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Sorcha O'Brien

Our Own Memories: Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification

Edited Transcript of The Tommy Marren Show, Midwest Radio, 27 May 2019

Tommy Marren: I was mentioning earlier on, in relation to an event that is happening over in the Museum of Country Life in Turlough in Castlebar this Thursday—it's an event that's to do with taking people back to the time and the impact of rural electrification in Ireland, back in the 1950s and '60s. It's a project which is called the Electric Irish Homes textile project, and on Thursday between two and four at the Museum of Country Life in Turlough in Castlebar, some women from the region are going to share and explore their experiences and their memories of rural electrification and they're doing it using a variety of very creative approaches. And I think it's a very interesting little project this, and I am first of all delighted to have on the line Dr. Sorcha O'Brien from Kingston University. Good morning and thanks for joining us. [...] Now, you were head of the research team on this, were you?

Sorcha O'Brien: Yes, this is part of a research project that started off as a historical investigation into rural electrification and the effect on rural Ireland, and very much about the effect on everyday life. And what I ended up doing was really focusing it to look particularly at women's experience of rural electrification and particularly looking at the introduction of electric appliances into the home. So, we have been looking at things like washing machines, the fridge, the electric iron, and looking at what effect did they actually have on everyday life in the home, and very specifically in the kitchen. Because you have all of these new appliances coming in, people are getting electricity into their house for the first time and there's just all the advertising and the promotion where the ESB [Electricity Supply Board] have rolled out the whole [electrical] network, and there's all of these advertisements promising this amazing modern new life. And really, what we're interested in doing, is looking at: what effect did it actually have? That's the fantasy, what was the reality, as well?

Tommy Marren: Yes, because it's so long ago now, and the people who will be giving their experiences on Thursday about the impact that suddenly being able to plug in an iron or a washing machine or a kettle had. I mean, the kettle was always on the boil on the range, because that was the only way of doing it. Because it was so long ago, sadly, the generation who remember that are now in their twilight years, aren't they?

Sorcha O'Brien: Well, the thing about it is that it's not actually all that long ago, because you're talking about living memory and there are quite a lot of people still around who remember this, and for them that's their lived experience. We're having an exhibition on this topic [...] opening in the museum in July, but part of that was that we did an oral history project where we went and interviewed about 60 women, who are mostly in their 70s and 80s, about their experience and their memories. And this is part of what we were doing with the textile project as well—that an awful lot of them said... when we asked them, “what did you do when you got, for example, a washing machine, and you weren't doing a Monday wash day anymore—what did you do?” And an awful lot of them said, “we did textile work, we did knitting, we did sewing, we did crochet...” [...]

Tommy Marren: And one of the participants is actually on the line: Noreen Durken. [...] And how did you get involved in this?

Noreen Durken: Well, Sorcha came to speak to us in the ICA [Irish Countrywomen's Association], and she asked us to take part in this project, and it sounded very nice and it sounded as if we all needed to record our memories, because as long as you are able, because, you know—another generation and people won't ever know what happened at that time. So we did sign up to doing it and then we had interviews and we did all that and that was all very nice, and it took us a little while to put our thoughts together and to get them down on paper in good order. We had to think about our punctuation and proper phrases and all that because we knew people would be reading it. [...]

Tommy Marren: [...] Can I take you back, do you remember the fellas putting up the poles?

Noreen Durken: I do indeed, very well.

Tommy Marren: When you were in National [primary] School, now, was there electricity?

Noreen Durken: No. No.

Tommy Marren: No. So everything was done by hand?



Embroidered panel by Noreen Durken, from the Electric Irish Homes textile art project, May 2019. Photograph by Brian Cregan for the Electric Irish Homes research project.

Noreen Durken: You got up in the morning, or your mother got up in the morning and she had to take out the ashes—the fire was made the night before—and make sure the coals were alive, and put on the fire and put on the big kettle with the water in it—water had to be got from somewhere, the well or someplace, if it wasn't there already, and wait for the kettle to boil... And really and truly when I look back at the slavery, and it was slavery—now that we all have a better way of life—that our mothers went through, and they did all this work and an awful lot more, without a word, everybody was the same, nobody had anything better than anybody else, so long as people had their health and a few shillings to pay their bills, that really was their big worry. [...] Actually, my grandmother lived to be 99 and [...] I will always remember my grandmother, when the light came on, she said it was the light from heaven. [...] But people saw corners in their houses that they never saw before! And the dust and everything that we never saw! And it was such a blessing. It was the most important thing, I think, that ever happened in rural women's lives.

Tommy Marren: Yes, without a shadow of a doubt, because as you say, I mean they didn't regard it as slavery, but we could definitely term it slavery now, if you compare it with the mod cons of today. We have Alexa now, all we have to do is say, "turn on the radio, Alexa," and it's done. It's gone from one extreme to another...

Noreen Durken: ...it is, and for that reason alone I think it was great to write our memories. Now, they're not perfect. I mean they're *our* memories, so they are our memories. So it was great, some of the generations along the way, or even our own children that never saw this day, will be able to look back and say, "well look at the way people worked in those times, and what a blessing the electrification was." It was *the* most, as I said, the most important thing in rural women's lives.



Irish Homes
textile art project
participants at
work with artist
Anna Spearman
(centre), Noreen
Durken second
from left, January
2019. Photograph
by Brian Cregan
for the Electric
Irish Homes
research project.

Tommy Marren: Yes, it's amazing, people are texting in their memories of when the electricity arrived. One [...] lady rang to say that her mother would take out the light bulbs after they were switched off, in case they went on fire. There was an element of real fear about it.

Noreen Durken: That's right, there was. And the other real fear that people had was: Could they pay for it? Because they really weren't used to having bills, apart

from maybe a few shillings for the rates, and the other bills were paid off when you sold cattle or brought eggs to the shop or the butter that you sold, and the groceries were bought then. So people were terrified that they were going to have huge bills.

Sorcha O'Brien: And that's one of the things that you see from the ESB advertisements from that time as well, is that they were advertising to people, not just that this is cheap, but what can you get for this money? You know, that it's going to bring new things into your life and you're going to be able to have a better standard of living, to try and combat that fear about the cost. [...]

Tommy Marren: A gentleman called in to say that when the first electric kettle came to their house, their grandmother lived with them. She refused to drink the water from the kettle because she said she would only light up inside.

Noreen Durken: Yes. It was absolutely surprising what people thought, they had great imaginations!

Tommy Marren: Yes. [...] Another caller says when the electricity arrived in their parish, again it was a granny living with them, and I suppose it was an era then in the 50s and 60s when grannies did live with their sons and daughters, and she wondered, would there be electric knitting needles?

Noreen Durken: She was before her time!

Tommy Marren: She sure was. Yes, she sure was. Well, look, it sounds fascinating, [...] and it was forward thinking for its time, Sorcha, wasn't it?

Sorcha O'Brien: Absolutely, it very much was, and was very much the idea of trying to bring modern services and modern infrastructure to the entire country—that it was for everybody. And that was very much rolled out by the ESB across the country, area by area, but what they were doing was trying to give the same facilities: whether you lived in the centre of Dublin, you would have the same facilities as if you lived out in rural Mayo—that it would make absolutely no difference at all. [...]

Tommy Marren: Yes. And you know, this has generated a huge number of calls and I'm delighted, because people are even saying, you know, their moms and dads are no longer alive and they never got this kind of information from them, so it's great to have it. [...]

But look, that's where we are anyway, Thursday afternoon of this week, the Museum of Country Life in Turlough in Castlebar, between two o'clock and four, drop in if you're around and relive some of those wonderful memories. [...]

Further Reading

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