

## Book Review: *Work, Sex, Parenting: Solving Irish Women's Mid-century "Problems"*

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*Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 60s.* Caitriona Clear.  
London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 189 pp. \$39.95 hardcover.

In her most recent book, *Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 60s*, Irish women's history scholar Caitriona Clear provides an interesting and interdisciplinary perspective on select women's magazines at a pivotal time in the country's history. A senior lecturer in history at the National University of Ireland Galway, Clear has a track record of examining women's lives in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, but this is the first time she spotlights social change by focusing on periodicals.

The book is not a comprehensive examination of all Irish women's magazines. Although other women's magazines were published at that time, Clear focuses on only two publications: *Woman's Life* in the 1950s and *Woman's Way* for much of the 1960s. Though she occasionally brings in other Irish and a few British periodicals, this is done only for comparative purposes.

The book is organized into nine chapters. Clear provides a glossary of terms (some of them in Gaelic) at the beginning of the book, which offers an overview of some of the social, economic, political, media, religious, and educational developments of the day. The book also has three appendices: one giving an overview of the political, social, and economic developments in the country at the time; one providing a brief overview of the other women's magazines published at the time; and the last offering demographic materials on women, paid work, and marital status.

In hindsight, I would have read the glossary of terms and the appendices first, before plowing into the book itself. The book would also benefit from a map of the country for readers unfamiliar with Ireland.

Clear provides an overview of the editorial and advertising content of the magazines and offers insights into their changing women readers. But the volume's real strength is its analysis of the "problem pages"—reader inquiries sent to the magazines' so-called "agony aunts," who doled out advice and suggestions. "Mrs. Wyse" was *Woman's Life's* "agony aunt" in the 1950s, while Maura Laverty and Angela Macnamara responded for *Woman's Way* in the 1960s. In addition, Clear does an excellent job in her analysis of the readers' letters published in *Woman's Way* in the 1960s.

The book is organized chronologically. Only two chapters deal with the 1950s and *Woman's Life*. The first of these chapters provides an overview of the possible readership and the advertising and editorial content of the publication. But it's in the second chapter that Clear hits her stride with her analysis of the "problem pages," in which Mrs. Wyse, the magazine's "agony aunt," responded with guidance to troubled readers seeking advice. Clear

argues that these problem pages “are the only evidence we have of what some Irish girls and women believed to be problematic in their lives. And they are virtually the only evidence we have of advice given to women by a woman in a position of authority...” (p. 28). Slightly more than 40 percent of these problems dealt with courtship or romance. Often, the problem pages highlighted the difficult dilemmas faced by unmarried daughters in the 1950s. According to Clear, the behavior expected from an unmarried adult daughter in Ireland was to care for ailing parents and/or rear younger brothers and sisters, “even if this clashed with the prospect of work” (p. 33).

In the 1960s, expectations for women in Ireland had changed, and *Woman’s Way* magazine “presented itself as a manual for a new age—an optimistic, self-consciously Irish one...” Clear argues (p. 46). The magazine offered service articles, opinion columns, and features. It was more graphically attractive. The readers were a reflection of the times—“opinionated, baffled, defensive, confident, tentative, creative,” Clear writes. Reader letters flooded into the magazine—so many, in fact, that only a small portion could be published. Their topics ranged from “hints that help”/“things they say”/“why they don’t” (a hodgepodge of practical suggestions and humor) to women’s status, including birth control and working outside the home.

*Woman’s Way* continued publishing its problems pages, but the subjects discussed differed considerably from what had trended in the 1950s. Issues associated with sex captured the top spot, followed closely by courtship (not sex) and parenting. Although the magazine published letters and articles supporting contraception, its problems pages represented a forum for more conservative stances. The magazine’s agony aunt opposed artificial methods of birth control—for both single and married women—and was wary even of the Catholic-Church-supported “natural birth control” method.

The volume provides some new insights, linking the readers’ letters, problems pages, and “agony aunts” to a broader women’s history context that complements existing scholarship of Irish press history. The book is not necessarily the easiest text to read, but it is well worth the effort.