

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961. Discourses, Experiences and Memories* by Caitriona Clear

Review by: Maura Cronin

Source: *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 53 (2001), pp. 191-192

Published by: Galway Archaeological & Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25535733>

Accessed: 30-11-2018 15:33 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Galway Archaeological & Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*

Overall, this volume covering the background to the two surveys and the cultural landscape of Clare Island is a work of outstanding scholarship, superbly written, referenced, indexed and illustrated. It is a credit to the four contributors and to the Royal Irish Academy. A high standard is established for future volumes examining the island's archaeology, geology, botany and zoology.

Bernard O'Hara

Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961. Discourses, Experiences and Memories*. Irish Academic Press, 2000. pp 278. ISBN 0-7165-2714-6 (hardback), 0-7165-2717-0 (paperback).

This study is based on exhaustive research in government departmental correspondence and reports, folklore records, newspapers, handbooks, periodicals and prescriptive literature, as well as on the personal testimonies of over forty individuals, male and female. Hence, it is a study not only of Irish women's household work, but also of the intricacies of Irish society as a whole in the period between the foundation of the state until the early 1960s when the accelerated availability of electricity and running water arguably reduced women's household workloads, but before the more radical questioning of women's social role gained currency. The title – *Women of the House* – has been carefully chosen to reflect the depth and range of experience of those many married and single women who 'had primary responsibility for the daily maintenance of a dwelling and the lives of its members.'

Through an investigation of such diverse matters as the portrayal of women's role in popular literature, pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, housework, financial control and relationships, the study explores not only the personal experience of individual women, but also the sometimes dogmatic, sometimes nervous approach of state and church towards the improvement of working and living conditions for 'women of the house'. There is no doubt that women's welfare and/or capacity to operate in spheres other than motherhood and domesticity were either (at best) downplayed or (at worst) ignored. This comes across clearly in the state/church/public reaction to such issues as the payment of children's allowances to fathers rather than to mothers; the controversy regarding the inclusion of homemakers' representatives on the abortive National Vocational Assembly; and the debate as to whether the bearing and rearing of large families did any damage to women's health.

Yet, Caitriona Clear ably redresses the balance skewed by those historians who, viewing the past solely through the lens of present-day values, paint the post-independence period as an uninterrupted experience of female disempowerment. Firstly, she suggests convincingly that while this period was most certainly one of 'missed opportunities' in state amelioration of women's working conditions, state and church obduracy also ironically spared women the worst effects of the 'institutionalised idealism' put forward by the 'home-centred feminists' of the day. The vision of many of these first-wave feminists, whether centred on parenting, cooking or the 'natural' role of women, was limited by their upper middle-class status. Indeed, they were as far removed from the needs of most women (especially those of rural background) as were the advice pages of many of the increasingly popular women's magazines of the time. Secondly, Caitriona Clear's dovetailing of documentary material with the complex evidence of the personal testimonies warns against the danger of over-simplification through demonisation. Experience was as varied as individuals (or households), and although legal and social constraints most

certainly relegated women to a potentially vulnerable position, this study reminds us (at least those of us born in the 1950s!) of those aunts/mothers/neighbours who paid sincere homage to the 'natural position' of the male as head of the house, but who were themselves benevolent despots who controlled purse, children and house. As one contributor to the study expressed it regarding his mother: 'She WAS the house, really'.

However, lest it be thought that *Women of the House* presents a romanticised view of the past, there is ample evidence from the documentary sources and personal testimonies to reiterate that female authority in the house had its price, and that price was a heavy workload - an endless and frequently unaided round of childminding, feeding, washing, cooking, and making ends meet on a usually limited budget, plus - for many rural women - the added burden of farm-work. But then, the general attitude among women as well as men, to male participation in household work was equivocal. Either the man was generously *going beyond* his duty to *share* what was essentially the woman's work or else he was interfering in the woman's jealously guarded sphere of autonomy.

This book is one which really should be read not only by historians but by all those who want to learn about, or remember, the complex realities of women's experience in the home in the first forty years of the state. The book scores on a number of counts. It is the product of insightful and thorough research. Its well-chosen illustrations not only accompany but expand on the text. It combines documentary, statistical, pictorial and oral evidence to the best possible effect. Finally, it is credible because it has no axes to grind, exploring women's role and work in a reflective and even-handed manner. Every piece of personal testimony brought back to me not only forgotten aspects of home lives from my own childhood, but also made me revisit some of my own (frequently contradictory) attitudes, many of them shaped in the Ireland of the 'fifties and 'sixties. Perhaps the past is a 'foreign country' but the most striking part of this study is that it not only resurrects the past in all its complexity, but also raises questions relevant to the present.

Maura Cronin

Tom May, *Churches of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora*, published by the author, Galway, 2000, pp. 169, illustrations, ISBN 0-9538596-0-6 Hardback, 0-9538696-1-4 Paperback. pb. IR £9, hb. IR £15.

There is at least one in every parish. Each is different from the other. Each is a focal point for the community. In them, we celebrate births, marriages and deaths. In them, we bare our souls, cry our fill, and in our lifetime, donate a small fortune. At times they throb to the sound of music and, yet, mostly shimmer in the silence of time itself. They offer comfort to the lonely soul and broken of heart. In physical appearance, they tower above us and weather storms. They are always there, it seems, because they are our churches and how easy it is to take them for granted.

Not anymore, because this book gives a vivid picture, both in words and illustrations, of the seventy-two Catholic churches in the diocese of Galway. Written by Diocesan Financial Administrator, Tom May, it includes public and diocesan churches currently in use and does not cover private or order chapels. While the book tells only the story of the physical church building, the author is very conscious that each church means much more to its people.

Nevertheless, the pen pictures of these houses of prayer, many in places rarely heard of, are truly fascinating. In some cases, the cost of the building is given, and, where available,