



**Mary O'Dowd, Maria Luddy.** *Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1925*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xiv + 448 pp. \$32.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-108-73190-4.

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While the decades since Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's landmark *Family Fortunes* (1987) have seen a steady increase of work on English and Scottish families, equivalent work on Irish families has remained sparse. In *Marriage in Ireland, 1660- 1925*, Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd aim to address this gap with an ambitious study of the "logistics of heterosexual marriage in Ireland" over three centuries of British rule (p. 407). Luddy and O'Dowd approach this sprawling topic thematically. The book's twelve chapters are divided into four sections, the first focused on a legal history of marriage, and the subsequent three on experiences of courting, marrying, and separating. Each section is further divided in thematic chapters, which are in turn organized in topical sections. Thus, part 2, "Ways to Marry," contains chapters 3-6, which include "Meeting and Matching with a Partner," "Courtship Behavior," "Breach of Promise," and "Abductions." The chapter on courtship behavior is then further divided into subsections on public courting, secret courting, financial considerations, premarital sex, and seduction.

Though presented as a preliminary survey, this volume contains a substantial amount of primary research. This is partly a symptom of the lack of existing work on the subject. But it is also driven by Luddy and O'Dowd's interest in bringing

together official definitions of marriage with individual experiences. To this end, they have consulted an impressively large body of sources, pairing parliamentary papers, court records, registrar's lists, and church archives with personal papers, newspaper accounts, and folklore. This approach allows them to deftly navigate Ireland's overlapping religious and civil jurisdictions, describing informal marriage practices alongside official ones. It also allows them to incorporate a tremendous number of individual accounts, bringing real stakes to often impersonal demographic trends. While they are not always strongly stated, this comprehensive research has led Luddy and O'Dowd to several significant conclusions. Their investigation of informal practices demonstrates the importance of marriage as a social institution across social classes. Their survey of doweries through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries allows them to challenge the argument that the Famine made marriage more financially minded. And their tabulation of newspaper reports provides new statistics on the prevalence of marital violence, spousal murder, and abduction

Of course, no survey is ever fully comprehensive. Like many histories of family life, these themes do skew towards the disastrous (happy couples leave few court records). And although Luddy and O'Dowd acknowledge potential contri-

butions from cultural history and gender and sexuality studies on these topics, their approach is primarily rooted in social history. As a result, the somewhat cursory treatment of topics such as symbolic gift giving and wedding ceremonies (chapter 7) or sex work (chapter 8) will undoubtedly leave some readers unsatisfied. But it is also difficult to ask this already lengthy study to include more. Luddy and O'Dowd themselves position this volume as a foundation for future work, rather than the definitive study on Irish marriage. They flag three areas they think are particularly promising: the role of extended family, children, and further comparative work with England and Europe. In practice, the breadth of topics covered here will likely spark many more ideas.

Unfortunately, this thematic approach does make it more difficult for Luddy and O'Dowd to give their readers a sense of the larger arc of Irish marriage over three centuries. Their introduction identifies some significant changes from 1660 to 1925: demographic growth, rising literacy, growing numbers of newspapers, and women's shifting legal position. They also point to some intriguing particularities of the Irish case compared to England and Scotland: poverty, limited urbanization, the Famine and resulting emigration, the unique position of the Catholic Church, and the lack of legal divorce through the twentieth century. But this broader context is often obscured by thematic divisions between and within chapters. Most concerning, chronological clarity is often sacrificed for topical coverage. Though chapter and section titles rarely include date ranges, most are understandably focused on a subset of the period from 1660 to 1925. Thus, not every chapter starts in 1660 and ends in 1925, nor does each chapter spend equal time between the early modern and modern periods. However, the period focus of each section is not always clearly stated. Combined with the lack of a larger narrative about the evolution of marriage, this vagueness leaves the readers to work out for themselves which topics are consistent features of marriage over the three-

century scope and which are tied to certain periods or events.

Change over time is most difficult to discern in the broadest chapters. For example, chapter 7, "Marital Relations," begins with a brief section on wedding ceremonies and celebrations, followed by a long section titled "Forms of Patriarchy," three very brief sections on wills, and a final section that describes women's changing property rights over the nineteenth century along with the sexual lives of a small set of twentieth-century couples. The conclusion then mentions family size, before stating, "there can be no generalizing about intimate relationships between married couples" (p. 259). The reader is left with a vague sense of some aspects of married life, but a limited grasp of their relative frequency, scope, or change over time. This encyclopedic approach is also repeated in chapter 4, on courtship; chapter 8, on adultery; and chapter 10, on marital violence, with similar issues.

Chapters with more specific topics are easier to follow. For example, in chapter 6, "Abductions," Luddy and O'Dowd convincingly argue that abduction was "extensively practiced" from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth century, peaking in the 1830s and 40s. Backed by a broad survey of court records and newspaper accounts, they argue abduction was economically motivated, and thus first practiced among minor gentry before descending to the lower-middle classes. Their survey also shows only 20 to 30 percent of cases resulted in convictions, suggesting most abductions did eventually end in a marriage. However, their incorporation of individual accounts also emphasizes the physical and sexual violence of abduction, allowing them to assert that few abductions were pre-arranged consensual agreements. Chapter 2, on itinerant ministers; chapter 5, on breach of promise to marry cases; and chapter 9, on bigamy, have similarly focused scopes and conclusions. Still, the thematic separation of these more argumentative chapters makes

it difficult to point to significant turning points or causal factors beyond the specific case studies.

The thematic organization also obscures the extent to which this book focuses on the nineteenth century. The beginning and end points of the more focused chapters frequently hinge on nineteenth-century legislation, such as the 1844 Act to prevent “clandestine” marriages, the Irish Poor Law, and the divergence of divorce law between England and Ireland after 1857. The broader chapters have more uneven chronologies, but their most substantial sections often focus on the nineteenth century as well. Those more interested in the rest of 1660 to 1925, meanwhile, may be disappointed. Discussion of eighteenth-century marriage is mostly limited to legislative changes in chapter 1, “A Legal Marriage,” and chapter 9, “Bigamy.” Debates about early modern affectionate marriage, wider kinship networks, or the transition to modern family forms, all common in English and Scottish literature, are acknowledged but not expanded on. Twentieth-century references are even more scattered, appearing briefly at the end of some chapters in focused accounts of the Irish Free State’s relatively harsher attitude to breach of promise and bigamy cases, and a moral panic over sex work and national health in the 1920s. Again, the book’s already broad scope makes it difficult to ask for more content—but Luddy and O’Dowd could have been more selective and transparent about their primary focus.

Ultimately, this volume contains a tremendous amount of information about marriage in Ireland, though it is not always fully contextualized. Though the title suggests a general survey, these chapters can focus in quite quickly to specifics, which may make it difficult for readers not already familiar with the main themes of either Irish history or the history of the family. But for readers hoping to supplement or expand their work on marriage, family relationships, or women’s legal and social positions in Ireland, this volume opens new questions and sets readers on the path to answering them.

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