

Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 60s

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Author: Catriona Clear

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Reviewer: Catriona Beaumont

In a recent blog post for the [Women's History Association of Ireland](#) [2], Caitriona Clear reflected on how Irish women's history had now reached a critical mass 'whereby it does not need to be identified with any one historian or any group of historians'. She went on to suggest that following a recent article in *Irish Tatler* magazine on Irish women's history 'girls and women who never thought they were interested in history at all will read for relaxation and comfort, at home, in coffee shops, on buses, and in hairdressers' about the past lives of Irish women'.⁽¹⁾

Clear is one of the historians who can be credited with playing a crucial role in ensuring that Irish women's history has now become firmly embedded in the historical narrative of twentieth century Ireland. Her new book *Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's magazines in the 1950s and 60* builds on previous work exploring the lives of Irish women in post-independence Ireland.⁽²⁾ This latest research focuses on the interests and concerns articulated by women and girls in the pages of popular women's magazines. As well as providing new insights into Irish women's lives the book contributes to a growing body of work seeking to re-assess the experiences of women and girls in both Ireland and Britain during the 1950s and 1960s.⁽³⁾ Moreover the book is an important addition to on-going debates about the use of print media and women's magazines by historians and calls into question how these sources can enlighten, challenge, confirm or even distort what we know about women's everyday lives in the 20th century.⁽⁴⁾ An indication of how current these considerations are is the success of Dr Ciara Meehan's exhibition [Modern Wife, Modern Life](#) [3], currently touring the Republic of Ireland and showcasing the content of Irish women's magazines popular in the 1960s.

In her introduction to *Women's Voices* the author makes it clear that despite being the first book to explore Irish history through the lens of popular women's magazines her research does not set out to provide a comprehensive history of Irish women's magazines in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead the aim is to examine readers' contributions to two of the most popular magazines *Woman's Life* (published 1936–59) and *Woman's Way* (1963 onwards). A useful appendix (appendix two) provides a brief summary of other magazines read by women at this time namely *Woman's Mirror*, *Model Housekeeping* and *Irish Tatler and Sketch*. To facilitate the book's central aim of allowing the voices of women living in 1950s and 1960s

Ireland to be heard, the author narrows her focus even further to a study of the problem pages, letters pages, press releases and small advertisement sections of both *Woman's Life* and *Woman's Way*. What emerges is a detailed, original and captivating account of readers' lives, loves, worries, dilemmas, heartbreaks and the advice given to these correspondents from the editors and columnists of both magazines.

The book is divided into seven chapters along with an introduction, conclusion and appendices. A useful 'Explanation of titles' and 'Glossary of terms' is provided at the beginning of the book for readers unfamiliar with Irish history or the Irish language. In her introduction Clear reminds readers that 'academic studies of magazines over the past half-century have restored respect both to magazines and to the women who read them' (p. 2). This is an important point. As the author suggests this revised view of women's magazines finally lays to rest the presumption, fuelled by Betty Freidan's seminal text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that women's magazines in the 1950s and 1960s were instrumental in creating and enforcing the ideal of the 'happy housewife heroine' (p. 2). Utilising women's magazines as a source for women's history instead allows for a more nuanced understanding of women's lives. As this book demonstrates so effectively readers of women's magazine in the 1950s and 1960s were not passive receptacles for an ideology of domesticity. Instead they were active agents in their own lives regardless of whether or not they accepted traditional domestic roles or railed against them.

The introductory chapter includes a brief overview of women and social change in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. This is crucial to ensure that the subsequent discussions of the content of women's magazines and the views expressed by readers are placed firmly in context. I was a little puzzled however by the structure of the book here. In addition to the very useful history provided in the introduction there are two appendices; appendix one provides more general details of political, economic and social developments 1951–69 and appendix two provides data on women, paid work and marital status in Ireland 1946–71. Having these three separate sections was rather confusing. Instead an additional chapter devoted to the historical context would in my view have been more effective.

The final section of the introduction outlines the methodology adopted for the study and explains the rationale for the selection of the magazines (based on popularity and the fact that they included diary or letters columns and problem pages). All extant issues of both magazines were looked at for the relevant years adding to the richness of detail underpinning later discussions. Clear explains here that at times reference is made to other Irish magazines, for example *Miss* and *Young Women* (although these are oddly missing from appendix two). For purposes of comparison shorter but continuous runs of British magazines for example *Woman's Realm* and *Woman's Own* are referred to, most often in the concluding section of the various chapters. Such comparisons are informative and useful although at times their inclusion felt a little 'tagged on' and could possibly distract from the central theme of women's voices in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s.

The remaining seven chapters are ordered chronologically and thematically. Here the originality and significance of the book becomes evident. Wonderful detail is provided throughout these chapters about the lives, views and concerns readers wished to express in print during these years. *Woman's Life* magazine, published throughout the 1950s, is the focus of chapters one and two. In the absence of circulation data and the fact that *Woman's Life* did not have a letters page, Clear imaginatively uses competition pages, small advertisements and diary (notice of events) pages to identify the readership of the magazine. There is evidence of a wide readership throughout the country and in Northern Ireland although the majority of readers appear to be town based. Interestingly, Clear suggests that a small but significant readership was resident in the UK. In 1957 the majority of entrants to the 'bonnie babies' competition had English addresses. This is a poignant reminder of the high levels of emigration and the desire of emigrant mothers to keep in touch with family and friends back home.

The diary pages of *Woman's Life* provide historians with useful details about the social and leisure lives of women during the 1950s. Organisations such as the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) and the Irish Housewives' Association sent in news items about their activities. Drama groups, the Irish Red Cross and

tennis clubs also feature in these pages. Profiles of Hollywood stars or women prominent in Irish theatre were included along with news about popular singers of the day and well known fashion designers. Clear draws attention to the fact that the activities of women in public life (there were only six female members of the Dail at this time) were seldom mentioned. It is significant that the male editor of the diary pages, Maxwell Sweeney, 'continually chided women for their lack of interest in politics' (p. 20) thereby challenging the view that women's magazines sought to reinforce an ideology of domesticity amongst their readers. The idea that women should have lives extending beyond the kitchen sink was also expressed in a 1951 article arguing that women had a right to work outside the home and should be equal partners in marriage. Moreover women and girls were encouraged to continue in work and education throughout the lifetime of the magazine.

Religious questions and pressure to conform to Catholic social teaching were considerations never far from the surface of Irish life in the 1950s. Clear writes that *Woman's Life's* position on religion was complex and strict censorship laws meant that articles on issues such as pregnancy, childbirth, sex and unmarried parenthood rarely featured. Chapter two takes a closer look at the problem pages of *Woman's Life* but with the important caveat that problem pages in magazines must not be taken as 'straight historical evidence of the troubles and difficulties people had at any given time' (p. 27). It is made clear that the problems expressed in the pages of *Woman's Life* and *Woman's Way* are a kind of evidence of some of the problems some Irish women and girls were able to articulate and that Irish magazines were able to print, during the 1950s and 1960s (p. 27). In spite of this the importance of documenting such problems is highlighted by the author when she reminds us that 'they are the virtually the only evidence we have of advice given to women by a woman in a position of authority that was secular – insofar as anything could be secular in Ireland in this decade' (p. 28).

With these considerations in mind the chapter goes on to provide a detailed account of the most prominent problems published in *Woman's Life* and the advice given by the magazine's agony aunt 'Mrs Wyse'. Courtship, extended family, work/education and marital problems were common themes raised in the problem page. Both the problems aired and the advice given, provide a real insight into Irish women's lives during the 1950s. 'Mrs Wyse' provided practical advice for women with regards to their love lives and encouraged women to 'drop' boyfriends who treated them badly or did not propose after a reasonable period of time. Single women were encouraged to enjoy their lives and take up every opportunity to develop careers for themselves. Rather surprisingly married women were regarded as something of a 'lost cause, who could and should expect nothing from their menfolk, not even financial security' (p. 43). In all her advice 'Mrs Wyse' took it for granted that women had control over their own lives and could change their circumstances. This presents a more positive, albeit complex, representation of women's lives in 1950s Ireland, a decade most often associated with doom and gloom, conservatism and gender inequality.

Chapters three to seven move on to the 1960s and *Woman's Way* with an account of the letters pages and problem page published in the magazine. The chapters are divided into specific themes: 'Young people and miscellaneous', 'Women's status', 'Sex education and birth control', 'Courtship and marriage and extended family/parent-child/miscellaneous'. These headings reflect continuity in terms of the worries and concerns that prompted women and girls to write into *Woman's Way* but also reveal the changing economic, social and cultural landscape of Ireland in the 1960s. Clear writes that the editorial content of the magazine was rich and varied with the familiar mix of features about celebrities alongside more serious articles discussing women in prison, women's legal rights, prostitution, pensions, unmarried mothers and working wives (p. 46). In common with *Woman's Life*, *Woman's Way* encouraged women to participate in public life and to take more of an interest in politics. The letters page of the magazine was an important medium through which readers could express their views and interact with one another. Clear argues convincingly that this demonstrates 'more and more Irish women, every year, valued their opinions enough to write them down and send them off to a magazine, an important finding in itself' (p. 50).

The content of the letters page included helpful hints passed from one woman to another on matters including cooking and housework and this category of letter made up the largest percentage of those

published. This would imply that a significant proportion of the readership was made up of housewives and mothers. Other concerns included the plight of the Irish traveller community, interracial marriage and the education of young people. Chapter four considers the letters published on the status of women. Clear argues some readers viewed *Woman's Way* as a champion of women's rights during the 1960s. This fact once again dispels the presumption that popular women's magazines always set out to promote traditional domesticity for women at this time. Subjects raised by readers and published in the magazine included married women working outside the home, birth control/family size, farm women's lives as well as marital relationships and unmarried mothers. Although family size did fall in Ireland from the early 1960s the wide range of views expressed about the religious and moral implications of birth control suggests that many women grappled with their conscience when deciding to go against Catholic social teaching on this matter. The fact that divorce was never mentioned in published letters throughout the 1960s also suggests that despite the emergence of a more 'modern' Ireland in the 1960s Catholic teaching still had a strong hold on public opinion. Unlike birth control, a private decision between husband and wife, marriage breakdown was a much more public matter. With divorce illegal in Irish law and condemned by the Catholic Church it is perhaps not so surprising that it did not appear on the letters page of *Woman's Way*.

Moral questions are the focus of chapter five with a survey of the problem page of *Woman's Way* and readers' concerns regarding sex education and birth control. Clear notes a change here from the previous decade when queries for information about sex, pregnancy and birth control were almost completely absent. Two 'agony aunts' dispensed advice for readers during these years, Maura Laverty and Angela Macnamara (who took over from Laverty in 1963). Macnamara in particular was determined to answer reader's problems regardless of any possible embarrassment. As a result topics such as venereal disease, pregnancy, the loss of virginity, menstruation and breast-feeding were all addressed. What becomes abundantly clear is the lack of knowledge amongst young women and girls about sex and reproduction and Macnamara frequently berated mothers for not educating their daughters on such matters. Even more disturbing are the letters from young women and girls who were the victims of child sex abuse, particularly in light of what we now know about the scale of this problem in twentieth century Ireland. In these instances Macnamara advised the victim to tell their parents and contact the police.

The final two chapters detail the problems and advice published on courtship and marriage and difficulties pertaining to family life and parent-child relationships. As in the 1950s readers were advised not to put up with boyfriends who did not appreciate them. Whilst age differences between couples (with the man often many years older than the woman) were not considered a problem, relationships between a Catholic and non-Catholic were discouraged once again highlighting the on-going influence of Catholic Social Teaching. Chapter seven provides some interesting insights into teenage life in the 1960s and the tensions emerging between young people and their parents at this time. Angela Macnamara usually took the side of young people and advised parents that they had to accept their children were 'growing up and need to get out and have recreation suitable to their age' (p. 109). She also encouraged young women to enjoy life before settling down to marriage and a family, as there was no need for 'a mad rush into matrimony' (p. 116).

This book is successful and significant on a number of levels. It provides a rich and detailed account of popular women's magazines in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. In doing so Clear very effectively gives voice to the interests, concerns and aspirations of Irish women which in the past has been drowned out by the 'noise' of Irish political history. The book also provides a much more nuanced account of social and cultural change in Ireland in these two decades adding much to our understandings of modern Irish history and the lives of Irish women in particular. Clear writes in an accessible manner and the inclusion of images from the magazines and the engaging content ensures that this publication will appeal not only to academics and students of history but also to those who 'never thought they were interested in history at all'.⁽⁵⁾

Notes

1. Caitriona Clear, 'Irish Women's History Has Arrived' <<https://womenshistoryassociation.com/blog/irish-womens-history-has-arrived/> [2]> [accessed 15 July

- 2016].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922–1961* (Dublin, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. For example *Women's History Review*, Special Issue, 'Revisioning the History of Girls and Women in Britain in the long 1950s' (forthcoming 2016).[Back to \(13\)](#)
 4. For example *Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption*, ed. R. Ritchie, S. Hawkins, N. Phillips & J. Kleinberg (London, 2016).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Caitriona Clear, 'Irish Women's History Has Arrived' <
<https://womenshistoryassociation.com/blog/irish-womens-history-has-arrived/> [2]> [accessed 15 July 2016].[Back to \(5\)](#)
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