

Chapter 9.

Remembering the Creameries

Maura Cronin

Introduction

What were the creameries and why remember them? Milk collecting and butter producing centres, the Irish co-operative creameries were first established in the 1890s, with another organisational wave in the 1920s. For almost a century, they remained dotted through the Irish countryside, particularly in the traditional dairying areas of Munster and South Ulster. Areas without their own creamery – particularly in the more westerly regions of Cork and Clare - were served in the 1940s by the ‘travelling creameries’. Lorries, equipped with the necessary separating and weighing machinery, and stopping at particular cross-roads to collect milk from small suppliers, these were disappearing by the 1960s. Further change accompanied Ireland’s accession to the European Economic Community in the early 1970s. With the increasing concentration of milk processing in large modern plants, many smaller creameries were closed and their business merged with that of their larger neighbours. By the early 1990s, only 34 independent creameries were left of the 187 which had existed in the Republic three decades earlier. By the opening of the twenty-first century, only 29 remained.¹

Sources of Memory

Two main sources recall the creameries. The first is documentary: the large number of histories published to celebrate the anniversaries of individual co-operatives. The second source is oral: informal interviews with individual suppliers, managers and workers, discussing the creamery’s role in the local community within the range of living memory – from the 1930s to the phased

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rationalisation or closure in the decades after 1970. Over 130 such interviews have been recorded since 2000 by the Oral History Centre and undergraduate students in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Mostly covering the counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary, but with a sprinkling from other counties in Munster and beyond, the creamery interview collection is the fruit of a meeting with a number of local historians from County Limerick in December 1999. That meeting discussed a number of oral history project themes as potential windows into the changing social world of rural Ireland. Workplace, religion, leisure, folk-beliefs were all considered, but ultimately, the agreed theme was that of the creameries. This decision was reached for two reasons: firstly, because the creameries deserve to be recalled in their own economic right, and, secondly, because they were foci of Irish rural society in their day – a meeting place where people met, talked, and argued on a daily basis. From the historian's vantage point, therefore, they provide a lens through which to review social gradation, community solidarity (and fissure), gender relations and local pride in a world changing immeasurably in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Above all, the creameries bring up the issue of memory and remembering, nostalgia and pragmatism regarding the passage of time and changing ideas and lifestyles.

The published and the oral sources complement one another. The creamery histories, well researched and written by those with first-hand memories and with access to creamery records, provide unparalleled insights into the foundation of the creameries, the identity of their suppliers and the ebb and flow of their fortunes over a long period. The interviews, precisely because they are less formal and are unconstrained by the word-limits necessary in published work, add considerably to our knowledge of processes considered routine in their day, but unfamiliar to a new generation. Take, for instance, one former creamery worker's description of the process of butter packing in his local creamery five miles east of Limerick city:

'They would use these big, like, wooden shovels to take the butter out of the churn and they would cut it into sections and they would put it in. He [the butter maker] would line, ah, butter-boxes - they came in about 18 inches square, slightly narrower on the bottom, slightly wider on the top. Now they were about 18 square but they were also about 18 inches deep and they would use a pounder – everything now was thoroughly cleaned, and the pounder was made of wood and you would use that pounder to pound the butter into the box. Now he would start off by lining the box with a greaseproof paper, again made out very nice and clean. He would wrap it on all four sides, in actual fact 5 sides, bottom and four sides - and he would line it all and he would start off to put the butter in. He used the little wooden pounder to pound and to firm up the butter nicely into the box, then he would wrap the greaseproof paper across the top and put a wooden lid on it. That butter was then put into a cold-room and kept until it was required. That was the larger boxes, but then they had a custom for the pound of butter and they would cut those using, like it was to all intents and purposes, it was like a wire mesh that they would just pull down across it and they would cut it into uniform slices or square which would be one pound.²

Moreover, as the on-the-spot answers show, the oral evidence lends a freshness and immediacy to the published record. Answers are spontaneous, innuendoes are more easily interpreted, and the emotions accompanying the act of 'remembering' are more readily accessible.

It was this emotion, this powerful wish to remember, which characterised the responses to the Oral History Centre's appeal for interviewees. Our contacts with local radio and provincial local newspapers throughout Munster, outlining our plan and appealing for interviewees, met with an enthusiastic response. Even more so did the poster displayed in branch libraries and published in the *Vale Star* and *Observer*, which serve East and West Limerick respectively. The poster read:

Remembering the Creameries 1930-1975.

Were you a creamery supplier? Shareholder? Worker? Manager?

Do you remember going to the creamery during the school holidays?

Did you prepare the churns and tankards for the milk?

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Did you feed calves with the skim milk when it came back home?

What are your memories or creamery life?

'That loaded word, "remember"' proved the most powerful 'open sesame' in the project, as was clear when we received an answer back from a ninety-year old West Limerick farmer. He wrote no letter, but just cut out the small poster from the newspaper and, beside each 'do you remember?' question, simply wrote 'yes'... 'yes'... 'yes', adding that he would talk to us about his local creamery, with which he had a life-long connection.³ Others echoed him, as did the mid-Tipperary farmer who confided in the student interviewing him: "'Tis grand now for someone to want to talk about it'.⁴

A Changing World

This desire to remember and to record seems particularly sharpened by individual and community awareness of the fast pace of change in their local areas. The local landscape confirms this sense of passing time. Though a number of creameries like Fealebridge on the Limerick-Kerry border continue to operate as intake centres for the larger companies, the more common vista is one of disused and decayed buildings or sites vacant following demolition. At Clarina, five miles west of Limerick city, the creamery has been obliterated and replaced by a petrol and heating oil outlet, while at Annacotty, north of the city, a minimal continuity remains, with the old creamery site covered by a huge new Co-Op Store. Elsewhere, the creamery's physical shape has been frozen in time: the ultimate surrender to change is visible in the creamery building's transition to heritage centre at Drumcollogher (Co. Limerick) and Emly (Co. Tipperary) or its incorporation into a new and thriving business, like the Creamery Pub near the Bunratty folk park in County Clare.

This 'then and now' contrast dominated many of the memories. As one West Waterford farmer expressed it:

'Oh sure, there was a vast difference (between then and now). In my memory there was about 50 people working there and about five or six - even at one stage seven - trucks working out of there. And I suppose there was 200 suppliers coming there with milk in horses and carts, and of course that's all gone now and there is only two, three people working there and two trucks working out of it. No milk coming in there.'⁵

Even for those who did not participate in the oral history project as interviewees, the wish to remember is seen clearly in the keeping of creamery-related mementoes. The most common of these are the creamery books (monthly records of the milk delivered to the creamery, measured in pounds rather than gallons) tucked away on shelves and in drawers in almost every farming household which had links with the creamery. Equally powerful in jogging the memory are the butter-papers, the squares of greaseproof butter wrapping bearing the name and emblem of the individual creamery which, as one undergraduate researcher found, are difficult enough to locate:

'I did manage to lay my hands on some old butter wrappers from [Drumkeen] creamery. A local woman told me that many of them took these as souvenirs when the creamery closed.'⁶

Confidentiality

In sharing their memories, individuals were very generous in donating these creamery books and butter wrappers, or loaning them for microfilming and photographing. The accessing of creamery ledgers and other official creamery records – either individual volumes or incomplete runs – proved more problematic. Many of these, following the closure of the creamery, were rescued from rubbish skips or procured through the efforts of concerned individuals by means which they were not always willing to divulge. The question of ledgers raises a number of conflicting but intermeshed issues surrounding the memory of the creameries. Firstly, the lengths to which individuals have gone in order to salvage some of the

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remaining records shows the strength of the desire for conservation and remembering. Secondly, there is a frightening degree of attrition of such records. Even as this chapter is being written, two Co. Limerick creameries have been closed and the records have disappeared. Such destruction is linked with the third issue – that of confidentiality and local sensitivity. Little has changed since the Limerick Rural Survey of the early 1960s explained that ‘the community is secretive about its private affairs’ (Newman, p. 199) and informal enquiries regarding the salvaging and archiving of the records were in some cases met with a very hesitant response: would farmers’ private business be exposed to the public, particularly in relation to income and bad debts? This may be all very frustrating to the researcher, but it is a salutary reminder – and one which the project organisers respect unreservedly – that the individual’s and community’s right to privacy must be given precedence over all other considerations. Those who have been generous enough to share with us their memories and their hospitality must be put first, for without them there would have been no project and no windows into the changing world of the later twentieth century.

How wide was their world?

The creamery memories cast much light on the parameters of the Irish rural world from the 1930s onwards. How far did people travel? Did their world extend only a few miles, or did it stretch much further? What role did the daily journey to the creamery play in defining the boundaries? Why were creameries built where they were, and why did people patronise certain creameries rather than others?

The centrality of the parish to the shaping of local identity was stressed in the Limerick Rural Survey of 1964 (Newman, p. 160). The creamery community, however, transcended parish boundaries, most creameries serving several parishes or portions thereof, while parishes were frequently divided between different creameries. As a mid-Tipperary farmer explained to his young interviewer,

You'd be talking about the parish of Boherlahan Dualla.. There'd be several of the farmers down towards the Moycarkey side [would come to Grange creamery]... At the other end of the parish they went down to Littleton. ...You'd Ardmayle at the further end of the parish and... the Cashel creamery [and].. there was a creamery down in Boherlahan.'

A farmer from the Limerick side of the Shannon Estuary painted a similar picture:

'I'm trying to remember how many parishes that came. You had them from Ballysteen, Kilcornan, Cappagh, Barrigone and Coolcappagh. That was about it, the five different parishes. I'd say the furthest away would have been around twelve miles down below near Pallas.'⁷

In general, the creamery world covered an area running out from five to eight miles in all directions, though in parts of Mayo the journey to the creamery might be as long as twelve to fourteen miles.⁸ The mode of transport available determined the geographical range of the suppliers, usually corresponding to the distance which could be covered in a reasonable space of time in a horse- or donkey-drawn cart. In the Mayo case, the long range was both explained and facilitated by the presence in the community of a hauler:

'A hauler, he used to bring all the milk in a long trailer; used to bring up to a hundred cans of milk.... There would be a hauler in our area, now, bring[ing] up to a hundred cans, and another hauler in Kilmaine and the far side of Ballinrobe – plenty of haulers.'⁹

'Conveyances'

The modes of transport described by interviewees reveal many aspects of rural life in the forty years up to the 1970s. Firstly, there was the endless resourcefulness of individuals in utilising and adapting scarce resources. Anything on wheels could be used to bring milk to the creamery, like the baby's pushchair which one former

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creamery manager remembered as the 'conveyance' used by a very small supplier in the hilly country on the Cork-Limerick border in the late 1960s, or the slightly more elaborate contraption used by a County Mayo woman a decade previously:

'Mrs. O'Brien, she lived a mile and half [from the creamery], about a mile we'd say. She used to bring two cans of milk in a trailer at the back of the bike. A small little trailer with two bicycle wheels on it, and two tins of milk in it. Twenty gallons of milk, I think, she used to have in it, I don't know....'¹⁰

The adaptable donkey was the favoured mode of transport of women and smaller suppliers:

'Ah, there were a few women: Babe Casey with a donkey, Phil Seán Óg with a pony and Molly the Wood used to hitch a lift with her churn... over the road, from her own cross. Whoever'd come on first would take Molly, Molly and her churn over the road...'¹¹

But the donkey was more than this. He was the animal which young boys took to the creamery before the capacity to control a horse marked their initiation into manhood: 'I took a donkey when I was about ten years old.... Because I wouldn't be old enough for a horse. You'd want to be 14 to 15 years before you'd be allowed a horse'.¹²

A Wider World?

The increasing availability of motor transport in the late 1960s did not unduly alter the size of the creamery's world, suppliers with a new access to tractors and cars seldom changing creameries, but continuing to deliver where their fathers had done before them. Creamery workers, however, could forge links between the local and the wider world. With the purchase of lorries by individual creameries, beginning

in the 1920s and accelerating once wartime rationing came to an end in the early 1950s, the business connections of the local creamery – and the personal experiences of some of its workers - extended further afield. South Tipperary creamery lorries travelled daily with milk to Urneys Chocolate Factory in Tallagh, Dublin, while the lorry driver from North Cork's Boherbue Co-Op routinely brought pigs to the bacon factories in Limerick. (Kilmanagh Centenary Committee, 1994, p. 73; Drangan Centenary Committee, 1997, p. 4; Guerin, 2001, pp. 72-3). Links with other creameries were also provided by the fitters who travelled around repairing equipment and supplying and fitting machinery parts.¹³

The butter makers, too, provided a link with other places. Many butter makers were young women who were not natives of the area but who came to the creamery from other areas and then married a local farmer. The butter makers at Mullinahone included women not only from other parts of Tipperary, but also from the counties of Limerick, Carlow, Kilkenny and Wexford, while a farmer from between Limerick city and Kilmallock described how his mother

‘in her early days... came down from the North of Ireland – Tyrone. Down from Tyrone as a butter maker, passed her exams, her dairy and science exams above in the North, and this was the only place she could get, she was assigned down here.’¹⁴

Not isolated, therefore, yet closely tied to the local world, the creameries and the memories surrounding them exude a strong sense of place and fierce local loyalties. The creamery suppliers at Newcastlewest in County Limerick, for instance, had an ill-defined rivalry with the larger neighbouring creamery at Castlemahon.¹⁵ Similar rivalry existed between the South Kilkenny creameries of Kilmanagh and Cuffesgrange and between the North Cork neighbours of Boherbue and Ballyclough (Kilmanagh Centenary Committee, 1994, p. 38; Guerin, 2001, pp. 72-3). The creameries at the South Tipperary villages of Mullinahone, Drangan and Killenaule had no hesitation in tendering each other assistance when building work was in progress, but kept a close eye on one another's doings, and resolutely

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opposed any moves towards amalgamation (Drangan Centenary Committee, pp. 66, 107). This pride of place, enforced by claims to skill and quality, was effectively summed up in the butter wrappers arriving in the kitchens of local suppliers and non-suppliers alike. As early as 1912, Kilmanagh's wrappers, advertisements and letter-heads stressed its 'Cille-na-Manach' butter's victories at the Royal Dublin Winter Show (Kilnamanagh Centenary Committee, 1994, p. 37). Four decades later, on East Waterford kitchen tables the wrapper proudly proclaimed 'Gaultier Creamery', while consumers on the line from Limerick to Tipperary could chose between the produce of 'Dromkeen, Manufacturers of Choicest Creamery Butter' and that labelled 'Four Elms' from the rival creamery at Drumbanna, outside which grew four large elm trees. Or one could go for the butter from nearby Kilross, whose wrapper, combining quality and antiquity, proclaimed it to be 'the oldest creamery in Ireland, yet the most up-to-date'.¹⁶ Even more dramatic was the advertising line followed the creamery at Ballyduff near the north Tipperary town of Thurles. Established in 1898, and called the Centenary Creamery to link it with that year's commemoration of the 1798 rebellion, its butter-wrapper bore the symbol of the pike-man and adapted to commercial purposes Ingram's rousing nationalist poem, 'Who Fears to Speak?':¹⁷

'Who fears to speak of '98,
Or the famous butter that bears the date,
Here in the lists full armed I stand
To champion both the date and brand'.
(Smith, 1998, back cover.)

Mutuality and Sociability.

All those remembering the creamery stressed its function as a meeting place where suppliers, irrespective of status, engaged in social conversation, leg-pulling and

usually (though not always) friendly argument, and where social divisions were bridged by the camaraderie of the assembly. From Clare, a former manager recalled the male conversation outside the creamery:

‘There’d be a lot of talk... it would be mainly about farming in general, you know,... the price of cattle, things that went on, what happened in the pub the night before. There might be a fight here or a row there, neighbours that fell out, court cases. Oh, there was a variety of telling yarns, stories, dirty stories naturally.... There would be a lot of argument about football matches and so on. Then there would be other issues like in the newspapers and you know, court cases would be discussed and murders and all the rest of it. And there would be a bit of light-hearted banter and a good lot of lies told, you know. Some one trying to put one over on someone else, you know, there was quite a bit of that...¹⁸

And, from County Offaly:

Oh yes, plenty of boys... and girls [would meet there], and *am*, especially on a Monday morning if there was a dance [on the previous night], we’d be talking about the dances’.¹⁹

For the women who went to the creamery, the social mixing was equally important, particularly if a large contingent of those attending were female. As an 88 year-old West Cork woman put it in describing the assembly at the Travelling Creamery near Dunmanway, ‘Oh, [you’d be] talking to every single whole one. It was all talk. Everyone was talking.’²⁰ A near contemporary from the Killarney region, painted a similar scene filled with

the gossip of the day and the night before, and everything, and talking about the girls who were going with fellows and all this kind of thing: the general thing - anything strange at all. ‘Twas like what we’d call the *News of the World* paper. You’ll come home with plenty of news.’²¹

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News spread all the more effectively during the long wait in the creamery queue. The journey there and back might only take ten to fifteen minutes each way, but 'then you could have to wait, you'd chat with the neighbours and you'd wait your turn, so it might be customary to spend an hour or an hour-and-a-half going to the creamery and coming back.'²²

But the news was not just for those who delivered the milk. 'Well, any news at the creamery?'²³ was the first question put by wives, elderly uncles, mothers, fathers and neighbours to the one returning from the creamery. 'Everyone brought a different story from a different side of the parish. You carried home the story with you, who was dead, who won the matches and all that...'²⁴ Both the creamery visit and the news carried home eased the isolation of those confined to the house – married women with children, older people – and of single people with few other social contacts except Sunday mass. As one Co. Limerick farmer put it,

'There was a lot of bachelor farmers. They met no one on the farm and they had no contact with anyone until they'd go to the creamery. It was a bit of craic and sport going on. Where's after when the creamery closed they were on their own all day and they'd get depressed being all on their own on the farm. The creamery was good for them mentally and physically. It was an outing. I know you'd get drowned wet, but still they were out and meeting people, whereas when the creamery closed, they were kind of hermits on their own.'²⁵

Social Gradation

However, recollections also suggest that the creamery camaraderie was to some extent superficial. Though the memories seldom use the words 'class' and 'status', they closely echo the Limerick Rural Survey of the early 1960s to suggest a

closely-knit but finely stratified rural society where social distinction coexisted and competed with mutuality.

The creamery manager was central to the success and identity of the creamery. Indeed, one creamery centenary history, that of Drangan in South Tipperary, had its chapters arranged by manager: 'The William Murray Period', 'The Ned Hall Period', 'The Jim Blackwell Period', 'The Pat Sugrue Period' – four managers spanning over half a century. The neighbouring (and rival) creamery at Mullinahone had just twelve managers over a ninety-year period, the last 68 years being dominated by four managers (Drangan Centenary Committee, 1997, p. 3; Foley, 1993, p. 152). Along with the priest, teacher and doctor, the manager was at the top of the local social pyramid, the Limerick Rural Survey of the early 1960s describing him as being of

'exceptionally high status. Farmers believe that it is necessary to be on good terms with him because he has great economic power. The creamery provides a limited number of jobs for farmers' sons. So many farmers' sons compete for the small number of jobs that they are valued far more than they are worth. It is a common illusion among farmers that such jobs can only be got by currying favour with the manager. Most of the farmer's earnings come from the creamery, and there is a definite fear that anyone who is not a friend of the manager will get small returns for his produce' (Newman, 1964, p. 197)

From North Kerry came a story, possibly not totally accurate, but illustrating the same myth of the manager's omnipotence:

'Three farmers were talking about the best way to get a good return at the creamery. The first fellow said: "I feed the cows raw potatoes: that brings up the milk yield". The second said: "No, you'd be better off to boil the spuds first, and then give them to the cows." The third said: "Not at all. I find you're better off with the raw spuds,

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but it isn't to the cows you give them. Give them to the manager.'²⁶

But neither the Survey nor the myths accurately capture the complex relationship between manager and suppliers. Power and status there was, frequently embodied in the creamery manager's house, equal in standing to that of the parish priest (Drangan Centenary Committee, p. 71). But such status was dependant on the manager's success in running the creamery:

'The manager in those days, the creamery manager, it was policy that if he was a successful man and got on with the farmers he stayed, and managers in creameries as far as the farmers were concerned were probably there to stay if they were successful and getting on with the farmers. So, in the time period that I remember the creamery, there would have been three or possibly four managers over quite a long time period.'²⁷

Many managers went far beyond the call of duty by quietly stepping in to advance money to suppliers who were in economic difficulty, squaring the debt when times improved.²⁸ Nor was this linked with any undue personal prosperity on the manager's part, as he was very much second-fiddle to the more powerful members of the creamery committee, on whom he depended for increases in salary.²⁹ As one former manager from County Clare explained:

'It might have been a well held job in public eyes, but it was never a well-paid job. No, because there is no money in the farming industry, only, so we were never a well-paid group, we were just adequate at best. And while we might have the perception of the honour and glory, that was as far as it went. People certainly would have asked us our opinion on various things and in that sense people looked up to a few key figures in the parish, whereas they now tend to form their own opinion.'³⁰

Within the ranks of the suppliers, too, there were definite lines of economic cleavage. Larger farmers tended to dominate the creamery committees, some families being represented on the committee over many years (Drangan Centenary Committee, p. 93) At Kilmanagh in South Kilkenny, three generations of the same family might serve on the same committee and some individuals served for over half a century. But the committee did include middle-rank as well as big farmers, and it was much more than a power-brokering and decision-making body. It was something of a man's club which provided a monthly excuse for the farmers involved to escape the daily routine and return briefly to the carefree atmosphere of their days as single men. Joe, a farmer from Shannon-side remembered it thus:

'Once a month the committee [met]. My father was a committee member. I can remember coming and meeting my father at the Square in Askeaton and he'd be in the pub and he would call us in. He'd buy us sweets and he'd tell us to keep quiet, like, not to tell mother when we went home that he was in the pub. She'd be worried that he wouldn't come home or that something might happen to him. If he fell off the bicycle she'd have no one to milk the cows or look after the farm. We were young at the time, and a woman with small children and a lot of responsibilities, naturally had that worry that something was going to happen. They were a crowd of men together and they'd forget about their wives and children.'³¹

The social distinction between smaller and larger farmers was not expressed solely by one's relationship with the committee. The creamery itself was, in many ways, the public forum where individuals' prosperity and status was put on public show and where status was clarified. One farmer explained the gradations in terms of cows:

'There was the five-cow man, the ten-cow man, fifteen-cow man twenty-cow man, forty-cow man. That'd be the max, I'd say at the time, forty cows... they'd have been the bigger farmers of the area'.³²

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Others saw status reflected in the modes of transport used – ‘pony cars, ass and cars, horse and cars – all according to your station’:

‘From these lines of carts it was often estimated what kind of farmers were there, how big they were and how efficient they were. One churn indicated a small farmer; two churns indicated a medium farmer, and three or more churns meant he was a big farmer.’³³ (Guerin, 2001, p. 68).

Even if labourers and farmers did mix in the creamery queue, the social divide was visible to all. One former farm labourer from East Limerick merged memories of the creamery with a general commentary on rural social gradation in the 1940s:

‘You’d have to go to the creamery Sunday morning [while the farmer got ready for mass]. But don’t forget, by and large, at that time the farmer’s boy was really looked down on. He was lower than the lowest step of the ladder, do you understand me? Most of us were nearly illiterate, you know, with pieces on our trowsers... and our shirts hanging out the backsides of our trowsers, and our cap turned back and all that. They wrote songs about us:

‘‘The farmer’s boy to the creamery’s gone,
On an ass and car you’ll find him,
A big ash-plant in the heel of his fist,
And his shirt hanging out behind him.’³⁴

Status and prosperity, however, did not necessarily go hand in hand. Farmers, despite their perceived superiority, to some extent envied the creamery workers who, though laid off in slack times, at least had the ready cash which came from a regular weekly income – a source of some tension between the two groups. As Martin, a creamery worker from the Tipperary-Limerick border, remembered the farmers queuing outside:

'They'd be talking their own chat about the price of milk and "We're working for nothing", and "We should be getting more for our milk". They were always cribbing anyway, no matter what you'd give them.'³⁵

Women's Role

And where did women stand in the world of the creameries? Women, it must be said, with the exception of widows, were relatively few in the ranks of those interviewed, the general pattern being that the wife encouraged the farmer to talk to us about his memories, but would eliminate herself from the conversation with the plea that she 'wouldn't have anything interesting to tell us'. It took some persuasion to convince these women (some of whom had actually worked in the creameries themselves) that their story was well worth recording. This was not, however, a matter of women seeing their former or present role as inferior to that of the man. It seemed, rather, to reflect the reality that in most areas the creamery was 'a man's world'.

'There'd be no women, no', explained a farmer from mid-Tipperary, partly to 'take a rise out of' his young interviewer, but also reflecting the reality that in many areas, women were really not welcomed at the creameries. This was partly because their presence interfered with the free run of the male conversation, but also because it put additional work on the men, who felt obliged to lift the heavy milk churns from the cart to the stand:

'I'd tell you the work was [heavy], you know... there could be a twenty-gallon churn there and say it'd take two good men to lift that up from the trailer up to the platform, and then it'd be spllied into the weighing area. And you might need three men at times. O.K, a smaller ten-gallon churn, maybe a man would lift that on his own all right, but Jaysus, there's no woman who would lift that... You bring me a woman who could lift – or two women – that could lift a twenty-gallon churn between them, and I'll say fair play. I don't think the woman was made yet.'³⁶

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In fact, there were striking regional variations in the gender-balance at the creameries. In West Waterford, women came to the creamery 'when there was no man in the house' while in South West Clare women did the creamery run as a matter of course, in the place of 'the men at work in the fields and the gardens'.³⁷ The further west one went, the more women predominated in the creamery queue. A woman from West Cork explained how

'Twas all women west were going to the [travelling] creamery... 'Twas covered in women all heading west in the back of the cart. There was about a hundred women, away more women [than men]. Only about two men used go to the creamery. 'Twas a creamery of women...³⁸

But even where women did do the creamery run, the task was confined to those of a certain age and marital status. Brigid, who had brought 'the milk of two cows' to a creamery near Killarney, recalled:

Years ago, like, we say fifty years ago, 'twas all women who were going to the creamery, young girls that were at home working on the farms, they went in their donkey car. You see, the girls then, you see, if, if the farm was fairly big, they would have to every... every farmer's wife then had to have a girl working with them, a servant girl they used call them... A married woman never went that time... they had enough to do, minding children'³⁹

The same picture emerged from memories of West Cork:

'And would [the women at the creamery] have been married women, now, or would they have been single women? Molly the Wood wasn't married?

No. Molly the Wood wasn't married at all. Sure Seán was her brother. Babe Casey wasn't married or Ann-Marie Flynn wasn't married, but she was a young girl at that time. But my God, she had the slowest donkey! Well, holy Jesus he was! It would take her an hour and a half to go home, I'm certain like. Well,

the steps were as slow, they were like.. *plod, plod, plod...*⁴⁰ [And Tom stopped short while he thumped out the sound of the donkey's hooves on the table.]

Most of those who shared their memories moved from the specific creamery issue to the wider role of women in rural society, and, even more importantly, to the perceived qualities of a 'good woman'. Common sense and avoidance of 'finery' were qualities high on the list. A West Limerick farmer and his wife showed the bill for their wedding expenses in the 1940s, the man pointing to the absence of 'fancy' things in his bride's trousseau and declaring with unconcealed pride and affection: 'Look at that. Wasn't she the sensible girl!'.⁴¹ The related motif of work dominated the view of what a woman should be. A mid-Tipperary witness talked of the woman's need to be a 'hard worker', who cared for her family and was a good basic cook.⁴² The woman who talked too much was considered a waster of her own and other's time – an issue with some relevance to the daily creamery journey. When Brigid stopped sending milk to the creamery, she kept up the social contacts:

Girls would stop at the house on way from creamery to talk. You see, when they'd come then all the donkeys – about four or five donkeys and cars – would stop outside and I'd be talking... We'd discuss knitting or something and I remember one girl, her mother was a hard worker and she wanted her daughter to be working always, and everything, and so she was up in the hill from us and she used to be able to see us. The car could be stopped outside the door, and she'd say: 'Look at that woman below and she keeping the girls idle'.⁴³

Community and Outside Agencies.

The creamery memories raise one further issue of vital importance in the understanding of rural Ireland over most of the twentieth century, i.e. the relationship between the local community and outside agencies such as the the

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state. In the early days, despite the adulatory accounts in the centenary histories, hazy snippets of memory remain of individual farmers in the 1920s resenting what they saw as undue pressure to become part of the creamery structure.⁴⁴ It is not clear whether this resentment was linked with the 1924 Dairy Produce Act, which placed all creameries under Department of Agriculture control and instituted a central watchdog in the form of the Dairy Produce Inspector.⁴⁵ The intrusion of the state in the shape of this inspector or, as he was known colloquially, the 'dirty man', continued as a source of friction right through the creameries' twentieth century existence. This is apparent in a veritable mesh of modern folklore surrounding the increased tension between a new, centralized age of hygiene and quality on the one hand, and the older, more careless methods on the other. There is the frequently recurring story – uncomfortably authentic - of the cat (or mouse or rat) drowned in the milk. There are accounts of the methods (usually unavailing) used to outwit the manager in his checking of the milk's fat content. Some small suppliers in West Cork mixed goat's milk with cow's milk to keep up fat content, taking care to avoid over-adulteration in case the strong taste would give the game away.⁴⁶ But the individual against whom folklore shows the suppliers pitting their wits was the 'dirty man', who was subjected to the cutting edge of farmers' tongues, as one memory from North Cork suggests:

'One day [the inspector] arrived at Tureen creamery and he was carrying out his duties in a very officious fashion when a supplier arrived with a very rusty dirty tank. The milk was unstrained; there was plenty of straw and sops of hay floating on top of it... But your man was even worse. His hands were not washed for quite some time, his clothes were so dirty, if he got out of them they would stand by themselves. The inspector looked at your man and said: "Tell me, are you a milker?" Your man stopped for a while and looked back at the inspector and replied: "No, I'm the bull". (Guerin, 2001, p. 69)

From the Golden Vale of County Limerick came a similar account:

The inspectors would be there then an odd time. When the farmers would see them, they'd be all shivering in their shoes, of course, like, you know. But this lady was waiting there anyway and when she... when you turn up the tank and turn it upside down, [the inspector] saw the bottom of it, like. It was all black and dirty you know, and he said: 'Look, you've to clean that', he said. She said: 'I'd like to see what you're like if you were turned upside down!' But that was true. She was a gas woman!⁴⁷

It fell to the manager to interpose between the central authorities and the suppliers – a task requiring considerable skill, the mishandling of which could land the manager in trouble with either side. He had to be honest in dealing with the authorities, but he also had to take care that his answers were not so straight as to injure the interests of his suppliers. The way in which managers faced this dilemma has passed into the folklore of individual creameries, as in the following story from South-West Clare:

'Well, the biggest character of all was the manager who was there before me, whom I knew, a man called Mickey Kelleher, who was extremely witty.... There was a scheme running where the creamery would advance £5 to a farmer to buy a cow... to increase milk production. But the loan would have to be sanctioned.... [The manager was asked]: "Kelleher, that man you sent in the request for, how many cows will he have when he buys those five?" He said: "He will now have twelve". "And has he grass for all of those?" he said. "Well" [said Mickey Kelleher] "I don't know about grass for twelve, but he has water for forty" – his land was so wet'⁴⁸.

Nostalgia and Realism

From the early 1970s onwards, the rationalisation and eventually the phased closure of the creameries became inevitable. Most interviewees saw the process

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beginning with the introduction of the bulk tank between the late 1960s and mid-1980s (depending on the region) and accelerating with the transfer of milk separating functions from the smaller to the larger creameries in the 1980s: 'When the bulk tank first came, a few of the boys got in bulk tanks, but they never came to the creamery again.⁴⁹ There was a consequent sense of loss. A number of people employed in the creameries lost their jobs, like the eighty people employed in sixteen branches of the West Clare Creameries:

'Well they stayed in the area and tried to get work locally. Some of them were elderly enough and it suited them to be laid off. Other people it didn't suit but by and large there was a fairly big loss of employment...'⁵⁰

For small suppliers unable to keep up with the demands of a modernising dairy industry, the end of the creameries meant a gradual withdrawal from milk production. Without their daily trip to the creamery they become more isolated from their neighbours – a situation compounded by the institution of Saturday night mass which siphoned many members of the community away from that other focus of rural social life, the chat outside the chapel on Sunday morning.⁵¹

The greatest loss for many was the disappearance of the witty conversation integral to the creamery gathering:

'People wouldn't be stuck for a word... God, you'd some... you had some great characters... they're all gone, really, you know. They're all gone.'⁵²

Yet, in these memories of the creameries, nostalgia was balanced by realism. Individuals were, even unconsciously, capable of looking back with the critical eye of the historian and judging things as they were, rather with the eyes of the present. Maybe this was because they themselves, like their world, had changed with the

times. Former creamery managers, farm labourers and suppliers, all provided an astute retrospective assessment which, though tinged with some nostalgia, was essentially practical and avoided any simplistic generalisations.

On the matter of gender relations, for instance, the memories confirm Caitriona Clear's suggestion that the balance of power between the sexes was very much shaped by individual and family circumstances (Clear, 200, pp. 187-93). When John, an East Limerick farmer and his wife, Peggy were asked, 'Was it a man's world', Peggy immediately responded: 'Indeed it was!' But John took marginally more time to answer: 'No', he said. 'It was the cow's world'. To the intrigued interviewer, he went on to explain how, on a Golden Vale farm, the death of a cow put everything else on hold, father, mother, sons and daughters going without until the vital animal had been replaced.⁵³ A former farm labourer, from within twelve miles of John's home, reminiscing about the tough life of his peers in the 1930s also showed the historian's capacity to contextualize:

'Looking back on it now, I'd say to my lads – they'd say to me: "You were a terrible fool: why did you stay in that system?" But don't forget, there was nothing else, there was nothing else... We didn't take any notice of it at that time. 'Twas accepted as the norm, like.....'⁵⁴

Perhaps the last word should be left to the County Clare creamery manager:

'I don't think anybody would like to go back to the back-breaking things. I suppose it's easy to be nostalgic. The reality is that it was tough work and people didn't have as much money in their pockets. I don't think the people who have moved on would go back to the other way either, so I suppose there is no point in being self-pitying or whatever way you would like to put it.'⁵⁵

Notes:

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¹ Information kindly provided by George Kearns, Irish Co-Operative Society.

² Richie, early 60s, retired plumber, 12 May 2000.

³ Neilus, West Limerick Farmer, 90 years old, October 2000.

⁴ James, farmer from near Cashel, Co. Tipperary, 59 years, April 2001.

⁵ Michael, farmer from north of Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, in his 50s, April 2000.

⁶ Caroline Conway, speaking about her experiences researching Drumkeen creamery, Co. Limerick, May 2001.

⁷ Joe, farmer from Shannon Estuary country, 60s, April 2001.

⁸ Brigid, small farmer's widow, from near Killarney, Co. Kerry, 88 Years, April 2000; Bill, East Cork farmer, 61 years, April 2000; Jack, East Limerick farmer, 60s, April 2000; Dan, South Mayo farmer, 74 years, April 2000.

⁹ Dan, South Mayo, 74 years, April 2000.

¹⁰ Maurice, former creamery manager in County Limerick, 50 years old, February 2001; Dan, South Mayo farmer, 61 years, April 2001.

¹¹ Tom, farmer from near Skibbereen, 60s, West Cork, April 2000.

¹² Tom, April 2000.

¹³ Jim, fitter, North Cork, 60s, April 2000.

¹⁴ Jack, East Limerick farmer, 60s, April 2000.

¹⁵ Bríd, farmer's daughter from near Newcastlewest, 60s, April 2000.

¹⁶ Author's personal memories of East Waterford; butter papers collected by the Oral History project.

¹⁷ Sean Ryder, 'Young Ireland and the 1798 rebellion' in Laurence Geary, 2000, *Rebellion and remembrance in Modern Ireland*, Dublin, p. 135. John Kells Ingram's poem, officially entitled 'The Memory of the Dead' was published in the *Nation* newspaper in 1843. Its opening lines ran:

'Who fears to speak of 'Ninety-Eight?

Who blushes at the name?

When cowards mock the patriot's fate,

Who hangs his head for shame?'

¹⁸ Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000.

¹⁹ Con, farmer's son, Co. Offaly, 60s, April 2001

²⁰ Julia, farmer's wife, near Dunmanway, 88 years, April 2001.

²¹ Brigid, 88 years, April 2000.

²² Richie, early 60s, May 2000.

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- ²³ Kate, farmer's wife, 50s, East Limerick, April 2001.
- ²⁴ Joe, farmer from Shannon Estuary country, 60s, April 2001.
- ²⁵ Joe, April 2001.
- ²⁶ Story told by John, from near Listowel, in his 30s, December 2003.
- ²⁷ Richie, early 60s, May 2000.
- ²⁸ Denis, creamery manager's son, mid-Tipperary, late 60s, April 2001.
- ²⁹ Denis, April 2001.
- ³⁰ Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000.
- ³¹ Joe, farmer from Shannon Estuary country, 60s, April 2001.
- ³² Seán, Co. Limerick farmer, 50s, April 2001.
- ³³ Seán, Co. Limerick farmer, 50s, April 2001; Recollection of retired lorry driver, Den Joe McCarthy of Boherbue, Co. Cork, recorded by Joe Guerin.
- ³⁴ Evidence of Paddy, former farm labourer, East Limerick, March 2001.
- ³⁵ Tim, farmer from near Macroom, Co. Cork, 60s, April 2000; Martin, creamery worker from Tipperary-Limerick border, 60s, April 2000.
- ³⁶ James, farmer from near Cashel, Co. Tipperary, 59 years, April 2001.
- ³⁷ Michael, farmer from north of Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, in his 50s, April 2000; Lily, South-West Clare, 70 years old, April 2000.
- ³⁸ Julia, farmer's wife, near Dunmanway, 88 years, April 2001.
- ³⁹ Brigid, 88 years, April 2000.
- ⁴⁰ Tom, farmer from near Skibbereen, 60s, West Cork, April 2000.
- ⁴¹ Neilus, October 2000.
- ⁴² Denis, creamery manager's son, mid-Tipperary, late 60s, April 2001
- ⁴³ Brigid, near Killarney, 88 years, April 2000.
- ⁴⁴ Evidence of Tom Murphy, the writer's father (c. 1978) regarding his maternal uncles' reluctance to become involved in the creamery near the Nire Valley in County Waterford.
- ⁴⁵ Kilnamanagh Centenary Committee, pp. 62-3.
- ⁴⁶ Julia, farmer's wife, near Dunmanway, 88 years, April 2001
- ⁴⁷ Mick, farmer from near Kilmallock, 59 years, April 2002.
- ⁴⁸ Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000.
- ⁴⁹ Richie, early 60s, retired plumber, 12 May 2000; Bill, East Cork farmer, 61 years, April 2000; James, farmer from near Cashel, Co. Tipperary, 59 years, April 2001.
- ⁵⁰ Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000.
- ⁵¹ Maurice, former creamery manager in County Limerick, 50 years old, February 2001.
- ⁵² Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000
- ⁵³ John, East Limerick farmer, 60s, October 2001.
- ⁵⁴ Paddy, former farm labourer, East Limerick, March 2001.
- ⁵⁵ Seamus, retired creamery manager, Co. Clare, 60s, April 2000

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