

Farmwives, Domesticity and Work in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland

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Abstract: Despite the growing significance of the ideology of domesticity and changing farming practices, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish farmwives continued to have an active economic role on the farm. The continuation of their economic role reflected wider cultural beliefs that saw work as central to claims to property ownership, reinforced by the growth in the language of economic and political rights during the nineteenth century, which shaped how men and women understood work, ownership and personal rights.

In 1911, Mrs Margaret O'Brien and Dr Joseph O'Brien of Baronstown, County Louth, were engaged in an acrimonious legal separation. They had married in the Roman Catholic Church in 1895 and had four children. Mrs O'Brien successfully proved her husband's cruel treatment, but the issue of alimony was not to be so easily settled. Mrs O'Brien reported that her husband, a medical doctor, earned £160 from his dispensary practice, a further £500 from his private practice, stocks and shares and animals, and he lived rent free. She only had eighty pounds a year from her private property, which was not sufficient to support herself and the three children who currently lived with her in Blackrock, County Louth. Dr O'Brien's depiction of the household economy was slightly different. He argued that his total income was £500 a year, from which he paid twenty-five pounds a year rent, thirty pounds a year for his daughter's education at Balbriggan Convent, two horses at sixty pounds a year and a pony and trap for his wife at twenty pounds a year. He had two male and two female servants at twenty-five pounds a year each and paid twenty-five pounds a year to the bank for a guarantee that he made for his father. He believed that his wife's income from her property in Cavan was £200 a year and that she had stocks and shares. Furthermore, before she left home, his wife had over 300 hens from which she derived a 'substantial income' and she used to make him pay for whatever eggs he ate. She never contributed anything to the upkeep of the household or the support of children. Mrs O'Brien disputed this latter claim, saying her husband had only taken over the payment of their daughter's education last year after she returned from a temporary separation. She paid for half the harness and trap and supported and clothed the children with her money. She denied owning stocks and shares and pointed out that she had lost her egg income since leaving home. Her lawyer argued that it was

customary for wives to receive a third of her husband's income in alimony. Dr O'Brien offered one pound a week; the judge ordered payment of three pounds a week alimony.¹

With an annual income of over £500 a year, Dr and Mrs O'Brien were situated amongst the wealthiest middle-class families in rural Ireland.² Yet, despite Dr O'Brien's high income, their professional status, and that they lived during a period when the ideology of domesticity, that rested on married women's non-working status, was central to middle-class identity, both Dr and Mrs O'Brien happily acknowledged not only Mrs O'Brien's economic role, but that she was involved in paid work, albeit work within the 'home'. Furthermore, her income from the sale of her eggs was not simply 'pin money'. In 1911, women on small farms in Ireland could make between twenty pounds and sixty pounds a year from their egg sales.³ With 300 chickens, Mrs O'Brien's income would have been at least thirty-four pounds a year and would feasibly have been as high as sixty-eight pounds.⁴ This would have paid their annual rent as well as wages for at least one servant. Taking a conservative income of thirty-four pounds from egg sales and eighty pounds from property, and assuming Dr O'Brien's suggested total income of £500, Mrs O'Brien produced 18.6 per cent of the family income.

Women's work has been a topic of significant interest in recent years and married women's work in particular has been given a central role in understanding the progress and nature of the industrious and industrial revolutions.⁵ A central part of this discussion has been explaining the move from a family economy to a breadwinner model for household economies.⁶ In the family economy model, the entire family contributes to the economic well-being of the household through productive activity. The typical family economy would be the peasant smallholder, where everyone had tasks on the farm to contribute to family subsistence. Similarly, the artisanal weaving family, with the husband weaving and wife and children spinning, fit this pattern. In contrast, it is argued that in the nineteenth-century United Kingdom, bolstered by the ideology of domesticity, the breadwinner became a dominant part of family life, where the central earner was the husband, and wife and children were dependent upon his 'family wage', an ideal increasingly supported by trade unions and protective legislation.⁷ Working wives were undesirable and reflected a failure of the husband's earning power, but often poverty required women to make money. As a result, there was a trend towards poorly-paid, casual and makeshift work for married women in the nineteenth century, although the effect was regional and not always a significant break from the past.⁸

It has been suggested that a similar pattern happened in farming as the expansion and modernisation of family farms moved farmwives from the farmyard to the farmhouse. Yet, there has been little empirical evidence of this shift outside studies in the United States.⁹ Furthermore, some historians of women's work presume that this shift did not happen for farmwives, but since it is assumed that they were mainly unpaid, their economic role has not been greatly explored.¹⁰ Underlying this discussion is the implication that much of the farming world remained 'pre-modern', particularly outside England, where smallholders are still described as peasants, and so the breadwinning model was irrelevant.¹¹ More recently, smallholders have become a topic of interest within agricultural studies and a more nuanced picture has emerged of the relationship between small family farms and the industrial and commercial economy.¹²

In an Irish context, Joanna Burke, in a similar argument to that made in the United States, argues that the ideology of domesticity, alongside new technologies in farming, pushed women out of the productive side of farming life at the end of the nineteenth century, but in return, they gained status as housewives. She suggests this was reinforced through farming organisations, such as creameries and cooperatives, which made single payments to the head of household for all goods received, rather than to its individual members, implicitly reinforcing the breadwinner ideology that was linked to domesticity.¹³ Revisionists have not so much rejected her argument as located the changes she identifies later in the twentieth century. Ciara Breatnach places the move to unproductive work for farmwives in the period after the 1920s when eggs sales declined; Carmel Duggan puts it in the 1980s when farming magazines reduced women's sections exclusively to discussions of consumption.¹⁴ Yet, while such studies raise vital awareness of the continuities in farming women's working lives across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been no direct engagement with Bourke's argument for the period of her own study. This article wishes to engage with Bourke, arguing that she was right to identify changes in ideas around farmwomen's work, but that such new ideas had to compete with both the economic and cultural significance of female labour on Irish farms. In doing so, it argues for a more complex picture, where new ideas of domesticity competed with old to create a form of domesticity that had space for female labour on the farm.

Sources for uncovering the day to day details of women's work on the farm are difficult to come by, especially for members of the farming family who were often unpaid and so left no paper trail in accounts or other records. While Bourke relied mainly on official and quasi-official reports, such as the census, Royal Commissions and studies into rural labour patterns, along with commentary in the press, this article will combine such papers with descriptions of women's rural lives that emerge in the reporting of legal cases, including divorce and separation, inheritance disputes, criminal cases and breach of promise of marriage suits; and crime records, including police reports and associated papers. The evidence of farm life that emerges from such cases is normally incidental to the 'purpose' of the record, usually appearing in the testimonies of witnesses as they described events surrounding a crime, the nature of property relationships, or family dynamics. Reading them independently, it is difficult to get a sense of their typicality, especially as most represent 'extreme' cases of family breakdown or strife. Yet, by viewing such cases through the lens of cultural history, such cases can be viewed as 'texts' and products of the society in which they were made. Such texts rely on a shared 'language' or cultural mindset so that their meaning can be understood by an audience in court and beyond. More significantly than the individual cases are the frameworks that they draw on to explain events, which provide insight into the social, economic and cultural world that produced them; by using multiple texts alongside each other, a detailed picture of the world that produced them can be developed.

At the same time, such exceptional cases can create problems when reflecting on the importance of region, which is of particular concern in an Irish context, where individual counties are noted for their distinctive economic and cultural identities. Examples used in this study are drawn from across Ireland and most counties are represented; at the same time, the evidence is weighted along the west coast from Londonderry through

Donegal, down through Connaught and Munster, and incorporating the Western counties of Leinster. The more urbanised areas such as Dublin and Eastern Ulster have provided a smaller number of cases. It is difficult to extrapolate whether this is simply a case of sampling error, perhaps particularly caused by higher levels of rural unrest in particular counties that created more records and reports of crime; a reflection of the distribution of the farming population; or, indeed, identifying a culture associated with Catholic and Gaelic Ireland. However, given that the farming families discussed in this article are found across Ireland and include both Catholics and Protestants, it does appear that the values around women's work discussed in this article were common across the majority of Ireland and that region alone is not a sufficient explanation for those that behaved or thought differently. Later studies may be able to shape the contours of difference across Ireland with more precision.

Farming in Ireland

While Ireland has been described as the 'classic peasant economy', farming was not untouched by the modernising drive. From at least the early nineteenth century, there was a move towards enlarging farms and an increased dislocation of cottiers from the land and into waged labour. This process was accelerated by the famine of the late 1840s, which saw the death or emigration of large numbers of Ireland's poorest peasants as the potato blight wiped out the central food crop of this social group. After the famine, farming became increasingly commercially engaged and there was a move from potato and cereal to pastoral farming.¹⁵ Between 1850 and 1910, cattle numbers increased by a third, while the acreage under grain and potatoes halved. By 1908, hens and ducks were more important to the economy than wheat and oats, which in the 1840s had made up more than half of agricultural output.¹⁶ The move to pastoral farming was accompanied by the expansion in farm size, but this should not be exaggerated. The farming class, which made up around fifty per cent of the Irish population, was usually divided by farm size, into small (one to thirty Irish acres), medium (thirty to one hundred acres) and large (over one hundred acres).¹⁷ Yet, by 1911, only fourteen per cent of farmers had farms over fifty acres; even in rich, high tillage areas, such as Kilkenny and Wexford, they never made up more than twenty-two per cent.¹⁸

As was typical across much of Western Europe until the end of the century, pluriactivity was common in farming households.¹⁹ Many farmers engaged in multiple forms of agriculture, combining cereal, grass and livestock, and while larger farms tended to give more acreage to pastoral farming, there is no clear relationship between farm size and land use.²⁰ Even very poor farmers tended to have some engagement with the market, transforming their goods into cash or store credit.²¹ This was aided by cooperative creameries and societies in the last decades of the nineteenth century, which provided the expensive technology that was beyond the means of individual smallholders and acted as middlemen to enable bulk sales to urban markets, although with mixed success.²² As in previous generations, many farmers supplemented their farming incomes. Fishing remained a staple for those on the coastline and supported small farms into the twentieth century, as did engagement in industrial works for those in the north.²³ Homework, mostly

engaged in by women, including linen-finishing in Ulster, lace-making across the country, and other textile trades, also contributed to household incomes and was encouraged by social reformers as a measure against rural poverty.²⁴ Remittances from family members who had emigrated, particularly to the United States, contributed a substantial sum to the post-famine economy, amounting to ten million dollars in 1906 alone.²⁵ There were also individuals, such as Dr O'Brien, who lived on farms and engaged in farming activities, but whose primary income came from another source, such as the professions or trade. Irish farming appears to have performed reasonably well in the context of the late nineteenth century, strengthening ties to the market, increasing rates of productivity per worker, and raising living standards. In terms of productivity per head, Ireland performed well relative to Britain during this period, although less impressively in a broader European context, where it sits in the middle of the league table.²⁶

Women's work on the farm in cultural context

Working the land in Ireland was associated with rights that in turn brought authority and respect. A moral economy of land ownership prevailed amongst most farmers in the nineteenth century, incorporating a strong sense of customary ownership, fair rents and tithes, appropriate usage of land, and a belief that land should remain within a single family over generations.²⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century, this moral economy was transformed in Ireland into a nationwide and organised National Land League, who exercised it through formalised rules and regulations.²⁸ These cultural beliefs informed how many in the Irish farming community related to land and determined their sense of ownership and belonging. While lineage, blood and inheritance always formed a significant feature of the moral economy, so did working the land. The act of digging and clearing land, planting seeds and harvesting crops, or of grazing animals on land, was understood to convey ownership.²⁹

Work was the manifestation of a legitimate relationship with the land, conveying rights over a property and its resources. As a result, working the land or on the farm was a claim to the social authority associated with land ownership and, as a result, was the focus of several familial and community disputes. Evidence from court cases highlights how such ideas informed the responses of the Irish farming communities to people's work. In 1870, Anthony Gallagher, a small farmer in Donegal, died from a blow inflicted by Peter Sweeney during a dispute over whether Sweeney had the right to roof a small farm and so claim ownership of it. Sweeney and his wife were slating the roof when Gallagher tried to make them desist by pulling Sweeney's wife away; in turn, Sweeney struck Gallagher with a spade.³⁰ Patrick Maley, a farmer in Galway, died during a dispute with his son in their potato garden. William, the son, challenged his father's right to sow the ground, which had been divided with William after his recent marriage, and hit him with a spade.³¹ In 1918, John and Patrick Foy of Sligo were jailed for an assault on James Foy, when he brought his animals to graze on the land John was trying to plough. Both men claimed possession and James persisted in moving his cattle onto the land despite John's protests.³² Working or using land or household resources became the symbolic manifestation of ownership and so the disruption of such work by others reflected their

resistance to such claims or authority. In a similar fashion, the fact that landlords never physically worked the land undermined their claims to ownership and underpinned the emphasis on the absentee, parasitic landlord within the cultural representations of this social group by the Land League.³³

Members of the family who could not work the land were dislocated from their claim to rights on the farm and its resources, leading to the inability to work being associated with untimely death, at least in the minds of the police who investigated such crimes. In 1877, Margaret Whelan, the forty-five year old wife of a labourer in Longford, died after repeated fits of epilepsy. In 'consequence of the trouble she gave', her sisters had moved her to an outhouse with a yearling bull, where she lived without sufficient bedding or clothing for the last two months of her life.³⁴ In 1870, Mary Donohue, a small farmer's wife in Mayo, was burned to death in her own home in an attempt to disguise the beating that would have led to her premature demise. The police noted she was a 'sickly woman, unable to perform any work' and on bad terms with her relatives.³⁵ Similarly, the death of James Crilly, a small farmer in Londonderry, was accelerated by being stabbed with a farming fork. The police observed that, 'the old man was considered useless by members of his family'.³⁶

In a more complex situation from the early twentieth century, not working on the farm was used to indicate a sense of displacement from, and lack of authority within, the family. In 1901, Deborah White of Listowel, Kerry, became pregnant out of wedlock and her brother James wanted her removed from the household, where they lived with their parents, a brother and two sisters. His father refused to remove her from the home and instead she married Thomas Barry, the child's father, and he moved into the household. From the day of the marriage, James refused to work on the farm 'except one day cutting turf'. On 17th June 1901, James murdered the three-month-old baby and attacked his sister. At trial, he was found insane and kept in an asylum for over a decade.³⁷ Not working was used by James to highlight his displeasure at the new family arrangement; in an interesting reversal, his father's deposition after the murder stressed James' unwillingness to work as the reason why he was prepared to give evidence against his son. James had refused to work and through doing so, lost the loyalty of the family. Despite claims to lineage, inheritance or ownership, the inability or refusal to work the land reduced a person's rights to and within that space.

This belief system was reinforced within the folklore that was central to Irish rural culture, where disruptive or unhealthy family members were explained through fairy abduction. The swapping of healthy individuals for fairies who took their likeness was a central theme in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish folklore, and babies and women were particularly vulnerable to being replaced by malevolent creatures.³⁸ Fairy folk, while taking the form of a familiar person, were malignant and unlucky, draining household resources, being bad-tempered and generally disrupting familial harmony. The language of this belief system was repeatedly found in court cases centring on family members who failed to fulfil their role within the household. In 1863, Michael Bannon married the daughter of Mrs Coghlan and moved into her farm in Westmeath. They quarrelled and Bannon was murdered. When asked for an explanation, a witness explained: 'he was an imposter, he promised to bring money into the family, and that

it would be a good job to put him out of the way'.³⁹ Similarly, Michael Dwyer of County Limerick, when charging his wife with assault, declared on the witness stand: 'the prisoner, I think, is my wife', before recounting that since their marriage all of his thirteen cows had died, except one and a calf. This was a common sign of fairy interference. He also claimed that his wife had tried to lock up his things and he only recovered them when his keys fell from her pocket.⁴⁰

Michael Dillon in Galway in 1887 and Bridget Cleary in Tipperary in 1895 both suffered from fevers and were burnt to death as a result of rituals to bring them back and displace the possessing fairy, while Patrick McCormack of Donegal was beaten to death by his father under similar circumstances in 1890.⁴¹ Fairies provided an explanation for why certain individuals failed to perform their appropriate roles on the farm, and were an excuse to exclude such individuals from social authority and, in extreme circumstances, even a sense of shared humanity. At the same time, these tales passed down through generations reinforced the importance of work to social authority in the farming community.

The significance of work to claims to rights over farm resources and to power within the farming family ensured that work continued to be of importance to farmwives. This was often even more important for women who married into established farming families and gained a legal right to farming resources, without the requisite work. This tension was offset by the cultural practice of women bringing dowries on marriage. Like many nineteenth-century social groups, Irish farmwives were expected to bring economic resources to marriage, known as a 'fortune'.⁴² This was provided either by the woman's father or guardian, or through her own earnings. Daughters who worked on family farms were often provided with a dowry by their parents or the child who inherited the farm, acting as financial compensation for her own labour during her youth and young adulthood.⁴³ Other women worked in towns or abroad for a period of years to literally 'make their fortune'.⁴⁴

Dowries were common across Britain and Europe in the late nineteenth century, particularly amongst the middle classes. For some, they were viewed as the woman's contribution to the establishment of a new household and were usually counter balanced by similar economic resources on the part of the husband.⁴⁵ For others, they were used as a protective measure to ensure a woman's economic security after the death of her husband, and thus reflected the significance of the breadwinner model, with money placed into stocks or used to purchase life insurance.⁴⁶ Irish farmwives conceived of their fortunes as a way of buying a stake in the farm. The farming marriage contract was quite explicitly a business deal, where a woman or her father valued her husband's assets and made an appropriate offer, thus leading to folklore around husbands who borrowed stock to inflate their worth.⁴⁷ Marriages could succeed or fail at this point, and while Irish farmers were often criticised for their mercenary 'bargains', in many respects, this was only because they acknowledged the financial basis of marriage more explicitly than their 'romantic', urban counterparts.

Because the fortune was viewed as buying a stake in the farm, women understood themselves as having purchased rights on the farm and to its resources. This was not exclusive to post-famine Ireland. Dowries in the pre-famine period were often equated

with a woman's social worth, and those who brought large sums expected to be well treated. Women charging their husbands with domestic violence often remarked on the value of their fortune, with the implicit message that the higher the dowry, the more shocked the court should be at their ill-treatment.⁴⁸ Similarly, amongst elite Scots, the value of a woman's dowry was directly linked to the level of authority she expected to exercise in the household.⁴⁹ In post-famine Ireland, however, the fortune became more than a marker of social worth and a protection in old-age. It was asserted within marriage as the basis of women's rights on the farm. As in many peasant communities, a dowry purchased a woman's rights to the communal property of the household.⁵⁰

Moreover, this discourse of economic rights was given impetus during the period by the cultural context. Within Ireland, it was heightened by the rise of the National Land League that used the language of work imparting rights to enforce its own claims to secure rights for Irish tenants.⁵¹ It also tied into the increased political awareness of the middle class from the start of the century, who tied their claims to suffrage to economic independence and property ownership.⁵² And, it was shaped by the women's movement and their claims to political and economic rights. As women's property rights were increasingly defended, with the introduction of Married Women's Property Acts from the 1870s onwards, women learned a vocabulary for expressing those rights, which they could use in the private, as well as the public, sphere.⁵³

Women's economic rights were explicitly debated in the Irish press. As early as 1868, Widow Maguire complained her rights to the farming property were restricted by her landlord's custom of prohibiting the remarriage of widows with children to preserve her offspring's inheritance. She argued in a letter to the editor of the *Anglo-Celt*:

Their [the landlords'] justice halts I maintain for they only protect one party in their rights. The widow has her rights as well as the children and their justice to be even handed but be equally solicitous about her rights. [...] I hold one of her rights to be freedom to contract a second marriage if she wishes it.⁵⁴

In 1922, in response to an article by Evelyn Grogan, who denounced the idea that women had economic rights, the feminist 'KM' responded:

'Few husbands' (we are told) 'deny [their wives] something spent on amusement or special desires.' (Oh, beyond praise these beneficent ones and blest their handmaidens who have found favour in their sight!) Imagine the sensations of a man confronted with the privilege of 'something to spend on special desires and amusements!' [...] No the money and leisure to spend on special desires are not a man's privileges – they are his inalienable rights; [...] It is curious and instructive to realise that it is by the diametrically opposed process we get the conventional 'womanly woman' - one who has no interest apart from the care of her husband, her home and her children.⁵⁵

Similarly, women's economic rights became the focus of disputes on the farm. In 1863 in Galway, Thomas McQuelter and Mary Bane murdered Thomas senior in disputes over Mary's rights to the yard for her hens. This relationship had the added complexity that Thomas married without his father's permission, but her family had settled with him and provided a twenty pound dowry. In the lead up to the murder, the family argued over hens and Thomas senior threatened to banish them; while Thomas replied that 'he would have hens and eggs when the devil would be picking his bones'.⁵⁶ While this was a

dispute between men, hens and eggs were a female province. In threatening to banish the hens, Thomas was symbolically banishing his new daughter-in-law, denying her work and so a legitimate place on the farm. Thomas junior defended his wife's rights to the farm using the same language.

This was made more explicit in a Tipperary case from 1911. Mrs Ellen Shanahan prosecuted her brother-in-law, Mickey, with whom she and her husband lived, for assault. She recounted that Mickey complained that her ducks had got into his corn and then had beaten her with a shovel, until her husband intervened to save her life. She informed the magistrate that she had brought a fifty pound fortune into the marriage, but she was given nothing by her husband and supported herself through her poultry, and even this income Mickey tried to deny her. She complained, to the loud unified groans of her husband and brother-in-law, that she had no handling of the household and was not even allowed to cook. They also locked up everything in the house to restrict her access to it. The defence lawyer's response was, 'You got a big farm for your £50?', contesting the legitimacy of her claims to the farm's resources, and her lawyer interrupted to say 'they would give her nothing if they could help it'.⁵⁷ Her lawyer did not contradict the basic premise that dowries bought economic rights; instead, he argued that a small dowry should still establish rights to certain resources.

As both these cases indicate, the idea that women purchased rights on the farm was not uncontested, or at least, the exact nature of the bargain was open to further negotiation after marriage. This was especially evident during the height of the National Land League movement during the 1870s and 1880s. The increasing awareness that a long held desire in Irish society to ensure the continuity of the family name on the land might be more permanently realised through direct ownership of land led to a tension between non-mothers and their conjugal families. Through purchasing the rights to the farm, wives were often placed in the position to inherit on the death of their spouse. If there were no children born of the marriage, this meant that the land could potentially transfer into the wife's family, severing the tie between the husband's family and the land. In the context of the marriage bargain, wives were thought to be unfairly enriched at the expense of the husband's kin. This led to a number of attacks on widows without children, particularly in County Limerick, as families tried to convince them to give up control of the farm.

For example, in 1875, Mrs Deborah Dwyer, widow of a farmer, had shots fired into her dwelling. Mrs Dwyer was importuned by her father-in-law to return the farm, which he had originally given to his son on his marriage with her, but she refused unless her fortune was returned.⁵⁸ The following year another widow, Margaret Kerby, had shots fired into her dwelling-house. Her brother-in-law intended to sue her for money lent to her husband and threatened to drive her out of the farm which she held.⁵⁹ Mary Anne Walsh held ninety-eight acres of land after the death of her husband, when she had shots fired through her window in 1877. Her brother-in-law Maurice Walsh tried ineffectually to get the farm from her by purchase and it was believed he was trying to intimidate her into selling the farm. She had also received a threatening letter.⁶⁰

By the late nineteenth century, the conflicts that could arise when women asserted their economic rights were sometimes taken into account when negotiating marriage contracts. In 1891, at the Carlow assizes, James Heany was indicted for the murder of his wife,

Mary Anne. They lived on a farm near Drumlish, County Longford, with their three children and James' father. James pleaded not guilty. The *Irish Times* reported that the family had:

One of those family arrangements by which some of the land was to belong to the husband and some to the wife, and the house itself was divided between different members of the family, the prisoner and his young wife occupying one part, and the other being occupied by Heany, the prisoner's father [. . .] Mary Anne Heany was anxious to assert her own rights, and the prisoner, listening to a great deal that the father told him, was determined to assume some mastery over the house and farm, and this led to frequent quarrels about the land.

On the day of the murder, Mary Anne was making hay on what she considered her land and her husband threatened her life. Later that day, she came to dig potatoes and her husband, who was cutting oats, dragged her into the corn field and killed her with a scythe.⁶¹ The relationship between economic rights and social authority led Mary Anne's marriage settlement to undermine the authority that her husband, and his father, felt was appropriate for a husband to hold. In this instance, making her economic rights explicit exasperated, rather than reduced, marital tensions through challenging the patriarchal basis of nineteenth-century married life. At the same time, the disputes that provoked this marriage were informed by the wider cultural context, which both endowed those who worked the land with social authority, and questioned the legitimacy of women holding such rights in certain contexts.

Farmwives and domesticity

Despite a cultural context that reinforced the importance of female labour on the farm, as Joanna Bourke argues, domesticity was an increasingly influential ideal in late nineteenth century Ireland. In Dublin in 1884, city dwellers could listen to a lecture at the Young Men's Christian Association, or read about it in the next day's press, reminding them that while the speaker supported female suffrage, 'the principal sphere of women's influence must, however, be in the home of which she was mistress and owner – the chief mate of a gallant little home ship. (Applause)'.⁶² Similarly, in 1912 the Catholic population was treated to a sermon where the demands for female suffrage and education beyond secondary level were roundly criticised:

There has been for some years, a movement to draw women from their homes and to engage them in occupations which an elder generation thought entirely unsuited to them. [. . .] it is nothing less than a reversal of the order that God has established.⁶³

By 1937, the constitution of the new Irish Republic enshrined women's domestic role, stating that:

The State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.⁶⁴

Following this value system, female family members on farms were not counted as part of the agricultural workforce by census enumerators, while the number of women in paid labour declined. In 1881, 815,000 women were in paid employment; by 1911, this number was only 430,000. In the twenty years after 1881, the number of female agricultural labourers fell from 27,000 to 5000.⁶⁵ Ireland had the lowest reported levels of married women's work in Europe throughout the twentieth century.⁶⁶ As Bourke demonstrates, there was also an increased concern with women's work on farms in the late nineteenth century. Social reformers showed anxiety about women's labour and its effects on both health and the morality of the family.⁶⁷

Similarly, farm women started to voice complaints about what work was expected of them. Tensions over women's work and earning potential were at the centre of a number of domestic disputes. In 1874, Mary Anne McKeever brought a £500 dowry to her marriage with William McKeever, a farmer with 128 acres of land, near Stephen's-town, County Meath, and £3,000 of stock.⁶⁸ Yet when she arrived at the farm where she was to live with her husband, she found it 'more like a barn than a house'. From the outset, her husband complained about the expense of having a wife, refused to provide her with necessities, and then systematically tortured her to encourage her to return to her natal family. On one occasion, when she reminded him that they needed meal and other household foods, he refused to buy it saying 'when you won't earn, you won't spend'. Mrs McKeever claimed that she did her best, but unfortunately did not detail what role she played in the farm economy. When she sued him for separation, he denied cruelty and said she was extravagant.⁶⁹

When Kate Reilly reported her husband to the Cavan magistrates for domestic violence in 1922, she included in her list of complaints that 'he kept no boy since they married. He sent her to the bog each day until she had wheelbarrowed an acre of turf, when he put her to save and pitch all the hay'. He also forced her to collect his potato crop, carry water, and bring in the harvest.⁷⁰ These marital disputes centred on differing expectations of women's economic role on the farm, during a period when hard physical labour was becoming socially unacceptable for women, especially for those from wealthier backgrounds.⁷¹ Working in the fields became a marker of poverty and a number of breach of promise of marriage suits revolved around the question of whether a woman's labour in the fields proved that she was not a suitable marriage partner for farmers with property.⁷² This growing distaste towards working in the fields was mirrored by a significant decline in the number of women defining as female labourers in the census, which became increasingly evident over the century and into the early decades of the twentieth.⁷³ There may also have been a 'push' factor driving this change in taste, with the move from agrarian to pastoral farming reducing the need for female labour in the fields.

Despite this, the considerable cultural importance of working in Ireland meant that farmwives were slow to give up working. Women's work tended to centre on the farmyard. They were associated with tending animals, particularly raising pigs and poultry, dairying, both milking and creating products for market, and collecting and selling eggs and other dairy products. On the smallest farms, especially those where men needed to work off farm to supplement the household income, women also continued to work in the fields, digging turf and potatoes and harvesting crops, in addition to their domestic duties.⁷⁴ These

women often supplemented their income with collecting seaweed, as well as engaging in piecework for various textile trades, including linen-finishing, lace-making and knitting.⁷⁵ While economic necessity sometimes required flexibility in the gendered division of labour, in parts of Ireland men would not milk cows, seeing it as demeaning, while poultry was particularly associated with women, despite attempts by agricultural agencies to promote large-scale, male-run poultry farms.⁷⁶

Women's responsibility for animals, especially cattle, was reduced on large pastoral farms, where herding and caring for livestock was performed mainly by male labourers, but as few farms specialised exclusively in pastoral agriculture, even here women continued in their productive roles in other areas of farm life.⁷⁷ Furthermore, for the smaller farms that dominated the Irish economy, the move to pastoral farming increased women's economic contribution due to their association with animal husbandry. This is particularly evident in the case of poultry and pigs that continued to be closely associated with women across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using Cormac Ó Gráda's figures for agricultural output, pigs doubled in value to the economy from £5.5 million to £10.1 million (in current prices) between 1876 and 1928, while eggs grew from £2.1 million to £8.9 million over the same period. Pigs and eggs combined contributed twenty-six per cent of the total Irish agricultural output by 1928.⁷⁸ At that date, wool and milk, products that women played a significant role in producing, were worth a further £0.8 million and £15.7 million respectively (a further 22.6 per cent of total agricultural output). While these figures cannot be straightforwardly counted as women's contribution to the economy, they do highlight the continuing requirement for female labour on the farm.

The significance of women's economic contribution to the farming household was also reflected in the household budgets surviving for the period, mostly collected by various Royal Commissions and governmental staff. Anne O'Dowd's work on household budgets, taken from the Congested District Reports at the end of the nineteenth century, shows that women's work provided a significant percentage of the total cash income to farming households at the bottom of the social ladder. During a period when the annual wages for a male farm labourer were around twenty-five pounds, she highlights that the income from the sale of butter, pigs, wool and eggs was eighteen pounds out of a total cash household income of thirty-two pounds (fifty-six per cent) in Castlegregory.⁷⁹ In Brandon, it amounted to twenty pounds out of twenty-nine pounds (68.9 per cent); in Dingle thirty-nine pounds out of sixty-eight pounds (fifty-seven per cent) and in Kenmare twenty-one pounds ten shillings from thirty pounds ten shillings (seventy per cent).⁸⁰ Women were contributing on average over sixty per cent of the cash income in these small farming households in the west of Ireland. This is not because women were necessarily doing more work, but that the types of work they engaged in were more likely to produce goods for market.

A detailed breakdown of the sources of income in such households showed that eggs were a central component of every household budget detailed in these reports, while pigs were almost ubiquitous. Engagement in textile trades were well-represented, including knitting, sewing, embroidery and lace, while women on the coastline collected kelp for sale. Women who engaged in home industries, like knitting and linen-finishing, brought

in the largest cash contributions to their households. Given the extent of off-farm labour for men, in the form of fishing, migratory work or work on other farms, it is also likely that women in those households would have extended their areas of responsibility to compensate for their husband's absence.⁸¹ Following a pattern found in low income households across the United Kingdom, these budgets demonstrate the diversity of forms of income in a single region of Ireland, as poorer families attempted to make ends meet.⁸²

The importance of this income to rural homes was recognised during the period and was actively encouraged by social reformers, who promoted industry, including lace-making, poultry-keeping, dairying, pig-keeping, and a variety of textile-trades, as 'domestic' pursuits and an extension of the female role within the home, even though they brought in an income.⁸³ As MacPherson demonstrates, home industries were not framed as a purely economic enterprise in the Irish press, but integrated with women into the domestic sphere.⁸⁴ As Bourke notes of Irish lacemakers, 'they increasingly regarded their craft as confirming their status as housewives rather than as employed women'.⁸⁵ Women's work, therefore, was redefined as a domestic employment, rather than an occupation. This was a shift that was particularly easy in farming Ireland, as women's work was increasingly performed by unpaid family members in a setting where the boundaries between home and work were opaque.⁸⁶

The ability to imagine such work as 'domestic' also allowed for the continued engagement of women in farm work at higher social levels. As is suggested by the cases of Mrs O'Brien and Mrs McKeever above, women's continued involvement in farming was not just an economic necessity. Numerous women that could be comfortably defined as 'middle class' were involved in raising poultry and pigs and selling eggs and dairy products, and moreover, this was a role expected of them by their spouses. Mrs Nora Maher of Tipperary, who brought a dowry of £500 and whose list of complaints against her abusive spouse included having her egg and butter income removed from her, was accused by her husband of never doing any work, other than a little cooking.⁸⁷ The exact role middle-class farmwives played in producing these goods is not always clear, especially given that middle-class Catholic girls were often educated away from home in convents and so did not receive the extensive 'on the job' training that would have been required for skilled work like dairying.⁸⁸ Some households had servants and it is likely that the manual labour was performed by them and supervised by farmwives, in the same way that their husbands contracted out herding cattle, ploughing fields and digging ditches. Yet, whether their labour was managerial or practical, certain productive roles were allocated as women's work and the responsibility of the farmwife. Moreover, the confusion over the exact nature of farmwives' labour arises because it was discussed by farmwives as their own labour, in much the same way that their husbands took credit for a good crop or a fine herd.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The disjunction between support for the ideology of domesticity and the expectation that women in even wealthy farming families should contribute to the farming economy arose because there continued to be a strong cultural belief in the importance of labour

to claiming rights on the farm, as well as the ease with which female labour on the farm could be recategorised as part of the domestic role. While Bourke points to the victory of domesticity over farmwork in the late nineteenth century, this is belied by the continued active involvement of women on the farm. Instead, farmwork became an extension of the woman's domestic role and as a result was made invisible as 'work'. While the female family members of farmers, unlike their male counterparts, were classified in the census as unoccupied, this belied the significant role they played on the farm and in the national economy. When included, women made up one third of the agricultural workforce in 1871, with farmwives the largest single group of female workers.⁹⁰ Women's labour on the farm continued to be significant well into the twentieth century.

Moreover, far from this being the case of an older 'family economy' model persisting and being redefined by a 'newer' ideology of domesticity, customary beliefs around women's work on the land and its relationship to social authority were given a new impetus during a period when the language of 'rights' was of growing importance. Women utilised the language of rights, found in demands for landownership, in calls for suffrage, and in demands for women's rights, to reinforce their social authority during a period when they were under threat, both by the growing importance of patrilineal inheritance in demands for land rights and by the ideology of domesticity itself. Women's assertion of such rights on the farm did not always go uncontested, but their significance to maintaining social authority made it difficult for farmwives to leave their productive role behind completely.

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Notes

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2. Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780–1939* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 236–43.
3. Joanna Bourke, 'Women and Poultry in Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 25 (1987), p. 294.
4. Bourke suggests that around 1911, women received sixpence for a dozen eggs, but that they were often paid in kind, which could reduce the value of the eggs to as little as three pence a dozen. One chicken would lay around 110 eggs a year. Bourke, 'Women and Poultry', pp. 305–8.
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29. For an extended discussion of this see: Barclay, 'Place and Power'.
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31. *Return of the Outrages Reported to the Constabulary Office during the year 1873* (Dublin, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1874), p. 6.
32. National Archive of Ireland Convict Reference File F6 1918. For other similar examples see *Return of the Outrages Reported to the Constabulary Office during the year 1871* (Dublin, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1872), p. 9 and *Return of the Outrages Reported to the Constabulary Office during the year 1874* (Dublin, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1875), p. 4.
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62. ‘Women, her Place and Power’, *Irish Times*, 24th December 1884.
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