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Class and status in twentieth-century Ireland: the evidence of oral history

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In his recent monumental study of twentieth-century Ireland, Diarmaid Ferriter has emphasised the pervasiveness of class distinction, particularly in the decades up to 1960.[1] This consciousness of social class in its specifically Irish setting can be traced to the late 1930s when Arensberg and Kimball examined the shopkeepers and farmers of County Clare through an anthropological lens, while the early 1960s saw the publication of the Limerick Rural Survey, which explored the multiple self-images, social relationships and economic shapers of the various groups in the rural population.[2] In the 1980s political scientists, economists and anthropologists joined in the search for the meaning of status and community.[3] The windows on social stratification were further opened by the plethora of memoirs of childhood, urban and rural, published from the late 1980s onwards. These memoirs can be divided roughly into two types: the nostalgic and romantic, epitomised by Alice Taylor's works on rural Cork, and the starker and more critical memoirs represented by the publications of Frank McCourt on urban Limerick.[4] Even when works like these do not engage directly with the issues of social class and status, such realities can easily be read between the lines: the more negative the memory, the more sharply the inter-status divide that is presented.

What does oral history, i.e. the open-ended interviewing and recording of individuals, suggest about the nature of class and status in Ireland in the period 1930 to 1980? Since 2000 an ongoing recording project of the memories of older people by undergraduate students (mostly twenty-year-olds, but some considerably older) at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick supports Ferriter's view of a status-shaped society, but also prompts a far more nuanced understanding of that world. The interviewees talk about their life experiences, most vivid memories, working practices, pastimes and beliefs; the recorded exchanges seem at first glance to echo closely the published memoirs. Each of these two source types can be divided into the broad categories of 'positive' and 'negative', i.e. those that remember a good (but not perfect) world and those that recall mostly hardship and injustice. But the oral interviews have a number of advantages over the published memoirs. Firstly, they are in most cases far more spontaneous than the planned memoir. Most of those who kindly agree to be interviewed have never before considered recording their memories – 'Sure, what would I have to tell you' – and their narratives are therefore not shaped in advance. This does not mean that interviewees are either unprepared or taken advantage of. They are given an indication in advance of the thrust of the interview, and it is impressed upon them that they can decline to discuss anything that makes them uneasy or that might cause them or others embarrassment in the future. They are also invited to listen to the recording or read the transcript to ensure that they are happy with what has been recorded, and they sign release forms that allow them to stipulate the conditions under which their interview is held and accessed. While this certainly limits the range and depth of material gathered, the collection project prioritises respect for the dignity of the interviewees and their communities and recognition of their contribution.[5]

The second advantage of the oral over the written memoir is the opportunity for exploration provided by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The individual in the interview context responds to questions and is thus prompted to explore areas of experience other than those considered in a self-directed written memoir. Here success depends, of course, on the interviewer's intuition, experience, and capacity as a listener – one of the areas where older interviewers (those whose world at least partly overlaps with that being discussed) have an advantage over all but the

most perceptive twenty-year-olds. The oral interview scores in a third way over the written memoir in that the remembering and 'thinking-it-out' process is far more immediate and visible, and is preserved in the sound recording (and to a lesser extent in the transcript) where pauses, re-phrasing and return questions from interviewee to interviewer can prompt re-assessment and elucidation of the issues under discussion. Most of those participating come to the interview without an axe to grind, and while they certainly speak from a particular vantage point – which, incidentally, makes their evidence all the more valuable to the researcher – their historical awareness is actually well developed. This is not necessarily because they have any formal historical education, but because they are aware (unlike some younger interviewers and, alas, some more experienced historians) that the past must be judged by its own standards rather than those of the present day – 'But sure, that's how it was'.

It is interesting that in the 800 or so interviews we have carried out over almost a decade, interviewees have very seldom used the word 'class', unless pressed to do so by the interviewer. Does this mean that those speaking to us are imposing a retrospective and romanticised 'oneness' on the worlds they inhabited in the decades after the 1930s? This may partly be so, as in the case of the Limerick city woman whose recorded interview on childhood in the 1950s was punctuated by the twin recurring phrases 'Sure, we had nothing' and 'they were great times.'[6] On the other hand, this interview provides a salutary warning that what looks like a contradiction is actually an accurate reflection of complex realities. As Massey expressed it in the British context, identities cannot be regarded as 'singular, fixed or static' and the evidence of oral history similarly suggests that in the Ireland of 1930 to 1980 there existed simultaneously a deep social divide *and* forces that bridged that divide, the divide or the bridge being more or less visible depending on circumstances of time, place and activity.[7]

If class is delineated in the Marxist sense by an individual's relationship to the means of production, then the teasing out of class relationships in the Irish context is problematic. In her recent work on Irish women's experiences in the Second World War, Muldowney treated class in terms of 'people's access to the wealth of their society', while recognising the wide range of influences that are also brought to bear in this regard.[8] A similar nuanced approach is taken here, and while the term 'class' is used, the term 'status' is generally preferred since it takes account of the multiple shapes and shades of individuals' and families' places in the social tapestry.[9]

It is a truism that in rural areas in mid-twentieth century Ireland, land was the ultimate determinant of social status, that a wide gulf separated labourers from farmers, and that the display of such social gradations was common in the everyday round. Public meetings in the local hall or school, more frequent as the 1950s merged into the 1960s, saw an unspoken acceptance of hierarchy with the big farmers sitting in the front rows while the labouring men stood at the back.[10] At the creamery, where milk was brought for separation prior to butter manufacture, the number of churns on the cart (apart from those kindly carried in for a neighbour) made it clear who was 'the five-cow man, the ten-cow man, the fifteen-cow man, the twenty-cow man, the forty-cow man …'. Moreover, differences in status and levels of prosperity were immediately visible in the modes of transport used by those lined up outside the creamery. A horse-drawn cart bespoke a more solid farmer, a donkey cart was the sign of the small man (or woman), and as the 1960s passed, the increasing number of cars at the creamery added another layer to the visible signs of social hierarchy, to be further underlined in the 1970s by the increasing presence of the small bulk tank hitched on behind.[11]

The power of land ownership as a status symbol permeated even the city – possibly because so many city people were only one or two generations removed from the countryside. One elderly Limerick city woman, talking to her granddaughter in 2003, could not hide her pride in her own father's lineage. A fireman, active in some of the city's sporting clubs, he encompassed all the criteria necessary for status and respectability:

> He was the only son, and he was belong [sic] to the X family in Patrick Street ... He was [sic] one of the oldest families in Limerick. And they came in from Ballymore. And his father, he had farm and a pub, and along with having the pub, they would sit into the trap, and go into Limerick ...[12]

But among most urban working people, distinctions – in terms of both material comfort and status – were drawn along the lines of the employment of the main bread-winner in a household. Thus, a 'steady job' was the mark of social solidity, while erratic employment – particularly when a potential suitor was being vetted by family or neighbours – was (understandably) a less desirable condition. 'He's only a one-day worker' was the dismissive comment in Limerick city in the 1950s when referring to a man that depended on casual day-to-day labour, usually on the docks.[13] Yet the manifestations of status varied according to the context, and the gap could be (at least temporarily) bridged in situations where individuals of differing status rubbed shoulders in the execution of everyday work. This was most obvious in the rural context where socio-economic divisions could be transcended by an equally powerful mutuality. Michael, a south Tipperary farmer, pointed out the gradations within the local farming hierarchy and described how these were blurred by the requirements of seasonal work:

> The biggest farm that was around was a neighbour of ours here, twenty-five cows he had. That was a big farmer. And all the rest of us had eight or nine cows. We were the little, middle farmers ... Co-operation was very much always amongst farmers. And we used to get thrashings, thrashings on the corn, and the thrashings was a great old time. We used go from one place to another. We'd be looking forward to the ham and all the nice things we'd get to eat ... A great atmosphere at the thrashings. You'd be chasing the rats and the mice, and you'd see were there any nice girls there ...[14]

Such mutual dependence could narrow even the farmer–labourer divide. Recent research into the Irish Farmer's Union suggests that farmers in the 1920s were very reluctant to confront the newly militant labourers' movement, partly because they feared work stoppages, but also because they had no wish to alienate workers who were also neighbours.[15] Younger interviewers, with no personal memory of the complex nature of social relationships in the early and mid-twentieth century, frequently find it difficult to understand this combined distance and intimacy in the farmer–labourer dynamic. This gulf in understanding came across clearly in one interview between a young undergraduate and a former farm labourer from east Limerick. Having heard about the back-breaking work the labourer was expected to do in the 1940s, he asked: 'And what about the farmer – what would he be doing when ye were doing all this work?', to be quickly put right by his interviewee: 'The farmer? Jesus, he'd be working too, most of them all worked too.'[16]

The creamery, too, despite the visible hierarchy in the line of waiting vehicles, was the spot where big and small farmers and the 'boys' employed by farmers congregated on a daily basis on a temporarily equal footing. Nor was it a meeting place only for those working the land. In West Kerry the local fishermen, too, gathered there to meet up with farmers to exchange the news.[17] In this situation the pecking order was grounded not only in acreage or cow ownership but also in punctuality, machismo and one-upmanship. Being first down to the creamery in the morning was seen as the sign of a 'good farmer' (or a painfully punctilious one, depending on the vantage point of the interviewee) and neck-and-neck races to be first in the queue with horse, cart and churns, were not uncommon.[18] The chat in the queue, moreover, was mostly – though not entirely – male:

> 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 ...[19]

Such conversation among the assembled menfolk was, moreover, geared not only to spreading the latest news but to cutting neighbours down to size either in their presence or *in absentia*: 'The creamery was often regarded as a place to carry out a bit of light-hearted blackguarding and to send the next fellow off with a bellyful of lies ...'

The social divide was also bridged by the mutual acknowledgement of 'respectability', that intangible yet powerful force that prompted the labourer to recognise the farmer who was a good employer and neighbour as 'a thorough gentleman' and the term 'good stock' to be applied to the labouring family that had long associations with the neighbourhood.[20] My own mother remembered her County Waterford farming father's deep respect (which did not, of course, imply social egalitarianism) for one of his workmen who was virtually in charge of an out-farm about five miles from the family home.[21] One North Kerry woman (pseudonym Peggy) who had been in service with a neighbouring farmer in the mid-1940s remembered how the bonds between her own family and that of her employer were rooted in a common experience of work and a shared value system:

> *Interviewer*: Did she [the farmer's wife] have children?
> *Peggy*: Yeah, she did.
> *Interviewer*: And what did she do?
> *Peggy*: She helped around. She was only a housekeeper [housewife] too, but they all had to, we were working people that time, going back fifty-two years, like . . . She was a very exact woman so I had to be exact too, like. That's how we were keeping it up, like. So it wasn't bad at all, like. Then we would have six weeks off at Christmas. She would love it. She would love giving me presents of cakes going home. She would make the Christmas cake and all for me . . .
> *Interviewer*: For your family?
> *Peggy*: Yes, for my family, because my mother worked there before that . . . She did – my mother worked there and my father worked there. Yeah, and they thought we were very honest people.

The importance of 'non-workplace social relations' cannot be emphasised enough as shapers of identity and status in mid-twentieth-century Ireland.[22] Among men, occupational interaction was further cemented by alcohol-centred sociability. The linked yet separate worlds of farmer, cattle dealer and drover converged on fair day, not just crossing a status divide but also dovetailing the urban with the rural. One small-town entrepreneur from north Clare recalled the mixing pot of his father's public house in the 1940s:

> . . . and the drover's name was Denny Joyce. My father knew him well from the marts and whatever, and he called me over. And my father was outside the counter talking to Denny and he called me over to give him a half whiskey. It was an awful bad day, it had been raining very heavily and his coat was drenched and my father said to him, 'Denny' he said, 'why don't you take your coat off and hang it up while you're drinking your whiskey'. And he said, 'Well to tell you the truth, Mr Connors,' he said, 'just look at it' he said, 'It wouldn't be worth hanging . . . '[23]

The less frequent sharing of work and the occupationally-related socialising may account partly for the more visible status gap within the urban context. In the cities, meeting places were more likely to underline than to blur the status divide. For example, the dispensary, where supplementary welfare payments were made and free medical consultation provided for those unable to afford private treatment, was a veritable manifestation of class division. Those who congregated there – mostly women with their children – were acutely aware of the gap between themselves on the one hand and, on the other, both the dispensary officials and medical personnel and the more prosperous families who never set foot in the dispensary. Yet, just like the creamery in the rural context, the dispensary, for all its class connotations, was a communal meeting point for those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. In this way, it acted as a bridge spanning divisions *within* the ranks of those attending: some chronically poor, others temporarily reduced in circumstances by the bread-winner's death, desertion or unemployment, still others modestly comfortable but entitled to free medical attention. The long waiting time dovetailed with the conversation about shared problems to give a sense of community. As one man remembered it (and though he did not attend the dispensary in his own childhood, his comments are echoed by others who did):

> [They'd] be waiting so long, and talking to each other about their husbands, and the cost of living, and the dinners

> and the food, and, God help us, their misery in a good-humoured way . . . by the time the doctor arrived, they forgot
> . . . what their complaint was, 'cause time, they say, is a great healer, and three or four hours can do a lot.[24]

The local shop was perhaps a more inclusive meeting place, where women (and some men) from different social groups within the locality briefly transcended the barriers of social status through conversation. The daughter of one such shop-owning household not far from Limerick's railway station remembered how

> We used to sell skirts and kidneys and pork steam and, am, in the morning when my father used to come back from Shaw's with the offal – they used to call it – and the eye-bones and breast-bones, and all the housewives would be coming and you'd hear all the local 'ska' for the day. You'd hear who was sick, who had died, and what new baby had been born . . . [25]

Descriptions of food bought and consumed can be decoded to identify social class. While chicken for urban Sunday dinner in the 1950s bespoke some level of prosperity, the meat items sold in this shop (though used in thrifty households across the class spectrum) identify the customer network as belonging to a lower economic level of urban society. What one spread on one's bread was equally revealing. Mixed fruit jam – the cheapest on the market – suggested either thrift or poverty. Margarine was regarded as the spread of the really poor although, sometimes mixed with butter to make the latter 'go farther', it indicated some level of (shabby) gentility. Beef dripping, available from the local butcher, was spread on bread that was then fried on the pan to produce 'poor man's meat'.[26] Even those 'with notions' could find themselves the butt of derision if their diet betrayed them. In early twentieth-century Cork, elitist Montenotte was brought down a peg (behind its back) by the neighbouring and less exalted areas' dismissal of its residents lifestyle as 'brown boots and no breakfast', i.e. having the trappings of grandeur without the substance.[27] In a similar form of inverted snobbery, a Limerick woman dismissed the up-market area of the Ennis Road as 'quarter of brawn alley', where her apparently 'hoity-toity' (but presumably either frugal or financially straitened) employer bought the cheapest type of cooked meat in the smallest possible quantities.[28] It is interesting that such consciousness of social gradation is more apparent in interviews with women than with men. Were women more acutely aware of the intangible 'something' that made up status and respectability? Many interviewees stressed that a non-drinking father in regular work was the strongest guarantee of material security and a 'standing in the community', the general feeling was that a family's respectability could survive the problem of a drinking father provided that a tough, enterprising mother stood in the background. One Waterford woman's interview illustrated this particularly well. Stressing that women 'never went into a pub – God bless you, you'd be disgraced – I was never fond of pubs', she contrasted her own non-drinking postman father with her drinking railwayman husband, but also recounted how through her own enterprise her family 'had come up in the world'. Emphasising how 'lots of women' of her generation and similar position had done this, she remembered how she had begun by selling a few vegetables, then bought a van so she could do a selling round, and also went into selling ice-cream in the summer months.[29] Farmers' wives, circumstances permitting, had an even greater chance to turn their own enterprise to the advantage of their children. One man remembered how his mother

> had thirteen children here and considered that the best thing to do for her children – she was a futuristic woman – was education. Raising cattle on the farm and hand-feeding them . . . Up to 1920 [she] had gotten as much as forty pounds a head [for cattle] and my mother, with four children away in school at forty pounds a head . . . [30]

Even where material advancement was not possible, the mother was frequently the definer and guardian of respectability.[31] She managed the money, she supervised the polishing of the range and the scrubbing of the stairs and front step, and she supplemented income by taking in lodgers.[32] Most importantly, she presided over the enforcement of discipline, frequently (in an urban context where

proximity and mutual dependence marked neighbourly relationships) in a joint effort with other like-minded mothers in the lane. As Agnes, born in 1952, remembered:

> Mrs Ryan lived next door to us, right? And my mother would have a little nook across the door. My mother was very strict and she had this big thick stick – that thick, right? – and Mrs Ryan used to run in and she used to say,

In smaller towns the social gulf was both more and less visible than in the cities, depending on circumstances and context. While middle-class girls in Limerick in the 1970s were warned by their mothers not to be 'laney' – i.e. to behave in the way girls from the poorer lanes were perceived to do, George O'Brien, remembering the 1940s in the west Waterford town of Lismore, wrote of the 'unbridgeable, inscrutable gulf' between the inhabitants of the main streets and the poorer lanes.[34] The other, co-existing reality, however, was the constantly mutating bond of clientship, deference (sometime tongue-in-cheek) and genuine affection that existed between local elite on the one hand and 'the poor' (a term used almost solely by those 'above') on the other. This combined distance and common ground is apparent in a County Waterford woman's memory of the relationship between the parish priest and his poorer parishioners in the 1930s. This priest travelled around his parish on horseback and meeting one particularly impoverished and talkative old woman, he put his hand in his pocket as usual and, as he pulled out the coins, quipped, 'Ah, Moll, once a beggar always a beggar'. 'That's right, Father', she retorted, quick as a flash, 'Put a beggar on horseback and he'll ride to the devil'. Who looked down on whom? Who had affection for whom? If the simple view of a class-ridden and priest-dominated Ireland is confirmed by such an exchange, it is also challenged by it, particularly when we know that the priest in question told the story against himself.[35]

While the oral evidence suggests that class boundaries had always been porous to some extent, it also confirms that this porosity increased over time. In the opening years of the 1960s, the *Limerick Rural Survey* described the transition in the countryside from a 'rigid class structure assented to by all its members' to one that was 'unstable and open with all classes sharing upward mobility'.[36] Interviewees, whether they were uncomfortable with the concept or because it did not accurately reflect past realities, were hesitant to use the term 'class'. Anne, a strong farmer's daughter from Tipperary, took a long time before she got to the point of agreeing that there was a class divide between farmer and farm servant:

> *Anne*: . . . and we'd always have a boy or girl working in the house.
> *Interviewer*: Did ye know these, were they neighbours?
> *Anne*: Yeah, they were neighbours
> *Interviewer*: They'd stay with ye?
> *Anne*: If they were living near, no, they'd cycle. And they would be paid, a lot of them gave the money to their parents to feed them at home.
> *Interviewer*: Would they be less well off than ye?
> *Anne*: Oh they would, yeah.
> *Interviewer*: Would they sit with ye at the table?
> *Anne*: Well the servant boy, the working boy always sat at our table we ate at, but in some houses they had a table especially for servants.
> *Interviewer*: So there was a kind of class distinction?
> *Anne*: Yeah. Yeah.

This is echoed in the evidence available for provincial towns. One working-class woman who had been involved in the local drama group in a south Tipperary town had to be pushed by the interviewer (her granddaughter) to use the term 'class' in defining the status of the substantial and well-liked local shopkeeper who managed the group:

> - Would they be important members of the community, the people that were in charge?

- Well, important, no. He had a shoe store, you know. They were just shopkeepers like, he had a shoe store and his parents, he took it over from his parents . . . JL [another leading light in the group] had a shoe shop as well, but, yeah, he had a shoe shop and then next door his mother and father had a big drapery store. That kind of business, they were in that business, you know . . .

- They'd be, they wouldn't be poor, they'd be middle class?

- Middle class, yeah, middle class. And ah, the rest then were just ordinary, regular, regular people of the town, you know . . . [37]

In all these cases, status divides were bridged or at least disguised by the intimacy of small places. This is obvious in the case of rural areas, but it is also true of the urban setting. Towns and even cities were composed of mosaics of smaller localities where, particularly before the large-scale residential segregation of the 1960s onwards, families of varying degrees of prosperity (or the opposite) lived cheek-by-jowl. In the opening years of the twentieth century the streets and lanes of Cork's north-side working-class suburb of Blackpool were inhabited by a mixture of white-collar, skilled, unskilled and unemployed workers. Even up to the late 1950s Limerick's city-centre lanes had this same social mix of inhabitants and its Saint Mary's Parish was also populated by a wide-range of socio-economic groups, from the solid and prosperous pig-buyer to the casual worker.[38]

Religion
In such communities, small in the spatial or numerical sense, religion provided a common experience of spirituality and sociability, the latter possibly more important than the former. All social, economic and age levels of Cork city and county Protestant society flocked to the annual Christmas sale-of-work at St Luke's Home in the 1970s and well into the twenty-first century.[39] But within the larger Catholic community, too, whether at rural, village or urban level, a common ground for various social levels to meet as (temporary) equals was provided by confraternities, processions and jubilee celebrations. In 1938 the seventieth anniversary of the Jesuit Church in Limerick city, like the greater Eucharistic Congress of six years earlier, was an occasion of religious-cum-community celebration, with bunting, religious pictures and banners decorating the main streets of the different localities, and neighbours – mostly men and children, but some women, too – gathering for group photographs.[40] The 'Holy Year' of 1950 provided similar community-based religious activities, whole villages (or at least the menfolk) helping to erect crosses on the peaks of nearby hills.[41] The building of the Scout Hall in St Mary's Parish in Limerick in the early 1950s was commemorated by the compilation of a commemorative album replete with photographs of happy groups all pulling together, complete with captions like 'Many Hands Make Light Work' and 'Good Neighbours Help out at a Critical Time'.[42] In the 1960s what looked like the whole village of Foynes on the Shannon Estuary headed for Knockpatrick every St Patrick's Day in a celebration revived by a local priest, while the May and Corpus Christi processions in villages in East Waterford provided the same opportunity for 'the people' to come together in a one-ness of devotion.[43] The retrospective glance, of course, envelopes everything in a cosy glow of nostalgia. Interviewees refer to 'all the neighbours' as one harmonious group, bound together by the situation where 'nobody had anything' – part of that 'narrative of loss and decline' noted in many urban areas where population and material fabric have undergone considerable change.[44]

But religion's role in delineating social status was a double one, and memory as well as contemporary evidence confirms that it also confirmed existing divisions. In Frank McCourt's memoir of his Limerick childhood in the 1930s, social hierarchies were confirmed in the context of the church. One strong farming south Tipperary woman's throw-away remark that at mass 'you wouldn't sit beside a low class' gives the same picture for the rural areas where, up to the 1960s, the reading out from the altar of the Christmas and Easter dues payments clearly distinguished those big

farmers, doctor and local teacher – who gave offerings of a pound or more – from the labourers and others whose means (or generosity) stretched to a mere two shillings.[45]

Leisure

Leisure pursuits, too, can be used to read social status. The summer trips to Cork's indoor Eglington Street swimming baths are central to the memory of those whose parents were either lower middle or comfortable working class. For those further down the economic scale the 'free baths' on the Lee Road were the option, and the status difference of its clientele was visible: 'I went there once but it was freezing cold up there, but there was a fortune of people around there.' For those still further down the ladder, or who did not fancy the walk out to the Lee Road baths, a dip in the river at Pope's Quay was the option.[46] Similarly, whether a family took a summer holiday or not, or when it became able to do so, says a great deal about social and economic status as well as geographic location. County Limerick's strong farmers – or at least their wives and children – could afford the week in Ballybunion back into the 1940s.[47] In Cork and Waterford, because of relative proximity to the sea, the train or bus day trip to Youghal, Crosshaven or Tramore was possible for quite a number of urban working people in the late 1950s, becoming more common in the 1960s. Those with a constantly employed and more go-ahead father might rent a house at the seaside, but these were the exceptions: 'I can remember no one else taking holidays around us'.[48] Within the multiple layers of less prosperous urban families, the summer outing took the form of a day trek centred on a communal sociability involving neighbouring mothers, children, prams, and primus stoves to some riverside spot within walking distance of the city; Corkonians headed to the Lee Fields, while for working class Limerick the destination was Plassey, the mention of which still evokes a warm sense of nostalgia fifty years later.[49]

Outside the family context, two other forms of pastime provided the main social bridges. The *Limerick Rural Survey*, which constantly re-iterated the all-pervasive presence of class division in the rural context, saw hurling as one of the main forces 'surmount[ing] the class barrier'.[50] The oral evidence too, presents the hurling field as a common ground for all locals 'from middle class to poorer people'.[51] But there are also (less frequent) suggestions that hurling confirmed rather than diluted social divisions, and that there was an 'in-group' and an 'out-group', more 'respectable' (farming) families having the advantage over those of 'humbler' village status. Still other evidence indicates that advantage in such cases was based less on socio-economic background than on a whole new pecking-order based on whether a family was a 'real hurling family' or not.[52] But the hurling field certainly bridged the gap between the sexes and the generations. Allowing for the nostalgia for things past, the GAA context provided the opportunity for one-upmanship, young male braggadocio, and a veritable anteroom to courtship. As one midlands man, sharing his memories with his son, put it:

> There was always a friendship there with the lads playing and the girls. They'd always be on the hill and they'd be shouting for Johnny or Mick. There'd be a bit of rivalry there among the lads too. You'd like to tell them you were this big boy as well. Oh, you'd keep an eye on them all right. They knew you were watching them as well, 'cause you'd meet them at the dances on a Sunday night and they were really interested in [the match].[53]

Like sport, dancing could bridge the social divide. A middle-aged couple whose dancing days were in the 1930s remembered the mixed social milieu of the dance:

> *Interviewer*: Say, at the dances, now you know, like, would you have people who'd be well off and people who'd be pretty poor?
> *Joe and Mary*: Yes, you would.
> *Interviewer*: They'd all be together, would they?
> *Joe and Mary*: Ah yes, they would, they would.
> *Mary*: But you'd be, kind of, maybe, dancing to the higher up ones a bit![54]

This social mix was increased in the later 1950s when the narrower parish dances were replaced by the ballrooms, to which the bus and the increasingly common car brought dancers from far and wide: 'Those attending the ballrooms were from every class, I think, from the lad with the bigger car down to the fellow with the bicycle. All classes went to the ballrooms at that stage'.[55] But at the end of the day, the apparent one-ness of the dance floor was illusory. 'Dancing to the higher up ones' did not end with the 1930s and the contemporary comment that 'the farmer's daughter will dance with the farm labourer if he is a good dancer, but she will have no further contact' reminds us that the acid test of social fusion was not dancing but marriage.[56] Yet, that the dancehalls played their part in eroding social barriers even in this regard became evident in the 1970s when the increasing number of marriages between the children of farmers and of 'cottage people' caused much inter-generational angst.[57]

Conclusion

So what does oral history interviewing suggest about social class and status in the half century after 1930? Tracing the perceptions and realities of status consciousness through retrospective evidence has its pitfalls. Younger interviewers find it particularly difficult to explore this area, since more is revealed by the hints *behind* the interviewees' words than by the words themselves. In such interviewing, age is a positive advantage since one's research antennae are more sharply honed, ready to pick up an innuendo frequently lost on a younger person. On the other hand, age brings with it the danger of fitting the evidence to pre-suppositions and to one's own remembered past, so that the interviewer actually shares the interviewees' tendency to either romanticise, demonise or – to use a now almost forgotten colloquial term – to '*dis*remember'. However, while the interviewer is (or should be) aware of these pitfalls in seeking to portray and explain the past, informants sometimes seem to have obliterated from their consciousness past realities less acceptable at the time of interviewing. Joe, from strong farming stock in West Limerick, hardly remembered the necessity for a dowry until his wife, also present at the interview, forcibly reminded him and the interviewer that such a custom existed:

> *Joe*: Oh, there was a class distinction all the time. Well, you couldn't afford to marry a girl who had nothing because, ah, anyway she wouldn't suit you . . .
> *Mary*: Ah, you had to bring in a fortune . . .
> *Joe*: I mean, you hadn't to [bring in a fortune] . . .
> *Mary*: Ah, faith, you had!

Others, however, their memories sharpened (or coloured) by the experiences at the lower side of the status divide, clearly recalled these distinctions but concluded that they had not recognised them at the time. As one former farm labourer put it:

> 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 . . . [58]

All of this points to two contradictory but interwoven realities in Ireland's social fabric in the period 1930 to 1980. The first reality – stressed to the point of tedium in both academic studies and popular publications, but nonetheless real – was a deep social division. The other, which the oral evidence allows us to access, was a very hazy and mutating boundary between those so divided. In fact, far from being a black and white photograph with permanently positioned figures, the impression given is that of a hologram, the picture constantly changing in accordance with the vantage point from which it is viewed.

Notes

1   Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p. 505.
2   C. Arensberg and S. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Harvard, 1940); Jeremiah Newman, *The Limerick Rural Survey* (Tipperary, 1964).
3   Damian Hannan and Louise Katsiaouni, *Traditional Families: From Culturally Prescribed to Negotiated Roles in Farm Families* (Dublin, 1977); Damian Hannan, *Displacement and Development: Class, Kinship and Social Change in Irish Rural Communities* (Dublin, 1979); Marilyn Silverman, *An Irish Working Class: Explorations in Political Economy and Hegemony 1800-1950* (Toronto and London, 2001).
4   Alice Taylor, *To School Through the Fields* (Dingle, 1988); Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (London, 1997).
5   Although most interviewees give permission to have their names mentioned in publication, the project generally prefers to anonymise. Names appearing in this article are, therefore, mostly pseudonyms.
6   Agnes, Limerick city, born 1952, interviewed by the author, December 2003.
7   Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 195.
8   Mary Muldowney, *The Second World War and Irish Women: An Oral History* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 1-2.
9   The *Limerick Rural Survey* discussed in some detail the meaning of 'status', stressing that it was 'distinct from the individual who may occupy it', and that it could be defined in different ways according to occupation, personal and group traits (pp. 96-97).
10   Newman, *Limerick Rural Survey*, p. 205.
11   Seán, Co. Limerick farmer, born c. 1945, interviewed April 2001.
12   Mary, born Limerick city c. 1930, interviewed April 2003.
13   Agnes, Limerick city, interviewed by the author, December 2003.
14   Michael, south Tipperary farmer, born 1934, interviewed 7 March 2008.
15   Raymond Ryan, 'The Irish Farmers' Union', paper delivered at the Associational Cultures in Ireland Conference, NUI Maynooth, 17 May 2008.
16   Jim, east Limerick labourer, born c. 1930, interviewed April 2000.
17   Eileen, Crommane, born 1922, interviewed 13 April 2001.
18   Patrick, former creamery manager, West Limerick, in conversation with the author, May 2008.
19   Tom, Co. Clare creamery manager, interviewed by Rebecca Cleary, 1 April 2000. Mary Immaculate College Oral History Centre, 2000/11. In other areas, women were the main creamery-goers. See Maura Cronin, 'Remembering the Creameries' in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Irish Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005), pp. 180-181.
20   Newman, *Limerick Rural Survey*, p. 201.
21   Mary Murphy, born 1912, in conversation with the author c. 1970.
22   Gillian Rose, 'Locality Studies and Waged Labour: An Historical Critique', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1989, p. 319.
23   Johnnie, publican, north Clare, interviewed 7 April 2000.
24   Tim, Limerick city, interviewed 15 December 2003.
25   Kitty, Limerick shopkeeper's daughter, born 1940s, interviewed April 2001.
26   Brigid, born 1920s, interviewed April 2000; author's own memories of the 1960s and 1970s.
27   Thomas Murphy, born 1896, in conversation with the author, c. 1970.
28   Agnes, interviewed December 2003.
29   Margaret, Waterford city, born 1931, interviewed April 2000.
30   Johnnie, publican, north Clare, interviewed 7 April 2000.
31   Paisley Harris, 'Gatekeeping and Remaking: the Politics of respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism', *Journal of Women's History* Spring 2003, pp. 212-220.
32   Mag, Limerick city, born 1928, interviewed January 2003; Agnes, Limerick city, born 1952, interviewed December 2003.
33   Agnes, Limerick city, born 1952, interviewed December 2003; Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 179-181.
34   Sheila in conversation with the author, c. 1996; George O'Brien, *The Village of Longing* (Mullingar, 1987) p. 42.
35   Mary Murphy, born 1912, in conversation with author, c. 1980.
36   Newman, *Limerick Rural Survey*, p. 196.
37   Peggy, interviewed 23 February 2008.
38   Maura Cronin, 'Blackpool and its people 1830-1915' in Maurice Hurley and Ciara Brett (eds), *History of Blackpool* (Cork, 2007), pp. 48-60; John McGrath, 'Social and Economic Development of St Mary's Parish, Limerick, 1890-1930' (unpublished MA dissertation, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, 2005).
39   Author's recollection. The sale of work was held on the first Thursday of December.
40   Digital copy of photograph in Oral History Centre, Mary Immaculate College Limerick.