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**‘Compulsory Irishness’ :
Continuity and Change in the Irish Rural Idyll**

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This paper is based on a specific strand of my of my PhD research. My thesis topic is about rural Irish women and their friendships, however this paper considers ‘the rural’ and what specific forms of femininity are constructed by discourses on the rural in Ireland.

To do this I’m going to examine the links between ‘the rural idyll’ in Ireland, national identity and the role prescribed for women in that particular identity. I also wish to explore particular tensions between the changing dynamics of rural spaces and the reproduction of the rural as a heteronormative family space. I’m going to illustrate my exploration of this by looking at texts produced by the Irish Countrywomen’s Association.

Everybody has some concept as to what is the ‘rural’. Thoughts of the countryside in Ireland often bring images of farms, quaint villages, green fields, thatched cottages, stoned walls and beautiful scenery. ‘The rural’ also invokes discourses of community, of a ‘simpler life’ devoid of social problems, a good safe place for raising children, less crime and ‘salt of the earth’ people. In order to unpack the term the ‘rural idyll’ I find it useful to look at Jo Little work, a feminist geographer writing in a British context and who has played a vital role in bring debates of gender performance into the field of social geography.

In a paper Little and Austen comment that rural idyll represents the positive aspects of rural life. So that begs the question what are the positive aspects, how are they represented and what role does the rural idyll play in social relations? An example to consider is that the rural idyll in Western cultures is also conceptualised as a white space. Sarah Neal (2002: 443) discussing the recent fox hunting debate in Britain, points to the ‘idyllisation’ of the rural particularly in relation to pastoral images and argues that these ‘provide the corner stones of a specific national identity’. Press coverage in Britain represented what ‘true’ country folk look like and what they value. Neal comments;

The ironic contradiction of a highly industrialised and urbanised country using rurality as a pervasive representation of its identity is significant because it is based in a de-radicalized nostalgia for a pre-multicultural Britain. (Neal, 2002; 444)

The same comment can also be applied to Ireland. This example illustrates the role of the ‘rural idyll’ in enduring representation of national identity. A second point made by Little and Austen is

...despite this inherent fluidity in the meanings ascribed to the countryside, there are clearly elements of cultural representation of rurality that endure, changed only minimally over time and space. (Little and Austin, 1996; 102)

So this refers to my title that whilst the countryside is dynamic and changing place (ie the 'flux' or 'change' of the rural, therefore the rural on one hand is not a fixed category) , it is also possible to recognise elements of representations that endure over a long period of time (i.e. the continuity of the rural). In other words particular meanings that are represented by the rural idyll continue to be reinforced and re-inscribed in Irish National identity hence a 'compulsory Irishness'.

Nationalism and Rurality in Ireland

Now I will discuss the specific links between 'the rural' and Irish Nationalism. Since the foundation of the Irish Free state in 1922 the 'rural idyll' has played a significant role in the construction of a homogenous national identity

That Ireland that we dreamed of would be... a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of serene old age. Eamonn DeValera, The Irish Times, 18 March 1943

Eamonn DeValera was the first Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Irish Free State and author of the Irish constitution. He played a significant role in rejuvenating Irish language and culture. This quotation reflects the image he had of rural Ireland, of the nation and of the role of women. His romantic view of rural Ireland played a role in creating a homogenous Irish identity. Three articles in the constitution are of particular relevance;

- 11. 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.
- 21° In particular, 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.

- 2° 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.
- That there may be established on the land in economic security as many families as in the circumstances shall be practicable.

The struggle for land was an important part of the nationalist agenda and hence linked to national identity. Therefore rural communities and particularly the Irish farm family became an important representation of DeValera's vision of Irish identity. Here are actual constitutional links to the role of the land in national identity coupled with what is considered appropriate as a women's role. Women's national identity is associated with the home and particularly in a *supportive* role ensuring the 'common good'.

However national identity is about more than mere constitutional links, nationality must be practiced and reproduced. Michael Billig (1995:6) introduces the term banal nationalism which he describes as

... the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.

Banal nationalism is therefore immediate and reproduced continuously in everyday local life. It is particularly useful to think about cottage images as an example in the reproduction of nationality in Ireland. Cusack (2001:223) in her article 'A 'Countryside Bright with Cosy Homesteads': Irish Nationalism and the Cottage Landscape' discusses the use of cottage imagery in Irish art commenting 'the idea of a simple rural community based on the family and the village, [is] the image of a past golden age.' These images are constantly invoked by nineteenth century Irish Nationalists seeking 'folk roots'. Images from the rural West of Ireland have come to invoke nationalism and Irish identity. This art coincided with Eamonn DeValera's political influence. Cussack (2001: 231) comments 'this cult of the rural was maintained despite the fact that Ireland has effectively entered the modern world' and the cottage landscape imagery 'fulfils an important modernising function for the state to produce

a homogenous national identity'. Kneafsey (1998:112) also discuss rural imagery in the representation Irish culture in tourist literature commenting 'tourism constructs or reconstructs place identities'. Again the rural cottage imagery is continually reproduced and a significant example of banal nationalism. Therefore the reproduction of rural nationalism in Ireland remains significant today despite the continuous change in the countryside. Although only 7% of Ireland's rural population work directly in farming, the other 93% of the rural population does not occupy the same status in Ireland's nationalist imagination. While marginal populations can be imagined in city spaces to a certain degree 'the rural idyll' predominantly envisioned as a space for the nuclear family.

I will now look at some literature of the Irish Countrywomen's Association in order to explore the themes of continuity and change in rural Ireland. This group was originally founded in 1910 and called the United Irishwomen; it changed its name in 1935 as the organisation felt its name had nationalist connotations. From the outset the group intended to be 'non sectarian and non party political' as a response to the volatile political situation in Ireland at that time. The group has retained this ethos. The aims of the organisation are broad, to improve the standard of living of rural women throughout Ireland.

It is important to consider this group in the context of rurality and nationalism. It is the oldest and largest women's group in Ireland. The group has representatives on government advisory bodies but was never perceived as a threat to social relations. The group negotiates improvements in women's lives within the dominant system. The group is both respected and trivialised. Generally it is perceived as a conservative organisation by the Irish press due to the fact it did not support the divorce referendum in 1996. Its name also calls to all the women of Ireland, not designating a specific interest group.

Today the group's membership is declining and a large proportion of its membership is over 65. The leadership of the I.C.A. is aware of the need for new younger members. It now has guilds in city areas. Here is the organisations mission statement

'the aims and objectives of the Association are to bring women together in fellowship and through cooperative effort to develop and improve the standard of rural and urban life in Ireland having due regard to our Irish culture and to encourage the use of the Irish language in the affairs of Banracht na Tuaithe'

Here we can see that the organisation does not see itself in opposition to the Irish state but has a duty to maintain the appropriate Irish culture. The organisation is not specific about its purpose, indeed every guild in the Association does something different based on the needs of its members and the community it is involved in. The organisation plays a supportive role in community enhancing the services that may or not be provided by the state. Indeed their community work generally does not conflict with the needs of heteronormative families or the views of the dominant community. Now I wish to turn my attention to an I.C.A. application form. This leaflet was designed to attract new members to the declining organisation.



The ICA claims a space Irish women's identities. 'Join the organisation that has changed to the face of the women of Ireland'. They claim an active role in Irish life and Irish history. This however is juxtaposed against the image of a woman who looks decidedly unassertive and non-threatening. There is a disassociation with the rural roots of the organisation the ICA logo is not designed to attract attention. There is a simultaneous rejection and acclamation of the I.C.A. history, the organisation that changed the face of the women of Ireland has made its logo small so as not to attract the reader's immediate attention.

The woman pictured looks like a suburban housewife she does not represent the city or the countryside. This can also be considered a somewhat maternal image with the women

looking downwards. Is this the modern version of Eamonn DeValera's comely maiden? What would this woman do? According to the leaflet she can spend her leisure time enjoying in the plush surroundings of An Grianan playing Golf and pampering herself. This woman appears middle class with time to fill with leisure activities.

We also see the ICA's enactment of 'banal nationalism'. The ICA's logo is in green, we see their name appear in Irish. 'The ICA is proud of its heritage and community involvement'. Again this reiterates the supportive role of women in Irish life.

'We are non-sectarian and non-party political' in one sense the ICA has contested the divisions Irish politics but plays the role of nurturer and peace keeper. Everybody is welcome to the organisation. Instead of the mission statement membership of the organisation is based on fun and sharing activities. This reflects the changing role of the countryside in Ireland. The countryside is now less about farming production and more about leisure. The Irish countrywoman appears to be a suburban housewife with leisure time. The friendships of the Irish Countrywomen are based around educational and fun activities, there is more emphasis on a separate life for women beyond the home.

Conclusion

My examination of the leaflet is not a comment on the I.C.A. as whole but I would argue that through this leaflet the I.C.A. reproduces women's prescribed role in the rural idyll and in Irish national identity. Although there are elements that indicate that the Irishwoman is now a suburban housewife rather than a countrywoman. In the leaflet we also see the increasing importance of leisure activities in national identity. The Ireland represented is modern and middle class. The sharing of friendship and activities suggest that the Irish women can have a life beyond home and community but her role is still a supportive one. This leaflet simultaneously conceptualises a changing aspirational Irish identity *and* the banal nationalism through which a dominant rural identity is asserted. However I would argue the importance of recognising the tensions between the dominant rural identity and the diversity of rural women. There is need to acknowledge the multiplicity and change of rural areas and its inhabitants but it is essential to understand how the 'rural idyll' occupies the psyche and reproduces itself in the imaginings of an Irish identity and Irish womanhood.

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