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REVIEW

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RURAL ECONOMY AND FEMALE EMIGRATION
IN THE WEST OF IRELAND 1936-1956

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Abstract

The substantial production alterations within the agricultural sector in the West of Ireland in the 1930/1940s affected men and women differently and provoked a gender-specific behaviour pattern. While men tried to save their socio-economic interests through the formation of their own political pressure groups women acted more individually and more often emigrated. This emigration pattern was also influenced through the gender oriented (emigration) policy of Church and State.

'We are all perturbed to discover that rural girls today are not inclined to settle on the land. The whole future of this country is at stake.'¹

While comprehensive research on emigration from rural Ireland in the post-war period has been done,² the causes for the significant differences between male and female emigration patterns in the 1940s have received little attention so far.

There were 19,000 female relatives working on the farms in Connacht in 1936. Fifteen years later, in 1951, the figure was less than 9,000. While the number of women relatives declined by more than half, only about a quarter of the male relatives left in the same period.³

In this article I will discuss the question why proportionally so many more women than men left the farms in Connacht in that period. In the first section I will argue that a large part of these women's economic basis eroded due to substantial changes in the production structure. The women who left Connacht and mainly, though not exclusively, went to Great Britain are the topic of the second part, where I look at the reasons they put forward for their decision to emigrate. In the third part the influence which this female exodus had on those (males) who were left behind is examined. And fourthly the gender aspect of the policy on emigration of both the State and the Catholic church is examined very briefly.

1. Women in the Rural Economy

On Saturday, 12 September 1942, the following incident happened in Belmullet, County Mayo:

A farmer's son from Emlybeg, in the Mullet, was approached by a Ballina fowl dealer who requested him to convey with his horse cart a few boxes from Mr. O'Reilly's yard in Chapel St. to Mr. Hurst's premises in Main St. for conveyance to Ballina. The young farmer was courteous enough to oblige, but when he went to load the boxes he discovered they were two crates of old hens. Errismen as a rule do not engage in the fowl traffic, leaving this as a legacy to the opposite sex, and much as he disliked his engagement he drove off as fast as he could to get rid of his burden, and to escape the observation of many farmers' daughters who were on shopping errands in the town. Rounding the post office corner, and turning into Main St., the captives began to scream violently. The shame-stricken farmer's son drove faster and faster, but the uproar still grew, and excitement followed when the old 'cluckers' broke through the bars, some flying on to the horse's back, infuriating the animal, and others flying to the roof-tops of the nearest houses. The round-up went on for several hours before order was restored.⁴

The incident may have been unusual—and therefore got the necessary attention to be reported in the local paper. But it contains a precise description of the division of labour between men and women on one side and the strong social hierarchy within this rural society on the other. While we are told that certain aspects of the rural economy were strictly left by the men 'to the opposite sex', we also get the message that the farmer's son was concerned about the impact this episode had on the group of 'farmers' daughters', not on women generally. Both aspects, the division of labour and the social hierarchy, are crucial for the understanding of the rural society and the emigration pattern in Connacht in the 1940/50s.

It was mainly young cattle, sheep, pigs and eggs that were produced on the farms in Connacht in the early 1930s. There were a few creameries too, but almost exclusively in Sligo and Leitrim; sugarbeet was grown in East Galway and South-East Mayo after the opening of the beet factory in Tuam in 1934/35. Potatoes, on the other hand, were basically planted for home consumption and, like oats and barley, as feeding stuff for animal.⁵ But in 1934 less than 15% of the agricultural area in Connacht was under the plough.⁶

Most of the agricultural work was done by family labour—although there were substantial differences according to the size and the type of the farm.⁷ Book-keeping results from County Roscommon in the mid-forties suggest that on the small and medium farms (i.e. 10-50 acres) more than 90 per cent of all labour was done by family-members (the relatives assisting, the

farmers' wives and the farmers themselves).⁸ Within the family, there was a strong division of labour. While the men—farmers, their sons and other male relatives as well as farm-labourers—were mainly engaged out of doors, looking after the cattle and in tillage work, the women—beside their household duties⁹—were responsible for the milking, butter making,¹⁰ pig rearing, poultry keeping and rearing of calves and young cattle.¹¹

This prevailing pattern does not mean that women's activities on the farms in Connacht were restricted to these spheres alone. Where farms were run by women, there were often substantial alterations to that pattern.¹² The same applies to most of the 20% of those farms who had less than 10 acres where the men went to England as seasonal emigrants or worked outside their home farm for an additional income.¹³ All the evidence suggests, that women were quick to take over the work and rôles of men if the situation required it, but usually had to give up these functions as soon as 'normal conditions' were restored.

But all the women's spheres lost either absolute or relative weight on the small and medium farms in Connacht in the 1930s and 1940s. Some of the men's domain, on the other hand, expanded substantially. The number of pigs declined by half. While poultry and calf numbers remained stable, the figure for store cattle was increased by over 90%, that of fat cattle even by 163%.¹⁴

It was mainly the changed market conditions, which induced the farmers to this rapid adaptation. The trend away from tillage—which was only temporarily reversed from 1939–1948 when compulsory tillage was introduced—towards increased cattle production was, of course, an old one, well established already in the 19th century.¹⁵ But when cattle prices virtually collapsed after the outbreak of the economic war, the farmers in Connacht did not change to the subsidized tillage, as the Fianna Fáil government more hoped than really expected, but took the bull by the horns and increased instead of decreased the cattle production. Since the price for young cattle fell even more than for fat cattle, the farm families of the West were in many ways the main victims of the collapse in cattle prices in the early 1930s.¹⁶ 'The West, being a store cattle producing area [...] had to carry the real burden of the slump' wrote the *Connacht Tribune* with some justification in 1938, when cattle prices were rising again for the third successive year.¹⁷ Contrary to what Arensberg and Kimball thought they were observing, the economic war was first an attack upon the small and medium sized farms in the West.¹⁸

Probably long before the *Tuam Herald* advised them in 1939 to do so,¹⁹ the farmers had begun to hold on to their stores; it didn't take them half a dozen years to realize that the price for store and fat cattle decreased less than for young ones and that they had to increase their output of older cattle if they wanted to hold on to the cattle economy.

This increase in the production of store and fat cattle instead of pigs and young cattle was economically sound, but it also transformed the family farms definitely into cattle producing units. Cattle production as such was not unsuitable in the Irish context, but the farms in the West were hopelessly small for this more labour-extensive than capital-intensive form of agriculture. Ironically, this definitive transformation happened in those years, when, for the first time, a government 'tried to reverse this trend with its agricultural policy.

Men and women on the farms acted and reacted differently. The men primarily tried to save their socio-economic interests through the formation of political pressure groups.²⁰ The women, however, didn't organise themselves politically²¹ but rather tried to escape the increasingly difficult situation individually through emigration.

2. Female Emigration

If we look at the arguments with which the women explained their leaving it becomes clear that the motives were more complex than the economic situation on the farms in Connacht alone would suggest. The case of an individual may illustrate this. Maria McDonnell was born in 1924 on a small farm in Ballyvarry. After she had left school she stayed for some years at home, doing 'odd bits of domestic work'.²² She got her first job outside the home farm in 1944, when she was 20 years old, looking after the children of Mr. and Mrs. Fahy who had a pub and drapery shop in Ballyhaunis. When their children went to boarding-school, they asked Maria McDonnell to stay on, but she 'didn't want to without the children'. In 1951, when Maria was 27, she went back home for a while and then wrote 'to the agencies in Dublin looking for work in England.'²³

We know nothing about the changing production structure on the home farm and how far this were responsible for Maria's decision to emigrate. But we know that she, like most of those in the same position, refused or ignored alternative employment opportunities outside the agricultural sector in Mayo. There was, for instance, a toy factory in Elly Bay where around a hundred girls were employed in the mid-forties. The girls earned salaries from 17/6 to £1/2/6 a week, while their male supervisors got £2 per week—without 'doing work', as one of the employed girls complained.²⁴ Other possibilities would have been the hat factory opened in 1940 in Castlebar or another job as domestic servant.²⁵

But Maria eventually followed the pattern of most of those who were 'not needed on the farms so much as their brothers'²⁶ and didn't seek other employment in Connacht. As a result of this emigration it wasn't long before there was a shortage of female labour in Connacht. The Irish Housewives' Association lamented the 'shortage of domestic servants'²⁷ and James Dillon and other TDs described in the Dail the 'hardship of housewives' and urged the Minister for Industry and Commerce to allow

foreign girls into the country to enter into domestic service in Ireland.²⁸ The new Regional Western Sanatorium in Castlebar employed German girls as domestic workers in 1949, because no Irish girls could be recruited.²⁹ Sean Lemass' permission to employ female alien servants in the summer 1947 was publicly welcomed in Mayo.³⁰

The fact that many women emigrated in spite of the at least partial shortage of female labour indicates that there must have been motives other than the purely economic behind many women's decision to leave Ireland. Some members of the Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, established in 1948, came just a year later to the conclusion that 'many young girls who go to Britain, ostensibly in search of work, really go in search of marriage.'³¹ This is not surprising, if one takes into account that in the rural districts in Connacht in 1951 more than half of all women in the 15-44 year category were single³²—and this at a time, when almost the whole society was fully convinced that motherhood and church service were the only two respectable options open to young women. Even if a young woman fully accepted these values, her chances of realising them were low if she remained in Ireland.

A member of the Commission on Emigration said that 'they do not readily admit it, naturally enough, but they are primarily actuated in going abroad by a desire to get married, and many of them marry. Mostly they are attractive country girls who are striving to get away from the late marriage prospect'.³³ Even if the Commissioners didn't find them, there were girls who quite frankly explained why they were emigrating. 'We ladies can find teachers and professional men in England who will be glad to have us and help our make-up and be delighted to have us for wives' wrote, for instance, a Mayo women in 1951.³⁴

But most women made their decision to emigrate not in anticipation of what they hoped to achieve at their new destination; their analysis was generally more realistically based on their present situation within the rural economy in Connacht. Many began to articulate the fact that they saw their economic displacement as an opportunity rather than as a loss. When, for instance, in 1948 the members of a bachelors' club committed themselves publicly to insisting on a minimum dowry (according to the farm size of the bride) a young woman replied in the local paper that she regarded them as out of date and that it would be a tragedy to extricate them from the strings of their mothers' aprons. 'My advice to them is not to trouble about the ladies or their dowries in their old age, and to continue "fogging" the family "dudeen" which finds its resting place on the hob beside the fire.'³⁵

The social and economic conditions within Connacht generally became more and more openly criticized by young women. An 18 year old girl from Mayo justified her emigration to the USA not any more on the grounds of her superfluosness in the rural economy but on those of the undesirable effects this economy even had on those (men), who remained

in it. 'Yet', she complained in a letter to the editor,¹ 'what does he do on this day of rest? His favourite pastime (if pastime you could call it) is tending his sheep on the mountain or his cattle on the island or, like his departed grandfather before him, strolling from garden to garden to feast his eyes on his crops. Wake up, Mr. Rip van Winkle, you are 50 years behind the times.'³⁶

3. Farmers' Reactions

The at least temporarily impressive political activities of the Western farmers in the 1940s neither saved their economic basis nor their social status.³⁷ When the *Connacht Tribune* wrote in 1940 that 'no girl will marry a farmer'³⁸ it was undoubtedly an overstatement. But the 'exodus of women from this country' was indeed a 'most serious symptom of the times [...], something to think about'³⁹ as the same paper noted eight years later. It became obvious that the girls were not following the young men from rural parts but 'were leading them'.⁴⁰ 'Be careful, young farmers', wrote a farmer's wife after the dowry-demands of the bachelors, 'and don't overdo it. There are not very many farmers' daughters at home nowadays awaiting you to come along in search of wives.'⁴¹ As an illustration of the grave situation she mentioned the case of a young farmer who 'was forced to marry' a farmer's daughter who 'was many years his senior in order to obtain the required money.'

It didn't take long for the farmers themselves to begin to be conscious of, and comment on, the new situation. Michael Walsh, a farmer from Kerry, was looking for a comprehensive solution and wrote to the Taoiseach. 'Where will a farmer's son find a wife' he asked, if all these girls are emigrating? He demanded 'a strict law to stop these Farmers' Daughters that have plenty at home', but agreed 'very much to have poor boys and girls go there.'⁴² Others were more realistic and reduced their individual expectations of potential wives to a minimum which would enable them at least to upkeep the running of the farm. A 41 year-old farmer with '40 acres of good land' from County Limerick who found it 'very hard to get a wife as all the eligible girls have left the countryside' was in Mayo looking for a bride. 'A dowry is not essential' he wrote, 'the only qualification I ask for is that the lady must be able to milk.'⁴³

Unmarried farmers in Roscommon who repudiated the demands of the above quoted bachelors judged the situation as so serious that they completely overturned the traditional principles and even 'offered a sum of money to the girl that would marry them.'⁴⁴

4. Emigration Policy of Church and State

The Church was in a dilemma. On the one hand it realized clearly that as long as the women were made redundant on the farms they were

emigrating and, therefore, escaping to some extent the influence of the clergy. The simultaneous slump in cattle prices and the substantial increases in local rates had serious impacts on the Church's income in the 1930s.⁴⁵ Since the Church was interested in the increase of farmers' incomes it didn't want to interfere with the cattle economy when cattle prices were rising again after 1935.⁴⁶ Was it this dilemma that prevented it from seriously advocating an alternative (agrarian) policy which would have aimed at stopping the process of replacing the female work force through cattle?

The church, therefore, reduced its anti-emigration policy to appeals directed to the individual on the one side, and the Government on the other. It tried to convince the women that life on the land was 'happier, healthier and holier than in big cities.'⁴⁷ While the bishops warned young men and women publicly of the 'dangers to their religious and moral well-being' abroad, they urged the Government at the same time in a private transmission to An Taoiseach to prohibit 'foreign agents to enter the country to attract girls abroad with promises of lucrative employment.'⁴⁸ But quite realistically, the Bishop of Galway acknowledged already in 1938 that 'if they (*i. e.* the women) will not bear the duties of marriage and motherhood and strive to give to God and to Ireland good sons and daughters, then no legislation or constitution can save us.'⁴⁹

Neither the Fianna Fáil (1932-48 and 1951-54) nor the Inter-Party governments (1948-51 and 1954-57) had a coherent strategy against emigration. Virtually all political parties condemned (when in opposition) the 'export of people', but (when in power) declared that the task of stopping it was beyond the means of the government and regarded it as a blessing in disguise.

But the fact, that Great Britain demanded valid travel documents for all people seeking entry into Great Britain between the out-break of the war and 1952 provided the Irish Government almost against its own wishes with the means of regulating the outward movement of its people. In close co-operation with the British Ministry of Labour and National Service through its Liaison Officer in Dublin it tried, especially between 1942 and 1948, to direct the flow of emigrants exclusively through these official channels. But individual British (and sometimes Irish) recruiting agents were never completely prevented from operating in Ireland.⁵⁰

Up to 1941 the Government deemed it undesirable to prevent Irish citizens of full age from leaving the country. This policy was partially revised from 1942 to 1945, when the State tried to retain an adequate supply of labour for essential services like fuel and food production. Although travel restrictions were placed on men and women, men engaged in agriculture and particularly fuel production between 1942 and 1945 were more affected.⁵¹

Already in October 1941 travel restrictions were placed on boys and girls who were under 22 years of age.⁵² Because of the complaints of a large number of parents and guardians of young people that this caused hardship, the Minister for Industry and Commerce decided 'that travel permits might be granted to young people under 22 years of age' if they fulfilled certain criteria; criteria which were significantly different for boys and girls. While the personal skill and the ability to support a family in distress at home were causes for a travel permit in case of boys, girls had to satisfy the authorities primarily that if they went into domestic employment it would be in 'an institution of standing such as a hospital, convent or school or in the household of a clergyman' or that a responsible relative was so located as to 'be in a position to exercise supervision over the conduct of the emigrant.' While skill and the performance of specific functions were instrumental in the decision to provide or withhold travel permits in men's cases, in women's cases the Government's guide was mainly their 'moral well-being.'⁵³

Notes

1. A member of the Mayo Vocational Education Committee commenting on the fact that in 1957 only 4 girls applied for 6 scholarships for a month's course in poultry keeping, butter making and domestic science at St. Vincent's School of Domestic Science. *Mayo News*, 18.5.1957.
2. Cf. for example Hannan, Damian, 1970, *Rural Exodus. A study of the forces influencing the large-scale migration of Irish rural youth*, London. The gender aspect of emigration has received some attention in the last few years. Cf. Jackson, Pauline, 1986, *Migrant Women: The Republic of Ireland*. Report for EC Women's Bureau, Brussels; Rudd, Joy, 1988, 'Invisible Exports: The Emigration of Irish Women this Century,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 11, N° 4, pp. 307-311.
3. 1936 there were 18,973 female and 61,577 male relatives assisting on the farms in Connacht; the figures for 1951 are: 8,935 females and 44,731 males. If the figures are broken down according to the size of the farm it becomes clear that the smaller the farm, the more likely the women were to leave. Cf. *Statistical Abstract 1938*, p. 29; *Statistical Abstract 1955*, p. 48.
4. *Western People*, 19.9.1942.
5. But in East Galway potatoes were also grown for export.
6. *Agricultural Statistics 1934-56*, p. 37.
7. Bigger farmers with more than 50 acres of land were generally employing wage labour permanently and/or seasonally. Medium and small farmers (i.e. 10-50 acres) generally only employed wage labour seasonally. And very small farmers who had less than 10 acres were dependent on non-farm incomes; they could only survive with their families on their holdings, if at least someone of the family earned a substantial sum from wage-labour outside the home farm (i.e. from seasonal migration, County Council or Department of Lands employment or seasonally on bigger farms).

8. O'Connor, R., 1948, 'Financial Results on Twenty Farms in Mid-Roscommon in 1945-46', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, p. 90.
9. A vivid description of the 'jolly life of a farmer's wife' appeared in early April 1950 in a local paper: 'All she has to do is to carry in the turf and set the fires, cook the meals, wash the dishes, sweep the floor, settle the children's rows and get them off to school, air the feather beds, bake the bread, carry water from the well, scrub the table and chairs, wash the clothes, darn the socks, milk the cows, churn the milk, feed the chickens, set the dog on the cows, chase the cat out of the pantry, shoo the hens off the porch, chase the pigs out of the garden, gather the eggs, feed the calves, fill the lamps with oil and trim the wicks, and bring more water from the well.' *Connaught Telegraph*, 5.4.1950.
10. In Sligo and Leitrim, where milk was also sold to the creameries, this work was increasingly done by men. For a short description of the causes for this changing pattern see Bourke, Joanna, 1991, 'Dairywomen and Affectionate Wives: Women in the Irish Dairy Industry, 1890-914', *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 38, pp. 149-164.
11. That poultry keeping was a female domain becomes clear from the above mentioned incident in Belmullet. For a short general description of the division of labour on farms in the West of Ireland in the 1930s cf. Arensberg, Conrad, 1968, *The Irish Countryman*, New York, p. 55 ff.
12. In 1946 16.6% of all farms in Connacht were run by women (mainly, but not only, widows). Cf. *Census of Population, 1946*, Vol. V, p. 113 ff.
13. There was a variety of seasonal migration patterns in Connacht. From Achill and the Erris area often whole families migrated. In the Swinford-Kilmovee area usually the men went in spring and came back for Christmas. In Roscommon, where seasonal migration had no strong tradition, farmers' wives and children took over the whole farm work in the late 1930s, when their men 'who were prosperous farmers ten years ago' had to migrate to England to keep their farms going. *Roscommon Herald*, 8.4.1939.
14. Cf. *Agricultural Statistics 1927-33*, p. 88 ff. and *Agricultural Statistics 1934-56*, p. 119 ff.
15. For the importance of the cattle economy even on small farms in the West at the end of the 19th century cf. Cuddy, M. & Curtin, Chris, 'Commercialization in West of Ireland Agriculture in the 1890s', *Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 14, N° 3.
16. The price for fat cattle 1935 was 53% of the 1930 price, while for young cattle (less than one year old) it was only 35%. Cf. *Statistical Abstract 1937*, p. 174 ff. and *Statistical Abstract 1955*, p. 286 ff.
17. *Connacht Tribune*, 2.4.1938.
18. 'In many ways the "economic war" with England, which the De Valera Government is waging today in an effort to wean Ireland from its dependence upon an English market, is necessarily an attack upon the big farmer...' Arensberg, Conrad, 1968, *The Irish Countryman*, New York, p. 52.
19. *Tuam Herald*, 28.10.1939.
20. A great number of local branches of farmers' organisations were set up in Connacht from 1937 onwards. In Mayo alone more than a hundred Clann na Talmhan branches were established in the winter months of 1942/43. For a description and analysis of these agrarian policies cf. Moser, Peter, *Agrarökonomie, Agrarpolitik und Emigration: Irland 1936-1956*, unveröffentlichte Dissertation, Historisches Institut der Universität

Bern (forthcoming). See also Moser, Peter, 'Clann na Talmhan in Mayo', in Joe Byrne, ed., *Eghaidh Aghamore*, Westport, 1993, and Varley, Tony, 'Farmers against Nationalists: The Rise and Fall of Clann na Talmhan in Galway', to be published in Gillispie, Raymond and Gerard Moran, eds, *Galway: History and Society*, Dublin, Geographical Publications.

21. This does not suggest that women didn't fight collectively for their rights. There were—for example—successful strikes for wage increases by girls who were engaged in turf work during the war. Cf. for example *Western People*, 17.10.1942 and *Connaught Telegraph*, 15.5.1943. In East Galway there were even Ladies' Branches of Clann na Talmhan set up. But they had no formal link up with the main organisation and were in many ways more like a branch of the Country Women's Association than a specific women's unit of a political organisation.
22. Cf. the interview with Maria Barran (nee McDonnell) on 28.7.1986, in: Irish in Britain History Centre Archive, London.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
24. *Western People*, 8.9.1945.
25. Almost one-quarter of all occupied women in 1946 were employed as domestic workers. The Commission on Youth Unemployment, which was established by Sean Lemass under the Chairmanship of Dr. McQuaid in 1943, reported in 1951: 'Domestic service is by far the most important single avenue of employment for women in this country. From the evidence we have received it is also, in many respects, the most unsatisfactory.' Cf. SPO. DFA, 412/10.
26. Freeman, T.W., 1945, 'Emigration and Rural Ireland', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, pp. 404–422.
27. *Irish Press*, 26.4.1948.
28. *Dail Debates*, Vol. 105, Col. 1690/91, 30.4.1947.
29. The Secretary of the Roscommon County Council justified this recruiting abroad as follows: 'While we would prefer to fill the vacancies from local applicants, or at least from nationals, we feel that having regard to the nil response to recent advertisements the local market has dried up.' (At least part of the local indifference towards the new jobs was due to the fact that they were in a tuberculosis sanatorium.) *Roscommon Champion*, 2.4.1949.
30. Cf. for example *Western People*, 12.7.1947. From September 1947 till September 1948 'approximately 700 employment permits in respect of alien domestics have been issued by the Department of Industry and Commerce.' Cf. Draft Memorandum for the Government. Emigration of Irish Girls for Employment in Britain, in: SPO, DFA 402/218.
31. *Irish Times*, 1.2.1949.
32. Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems 1948–1954, Reports, p. 83.
33. *Irish Times*, 1.2.1949.
34. *Western People*, 20.1.1951.
35. *Roscommon Champion*, 10.7.1948.