

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Willeen G. Keough. *The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. xiv + 542 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13202-2; (e-book), ISBN 978-0-231-50693-9.

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## Irish Women

*The Slender Thread* explores the lives of Irish plebeian women on Newfoundland's southern Avalon Peninsula from 1750 to 1860. Working from a wide range of sources, Willeen G. Keough pieces together important aspects of these women's lives from work to the regulation of sexuality with a careful consideration of expressions of agency. Situated at a critical juncture between different streams in the historiography, Keough's book adds to the history of the Irish diaspora, the colonial history of Newfoundland, and women's history. I have focused my review on her contribution to women's history given my own area and the shared interests of this listserv. Other reviewers will, no doubt, be better able to comment on Keough's contributions to different areas.

Keough's book is an excellent addition to women's history, and she has done an enormous amount of meticulous research that has yielded many important insights. Piecing together diverse sources, like parish records, newspapers, diaries, court cases, census reports, missionary reports, and commercial account books, the author has uncovered the lives of women who were often marginalized in records and subsequent histories. In addition to documentary evidence, Keough has skillfully interwoven the local oral tradition into her narrative. As she recounts in the book, that oral tradition hinged on male-centered narratives that frequently began "Two brothers came from Ireland or England" (p. 2). Working to provide a corrective to this idea, which had been mirrored in the academic literature to date, Keough man-

ages to uncover the richness of these women's lives and their social and economic contributions. The result is a fascinating and highly readable book, which deals with a wide range of topics, including migration, work, family and community, justice, and sexuality, that will be of interest to a wide range of scholars and will be useful in both undergraduate and graduate courses in women's history.

*The Slender Thread* begins with two chapters that outline the reasons for migration from Ireland to Newfoundland, the difficult journey that ensued, and migrants' reception in the colony. Chapter 2 is a short and at times speculative given the paucity of sources recording Irish plebeian women's experiences, but it provides an important overview of the existing tensions regarding race and religion that crossed the Atlantic. Here, Keough carefully maintains a balance between highlighting the discursive constructions of femininity and the limited, but important, evidence of women's actual lived experiences. As Irish Catholics, these women were part of a community seen as problematic by British officials. Shifts in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British colonial policy from encouraging migratory fishery practices to supporting resident ones may have changed ideas about permanent settlement, but Irish migration remained a point of concern. Keough notes that the reception of Irish immigrant women was shaped by existing discourses that held them as feckless, promiscuous, and morally and socially threatening. As she aptly demonstrates in

chapter 3, however, women were integral to community formation and economic production, which would establish an Irish colonial society on the Avalon Peninsula. Through intermarriage, community formation, and production in the salt fish market in the early to mid-nineteenth century, women ensured the continuation of the Irish Catholic community and the transition to family production in the fisheries.

Keough takes up the point about women's essential work in chapter 4. This is an important and strongly argued chapter that provides a wealth of information on women's lives as a group with individual lives highlighted throughout. Women's work was essential to family and community survival on the Avalon Peninsula, and Keough finds that, while there were continuities in women's work extending from the home country, the colonial context of the fishery and subsistence agriculture varied their work. Irish Newfoundland women participated in both waged and unwaged labor that required them to perform often arduous tasks. In the period the author covers in the study, the cod fisheries increasingly depended on family production, which replaced the hiring of male transient workers. Women's role was key here. They were largely responsible for the curing and drying of the cod, which required skill, judgment, and strength. Heavy lifting and other acts that required a good deal of strength were thus valued and formed a sort of barrier to the burgeoning gendered ideal of women's fragility. Apart from family production, Keough has also managed to uncover evidence on a small number of women, mostly widows, who were fishing proprietors and employers. In addition to the fishery, subsistence agriculture in a challenging climate, and household production, women were also involved in various other means of work. As part of a varied survival strategy, women participated in expanding family resources, attaining new ones, and working for a wage. This chapter also includes a suggestive section on women's involvement in the wrecking and salvaging of ships. As members of a group, Keough notes, women were involved in stripping ships and salvaging useful goods that had washed ashore. Keough also discusses women who took on paid domestic work and were involved in teaching and midwifery and leaves the reader with a thorough impression of women's varied experiences in work.

Keough argues that Irish plebeian women on the Avalon Peninsula existed in a world separate from the rigidly defined gendered spheres emerging in England and British colonies in the period. Keough finds that the specific regional context provided protection for Irish

plebeian women against the burgeoning British, middle-class, domestic ideology premised on gendered separate spheres and notions of female dependence. She argues that the status of "helpmate," for example, seems not to have taken hold in the way it did in colonies like New England or Upper Canada. Further, she suggests that the notion of "helping" crossed gendered lines, so that men performed women's tasks and women men's, although the latter remained more common. Keough convincingly demonstrates the significant work women performed and how their economic role bolstered families and community, and also helped to shield the women from middle-class notions of respectability.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are where Keough most readily engages with discussion regarding women's agency. Here, she eschews the more standard interpretation of a patriarchal justice system silencing and penalizing women to the point of reducing their access to formal justice in favor of showing how women exercised agency in both formal and informal ways in homes, communities (largely in regard to gossip), and courtrooms. The spaces of home and courtroom appear to have been connected in ways that sometimes strengthened women's position. Since work in the fishery demanded that men would be gone for long periods of time, women gained a certain authority on their own. The regional context also shaped Irish Newfoundland women's lives as well. While Ireland industrialized and women and their work were marginalized in the process, Newfoundland remained preindustrial, which meant they kept their economic status. They also played a significant role in terms of spirituality and the maintenance of Catholicism. In regard to the legal system, Keough argues that women did have a presence in the courtroom, although it seems that single women and widows had greater access than their married counterparts. While Keough has found evidence of women's agency, in places in this chapter, the argument that "the courtroom was more often a site of their empowerment than their oppression" seems slightly overstated (p. 218). The chapter discusses the wide variety of roles women took on in court (e.g., as litigants, defendants, witnesses, and petitioners), but the issue of crimes like rape are not discussed in this section. In a chapter loosely connected by the subtitle "The Regulation of Irish Women's Sexuality on the Southern Avalon," we learn more of issues related to rape, abuse, and prostitution. While the evidence here is extremely limited and the author notes that instances of abuse were likely underreported, this discussion seems distant from the overwhelmingly positive portrayal that Keough presents in earlier chapters

in regard to formal justice. An expanded discussion on the ongoing role stereotypes of Irish, Catholic, plebeian women played (or not) would have been welcome.

Methodologically, Keough describes her work as blending “elements of poststructuralism and empiricism,” which she notes are “strange bedfellows indeed” (p. 9). Keough, however, seems to attribute many of the insights of women’s history solely to poststructuralism and the discussion in the introduction essentially boils down to her positioning the work in part as a reading of “hegemonic discourses” (p. 10). As such, the methodological (and I would add theoretical) discussion seems too contracted given the broad references to what has become nuanced discussions on these issues. Another methodological issue arises with the use of what Keough calls “oral informants.” The use of oral tradition blended with more traditional sources is fascinating and provides an interesting perspective on women’s roles in colonial development. In the introduction, she argues that she has used oral sources to supplement and fill in the documentary evidence using “the *common sense* test” (p. 13). While Keough is aware of the issues related to memory and the literature on memory as a field of study, a more sustained discussion on the politics of memory would have been a good addition to the book.

*The Slender Thread* is published as part of the Gutenberg-e online history series at Columbia University Press in conjunction with the American Historical Association, and represents a new direction in scholarly publishing: the online monograph. Reviewing this work for H-Women (an online forum) seems especially appropriate, and, as a reviewer, I feel compelled to review the print and digital text(s). The Gutenberg-e project began with the aim to help overcome the “crisis” in scholarly publishing and the emergence, but continued suspicion, of online publishing. To attract scholars, but especially emerging ones, the project offered \$20,000 fellowships to exceptional dissertations. The intended outcome was to be high-quality, scholarly e-books. The project later decided to publish both online and print versions of the books. An insert included with the usual package sent to H-Net reviewers explains the online series as “history monographs that were originally created as online only electronic works of scholarship. The print book is meant to be a partial representation of the much greater work that resides online.” The letter also explains that the books published in the series are available in an open access version (available since November 2007) or American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Humanities e-book version that requires an institutional subscription.

I chose to read the print version and then consult with the online version to read/view/listen to other aspects of the work due to the length of the work. There are some differences between the two online versions in regard to how user friendly they are, especially the search functions. The ACLS version allows for precise searches where readers can enter a word or phrase and be directed toward specific instances of its appearance in the text. The open access version, however, yields much more frustrating results. Once a search term is entered readers are pointed toward the chapter in which the word or phrase can be found, but not a specific location within it. Overall, access and reader preference may dictate which site a reader chooses to use.

Digital publishing has become increasingly accepted in scholarly fields, and there are strengths including ecological impact (less paper as long as you read from the screen) and the inclusion of multimedia, such as audio samples, slide shows, and video clips. These are excellent additions that will be beneficial to those interested in the work for either teaching or research. There are still a few kinks that need to be worked out in both online publishing and the connection between digital and print versions of the same text. Some of the awkwardness of the print version of *The Slender Thread* is due to the publisher’s choices of what to include in print. For example, the print version of *The Slender Thread* contains the same text and four out of five of the appendices. The print version, however, does not contain an index. (There is, in fact, no index that I could find in either of the online sites, and, given the limitations of the search function in the open access site, this is a concern.) The print version also seems to be an almost exact replica of the online one, and this leads to some minor frustrations for readers. I admit to being a bit confounded when I came across phrases like “Audio Sample” and “Web Link” parachuted in between two sentences. It was obvious they would be online, but where? Tracking down the correct audio files and Web links when they are not specifically cross-referenced was more challenging and time consuming than it should be. In other places in the book, “Audio Sample” was followed by a particular number, which made it much easier to find online. In the online version, these phrases also stand out as they are hyperlinked, but they are not even italicized in the printed text. Similar issues occur with the tables and figures, which are integral to Keough’s argument, but not included in the book. While some of the materials included in the appendices are very interesting, they did not seem as directly important to the argument and the figures would have been a useful addition to the print ver-

sion. A good section of the historiographical discussion is relegated to appendix A, but parts of it are printed verbatim from the main text. The reader must then negotiate between two versions of the same text in different places in the book, although the extended discussion in the appendix essentially amounts to ten pages of additional text (excluding the rather lengthy endnotes). These are not meant to be criticisms of Keough's book, which deserves a wide audience, but the publisher still needs to work out issues related to readability in different formats.

Like any good work of scholarship, I was left wanting to know more, and Keough has clearly charted out paths for further study. *The Slender Thread* is an important contribution to women's history as it adds a critical perspective on the significance of gender to Irish women's immigration and colonial development. Issues of ethnicity and work also provide insights into the complex workings of these categories in connection to gender. Keough does an excellent job of working from her sources to balance the discussion regarding discursive constructions and lived experiences. It is a clearly written and a fascinating book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

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