"HAVING TO MANAGE" ORAL REFLECTIONS OF DAILY FOOD PROVISION FROM WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN DUBLIN'S 1950'S

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Abstract

During the 1950's Dublin housed 50% of the internationally acclaimed restaurants in Britain and Ireland, namely, Jammet's, The Royal Hibernian and La Fayette at the Russell Hotel, making it, by way o this disproportionate representation, the gastronomic capital of the British Isles (Mac Con Iomaire, 2011a). Furthermore, the city also boasted an array of both celebrated and prosperous fine dining restaurants (The Savoy Grill, The Gresham Hotel, The Metropole, Alfredo's and The Red Bank), each of whom significantly contributed to the city's burgeoning international reputation for Haute Cuisine and grandeur.

Mirroring this conspicuous consumption, the contemporaneous presence of "The Irish Housewife", an annual woman's magazine targeting the middle to upper social classes, articulated a sense of style and sophistication for its readers, while simultaneously campaigning actively on social issues relating to the nutritional requirements of families and articulating concerns over the increasing price of food during the early years of the 1950's. Furthermore, "The Irish Housewife" also provided an informational conduit into cultural, historical and leisure pursuits, while at the same time pursuing the significant consumer buying power of its readers by way of its comprehensive advertising of food product, labour saving equipment, and richly endowed recipes.

However, despite evidence of what was indulgent opulence and grandeur for one social elite, a totally different reality existed for many Dublin mothers who, charged with the responsibility of feeding those under their care on what was a meagre income, were forced to perform a daily miracle in providing for the nutritional needs of their often oversized and under nourished families.

Using a qualitative methodology, involving semi-structured interviews eliciting the oral memoirs of these wonderful and under recognized women, counterpointed against secondary publications from the period, this paper will seek to recount a tale of innovation and heroism in the face of a daily grind, when viewed through the limiting and often disempowering lenses of food availability, food affordability, social routines and "having to manage".

Introduction

The arrival of the 1960's saw a major cultural shift in how Irish women viewed themselves. Resulting from the modernization of the kitchen environment, women, it was suggested, became free from what was the daily grind of providing for their families, and appearing to have more time and money at their disposal, were encouraged to engage in more leisure pursuits. However, while the 1960's became symbolic of a shaking off of the chains of drudgery, the 1950's were different. Set in a time where there were no burgers, hot dogs, energy drinks, vegetarians, or pizzas, and little in the way of storage facilities, labour saving equipment, or take away foods, the economic challenges for those on low income was enormous. In addition, high levels of unemployment, large families, wayward husbands, church control and poor housing, all conspired to make the lot of the urban housewife or mother, difficult and challenging.

In research terms, much of the extant literature on the lifestyles of the people of Dublin in the 1950's details a semi sophisticated existence, wherein fine dining experiences were provided by highly trained chefs in a suite of internationally recognized restaurants (Mac Con Iomaire, 2010, 2011a). Parallel to these tangible culinary experiences, much of the magazine advertising and cookbook content aimed at Irish women was conveyed in aspirational tones, illustrating an "attainable" lifestyle mirroring that of those residing in society's upper echelons (Clear, 2000). Consequently, there appears to be a dearth of literature researching the daily lives of these women, who, in straightened circumstances, performed a daily miracle in providing meals for their families. As such, this paper will endeavour to address this imbalance through re-animating their lives, through the oral recollections of those who lived through these challenging times.

Dublin; A Polarised Society

During the first half of the twentieth century, many of the women responsible for life-maintaining tasks were variously known as "homemakers", "mothers", and "housewives" (Clear, 2000). However, by the latter end of the 1940's, and the early years of the 1950's, the term "housewife" became problematic for some researchers and activists. Sheehy Skeffington (1946) lamented the use of this term, suggesting instead that the equivalent of the Irish "bean a tighe", or "woman of the house", would be more appropriate, suggesting a custodial role, wherein women exercised control within their home environment would better represent their authority and importance. To that end, organisations and publications articulating the empowerment of women flourished in the 1950's. One such organization, The Irish Housewives Association, founded in Dublin in 1942 by Hilda Tweedy, was self-

consciously feminist in nature, and though catering and advocation for mainly middle class Protestant urban women, also carried torches for among other things, women's rights to receive a direct payment of children's allowance, the provision of school meals for children in National schools, equal pay for women workers, consumer affairs (public health, working class housing conditions, quality control in foodstuffs, food prices), and access to education (Clear, 2000). Such political campaigns put The Irish Housewives Association on a collision course with the Catholic Church, and, though actively representing the rights of all women, it consequently did not feature in the lives of the poorer Catholic families. Furthermore, the cost of their annual magazine was one shilling and six pence, which represented a large portion (approximately 10%) of a poorer family's weekly income, thus distancing these families even further from being influenced by this organisation.

Although in the 1950's, food became disproportionately expensive (discussed later), The Irish Housewife recipe corner illustrated recipes for "family food", which was, economically speaking, outside of the cogniscence of the average city family/and those living in the new sprawling local authority housing schemes. Examples of recipes for starters (Avocados, Grapefruit Delight, Pearl Chutney; (a curry companion), Stuffed Tomatoes), soups (French Onion Soup), main dishes (Spare Ribs in Barbecue Sauce, California Chilli Beans, Salmon Souffle, Top Rib, Spaghetti Meat Loaf, Creamed Salmon, Halibut in Sour Cream), and desserts (Angel Food Cake, Jelly Fluff, Spiced Apple Flan, Apple Snow, Devil's Foodcake) indicated a need to satisfy an altogether different audience (who regularly dined out, and procured the recipes which they subsequently cooked at home from first principles). Indeed, during the early years of the 1950's, Dublin was rich in fine dining restaurants (Mac an Iomaire, 2011a), showcasing among others, Restaurant Jammet, a world recognized restaurant (Mac Con Iomaire, 2005), which was well known to most residents of Dublin, even though most of them never set foot inside the door. Furthermore, the ubiquity of other fine dining restaurants (The Gresham, The Shelbourne, The Metropole, The Russell and The Royal Hibernian) added to the reputation of Dublin as being one of the dining capitals of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century (Mac Con Iomaire, 2011a). In terms of providing universal access to cooking knowledge, there was no shortage of cookbooks in this period offering skills and social advice to the Irish housewife. The Department of Agriculture's *Cookery Notes* (1944), Josephine Reddington's *Economic Cookery Book* (1927), Roper and Duffin's *Bluebird Cookery Book for Working Women* (1939), Cathal Brugha Street's *All in the Cooking* (1943), Ann Hathaway's *Homecraft Book* (1944) and Maura Laferty's *Kind Cooking* (1946), were universally used in secondary schools and schools of domestic science, offering realistic recipes written within the context of the time (Clear, 2000). Maura Lafferty's Flour Economy (1940) was a collection of recipes based on potatoes and oatmeal

in a drive to conserve the country's wheat (Clear, 2000). However, again, these books were relatively expensive, costing from 1/6 to 5 shillings, a cost that would have been prohibitive for women struggling to put basic food on the table.

For many Dublin women, their daily lives counterpointed the lives of those who could afford to participate or aspire to a sophisticated existence. During the 1950's there was a shortage of the basic necessities, namely, tea, margarine, butter, cooking fat and flour, along with a limitation on the supply of the gas, which was needed to cook (Tweedy Archive 98/17/2/3/5.1951). Allied to this, the cost of these items increased substantially in the final years of the 1940's and the early years of the 1950's, due in the main to a deregulation on the part of the Government of price control and a post war shortage of some products (Tweedy Archive 98/17/2/3/5, 1951). Illustrating the price rise for some critical food ingredients offers a stark indication of the challenges for Dublin mothers. The cost of food staples in the 1950's, and the dramatic increase/decrease in 1951 was as follows (Irish Housewife, 1950/51)

Ingredient	**Price (1950)**	**Price (1951)**	**% Increase/Decrease**
Butter (per lb)	2/0	3/0	+50%
Bacon (per lb)	2-8	4/0	+43%
Sugar (per lb)	0/5	0/9	+80%
Tea (per lb)	4/0	2/8	-30%
Flakemeal (per stone)	5/0	4/0	-20%
Eggs (per doz)	2/8	7/0	+162%
Beef (per lb)	2/2	2/90	+30%
Potatoes (per stone)	1/10	2/0	+9%
Milk (per pint)	0/2	0/5	+150%
Bread (per loaf)	0/6	1/0	+66%
Rabbit (each)	1/6	2/6	+66%
Flour (per stone)	3/6	4/0	+10%
Corned Beef (per lb)	1/10	2/5	+30%
Liver (per lb)	2/8	3/0	+6%
Mutton (per lb)	2/4	2/4	no change
Apples (each)	0/4	0/4	no change
Biscuits (per lb)	2/0	2/6	25%
Lard (per lb)	1/2	1/9	+50%
Margarine (per lb)	1/11	2/6	+20%
Cheese (per lb)	2/5	2/5	no change
Herrings (per doz)	2/0	2/6	+25%

During this period, "The Irish Housewife" kept a close watch on these price increases, which by today's standards, were quite dramatic, with prices on many stock items increasing by over 30% between 1950 and 1951. To put this financial challenge into context, the average weekly wage in Dublin in the 1950's was about £4 and 10shillings (CSO, 2012), whereas unemployment benefit was only sixteen shillings for an individual or £1-12shillings for a

couple, about one fifth of the average weekly wage figure (Department of Social Welfare, 2012). Furthermore, this money was paid directly to the man, who in many cases, only passed a fraction on to the woman of the house. Indeed, while women controlled the household spending, very few of them knew how much their husband earned. Moreover, Humphreys, (1966) comments that while the tendency among labourers at the time was to give their wives control of the finances, it is not clear if these finances constituted total family income, or what the man deemed necessary for the family's subsistence. Additionally, due to high levels of unemployment and emigration, a majority of families probably found the economic situation tight in the 1950's, wherein, the financial burden for providing for the family's basic needs (rent, food and fuel) fell on women. This challenge is brought into sharp focus by Ferriter (2005:465-466), when stating that "between 1951 and 1961, 412,000 emigrated from Ireland", while between 1956 and 1957, "Ireland was alone in Europe in being a country where the total volume of goods and services consumed fell". Furthermore, within the period, 1951-1959, "employment in industry fell by 38,000 (14% of the industrial labour force" (Ferriter, 2005:466). The financial straightjacket for the oppressed mother was further complicated in that unemployment benefit was a lowly figure then. Thus, where there was a shortage of money, women often resorted to the relieving officer, or charitable organisations such as The St. Vincent de Paul and The Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers Society, the large volume of moneylenders who operated in Dublin, or one of the city's many pawn shops (Kearns, 1991; Kearns, 1994).

Consequently, the shortage of money determined the daily diet of these families. For many, the nutritional value of their food was poor, not by choice, but due to women having to provide for large families (ranging in size between six and twenty four), on a daily basis. Very basic diets consisted of "bread, tea, oatmeal, cocoa, potatoes, cabbage, herrings and pairings of cheap meat pieces for stews and soups" (Kearns, 1994:13-14). Sheep's heads, cow's heads, rabbits, pig's cheeks, pig's feet (crubeens), hearts and oxtails were also popular. Bread was a staple and a constant companion at all meals, due to its bulking ability and its cheapness. Furthermore, the social order determined that men and working sons often got the lions share (Kearns, 1994). In addition to this, the weekly menu in most households seldom varied (Cullen, 2005:120). "Sunday meals typically consisted of corned beef, cabbage and potatoes. On Mondays, Sunday's leftovers were reheated on the pan with some cabbage. Tuesdays and Thursday's saw vegetable stew, sometimes flavoured with marrobones being brought to the table, whereas Wednesdays and Fridays were fish days (mackerel, cod or ray). Saturdays were days for a rabbit and vegetable stew". While all of these meals delivered good nourishment, the contents were readily available and relatively cheap to buy for families in receipt of a weekly wage. However, due to financial pressures, many laboring families did

not have access to fresh fruit (Clear, 2000). Nevertheless, in terms of stews (a constant in the lives of poor families), leg of beef, stewing beef, beef heads, sheep's head and kidneys, along with vegetables, were key elements in the making of a meal to fill the family (Kearns, 1994). Other cheap and nutritional meals involved women buying cod's heads, boiling them and shaking the meat off. This, with a large loaf of bread cut on the table with a scrape of butter on it would make everybody happy (Kearns, 1994). However, despite this availability of cheap, bland, albeit nourishing food, a lot of illnesses were born of the fact that people were not properly nourished. For many in poor circumstances, their diet primarily consisted of bread, margarine and tea, which in many cases was hereditary, as these were the principle elements in the diet of their parents (Kearns, 1994).

A further concern, for families on low or meagre incomes in the 1950's, was that of food storage. Fridges were unaffordable in many cases, resulting in innovative strategies being employed by many women to protect food from spoilage. Perishables, such as milk, margarine, butter and buttermilk were placed in a basin of cold water. Tea, oatmeal, bread and sugar were sealed in biscuit tins to protect them from mice. As there were no such things are fridges or freezers, people would have to use their meat and other perishables on the day it was purchased. Indeed, many women bought from meal to meal. Exposed food was covered in gauze to protect it from disease carrying flies and bluebottles (Kearns, 1994). During the 1950's, ancillary labour saving devices such as washing machines and fridges were prohibitively expensive. Indeed, at a time when the average weekly wage for those lucky enough to have a job averaged £5 (CSO, 2012), the cost of a washing machine in 1951 was £25, about a month's wages for a working man (Clear, 2000). Furthermore, while the cost of a fridge rose from 40 guineas in 1951 to 98 guineas in 1958, the cost of a vacuum cleaner, if one aspired to such, was pitched at £21 (The Irish Housewife, 1951/1958), all of which conspired to condemn the ordinary Dublin mother, living in straightened circumstances, to the ongoing drudgery of work.

Methodology

This paper sought to record the views of a forgotten group of women who not alone lived through "the hungry 50's", but survived intact, with in many cases, their stories, lying buried within their own memories. Methodologically, the author stands firmly within the interpretivist perspective (Burrell & Morgan 2000, wherein knowledge is seen as an emergent social process, and where understanding and explanation of the

phenomenon of interest, comes through the language of the respondent. The specific methodological approach chosen by the author employed involved qualitative interviews, incorporating oral discourse. The use of oral history as a tool for culinary historians has long been advocated by key researchers, such as Mac Con Iomaire, (2010, 2011b), who argues that one of the reasons for using oral history is the lack of available written material. To that end, eight women, all in their eighties agreed to be interviewed. Themes were set by initially asking each of these women where their parents were born and if their father or husband was employed during the 1950's. Specific questions included their recollections on;

- How they made ends meet if there was a shortage of money?
- How they bought food, and what they cooked?
- Kitchen equipment, food storage and waste
- The psychological significance of cooking and caring in the 1950's and 1960's

Although interviews were programmed to last between forty five minutes and one hour, some of the interviews lasted much longer, such was the clarity of recall and desire to speak on the part of some of the interviewees. All interviews were taped, and avoided using names where possible except in one case where the respondent expressed a wish to be named.

Findings

A total of eight women were interviewed for the purposes of this research. Some of the interviews were on a one to one basis, while others were conducted in small groups. Although the sample size was small, most of the women interviewed spoke of how their neighbours managed, thus conferring a more inclusive and generalised feel on the findings. For the purpose of this research, findings will be grouped under a number of headings, namely, (i) the strategies employed by the interviewees to overcome the economic challenges of the time (making ends meet), (ii) food choices and how food was bought, (including remembrances associated with the day to day menu), (iii) kitchen equipment food storage and waste, if any and (iv) the psychological significance of cooking and caring in the daily lives of these women, and if this changed with the arrival of the 1960's.

(i) <u>making ends meet</u>

Although throughout the interviews, the strong conviction emerged that money "*was in short supply*", a sense emerged that women whose husbands had jobs in Guinness's, Jacobs, Patterson's Match Factory, or The Corporation, "*were made up".* But these circumstances were spoken of as being the exception, rather than the norm, and interestingly, with no tinge of begrudgery or jealousy, but rather a view that this minority of people were fortunate and to be admired. For a sizeable portion of city dwellers, many of the men had to emigrate to "*Birmingham or Bradford or London to work in the factories".* This caused a problem for women, who had to wait for a delivery of money. One interviewee poignantly painted a picture where *"On a Saturday evening, most of the women in the street stood at their hall doors, waiting for the telegraph boy to come up from the GPO with the wired money, If you got it you went straight to the local shop, which stayed open until ten. But if you didn't get anything, you just closed the door".* For these women, the financial rescue provided by the pawn shop, or a loan from the local shopkeeper, (cited by one of the interviewees as the daily norm), "*most of the women kept a book in the local corner shop*", rather than becoming involved with charities like the St. Vincent de Paul or the local priest was socially, more respectable. Comments on the latter ranging from *"We just didn't like this sort of thing",* and *"There was a kind of shame in it, and you know, you always wanted to keep the best side out",* to *"We would rather sell what we had than do that",* illustrated the dilemmas facing women at the time. However, where a sense of shame seemed ingrained wherein a dependence on charity to fund meals was evident, an altogether different sense of acceptable communal behaviour was articulated when it came to utilizing the services of the pawnbroker. Here, ubiquitous comments such as "*sure everyone done it"*, and "*you met your neighbours outside the pawn at eight o clock on a Monday morning",* were spoken of with great mirth.

The often fraught relationship with the pawnbroker was illustrated through statements such as "*some stuff was never released*", but "*if the interest was paid on it every six months it was then put back up on the shelf, and as long as it was not your husband's suit then you were safe".* However, other women admitted to selling valuable possessions or family heirlooms to get money to buy food. One interviewee remembered "*taking the curtains off the wall and selling them for food, and the next week, I sold two green lustres to an art dealer in Liffey Street, who paid me £9 without even seeing them".* Asked if she minded, selling these articles for less than they were worth, she replied *"Sure what else could you do? You couldn't just look at the children hungry".* But while it was common for most women to have to manage as best they could, some women were quite ingenuitive when it came to raising money. This was evidenced when interviewees spoke of "*selling bananas or knitting from a breadboard on the street corner*". Yet another interviewee spoke of her neighbour "*washing out the*

floors of three shops in Mary Street for three shillings a shop", adding kindly, "*you know, she had a big family, and her husband wasn't good to her"*. Another woman spoke of "*buying fish in the Fish Market in Chancery Street, and walking with my mother from The Four Courts to Chapelizod to sell to the people out there"*, humorously adding, "*sure we were entrepreneurs, before they even thought of it"*

(ii) <u>food choices, and how food was bought</u>

For most of the interviewees, there was a consistency about what was served at mealtimes. Breakfast consisted of a cup of tea and a slice of toast or some porridge before going to school or work. On the other hand, dinner was served up to "*the sound of the factory sirens*", giving a uniformity to the meal structure. Procedurally, dinner was served in the middle of the day. It consisted of a main course with bread, butter and tea, and in many cases, the men, or working sons, received a larger share. There were no starters, soups, or desserts, except perhaps on Sundays, when occasionally, jelly and ice cream was served.

In terms of the dinner, most of the interviewees spoke of their choice of food being determined by both price and family custom and practice. A common thread here involved the choosing of "*cheap cuts of meat*" such as heart, kidneys, oxtail, tongue, tripe, corned beef and brisket "*to stretch the money"*. The weekly menu was fixed within families, and normally consisted of some form of roast with roast potatoes and vegetables on a Sunday. For women with large families, beef's heart was a cheaper alternative for Sundays, and gave "*full and plenty*". Potatoes were a significant constituent in every meal, with one interviewee commenting "*once you had a pyramid of potatoes in the middle of the table, then everyone was happy*". Monday's were leftover days, where any leftover potatoes would either be "*fried up or made into potatoe cakes with a bit of flour and curly kale*". Tuesdays and Thursdays were stew days. Stews were "*your mother's stew*", were gleaned from family tradition, and "*never changed*". Subtle practices such as "*adding in a bit of bisto*, or "*leaving in or out the potatoes*", or "*adding in flour dumplings to thicken it up"*, while sacrosanct to some families, were abhorrent to others. Indeed, this often caused familial problems after marriage, with one woman commenting "*He (her husband) spent the whole of his life longing for his mother's stew"*.

But despite these preparational differences, all were in agreement that a good stew was easy to make, was cheap, and provided hot food for everyone at the table. Furthermore, some women felt that "stew leftover to the next day tasted even nicer". Interestingly, Coddle, the quintessential Dublin dish was not seen as a main meal choice, but rather as seen as a breakfast option, "*particularly for men who had come in drunk the night before"*.

Wednesdays, except during Lent, were days on which "*a boiling fowl*", with potatoes and vegetables was quite common. Because of the church regulations on fast and abstinence, fish, particularly, cod, mackerel or herrings was the predominant choice on a Friday. But in terms of value for money, rabbit was the dish of choice, particularly on Saturdays, with one interviewee commenting "*you could get a rabbit for one and six, and it made the best of a stew".* Another differentiated between rabbit and chicken stating "*there were four legs and a rabbit, but only two on a chicken, and when you had hungry kids, there was no choice".* Interestingly, some of the interviewees lamented the fact that while Miximatosis ended the use of rabbit as a dish, two interviews felt that "*this was deliberately introduced to make us buy dearer food".*

How food was purchased was ofen determined both by the availability of money at particular times of the day, and the amount of cooking utensils available in the kitchen. During the 1950's, women often shopped every day, or on more than one occasion over the day, to overcome the possibility of food "going off", or being eaten up by unexpected visitors, hungry children or drunken husbands. Furthermore, cooking utensils were limited, either through a lack of such items, or through being "*lent out to neighbours*". A breadknife, a large pot (for boiling potatoes and making stews), and a frying pan (for frying up the leftovers), were major elements of every working woman's kitchen. Bread, whether made or bought, was a fixture at every meal, because it was filling. Indeed, more than one woman spoke of "*bringing a pillowslip to the local bread shop and having it filled up with bread in Meetinghouse Lane".* However, due to the economic constraints, most food was bought in small portions, particularly tea, which was either rationed or very expensive, and butter. Local shops opened early (about 6.30 am, for breakfast purchases, and closed late, to cater for late money arrivals from the telegraph boy). For many, food was bought up to three times a day, with some women buying "*meal to meal*". One interviewee spoke of not being able to store things like tea or meat overnight because "*he might come in with a few drinks on him and leave nothing for the morning".*

(iii) <u>kitchen equipment, food storage and waste</u>

Kitchens were not well equipped in the 1950's, although most of the women interviewed were very aware of what was on offer, mainly through the reading of magazines and looking in shop windows. However, examples if innovation and parsimony emerged during the interviews. In terms of cooking food, the gas cooker was the universal form of food preparation equipment. Electric cookers were seen as "*too dear*" or "*not what their mothers used".* Neither were fridges or freezers available to keep perishable food fresh. In terms of

food storage innovation, one woman commented that, "*the oven served as a fridge for keeping things cool, because it was insulated*". This interviewee also spoke of her mother "*picking up a meat safe in The Iveagh Market*", where she "*safely stored food behind its wire mesh and locked steel door"*. Moreover, for many Dublin women, heat-sensitive food items such as butter , margarine and lard were "*stored under a basin of water, particularly in the summer, to prevent them from running"*, while for others, food storage was less related to a lack of equipment, due to the fact that, as stated earlier, economic circumstances determined that food was purchased on a regular basis over the day, and was by and large, consumed at each meal. If there was leftover meat, it was "*covered in gauze*", with most of the interviewees stating that they "*used flypaper that hung from the light-bulbs to kill flies in the kitchen".*

Throughout the interviews, there was a great sense that little or nothing was wasted. Indeed, attitudes to either the presence of waste, or what to do with it if it existed, were almost universal, in that there was normally none. Furthermore, a use could easily be found for leftover waste. References to the grease left over from cooking a roast being "*spread on bread the following day for the children going to school*", were cited on more than one occasion. Even damaged, or as one woman gently characterized "*bruised fruit*", was peeled to provide some additional food for the family. These peelings and for example, potatoe skins were either placed on the fire, or given to the local swineyard. One interviewee stated that "*even the food that we could not use was either fed to the neighbour's hens, or given to the pig man who came to the door for slops.*

(iv) <u>the psychological significance of cooking and caring in the 1950's and 1960's</u>

However, despite the banality of much of the food, and the limited availability of labour-saving devices, each of the interviewees spoke at length of how they learned to cook, and what it meant to them. Here, perhaps, the most interesting of the findings emerged, in that cooking, in many ways, empowered these women, with one interviewee stating, "*You learned to cook, by just watching our mother"*. Others spoke of "*learning to cook in the local convent*", but adding that, "*you had to bring along a starched apron and hat, and the ingredients, which your mother had to pay for"*, but that you "*felt good when you brought something home"*. One of the women spoke of going to Cathal Brugha Street for two years, describing the college as "*trying to do something for the young girls of Dublin"*, and feeling very proud of learning skills like "*cooking, laundry, deportment and stitching".* Fundamentally, everyone knew how to cook from an early age, and being offered the opportunity of recollecting on their being "*busy"* elicited a fond memory for all but one of the interviewees. This lady spoke sadly of being isolated by her mother at meal preparation time,

and as such, felt excluded from "*what women did*" for much of her life thereafter. It is worth considering this lady's testimony in that it encapsulates the social inclusiveness of what it meant to be able to cook, and indeed, the very opposite scenario, when one could not cook. "*My mother had thirteen children, and I was the eldest. When my mother started a meal, she would ask me to take the children for a walk. When I came back, I would stand opposite my house with my back to the wall, looking in through the window, and hoping for my mother to ask me in"*. Asked how it impacted on her in later life, she continued "*When I got married, on the first night, I decided to cook a dinner for my husband when he came home from work...I put some cabbage into water but forgot to press it down, and it boiled away to nothing. My husband said that I could burn water, and as a result, he did the cooking for the rest of our married life"*. When I suggested that this would be a blessing for today's women, she answered "*Oh no! I felt terrible for all those years"*, adding almost apologetically, *"but I could crochet*".

This, and previous comments would suggest, that despite recollections of financial hardship, lack of labour saving equipment, large families, wayward husbands in some circumstances and limited food choice, managing the home offered security and inclusion through controlling the kitchen environment, which, in many ways was were women did not have to be subservient, and where their opinions were, if not overtly so, respected. And when alluding to how it felt for these women to move into the 1960's, the sense that there was a loss of power and control for them, was evident. This decade, despite increased availability of kitchen equipment (fridges, hoovers, freezers, electric kettles etc.), televisions and record players through hire-purchase agreements, the wider availability and lower costs of food (through greater mass production and food processing), the wider availability and acceptability of food take-aways, and the homogenization of social classes through the wider availability of restaurant and leisure outlets, was not remembered so fondly. Asked why this was so, comments such as "*the children grew up and got jobs"* and "*they went their own way*", offered a sense that despite of the perceived hardship of the 1950's, the 1960's took away the very things, namely being busy and valued, that made these women happiest.

Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to recollect the views of women who sought to provide a basic food intake for their families in the 1950's in Dublin. The research was carried out against a backdrop of what was in some ways was both a glorious period for Dublin fine dining restaurants (Mac Con Iomaire, 2005, 2011a, 2011b), and an aspirational/image-forming period in the development of the roles and perceptions of post-war women. The findings

would suggest that for the ordinary women, who were aware of such fine restaurants, the provision of the daily meal was challenging due mainly to income constraints, food availability, how food was purchased, and stored and the psychological import of cooking for and providing for their families. Of considerable significance also was the fact that "the swinging sixties", were not remembered as fondly by these women as were the hardship days of the 1950's, due mainly to their pivotal role within the kitchen being eroded by increasing affluence. These were the days when The Beatles came to town, and where the young children that they had cared for became independent, found jobs, showbands, fast food, and fashion. They were also the days where there was "a virtual absence the emigration that had become a standard feature of Irish Life since independence" (Ferriter, 2005:537). Radio Telifis Eireann launched its television service in 1961 (Ferriter, 2005). Continental package holidays became an affordable reality for many Irish citizens, fulfilling the aspirational predictions of "The Irish Housewife" in the 1950's. Furthermore, in a strange way, the availability of "all mod con kitchens", as promised in the 1950's became a reality in the 1960's, and in doing so, freed up more time for these women, to do less. Indeed, the overwhelming compliment to the women who endured the hard times of 1950's Dublin was that they "managed". They learned to cook and to improvise in their cooking. They were innovative in the face of economic shortages, large families, and in many cases, less than co-operative husbands, and there was little or no waste from what they produced. We could indeed learn a lot from these exceptional women, if we chose to listen.

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