as Maria Luddy, Mary O'Dowd and Margaret McCurtain. These researchers pledged to continue and encourage a resurgence into the exploration of the Irish women's experience—on both sides of the border. Before this declaration, Ireland's historical women—the political activists, the educators, the rarely permitted practising professionals, the nurturers and protectors of the men who are lauded by our history books—had largely been forgotten. The WHN's one-day symposium sought to evaluate the research that has been embarked upon since the recommittal of academics of Irish history to revisit these forgotten stories. It also served as an inspiring recommittal on behalf of the attending postgraduate scholars, independent researchers and established academics to continue to carry the torch for the women whose experiences continue to be, and for too long have been, considered inconsequential to the history of our shores.