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Primogeniture and Ultimogeniture in Rural Ireland

Irish farmers in general have long eschewed the practice of subdividing their holdings among their offspring, insisting instead on a single male heir. In classic contributions, Connell, and Arensberg and Kimball have vividly spelled out some of the implications of this behavior for marital strategy, family structure, and the trend in rural incomes. The question of *which* son was most likely to succeed on the farm was also discussed by these authors, although only briefly. For anthropologists Arensberg and Kimball "there was no fixed rule or norm": the father simply chose among his sons the one most likely to become a successful farmer and other members of the family then acquiesced in the matter. Connell was somewhat more equivocal. After a canvas of the members of the Irish Folklore Commission, he suggested that the heir was traditionally the eldest son, although he also referred to "the worthiest son" and "the elect, the boy chosen to follow his father" in very much the same vein as Arensberg and Kimball.[1]

Neither casual observation nor indeed an examination of the better-known sources on post-Famine Irish farm life lends much support to the view that primogeniture was the dominant practice. Rather, a tendency towards ultimogeniture in rural Ireland was detected by Carleton, the novelist, even before the Famine, and by O'Donnell, a writer and political activist, over a century later. According to O'Donnell, "small farmer areas are the greatest source of emigrants. It is indeed a good thing that the young people there leave home as soon as they grow up, so that leaves the floor free for the youngest son, on whom the task of looking after the parent falls, to marry early." A few of Connell's inform-

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1 Kenneth H. Connell, "Peasant Marriage in Ireland: Its Structure and Development since the Famine," *Economic History Review*, XIV (1962), 502–523; *idem, Irish Peasant Society* (Oxford, 1968), esp. 116–117; Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), esp. 62; Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman* (London, 1937).

ants at the Irish Folklore Commission used similar reasoning. However, in general the folklorists' evidence is difficult to interpret. Nearly all of them allude to the primacy of primogeniture in folk *tradition*. The eldest was the first choice of his parents, unless, of course, he was weak, disabled, or particularly bookish or pious. One of the folklorists even quotes a Kerry aphorism to that effect. However, their accounts of succession *practice* are more equivocal and varied.[2]

This note offers a way of throwing more light on succession patterns on Irish farms a decade or two before Arensberg and Kimball's sojourn in County Clare. Its findings are drawn from information contained in the enumerators' forms of the 1911 Irish population census.[3] This census, like those of Great Britain in the same year, included an inquiry into marital fertility, and the resultant data provide an indirect way of examining inheritance patterns. Our focus is on the average gap between the reported duration of the partners' marriage and the reported age of the eldest resident son. The logic of this tactic is straightforward enough: subject to obvious caveats, a short gap implies that primogeniture was the norm, while a long gap—say of ten to fifteen years—implies a tendency toward ultimogeniture. The following is the procedure used. Relevant data were collected on farmers and farmers' wives who had been married at least twenty-one years in 1911, at least two of whose children had left home, and at least three of whose children had survived at the time of the census. This is somewhat arbitrary, but it means that our study includes only farm households where some scope for the selection of an heir existed, and where some children had already been excluded from consideration. Rather than narrow down observations to cases where only one surviving son was resident, it is assumed that the eldest remaining son was the one who would eventually take control of the farm, if he were not already

2 William Carleton, *The Party Flight and Funeral* (Cork, 1973), 20. See also Earnan De Blaghd, *Trasna na Bóinne* (Dublin, 1957), 11; Hugh Brody, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland* (London, 1973), 101, for instances of ultimogeniture. Peadar O'Donnell, "De Valera's Speech on Emigration—a Comment," *The Bell,* XVII (1951), 56. I owe this reference to Joseph Lee. "An mac is críonna in áit an athar"—the eldest son to replace the father: c.f. *Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann* (Irish Folklore Commission), Dept. of Irish Folklore Archive, University College (Dublin 1956), Ms. 1459, evidence of Tadhg Ó Murchadha, Waterville, and passim.

3 These are available for inspection at the Public Record Office, Dublin.

in control. This approach allows us to use a far greater number of observations from the areas selected at little cost.

The greater part of our data comes from thirty-three district electoral divisions in the baronies of Corcomroe, Inchiquin, and Burren in County Clare. This area was selected because it contains the townlands of Luogh, Inagh, and Rinnamon, which are familiar to the many readers of Arensberg and Kimball. Observations were also gathered from the Lattin-Kilteely-Kilbehenny area in Munster's Golden Vale, from the West Muskerry area of County Cork, and from a small area centered on the coastal village of Ring in County Waterford. The first of these is situated in what was in 1911—and still is—Ireland's richest dairying region; the second is a rather poor upland district of small farms; and Ring occupies an intermediate position.[4]

Since the average number of children reported for those families included for consideration is very large—it ranges from 7.3 in Waterford to 8.8 in Clare—a gap of five years or less between the length of a parent's marriage and the age of the eldest resident son seems acceptable evidence of primogeniture, and this shall be the measure used here. Its main weaknesses are that it does not allow for those couples who had two or three daughters before having sons, and that it fails to sort out those cases where all elder children were sons and the second or third stayed on to inherit the farm. In addition it glosses over the problem that not all potential successors would survive till the twenty-first year of their parents' marriage. On balance the five-year gap suggested here is a tough test of primogeniture.[5]

4 District Electoral Divisions 1–11, 14–16, 37, 46–49, 54–64; for Cork, D.E.D.s 220–224, 231–232, 235; for Tipperary-Limerick, 23–24, 29–31, 147, 155–162; for Waterford, 18–24, 26, 96–99. The District Electoral Division is an administrative territorial unit normally comprising several parishes.

5 The 1911 census (Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility* [Berkeley, 1973], 178, Table 60) implies an average interval between early parities of women ennumerated of about two and one-half years, but the interval was probably smaller for women with very large families. An average of nearly three children in five years is thus not altogether unrealistic. Assuming three for the purposes of illustration and allowing the equal likelihood of male and female siblings, the probability of no male birth in the first five years of marriage is one in eight, and the probability of at least two males is one in two. In these circumstances one eighth of the families included could not have had a son capable of meeting our test of primogeniture. But half of the families would have had more than one son within the period, thus making for a loose test of primogeniture. Clearly, to assume only two children in five years makes the test a tougher one.

The results are presented in Table 1. They are obviously not consistent with the primacy of ultimogeniture during the period in question, nor do they support the *dominance* of primogeniture. But in Clare in 46 percent of the cases the gap is five years or less, and in Waterford that proportion is substantially exceeded. Indeed, in view of the qualifications above, it is likely that in all selected areas except Cork primogeniture was a majority phenomenon in farming at this time. Nevertheless, the mean gap is large (six to eight years), with much variation in all four areas, and it should be remembered that random selection of heirs in any event would result in primogeniture in about one fourth of the cases.[6]

The large variance in the gap at least is consistent with Arensberg and Kimball's conclusions. However, recent criticisms of their view of family harmony under a patriarchal regime, as well as some perceptive comments by the folklorists, suggest that the anthropologists' discussion of inheritance patterns may not have reflected the social reality in some important respects. In particular it is likely that the chosen son, finding the cost of acquiescence and succession too high, did not always realize his parents' expectations as readily as posited. In Ireland, most observers agree, it was common practice, where possible, for farmers "to retain ownership and usually effective control until they die[d], or at least reach[ed] an advanced age."[7]

In addition, not all children could be expected to survive to the twenty-first year of their parents' marriage. For instance, if a 10% mortality rate is used (c.f. Kennedy, *Irish,* 59), then about 17% (30%) of those families with three (two) children in the first five years would have had no surviving son after twenty-one years of marriage. Bearing these considerations in mind, it would seem that our test is balanced, although only a little so, against primogeniture.

6 Although examination of the data on duration of marriage and the eldest resident son suggests strong incidence of "heaping" (or a tendency to report age in multiples of five and ten), this should not materially affect the *average* gap.

7 See in particular Peter Gibbon, "Arensberg and Kimball Revisited," *Economy and Society,* II (1973), 479–498; Damian Hannan, *Rural Exodus* (Dublin, 1970), 92–94; Brody, *Inishkillane,* 109–130; answers by M. MacEnrí (Bangor Erris), Michael J. Murphy (Tyrone), Brigid Keane (Mullingar), and Alex McConnell (Fermanagh) to the *Coinisiún* questionnaire. *Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems: Report* (Dublin, 1956), 86; Connell, *Irish Peasant Society,* 117; Arensberg and Kimball, *Family,* 118. D.G. Symes, "Farm Household and Farm Performance: A Study of Twentieth Century Changes in Ballyferriter, Southern Ireland," *Ethnology,* IX (1972), 25–38, however, finds a rather different pattern in his study-area in 1911.

Table 1 Gap between Duration of Marriage and Age of Eldest Resident Son

AREA	NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS	MEAN GAP	STANDARD DEVIATION	NUMBER OF GAPS OF 4 YEARS OR LESS (%)	NUMBER OF GAPS OF 5 YEARS OR LESS (%)
Clare	515	7.46	5.97	201(39.0)	238(46.2)
Limerick-Tipperary	223	7.14	5.32	81(36.3)	105(47.1)
Cork	221	8.08	5.48	64(29.0)	78(35.3)
Waterford	73	5.93	4.97	38(52.1)	44(60.3)

Thus, in effect, it was a question for the eldest son, if selected, of trading off his marriage prospects and independence for control of the homestead in middle or late middle age. He may not have relished the prospect and, naturally, the smaller the holding, the greater in theory would have been the incentive to leave. As one of Connell's informants, reporting from Castlerea in County Roscommon, put it, "sometimes they remain against their inclination, but the question of keeping the home and caring for the aged parents compels them to remain."[8]

This situation suggests a scenario less idyllic than Arensberg and Kimball's, but closer to practice in rural communities elsewhere, where individualist values reign, and where property considerations on the part of the sibling influence the succession outcome and, possibly, family harmony.[9] If the elder sons regarded succession in terms of a trade-off, then we would expect the sibling ranking of the successor to be inversely related to the age of the father or mother at marriage. If a farmer married young

8 See the Table at n.12 below, which is consistent with such trading-off. The mother had at least as great an incentive to prevent the heir apparent from marrying, since the fear that she might not "pull" with a strange daughter-in-law was a potent factor. The institution of the "match" tended to broaden the basis for such fears, since it meant that the women were unlikely to know one another well beforehand. *Coimisiún,* report of S.Ó Domhnaill, Castlerea.

9 For comparison see Alwyn D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside: A Social History of Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa* (Cardiff, 1960), 68–71; David Jenkins, "Aberporth: A Study of a Coastal Village in South Cardiganshire," in Elwyn Davies and Rees (eds.), *Introduction to Welsh Rural Communities* (Cardiff, 1960), 32; John W. Cole and Eric Robert Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (New York, 1974), 180–184; Ó Gráda, "Some Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Irish Emigration," in L.M. Cullen and T.C. Smout (eds.), *Comparative Aspects of Scottish and Irish Economic and Social History* (Edinburgh, 1977), 66–73, and the references cited therein.

Table 2 Correlation between Gap and Parents' Age at Marriage

AREA	$R_{gap,aam}$	NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS
Clare (aam:Men)	−.217	433
Clare (aam:Women)	−.225	496
Cork	−.206	221
Tipperary-Limerick	−.311	223
Waterford	−.319	73

and had a large family, a younger son stood a better chance of inheriting the holding by default. Our data permit us to focus on the correlation between the gap mentioned above and either parent's age at marriage ($R_{gap,aam}$). For Clare $R_{gap,aam}$ was estimated using age at marriage of both mother and father. Since the results were similar, and since the necessary details were frequently given in the case of widows, only the correlation between the gap and the mother's age at marriage was calculated for the other areas.[10]

The correlation coefficients are negative throughout, so the results are consistent with our argument. Inferential statements are strictly speaking not permissible, but if Arensberg and Kimball's view of County Clare as typical of the Irish countryside is accepted, then the results have more general implications. They argue that "the three communities that appear from time to time in the following pages are . . . samples, just as County Clare itself is a sample, a fairly representative mean among the major social and economic conditions in Ireland upon which there was documentation." If, in the spirit of Arensberg and Kimball, it is assumed that our data are representative, then a standard statistical test indicates that the hypothesis of a zero population correlation

10 Heaping of the age at marriage data means an errors-in-variables problem, so that the estimate of R is somewhat biased downward. This merely means that the test of the hypothesis is more stringent. It is also likely that some of those parents included in our test exaggerated their age in 1911 in the hopes of benefitting from the provisions of the Old Age Pensions Act, resulting in an upward bias in calculated age at marriage; but there is no reason why this should bias the estimated coefficients. On the pitfalls of the 1911 Census see David Fitzpatrick, "The Study of Irish Population 1961–1901," paper presented at the Irish Economic and Social History Society meeting (1977); Francis J. Carney, "Household Size and Structure in Two areas of Ireland, 1821 and 1911," paper presented at the Conference of French and Irish Economic Historians on "Peasant Societies" (1977).

coefficient may be rejected at any conventional degree of confidence.[11]

Clearly, then, there was more to inheritance than the whim of the father. The inheritance pattern was neither random, a reflection of Arensberg and Kimball's "familism," nor immutable, as instanced by a structure like primogeniture. It seems instead to have been considerably influenced by economic considerations, and thus liable to vary across space and over time.

Finally, it is unfortunate that the 1911 data, taken alone, do not permit a test of some closely related hypotheses. For instance, if the concept of a trade-off is valid in this context, we would predict that small farmers had less prospect of retaining the services of their elder sons than strong farmers. Thus to the extent that primogeniture was an aspiration on the part of all kinds of farmers, those less well-off were more likely to be disappointed. In the same vein we might posit that small farmers showed less reluctance in handing over control or in permitting the heir designate to marry early. Further research may provide a fuller answer to these questions.[12]

11 Arensberg and Kimball, *Family,* xxvii, xiii. The standard statistical test is described in J. Johnston, *Econometric Methods* (New York, 1972), 36–37. For $n = 500$, and $R = 0.3$, $t = 7.02$.

12 The following data, drawn from the 1926 census of the Irish Free State (Dublin, 1928), Pt. V, 66–70, are at least consistent with such an interpretation:

FARM SIZE (ACRES)	% OF FARMERS' SONS AGED 25–34 MARRIED	% OF FARMERS' SONS AGED 35–44 MARRIED	% OF FARMERS' SONS AGED 45–54 MARRIED
1–	7.4	19.8	27.0
5–	7.8	19.4	31.0
10–	6.6	19.3	28.7
15–	5.7	18.5	29.3
30–	4.4	15.8	26.3
50–	4.0	12.5	24.2
100–	3.5	11.7	21.7
200–	3.4	15.6	17.7