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To Leave the Land So as Not to Leave the Land: The Religious Motivations of Seasonal Migrants, Including Women, in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This chapter seeks to answer the question as to why, even though subsistence conditions militated against continuing to eke out an existence on unproductive holdings, many inhabitants in Ireland’s western counties did just that. Particularly in the west of Ireland, Irish women and men found ways to remain on their lands and in their dwellings despite the enduring proclivity for permanent migration from Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The answer lies in the Irish penchant to engage in a variety of vernacular religious practices reiterated via expressive cultural forms like proverbs and reinforced via plays and films. In addition, an otherworld feminine perspective permeated their consciousness. For the Irish, their implicit religion—a complex network of symbols and practices—remained intact, so much so that seasonal migration endured, and the Irish preserved their homelands.

Keywords: Ireland; Roman Catholicism; seasonal migrant workers; vernacular religion; implicit religion; expressive cultural forms; Irish vernacular worldview



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1. Introduction

“Catholicism is the religion of something like ninety-six percent of the population, but the next religion isn’t far behind”. (Kennelly 1988, p. 51)

Brendan Kennelly’s words give us pause. Many people, including scholars, have labored under a taken-for-granted assumption that the island of Ireland, labeled in the early Christian centuries as *“insula Sanctorum et Doctorum”* (island of saints and scholars), is exclusively Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic. One need only think of the coming of St. Patrick to the island in 432 CE and the subsequent celebrations and devotions paid to him to grasp the impact of Roman Catholicism on Ireland (cf. Padovano 1980; Fisher and McGuinness 2011).

Moreover, many legacies of Ireland’s monastic heritage are known. These include *peregrinatio pro Christo* or pilgrimage for Christ. In the Middle Ages, this practice resulted in the establishment of monasteries on the European continent. At home, abstemious living was practiced by monks in remote places like *Skellig Mhichil*; to this day, material cultural structures like “beehive huts” can be visited in remote areas of the Irish landscape. Studying this monastic heritage in tandem with the history of Ireland’s ecclesiastical Patrician orders provides a rich understanding of the influence of Roman Catholicism at home and abroad.

Notwithstanding Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries and England’s suppression of Roman Catholicism on the island beginning in 1536—and despite the rise of Church of England edifices in subsequent centuries and its members’ active efforts to convert Catholics during the Great Irish Famine (Irish *An Gorta Mór*: The Great Hunger)—the reputation of Ireland as a Catholic country persisted. To this day, the Irish people acknowledge their Roman Catholic clerics, especially during events that mark rites of passage.¹

However, this view of Catholic hegemony overlooks the fact that, in certain places in Ireland, other types of moral/ethical—that is to say, *religious*—forces were at work. Sometimes they ran counter to official doctrines and dictates. For example, although members of

the Roman Catholic clergy frowned on the practice of seasonal work-related migration to Scotland and England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practice endured (McNally 1973, p. 91).² Temporary migration patterns persisted in the counties of Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, and Donegal because seasonal migrants were motivated by religious ideas and concepts oriented towards the maintenance and preservation of their homelands. The urge to protect family dwellings and, above all else, next of kin shaped the ideological lives of many Irish who resided in the west of Ireland, affecting their decisions to travel for work. Efforts were made to preserve with a near-religious fervor one another's home places (O'Dowd 1981, p. 80; cf. O'Dowd 1982; Heaney 1991). For seasonal migrants to Scotland and other places in the British Isles, the reiterated rhetorical dimensions of the obligation to "keep the home fires burning" amounted to a sacred and aesthetic value (cf. Healy 1978, p. 115; cf. Hynes 1988).

Although this chapter does not delve deeply into the specifics of Irish seasonal migration,³ it does build on previous work by addressing how vernacular and implicit religious ideas combined with orthodox Roman Catholic ones to form what might be seen as a "values triad" for migrants that resulted in a triplication of religious belief and practice.⁴ With this thought in mind, we can better grasp the aptness of Sheed's insight that "... a man is a better Catholic for loving his own people. Not to do so is to be deficient as a man, and deficiency in humanity remains as a deficiency in religion" (Sheed [1932] 1983, p. vi).

To fully grasp the meaning of Sheed's words, this chapter explores the meanings of vernacular and implicit religious practices in the west of Ireland. Readers will recognize some overlap between the two concepts, but they deserve individual exploration. First, a brief explanation of Irish seasonal migration is warranted.

2. Seasonal Migration in Ireland

Broadly speaking, seasonal migration refers to the periodic movement of groups of people in patterns shaped by weather, climate, economic conditions, etc. In Ireland, "... seasonal workers were people who had close ties to the land: small farmers, cottiers, agricultural laborers, and generally poor people with family responsibilities and no means of earning cash at home" (O'Dowd 2019; cf. Collins 1976; Holmes 2000; Hynes 1988; Moran 1988; Ó Gráda 1973; Quinn 2020, 2022). To a large extent, the harshness of living conditions in counties like Mayo, Donegal, Sligo, and Roscommon, coupled with the difficulties of eking out a living from the land, stimulated workers to engage in agricultural labor in the fields of England and Scotland. After their own fields had been planted, the Irish joined teams called "squads" that traveled to England and Scotland, mainly in the summer months. Given nicknames like "*spailpíni*" and "tattie-hokers" (spelled in various ways), they moved from location to location—Ayrshire, The Lothians, Perthshire—co-ordinating their packing and shifting with the ripening of the crops (Quinn 2020, p. 268).

This set of work patterns raises several questions. In periods when vast numbers of Irish people in other parts of the island were fleeing poverty, hunger, and disease by emigrating permanently, what stimulated Irish seasonal workers to engage in temporary agricultural labor and return to their homes at the end of the harvest season? Why was it different for this cohort of the Irish population? What inspired them to preserve their homelands and dwellings? To answer these questions, we turn to the practices of vernacular and implicit religion.

3. Vernacular Religion

Vernacular religion is defined as "religion as it is lived, as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995, p. 44; cf. Lantis 1960, p. 203). Unlike institutional or formal religious practices, with their set times for worship and service, vernacular religion is of the quotidian variety, meaning that it is experienced within specific localities that are rich in specific styles, sounds, stories, and concepts of the holy (cf. Bowman and Valk 2014; James and Johnson 1988; Locklin 2017). To put this a bit differently:

vernacular religion's practices unfold in identifiable cultural contexts, be they regional, linguistic, cultural, or economic (cf. Locklin 2017, p. xvii).

Within vernacular settings, both public behaviors and material cultural items are imbued with importance (Dempsey 2017, p. 200). Likewise, narratives of one's personal landscape factor heavily. As Mulligan (2019, p. 234) notes, "the interdependence of location and individual" is profound.

In Ireland, such interdependence endured well into the modern period. Irish communities tenaciously preserved landscape rituals at specific moments in the calendrical year. For instance, the lighting of midsummer bonfires was assiduously observed, notwithstanding the fact that they had been outlawed by British colonial authorities (Whelan 2018, p. 108). At other times, the people exercised rites of divination and propitiation; they practiced avoidance rituals to preserve trees and bushes deemed to be sacred; they exhibited respect for beings believed to be supernatural, and they recounted the particulars of their observances in stories and memories (Danaher 1972, *passim*).

Within this everyday world, Irish tradition-bearers (*seanchaí*) assumed remarkable importance (Delargy 1945). Men's oral traditional lore "dignified hardship, suffering, injustice and dislocation [and] establish[ed] a narrative framework that conferred meaning on these otherwise inexplicably painful experiences" (Whelan 2018, p. 116). Storytellers' narratives were sought after, cherished, and zealously guarded; rituals of the delivery of their verbal art were proscribed in terms of time as well as place (Delargy 1945). In the people's minds, storytellers were able to even out the playing field by celebrating "egalitarianism, human decency, and Christian charity immersed in supportive networks of mutual dependence and reciprocity" (Whelan 2018, p. 116).

Irish women's lore, called *bansheanchas*, although functioning in different domains, operated at the communal forefront as well, emerging in matters of health and healing and playing key roles in rites of birth and death. Similar to shamans in other cultures, women engaged in activities fundamental to the successful continuance of their particular group by predicting outcomes, resolving communal breakdowns, and mediating disputes (Ó Cruaíoch 2005).

These activities align with what Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch calls the "Irish vernacular worldview" which is defined as, first, believing in cosmological dualism, second, exercising a creative ethnopoetic sensibility, and third, recognizing the existence of the otherworld feminine (Ó Cruaíoch 2022; cf. Mac Curtain 1989). Standing in stark contrast to the concerns of Roman Catholicism, each component of the Irish vernacular worldview influenced everyday religious life; each is explored in detail in this chapter.

4. Implicit Religion

If vernacular religion is about daily lived interpretations and practices, what is implicit religion? As noted above, implicit religion bears similarities to vernacular religion but differs in terms of being defined as "a quest for meaning that originates in the life-world and expresses itself in a complex network of symbols and practices" (Nesti 1990b, p. 420).

One might better understand how implicit religion operates by examining the complex network of symbols and practices that comprise the Irish vernacular worldview. To reiterate, that worldview is threefold: the belief in cosmological dualism, the exercise of a creative ethnopoetic sensibility, and the recognition of the otherworldly feminine. Let us examine each in turn, exploring how they interlocked in symbol and practice.

5. Belief in Cosmological Dualism

By considering the annual pilgrimage to the mountain of Croagh Patrick ("the reek", as locals call it), we can grasp how the Irish coexisted with their natural world and, in so doing, expressed a dual cosmological awareness. The symbol was the mountain, the practice, the climb of it. The rite of climbing is understood as "movement through a sacralized landscape", one that *escaped the confines of the parish system*" (Whelan 2018, p. 110; emphasis added). As many as 20,000 people made a choice to climb Croagh Patrick in 1812 (Whelan 2018, p. 110).

These numbers are important, for they index decision-making on the part of the pilgrims. In his discussion of implicit religion, Nesti claims that “He who lives in the world can only ever inwardly experience ‘the struggle between a series of values, each of which, in and of itself, appears binding” (Nesti 1990a, p. 423). If pilgrimage practices lay outside of the conventional liturgical forms of the Roman Catholic liturgy, then the work of the “pilgrim” became one of decision-making. Indubitably, the choice was influenced by the groups to which individuals belonged.

Of course, as discussed above in terms of the religious triad, this is not to say that Roman Catholicism was insignificant at certain times in pilgrims’ lives. Nor was the climbing of Croagh Patrick the only expression of cosmological dualism in the landscapes thought to be sacred and where local pilgrimage practices held sway. One need only think of *An Turas Cholmcille*, arguably the longest continuing pilgrimage in Ireland, to grasp how indigenous members of a County Donegal community bodily resacralized their village in memory of *Naomh Cholm Cille* (Saint Columba), their founder saint. His well is believed to contain healing water; on the day of *An Turas*, and at other times as well, the water was—and is still—collected and carried home for curing purposes (Quinn 2010). “Such places and their pilgrimages, though they have certainly changed in many respects over the centuries, are old—rooted in eremitic traditions that, in the Irish case, were born and flourished under a non-Romanized form of Christianity” (Taylor [2012] 2016, p. 214; cf. Ray 2011). Even so, in these instances, we can perceive how the dual nature of Irish cosmology operated. Over time, the symbols of mountains and wells were understood to be on par with chapels, just as practices like the collecting of curing waters were considered to be on par with Mass attendances on Sunday. Although Roman Catholicism held sway—81% of the population pronounced that faith in 1834, and few converted to Protestantism—(Whelan 2018, p. 119), yet pilgrimages to sites that were understood by the people as being sacred endured.

6. Creative Ethnopoetics in Narrative Tradition

Now that we have provided some examples of cosmological dualism as an aspect of the Irish vernacular worldview, and shown how it was actualized symbolically and ritually, let us turn to creative ethnopoetics in Irish narrative tradition. Similar to a belief in cosmological dualism, symbols and practices can be located in creative ethnopoetics as well; however, they are revealed in cultural forms like proverbs, idioms, expressions, and narratives found in stories and plays (cf. Meider 1984). It is within such forms that one finds “the complexity and wealth of values and meaning that suffuse the world, experience, and the life of human subjects” (Nesti 1990a, p. 428).

An example *par excellence* of creative ethnopoetics is found in the Irish proverb *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*. According to Ó Hógartaigh, this is “an Irish language expression whose literal meaning is ‘It is in each other’s shadow that people live’ but which, more broadly, invokes a sense of community and interdependence” (Ó Hógartaigh 2008, p. 1n). This communal interdependence, called *meitheal* in the Irish language, is working together for the good of all. Similar sentiments are showcased in other Irish language proverbs like *Iomad na lamh a bhaineas a cath* (“Many hands make light work”) (Flanagan 1999, p. 65) and *Níl neart go chur le chéile* (“There is no strength without unity”) (Mac Con Iomaire [1988] 1994, p. 12). The saying *Giorra cabhair Dé ná an doras* (“God’s help is nearer than the door”) (Ó Rahilly 1922, p. 1) means that one need not travel far to locate succor or support. Likewise, the value of beneficence is highly regarded, found in expressions like *Aithnítear duine ar an ndéir* (“A person is known by his charity”) (O’Donnell 1998, p. 45) and the strengthening words, “Charity begins at home”. Interestingly, the importance of the concept of *meitheal* is coupled with the significance of daughters in the Irish expression *Tá meitheal iníon aige*, meaning “He has many daughters to help him” (Máiréad—Irish American Mom 2021).

Conrad Arensberg ([1937] 1968, p. 73), commenting on “reciprocities of sentiment and duty”, notes that the word “friend” in the Irish sense means family; thus, it is not surprising that attention to kinship is found in proverbs like *Faoi bhun chrainn a thiteas an*

duilliúr, “The apple didn’t fall far from the tree” (Power 1974, p. 13); *Is tibhe fuil ná uisce* (“Blood is thicker than water” (Flanagan 1999, p. 52); *Is treise dúchas ná oiliúint* (“Nature is stronger than nurture”) (Uí Bhraoináin 2007, p. 303); *An rud a ghintear sa cnámh is deacair a bhaint as a fheoil* (“What’s bred in the bone will out”) (Uí Bhraoináin 2007, p. 365); and perhaps most telling of all, *Inis dom cia leis a rabhair, agus inneósad duit créad dhéanfair* (“Show me your company and I’ll tell you who you are” (Ó Rahilly 1922, p. 7).

In the west of Ireland, Irish people’s use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions aligned with their climbing of Croagh Patrick and their visiting of holy wells. Their “nature-sense”, that is to say, their physical connection with the natural world, aligned with utterances of their traditional oral lore. “The original meaning of the word ‘nature’ . . . derives from the Latin *natura* . . . ‘what man was born from’” (Keller 1994, p. 82). Indeed, unlike Roman Catholicism’s institutionalized religious spaces, it was the place where the people lived, their “cosmological townland”, so to speak, that informed their beliefs as well as their behaviors. The natural landscape instilled in them a strongly idiosyncratic concept of a *home land*, a fervent cosmological bonding (Dallat 1991; MacDermott 1972; Ó Ríordáin 1980).

There are additional expressions of creative ethnopoetics in terms of the Irish sense of place and attention to its preservation. A well-known dialogue in *Gone With the Wind*, the 1939 film based on a novel by Margaret Mitchell (1936) and set in the period of the American Civil War, exemplifies how the cultural belief complex was reinforced. In the scene, an Irish father, Gerald O’Hara, and his daughter, Scarlett, are discussing “Tara”, their home and family plantation. The conversation is multilayered, with expressions about land, family, what it means to be Irish, and what it means to be a woman of Irish descent. Interpreting his daughter’s disregard for the land, the father insists: “*Why, land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts* (emphasis added)”.

Scarlett protests that her father “sounds like an Irishman”; he rejoins:

It’s proud I am that I’m Irish, and don’t you be forgetting, Missy, that you’re half-Irish, too. And, to anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them—why, *the land they live on is like their mother*.

Then, pausing momentarily to forgive his daughter for her youth and innocence, he returns to his main point by insisting: *It will come to you, this love of the land. There’s no gettin’ away from it if you’re Irish* (*Gone with the Wind* 1939—Love of the Land/Tara’s Theme scene 1:00–1:29; emphasis added).

If narratives are believed to be faithful replicas of the nature of the world and human experience (Bennett 1989, pp. 301, 305), then this Irish father’s words ring true for consumers imbued with like-minded persuasions; those observers possess similar “implicit cultural assumptions that members of [a] speech community rely on to interpret instances of situated discourse” (Basso 1984, p. 50). Put another way, Gerald O’Hara’s sentiments fit into a “primary framework” (Goffman [1974] 1986). His narrative expresses the idea that one’s land is the *raison d’être* of existence. His paternal exhortation to his daughter conjures up a sense of purpose, even destiny. Harking to Ó Cruaíoch’s otherworld feminine (to be discussed in greater detail below), O’Hara’s reference to Tara in terms of the maternal, expressed in the words “the land they live on is like their mother”, is particularly profound, as is his confidence that the inevitable will ensue, for he gives voice to the idea that, in due course, his girl child will “grow into” Irish vernacular religious belief. To encounter statements like these is to, in Basso’s understanding, “expose the major premises on which they rest” and to realize that those premises “have the power to establish enduring bonds between individuals and features of the natural landscape” (Basso 1984, pp. 22–23).

If Gerald O’Hara’s words were expressed in isolation, devoid of similar expressions found in other ethnopoetic examples within Irish oral tradition, one might be disinclined to place much weight on them. However, such sentiments are reinforced in narrative contexts elsewhere. For example, in the 1952 film *The Quiet Man*, based on a short story with the same title (Walsh 1933)⁵, a parent—this time a mother—speaks to her son from the grave, conjuring up memories of home, landscape, and the familial affection they once shared:

Don't you remember, Seáneen, and how it was? The road led up past the chapel, and it wound, and it wound, and there was a field where Dan Tobin's bull chased you. It was a lovely little house, Seáneen. And the roses! Your father used to tease me about them, but he was that proud of them, too (*The Quiet Man* (1952) Location—Derryerglinna, Co Galway, Ireland 0:18–0:42).

In this monologue, one finds descriptions of not just *any* winding road but a very specific one, the one that wound “past the chapel”; moreover, that road did not *just* wind; rather, it *wound and wound*. Furthermore, adding to the sense of place, the mother's description identifies a particular spot, a field, where an unforgettable event occurred that involved a named neighbor and his cattle. That specificity amounts to what Basso (1984, p. 22) calls a validation of the premises upon which they rest.

Additional discursive features depict not only the land but the dwelling. Seán's mother describes it as a “lovely little house”, evoking the flowering of life with images of well-tended roses. Her narrative is delivered in exclamatory prose shaped with images of playfulness and familial pride. As the scene unfolds, the mother's recollection serves to explain her son's return; he adds weight to her memory by contributing his own. He addresses his birth and his future, saying, “. . . because I was *born* in that cottage over there and *I've come home* and it's *home I'm gonna stay*” (*The Quiet Man* 1:30–1:38; emphasis added). The son's distinct reason for coming back to his birthplace finds expression in lines that evoke foundation, return, and permanence. It is in these kinds of religious anchors that we perceive Irish migrants' awareness of what they owed and to whom they owed it, coupled with the realization of what it meant for them to carry out obligations to kin within their lived experiences.

The third example from popular Irish culture is found in *The Field*, a 1965 play written by John B. Keane and adapted for film (Keane 1966). The initial lines that address the importance of the land are sparse, but their meaning, accompanied by metaphor, is poignant. Just as Gerald O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* attempts to teach his daughter the meaning of place, so, too, does the father in *The Field* state to his son that the field is “worth fighting for, boy”. (*The Field* 1990, 5:49). Pausing with baskets of seaweed intended to enrich the patch they tend, the elder puts their efforts on par with the Divine: “God made the world, and seaweed made that field, boy” (*The Field* 1990, 4:37–4:42). To emphasize the be-all and end-all of their existence, he picks up a white-headed dandelion, declaring, “This is what we'd be without the land, boy”. With a few gentle puffs, he blows the spent flower's wisps, which scatter in all directions in the wind. With the dandelion's newly naked and exposed head in his hand, he holds it in front of his child's face, looks directly into his child's eyes, and nods to reinforce what it would mean to be in the condition of the scattered and lost (*The Field* 1990, 4:48–5:06). The profundity of the symbolism is clear: God may have made the world, but it was kinsmen working together that kept *their* world intact.

We are reminded of Bennett's (1989, p. 291) “belief story”, and the concept of a “cultural belief complex” wherein narratives are believed to be faithful replicas of the nature of the world and human experience (Bennett 1989, pp. 301, 305). Rather than being an escape from the quotidian dimensions of life, religious behaviors engage even as they transcend.

Later in the film, the father confronts the institutional religious system of Roman Catholicism by defiantly asserting that there is “another law, stronger than the common law” (*The Field* 1990, 53:32–53:35), and when the priest asks, “What's that?” the father's passionate reply is spat out: “the law of the land” (*The Field* 1990, 53:38). Although the priest attempts to claim institutional church authority, he admits that “there's just a thin veneer of Christianity painted over these people” (*The Field* 1990, 48:39). And in one of the more memorable soliloquies in the film, the father narrates the particulars of his family's sacrificial journey:

When I was a boy, younger than Tadgh there, my brothers and sisters had to leave the land, because it couldn't support them. We wasn't rich enough to be priests or doctors, so it was the emigrant ship for all of them. I were the eldest, the heir. I were the only one left at home. Neighbours [sic] were scarce. So my father and I,

we had our breakfast, dinner, and tea, working in that field without a break in our work. And my mother brought us the meals. One day, one day my father sensed a drop of rain in the air and my mother helped us bring in the hay before it was too late. She was working one corner of the field, and I was working in the other. About the third day, I saw her fall back, keel over so to speak. I called my father, I run to her. My father kneeled beside her. He knew she . . . he knew she was dying. He said an act of contrition into her ear and he asked God to forgive her her sins. And he looked at me, and he said, 'Fetch a priest.' Fetch a priest . . . And I said, 'Let's—let's bring the hay in first. Let's bring the hay in first.' My father looked at me with tears of pride in his eyes. He knew I'd take care of the land. And if you think I'm gonna face my mother in Heaven or in Hell without that field, you've got something else coming. No collar, uniform, or weapon will protect the man that stands in my way. (*The Field* 1990, 53:44–56:00)

It is here that we witness the key issue raised in this chapter: the near-futile attempt in some places in Ireland to hold on to the land, as well as its inability to sustain all of those who were born to it. The father explains that, for him and his siblings, a lack of money stood between them and advancement to the professional classes. He adumbrates the unwritten rule that children, especially firstborn children, must devote themselves to family care (Robertson 1953, p. 36). In addition, he elaborates on his belief in the importance of land over life—and a mother's life at that.

To endure all that the father's and son's efforts entailed was to commit what Taylor calls "acts of *moral geography* meant to constitute, reconstitute or reconfigure the meaning and *moral valence* of . . . *landscapes* in relation to both individual lives and collective cultural formations . . . linking one to another" (Taylor [2012] 2016, p. 211; emphasis added).

For those that stayed, who did not migrate permanently, temporary migration to Scotland amounted to an extension of many of the same kinds of work they did at home. For their kin, their work took on a sacred mission: to preserve their family's holdings (cf. O'Dowd 1991). Eugene Hynes (1988) reveals that "[T]he family and its particular farm came to be united symbolically [in the sense that] it was vitally important 'to keep the name on the land.'" Cousins sums this sense of duty well: "Neither famine nor eviction loos[en]ed the hold of the peasantry in much of the west" (cited in Ó Gráda 1973, p. 75; cf. Smyth 1983; Knott 1984). The land was their religious symbol; their hold on it equated to their implicit religious behavior as it is defined above: "a quest for meaning that originates in the life-world and expresses itself in a complex network of symbols and practices" (Nesti 1990b, p. 420).

7. The Conception of the Otherworld Feminine

It is at this juncture that we turn to the third aspect of the Irish vernacular worldview as set forth by Ó Cruailaoich, which is "the symbolic and socially functional significance of the conception of the otherworld feminine" (Ó Cruailaoich 2022). Numerous manifestations of the sacred feminine, replete with a variety of powers, exist in Irish tradition. These include the *bean leighis* (woman of healing), the *bean chaointe* (keening woman at the wake), the *bean sí* (English banshee, death messenger), and the *bean feasa* (woman of knowledge or wise woman) (Ó Cruailaoich 2003, passim). Aligned with these ideas of the sacred feminine is that of the woman who cares for her "holy ground", recognized as the nation but even more importantly, her family's land. In this regard, it was women, especially daughters, who took center stage. Meagher (1986, p. 342) asserts, "Economic conditions [at home] were very important . . . in shaping conceptions of the roles of [Irish] single women. . . . The wife's role was to be a mother; the daughter's role was to work". Most telling in this regard is the Irish proverb, *Is é do mhac go bpósann sé ach is í d'iníon d'iníon go bhfaighidh tú bás*: "Your son is your son until he marries, but your daughter is your daughter forever" (O'Donnell 1998, p. 30).

With this *bon mot*, we see Locklin's insight actualized: for the Irish, their religious lives and practices unfolded in specific cultural contexts that were regional, linguistic, cultural,

and economic (cf. Locklin 2017, p. xvii; see Figure 1). In the words of Victor Turner (1973, p. 200), it was “meritorious to choose one’s duty”. Lambert (2001, p. 181) adds that of all the ideologies of independent Ireland, women’s roles became increasingly circumscribed to caring for the family within the home. Those roles were reinforced by sayings like “Me own house and me own garden [or yard]” (cf. Quinn 2009, p. 197; personal communication) and by the well-known expression, “*Níl aon tinteáin mar do thinteáin féin*” (There’s no hearth like your own hearth). When one considers the personal politics of identity, a sense of place—particularly one’s *home* place—operated as a predominant factor (Wilson and Donnan 2006, p. 122; cf. Blunt and Dowling 2006).

The dwelling marked a “basic unit of distinctive Irish settlement and therefore of Irish social organization”. It symbolized and affirmed ideological positions about women:

The cottage as an ‘Irish citadel’ stands for [the] preservation and reproduction of Irish language, tradition and folklore, for which *women* were considered to have paramount responsibility in their capacity as caregivers . . . Thus the isolated rural cottage represented the realization, both in the physical fabric of the landscape and in the moral and spiritual domain, of the ideal form of Irish society. (Nash 1993, p. 49; emphasis added)

As for the hearth: in each and every Irish dwelling, it epitomized protected personal place and “the social life of the house” (Danaher 1995, p. 16). It extended beyond the walls of the dwelling, for its upkeep symbolized the strength of community and nation (Kenneally 2012, p. 225). “[T]o keep the fire continuously lit . . . was to symbolize the longevity of the clans” (Quinn and Delay 2017, p. 113). Evans notes:

The kitchen and the hearth are the very core of the Irish house, and the turf fire burning continuously day and night, throughout the year, is the symbol of both family continuity and of hospitality towards the stranger. When it goes out, it has been said, the *soul* goes out of the people of the house. (Evans 1957, p. 59; emphasis added)

Evans’s characterization of the turf fire as the “soul” of the dwelling enables one to grasp the importance of the hearth in the vernacular religious lives of the Irish, especially in the west of Ireland. Moreover, Evans’s metaphoric use of the word “soul” to describe the hearth of the dwelling harks to the kinds of women’s everyday religious behaviors that suffused the concepts of Irish sacred space. Is it any wonder, then, that the desire to return to the metaphoric meaning of the Irish hearth was so strong?



Figure 1. Tattie howkers digging potatoes. John Clark Maddison Collection, circa the late 1890s. Used with permission.

8. Conclusions

Extending the understanding of Irish religious belief to perceive it as a triadic complex enables us to recognize that specific places and particular localities play a salient role in determining how the Irish understood themselves as religious beings in the world. Challenged in this chapter is the well-entrenched perception that the Republic of Ireland is predominantly a “saintly” island oriented to Roman Catholic practices. Although Ireland has been thought to be a Roman Catholic island—so much so that it has earned the label “the land of saints and scholars”—and even though, for centuries, Roman Catholicism was perceived by many to be the predominant religious organization that informed Irish beliefs and practices—this chapter reveals that the tenets of Roman Catholicism constituted only some of the religious guideposts that informed seasonal Irish workers’ choices of religious activities and behaviors. Especially when it came to the beliefs that motivated them to engage in agricultural work abroad in the British Isles, other religious sensibilities were powerfully influential; to a large extent, they dictated how Irish people chose to act. Even though the “tattie-hokers” were reported to attend Roman Catholic religious services faithfully while working in the potato fields of England and Scotland (O’Dowd 1991), the need to protect their home places was a daily preoccupation for the men as well as the women. Proverbial lore associated with women is indicative of the fact that, like their fathers and brothers, Irish women were compelled morally to fulfill the working roles to which they were assigned by their families. To do so equated to the practice of vernacular religion, with its focus on human beliefs lived and experienced in myriad ways in the world (cf. Primiano 1995, p. 44).

In order to ascertain the implicit religious persuasions of seasonal migrants, the chapter utilizes the insights of Gearóid Ó Cruallaich and his promotion of the idea of the existence of an “Irish vernacular worldview” comprised of belief in cosmological dualism, creative ethnopoetics, and the otherworldly feminine. The first, dual cosmology, can be witnessed in communal practices that transcend the confines of organized religion; these include pilgrimage journeys to Ireland’s sacred mountains and visitations to the wells of founder saints. The second, the creative deployment of ethnopoetics, can be located in folkloric items like proverbs, customary sayings, narratives, and dialogues found in films. Collectively, examples from those genres help to explain seasonal migrants’ decisions to emigrate on a temporary basis only. Indubitably, migrants who undertook seasonal migration were shaped not by their “literal past” or “the ‘facts’ of [their literal] history”, as Brian Friel notes in his County Donegal-based play *Translations*, but by the “images of [their] past embodied in language” (Friel [1981] 2000; emphasis added). As this chapter has shown, those images, repeated regularly and passionately, indexed local and familial lands and dwellings.

The third piece Ó Cruallaich’s Irish vernacular worldview addresses the otherworldly feminine, which he locates in lore about the *bean sí* (fairy woman), the *cailleach* (wise woman), and other figures like the healing woman (*bean leighis*) regarded favorably for having special powers within the tradition. This chapter extends Ó Cruallaich’s ideas by recognizing Irish women as keepers of the hearth, the “soul” of Irish dwellings. Irish women were “elevated as the cultural arbiters of religious observance [and] valued for their inherited practical know-how” (Whelan 2018, p. 107). They lived roles that were inscribed in proverbs uttered about them and idioms used by them. The saying “Me own house and me own yard” is but one example.

Ian Reader notes that manifestations of implicit religiosity surface in day-to-day behaviors like folk customs shared community practices, and feelings of identity (Reader 1993, p. 16; cf. Bailey 1983). Examples of these have been reiterated throughout this chapter. The evidence shows that to merely focus on the Christian or Roman Catholic belief system as a factor affecting the behaviors of seasonal migrants to Scotland in the twentieth century is to miss—or dismiss—the compelling magnetism of the vernacular and implicit religious forces at play.

These fresh lines of inquiry offer a broader perspective on religion in Ireland, one that moves us far from the boundaries of “Catholic” and/or “Protestant” and towards the

awareness that binaries fall by the wayside when one considers vernacular worldviews and implicit symbols and practices. In addition, these insights are valuable in terms of opening up categories of awareness regarding emigrant groups entering Ireland at present, for they are probably entering with their own sets of vernacular beliefs and implicit symbols and practices, all of which deserve to be honored and respected.

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Notes

- ¹ Tom Inglis (1988) argues that when it comes births, weddings, confirmations, deaths, etc., in many places in the Republic of Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church continues to figure predominantly.
- ² McNally (1973, p. 91) notes that clerics were concerned that their parishioners’ faith might be compromised by travel.
- ³ For further information on Irish seasonal migration, see (Collins 1976; Holmes 2000; Moran 1988; O’Dowd 1991, 2019; Ó Gráda 1973; Quinn 2020, 2022).
- ⁴ Marian Bowman’s (2004) triadic perspective bears similarities to the one presented here, but it is not the same in the sense that Bowman places more emphasis on the individual than the group. There are other distinctions to note as well.
- ⁵ The story appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 11 February 1933.

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