

Welcome to the Summer 2020 issue of *Women's History*. This is a special issue on women and family in Ireland, edited by Dr Leanne Calvert (University of Hertfordshire) and Dr Maeve O'Riordan (University College Cork). *Women's History* is the journal of the Women's History Network and we invite articles on any aspect of women's history. We hope this themed issue inspires you and we are interested to talk to you about suggestions for future special issues.

Editorial Team: Laurel Foster, Sue Hawkins, Ellie Macdonald, Hollie Mather, Kate Murphy, Angela Platt, Katharina Rowold, Zoe Thomas, Kiera Wilkins.

Introduction

Almost thirty years has passed since Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy issued their groundbreaking agenda for Irish women's history.¹ Writing in response to the growth of women's history and gender history in Britain and North America, they critiqued its relative lack of progress in Ireland, where women's history was still in its 'pioneering stage'.² Recognising that the dominant discourses in Irish history worked to exclude and marginalise women, the authors of the 'agenda' highlighted key areas that were ripe for an exploration of women's lives in Ireland. A recurrent theme throughout was the pivotal role that the family played in shaping the experiences of Irish women. As the primary unit of social organisation, the family intersected with many other areas of Irish life, including (and not limited to) war and conflict, politics and patronage, the economy, religion, crime and deviancy. Writing women into the historical narrative, and restoring them to their place in the historical record, would enrich our overall understanding of Ireland's past. Moreover, the 'agenda' pointed to sources that could illuminate these understudied aspects of women's lives, including family correspondence, art, literature, wills and testaments, land settlements and church court minutes - mapping out a research trajectory for future scholars. As the authors of the agenda argued, reorienting our focus towards women would revitalise the discipline, affording a unique opportunity to challenge and reshape accepted narratives in Ireland's history.³

In the thirty years following the publication of the 'agenda', research on the family and family life in Ireland has made considerable strides. Underpinned by the efforts of historians of women, a rich and flourishing body of scholarship now exists that enhances our knowledge of the family and life-cycle in Ireland. Scholarly work on the family - its making, breaking and lived experience, has grown enormously and persistently breaks new ground. Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd continue to lead the way and their forthcoming book, *Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1925* (2020), promises to make a major contribution to the discipline.⁴ Likewise, Diane Urquhart's pioneering new book, *Irish Divorce: A History* (2020), constitutes the first sustained examination of divorce in Ireland. Chapters dedicated to the family and family life by O'Dowd, Sarah-Anne Buckley and Lindsey Earner-Byrne in the well-received and revamped edition of the *Cambridge History of Ireland* (2018) stand as a ringing endorsement of the progression of the field.⁵ Indeed, it is notable that scholarship

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on the history of the family continues to fulfil the aims of the agenda', enhancing our understanding of family experiences by cutting across both class and confessional boundaries. Our own work is a case in point. Focusing on Presbyterian families, Leanne Calvert's work addresses a significant gap in knowledge between Ireland's better studied Anglican and Catholic communities. Her work has considerably added to our understanding of a number of key areas, including courtship, marriage, childbirth, adolescence and sexuality.⁶ Likewise, Maeve O'Riordan's work casts fresh light on the women of Ireland's landed classes, deepening our knowledge of their multi-faceted roles as household managers, entertainers, mothers, sisters and sexual partners.⁷

As the anniversary of the 'agenda' approached, we wanted to reflect on the progress that has been made in the history of the Irish family, and identify new directions in current research. Like the authors of the 'agenda', we looked to developments taking place in the history of the family elsewhere. Invigorated by new approaches, such as the history of emotions, historians of the family in Britain, North America, and Europe are expanding their focus to include relationships between siblings, step-families and wider kin.⁸ Recent scholarship has also explored the changing roles of women in the family at different points in the life-cycle, taking into



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Family group.
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Boole Library Archives,
University College Cork,
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account the impact that age and ageing had on the position of women in the family. We wanted to find out whether historians of the family in Ireland were following similar pathways and how these approaches might be applied in an Irish context.

These questions culminated in a one-day symposium held at the University of Hertfordshire in June 2019. Entitled, *Women and the Family in Ireland: New Directions and Perspectives, 1550-1950*, we brought together established scholars, early career and postgraduate researchers, working on all aspects of the family and its relationships in Ireland. Generously funded by the *Women's History Network Small Grants Scheme*, the symposium intended to start new conversations, spark collaborations between scholars, and identify new directions in the research agenda of the Irish family. The period-focus of the symposium was intentionally long to allow for themes to emerge and for scholars to share methodological approaches to similar questions. The event attracted researchers at all career levels from across Ireland, Britain, France and New Zealand. This issue brings a selection of these papers together and stands testament to the rich scholarship being undertaken on women and the Irish family. As we considered how the field has developed and where it is heading, several themes emerged. Scholars presented work which utilised family correspondence, art, literature, wills and testaments, land settlements and church court minutes, material culture, as well as new digital databases which allow new mapping methods to be used on family history.

A major theme that emerges not only from this collection, but also from the symposium itself, is that scholarship on women and the family in Ireland continues to challenge and refine our understandings of Ireland's past. New perspectives on 'traditional' source material, coupled with the release of new archival collections, means that Irish historians are continuously working at the cutting edge of their discipline. Maeve O'Riordan's exploration of unmarried women in elite Irish families uses personal correspondence, memoirs and diaries to illuminate the lives of women who have been hitherto overlooked. Her article presents a continued challenge to the assumption that women's lives gained importance through their status as mothers and wives. The women in her article played an integral role in their families

throughout their life courses, while also retaining individual spirit and flair, carving out their own interests, hobbies and pursuits. Re-examining sources with new perspectives is a theme continued in Éadóin Regan's feminist rereading of the works of George Egerton. Applying concepts derived from Jungian and psychoanalytical theory, Regan interrogates what Egerton's texts can tell us about contemporary ideas concerning women's mental health. Her article highlights both the universality, as well as the individuality of Irish women's experiences of maternity, sexuality and the family. Leanne Calvert's piece on marital breakdown demonstrates the important contributions that Presbyterian church court records make to our understanding of Irish society. As Calvert stresses, these sources are overlooked and underused by Irish historians, who dismiss them on account of their assumed differences from the Irish population at large. In the absence of a comparative archive for the Irish ecclesiastical courts, these sources are ripe with potential for unlocking the intimate worlds of women and men in Ireland's past. Calvert presents us with tantalising flashes into the reasons for, and methods of, marital breakdown, including domestic violence, separation, bigamy and cohabitation. Indeed, as Emma Dewhirst's article reveals, the release of new archival material means that we can have a new appreciation for the integral role that the family - and particularly women, played in the creation of political revolutionaries in Ireland. Dewhirst draws largely on the Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), which was made digitally available as recently as 2016.⁹ Released in the run-up to Ireland's *Decade of Centenaries, 1912-1922*, the collection brings together a searchable database of hundreds of thousands of individual accounts that shed light on the activities of nationalists in Ireland during the revolutionary period. Her use of family history could reshape accepted narratives on Ireland's revolutionary history.

The overriding theme that emerges from this collection is that current frameworks for understanding the Irish family are in need of revision. We were struck by the very many different ways in which Irish families were made, functioned and deviated from 'traditional' nuclear forms. While scholarship on the Irish family has certainly flourished in recent years, the overwhelming majority of this literature remains focused



'Women and the Family in Ireland Symposium participants, University of Hertfordshire, June 2019'.

Credit: Maeve O'Riordan.

on the vertical relationships between parents and children, and husbands and wives, without making distinctions between and within biological ties. Such a focus obscures the distinctive experiences and contributions of other individuals in the family, such as stepparents and stepchildren, siblings, half-siblings and wider kin. As the contributions which follow demonstrate, the 'Irish family' was pieced together, made and remade, by both biological family members in their roles as aunts (unmarried and married), uncles, sisters and brothers, as well as adopted care-givers, through death and remarriage, with no clear biological ties. It is only by embracing a wider definition of 'the family' that we can fully capture the diversity and multi-faceted nature of Irish family life.

Moreover as O'Riordan argues in her article, 'the concept of the family cannot be limited to those living under one roof creating children together'. The boundary of an individual family could be fluid. That not all families lived together neatly under one roof is demonstrated in Calvert's article on marital breakdown. The records of the Presbyterian church courts reveal how individuals remade families outside of accepted legal frameworks. Spouses simply walked out of unworkable marriages, leaving behind children. Some contracted new relationships and lived together with their new partner (and their subsequent children) under the guise of husband and wife. Dewhirst demonstrates that the concept of family should not be limited by life stage and that the childhood influences of parents could live on into adulthood, while Regan uses literature to explore how an absence of critical familial relationships might have detrimental impacts on women. Each of these papers use a data source which might not be available for the wider population: Calvert sheds light on the historical goldmine that is the Presbyterian church courts; O'Riordan had the benefit of using extensive family papers which can be the preserve of gentry and aristocratic families, preserved and archived by the National Library; Dewhirst's families were deemed exceptional because they contributed to the national struggle; while the families explored by Regan are fictional. Yet, they can all enrich our overall understanding of Ireland's past and tell us something about the history of the Irish family more broadly during the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth centuries. If women played these extensive and influential roles within these families, might not the 'traditional' family need to be re-examined across the entire social spectrum? We hope that this issue provokes further conversations among scholars of the family, of gender and of wider society, not only in Ireland but further afield.

Notes

1. Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy, 'An Agenda for Women's History in Ireland, 1500-1900', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28/109 (1992), 1-37.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 5, 37.
4. Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1925* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020). See also, Maria Luddy, *Matters of Deceit: Breach of Promise to Marry Cases in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Limerick* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2011); Maria Luddy, 'Marriage, Sexuality and the Law in Ireland', in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (Cambridge,

Cambridge University Press, 2018), 344-62; Mary O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (Harlow, Pearson Education, 2005); Mary O'Dowd, 'Marriage Breakdown in Ireland, c. 1660-1857', in *Law and the Family in Ireland, 1800-1950*, ed. Niamh Howlin and Kevin Costello (London, Palgrave, 2017), 7-23; Maria Luddy, 'Marriage, Sexuality and the Law in Ireland', in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, ed. Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 344-62.

5. Mary O'Dowd, 'Men, Women, Children and the Family, 1550-1730', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland. Volume 2, 1550-1730*, ed. Jane Ohlmeyer (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 298-320; Sarah-Anne Buckley, 'Women, Men and the Family, c. 1730-c.1880', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland. Volume 3, 1730-1880*, ed. James Kelly (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 231-54; Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'The Family in Ireland, 1880-2015', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland. Volume 4, 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 641-72.

6. See for example, "He Came to Her Bed Pretending Courtship": Sex, Courtship and the Making of Marriage in Ulster, 1750-1844', *Irish Historical Studies*, 42/162 (2018), 244-64; "A More Careful Tender Nurse Cannot Be Than My Dear Husband": Reassessing the Role of Men in Pregnancy and Childbirth in Ulster, 1780-1832', *Journal of Family History*, 42/1 (2017), 22-36; "Do Not Forget Your Bit Wife": Love, Marriage and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in Irish Presbyterian Marriages, c. 1780-1850', *Women's History Review*, 26/3 (2017), 433-54.

7. See for example, Maeve O'Riordan, *Women of the Country House in Ireland, 1860-1914* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2018) and 'Elite Courtship: The Case of Mabel Smyly and Dermot O'Brien, 1901-1902', in *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland*, ed. Jennifer Redmond, Sonja Tiernan, Sandra McAvoyn and Mary McAuliffe (Sallins, Co. Kildare, Irish Academic Press, 2015), 36-52.

8. See for example, Lyndan Warner, ed., *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400-1800* (London, Routledge, 2018); Amy Harris, *Siblinghood and Social Relations in Georgian England: Share and Share alike* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012); C. Dallett Hemphill, *Siblings: Brothers and Sisters in American History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011); Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker Than Water: Siblings and Their Relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).

9. Military Archives, 'Military Services Pensions Collection', [<http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection-1916-1923>].