

STATISTICAL AND SOCIAL INQUIRY SOCIETY OF IRELAND.

SOME CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE LOW IRISH MARRIAGE RATE.

BY JAMES MEENAN, M.A.

[*Read before the Society on Friday, 20th January, 1933.*]

Ireland, as has been well said, usually appears either at the top or at the bottom of tables of international statistics, only occasionally in the middle. If this be true of Ireland as a whole still more is it true of the Free State area in which the greater part of the nineteenth century was a period of economic decline uninterrupted by any alleviation such as industrial prosperity brought to the north-eastern counties. In no aspect perhaps of economic life is the resultant contrast between the Free State and other countries so marked as in the marriage rate. As will be seen from Table No. 1 the Free State marriage rate has always fluctuated upon a level appreciably lower than that prevailing in other countries.

TABLE NO. 1.—AVERAGE ANNUAL MARRIAGE RATES IN VARIOUS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, PER 1,000 POPULATION. 1864-1925.

	1865-83	1886-95	1896-05	1906-13	1921-25
England and Wales	8.1 <i>a</i>	7.5	7.9	7.6	7.8
Scotland ..	7.2	6.7	7.1	6.7	7.1
Germany ..	8.4 <i>b</i> .	7.9	8.2	7.8	9.4
Netherlands ..	8.0 <i>a</i> .	7.1	7.5	7.5	8.2
Free State ..	5.1 <i>f</i> .	4.0 <i>c</i> .	4.5 <i>d</i> .	4.8 <i>e</i> .	4.9

a, 1865-82; *b*, 1872-82; *c*, 1881-90; *d*, 1891-00; *e*, 1901-10; *f*, 1864-70.

In itself this disparity demands attention. In countries more happily circumstanced it is only necessary to trace and to account for the fluctuations of the marriage rate. Here it is not only necessary to discover why more people got married during one period than during another but also to ask why in any period, even in that period in which the marriage rate was at its highest, more people did not get married; why the proportion of unmarried people has steadily increased; why the average age of marriage has grown later. In this paper it is intended to review these aspects of our social life and to point to some possible explanations of their presence but at the outset it must be emphasised that such a review can only claim to be of a most general nature since many points raised are in themselves worthy of far closer attention than they have hitherto received.

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In this paper it is undesirable to attempt to trace the movements of the marriage rate from one year to another. It will be found however that both Table No. 1 and the ordinary decennial averages of the Census returns tend to obscure these major fluctuations which are apparent in Table No. 2.

TABLE No. 2.—MARRIAGE RATES IN FREE STATE 1864-1931.

	Av. Ann. M.R.		Av. Ann. M.R.
1864-1873	5.05		
1874-1894	4.18	1874-1878	4.54
		1879-1888	3.97
		1889-1894	4.23
1895-1920	5.01	1895-1900	4.56
		1901-1913	4.87
		1914-1920	5.15
1921-1931	4.74		

From this it will be seen that the marriage rate, after a long period of depression in the final quarter of the last century, rose steadily to a culminating point in 1919-20 and has declined thence within the last decade. These movements certainly bear out Dr. Farr's description of the marriage rate as the barometer of a country's prosperity.

In the first period under review (1864-73) there was a comparatively high average annual marriage rate. It would seem legitimate to attribute this to the fact that on the whole agricultural prices remained steady in this period, rising markedly in 1871 and 1872 in sympathy with the expansion of prosperity in England preceding the slump in 1873. Another factor may be found in the proportionate increase of the younger age groups in the censal period 1861-71.

The second period, extending from 1874 to 1894 shows a decline until 1879, followed by a succession of low rates for ten years and a partial recovery in the last six years. The decline was not peculiar to this country: in the period 1880-85 the average European rate fell by 7.5%. But there are two peculiar features about the fall here. Firstly, it was much greater here than elsewhere. Sir William Rawson Rawson, writing in 1885 of the five preceding years, points out that while the decrease was of 3.3% in Scotland and of 10.1% in England it was as great as 20% in Ireland. Secondly, over this period not only was there a fall in the birth rate for this area but also in the fertility rate, while the death rate, infantile mortality rate, and the rates of mortality from tuberculosis and cancer rose appreciably. This point is most interesting but unfortunately discussion of it would lead very far away from the present subject. Taking the period as a whole the causes of the decline are obvious enough. The years 1873-76 were depressed in comparison with preceding years and a series of bad seasons brought a catastrophic decline of almost 40% in the value of the 1879 harvest as compared with that of 1876. There followed a famine and a minor financial crisis. The following years brought a succession of bad seasons, an increase in evictions and in emigration and the intensification of the Land War. There was also an increase in epidemic diseases. The marriage rate for 1880 (3.57 p. 1,000) is the lowest recorded since the inception of registration and in five of the eight subsequent

years it fell below 4.0. Nor was that all. In this decade, the 'eighties, Irish agriculture had to face new rivals upon two fronts at once. The fall in the price of American wheat and the entrance of Denmark and Holland into the English dairy produce market so altered the existing economy that the Irish farmer who had changed to an extensive agriculture was placed in as parlous a position as his neighbour who had remained in tillage. Although the population fell by about 22% the per capita value of arable and pasture land only rose from £2 2s. 0d. in 1861 to £3 in 1891. Under such circumstances it was no wonder that the marriage rate declined. The contrast between agricultural prices, ultimately a potent factor in determining the marriage rate at this time (especially among the rural population), in this and in the subsequent period is well worth noticing.

TABLE No. 3.—AGRICULTURAL PRICE LEVELS, IRELAND, 1896, 1913, 1917.

	1896	1913	1917
	As compared with those of 1873 (= 100)	As compared with those of 1896 (= 100)	As compared with those of 1913 (= 100)
Wheat	57	118	219
Oats	93	119	254
Barley	121 <i>a</i>	115	213
Butter	65	115	197
Eggs	120	147	224
Beef	63	119	200
Mutton	75	122	165
Store Cattle 1-2 yrs.	91	147	172
„ „ 2-3 yrs.	92	133	182

a The price of barley was abnormally low in 1873.

Almost in itself this table might explain the rise in the marriage rate in the years 1895-1920. Not only the economic but also the political and social conditions became more favourable. The Land War flickered out with the Plan of Campaign in 1889. The co-operative movement, which brought improvements in output along with an extension of agricultural credit, began to make headway among the farming classes. Remedial measures such as the C.D.B. and the light railways were brought in by a Conservative Government. In every department of economic life there was a lull after the storms of the two preceding decades. A measure of prosperity came at last as prices climbed steadily upwards in the years before the War. This rise in prices coincided with the extension of land purchase which gave the farmers an increased spending power of several millions a year. Finally the European War sent agricultural prices sky high as had the Napoleonic War just over a century before.

There is one point, however, about the rise of the marriage rate in this period to which reference must be made later. While over this period the rate rose sharply as compared with the 'seventies and 'eighties, the disparity is enhanced by the very high marriage rates recorded in 1914-15 and 1919-20, in which returns the influence of the War is obvious.

It may be remarked that in this resumé of the fluctuations of the marriage rate no mention has been made of the most prominent

feature of Irish life—emigration. Very often the low marriage rate has been attributed to the influence of emigration and this presumption appears to be strengthened by a rough correlation between the two. But it is submitted that, strictly speaking, this theory is incorrect. A clearer view of the relation would be gained by regarding both the one and the other as symptoms of an unhealthy economic position. To clarify this matter we might divide the period from 1864 into two parts, taking the recovery of the marriage rate in the 'nineties as a rough dividing line. Before that time emigration came in waves, taking at its highest an annual toll of anything from 80 to 110 thousand, and even at its lowest taking 40 to 70 thousand. After that date and up to 1920 it gradually becomes stabilised around 30 thousand a year. Up to the rough date taken emigration was due to what have well been called forces of repulsion. It was occasioned, speaking generally, by the conditions of land tenure, by the swing from tillage to pasture, by the clearances and by the lack of industries to absorb the surplus agricultural population. In that period the Irish emigrant was driven from the country by economic forces. Obviously it is misleading to state that there were few marriages because those of marriageable age emigrated. The reverse, that they emigrated because there was no possibility of marrying and settling down at home, is nearer the truth. In the second period the force is rather one of attraction, an urge to emigrate regardless of economic conditions at home. (It is not of course suggested that this force arose only in this period.) Undoubtedly it must be admitted that this type of emigration necessarily had repercussions upon the marriage rate. But in this period emigration had dwindled greatly from its former size; the late Professor Oldham never tired of emphasising the fact that, if the marriage rate had not been so abnormally low, the natural increase of the population would have more than sufficed to offset the loss by emigration. Furthermore, as will be seen in Table No. 4, this theory completely fails to account for the growing celibacy among all age groups.

TABLE No. 4.—PERCENTAGE OF UNMARRIED MALES AND FEMALES IN THE IRISH FREE STATE IN EACH AGE GROUP—25.65, 1841-1926, TOGETHER WITH RATE OF EMIGRATION.

Year	25-35		35-45		45-55		55-65		Rate of Emigration
	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	
1841 <i>a</i>	43	28	15	15	10	12	—	—	— <i>b</i>
1861	57	39	24	18	14	14	11	13	17.6
1881	62	41	27	19	17	16	14	14	12.7
1901	72	53	38	28	24	20	18	17	11.9
1911	74	55	44	31	29	24	23	21	8.2
1926	72	53	45	29	31	24	26	24	8.8

a Age-groupings were 26.36; 36-46; 46-56; 56 and over.

b 1864-70.

It is apparent that this movement, which is of cardinal importance to the marriage rate, is largely unconnected with emigration. The whole question of the exact connection between emigration and the marriage rate is perhaps of academic importance. It is cited here because there is a widespread tendency to regard emigration as the source

of all social evils in the past and to hail its present decline as a guarantee in itself of national prosperity in the future. Rather would it appear that the real demographic problem lies in those forces which depress the marriage rate so greatly and to which reference will now be made.

This part of the discussion may well be prefaced by a single example of the disparity existing between the marriage rate in the Free State and in other countries. The highest marriage rate recorded here was 5.57, in 1920. An attempt was made to find the lowest marriage rate in any other European country over any period during the last thirty years. The War years were excepted. The lowest that could be found was 5.8. The country was—Iceland! The lowest rate recorded in any European country was above, and markedly above, the highest recorded here. Unfortunately, the contrast is more glaring still. The four highest rates recorded in this area in the last 30 years were those for 1914-15 and 1919-20. It is impossible to think that these rates were uninfluenced by the European War. Leaving the War and immediately post-War years aside as abnormal the next highest rate is 5.07. But perhaps enough has been said to indicate the abnormality, in all fluctuations and at all times, of the Irish marriage rate.

Much of this abnormality may be traced to two features of social life which have assumed a growing importance in the last few decades—the growing postponement of marriage and the increasing number in later age groups who do not marry at all. It is rather difficult to treat these two fruits of economic conditions at short length for they not only spring from the same root but their offshoots are often intertwined; sometimes indeed the one grows into the other. To take first the growing postponement of marriage, it will be seen that the age of marriage has grown later since 1841.

TABLE No. 5.—PERCENTAGES SINGLE IN YOUNGER AGE GROUPS, 1841-1926.

Year	15-20		20-25		25-30	
	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.
1841 ^a	—	—	90.0	80.0	40	30.5
1861	99.8	97.8	91.9	76.2	68.5	47.5
1881	99.8	98.8	92.7	82.1	70.8	53.1
1901	99.9	99.2	94.8	86.4	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
1911	99.9	99.3	95.1	86.5	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
1926	99.9	99.3	96.0	87.0	79.8	61.8

^a Age-grouping 17-25, 25-35.

^b Age-grouping changed.

In the Free State it has never been necessary to state age upon the marriage certificate so that no figures of the average age at marriage are available except those gleaned by the 1926 Census. These gave the average ages as being 32 for the male and 29 for the female. The English figures for 1930 present an instructive contrast, being 27.5 and 25.5 respectively.

It is easy to see why marriage comes at a comparatively late age in an agricultural country. In the countryside one generation is forced to wait for the decease of its predecessor. In industry,

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however, in which marriage should normally come at an earlier age, special conditions exist in the Free State which are worthy of notice. In the first place it would appear from the 1926 Census that blind-alley occupations are entered and left at a later age in the Free State than elsewhere. The contrast in the case of two typical occupations of this nature is shown in Table No. 6.

TABLE No. 6.—AGE-GROUPING IN BLIND-ALLEY OCCUPATIONS IN FREE STATE (1926) AND IN ENGLAND AND WALES (1921).

Years Old	Male Messengers		Male Paper Sellers	
	F.S.	E. and W.	F.S.	E. and W.
12 and 13	1	8	2	8
14 „ 15	28	69	21	46
16 „ 17	44	20	42	31
18 „ 19	27	5	35	15

Secondly, this initial delay will entail a further delay in obtaining that type of permanent occupation in which marriage becomes possible. The next table shows how much greater is this delay in the Free State than in neighbouring countries.

TABLE No. 7.—PERCENTAGES IN YOUNG ADULT AGE-GROUPS GAINFULLY EMPLOYED IN FREE STATE AND SIX COUNTIES (1926), AND ENGLAND AND WALES (1921).

Years Old	Free State	Six Counties	England and Wales
<i>Males (All) :—</i>			
16 and 17	72	83	91
18 „ 19	91	94	96
20 to 24	96	97	97
<i>Females (Unmarried) :—</i>			
16 and 17	45	62	71
18 „ 19	61	71	79
20 to 24	67	74	80

Thirdly, it will be agreed that the lack of female employment here has the effect of postponing the time at which marriage becomes financially possible. Lastly, it must be remembered that in the Free State there is an abnormally large proportion of widows and of fatherless children. Again the effect of this state of affairs upon the marriage age is clear enough. A young man, starting work at a comparatively late age, has often to support his own family and to postpone the day on which he will set up for himself.

There are also some considerations which are common to agriculture and industry. In both the low death rate in the older age group tends to delay the time at which those in the younger age groups will find it possible to marry. But perhaps a more important consideration is that of the standard of living. Broadly speaking a man will not marry until he can afford to maintain a certain standard of living after marriage, and the influence of the abnormalities just noticed is to postpone the age at which he can do so. But there are two other factors in the case of the Free State over and above those such as housing, etc., which are common to every country. In the first place this people having previously subsisted upon a very low standard, suddenly experienced a great wave

of prosperity not only during the War but for years before it. In a sense this rise has been common to all countries but it has been more marked here since it was from an exceedingly low level. Then, for practical purposes, the War was a source of profit rather than of loss. In this country there were little of the hardships experienced by the belligerent countries during the War nor of the disorganisation which followed its conclusion. But since the War the means available to maintain that standard of living have shrunk considerably. Nevertheless there is a constant struggle to maintain it which has its reactions upon the marriage age. The intensity of the struggle is increased by two other factors peculiar to this people. In the first place, perhaps on account of the lack of a native culture, perhaps on account of social and economic ties, there is a constant tendency to derive the concept of what constitutes a suitable standard of living from two countries in which that standard is particularly high—England and the United States. Pursued too far, this trail might lead the meeting to the advertisement columns of the *Daily Express*, but it is possible that this acceptance of foreign standards has had some reactions upon the age of marriage here. In the second place the desired standard of living is made somewhat more difficult of attainment by the fact that limitation of births is little practised in this country. That fact means that, other things being equal, marriage must be postponed.

The working of these influences will be clearly seen in the following table which shows their effect in every department of national activity.

TABLE No. 8.—PERCENTAGES SINGLE IN EACH AGE-GROUP OF VARIOUS OCCUPATIONS AS % OF TOTAL MALES OR FEMALES AT WORK IN THAT GROUP (1926).

	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-44
Farmers (Male)	89.6	65.3	46.3	30.9
„ (Female)	76.2	56.6	38.3	25.1
Farmers' Sons	99.5	96.9	91.5	82.7
„ Daughters	98.1	94.8	90.0	87.1
<i>Male Agricultural Labourers</i> :—				
Living In	99.1	97.1	95.7	92.4
Living Out.. .. .	95.0	75.1	56.9	43.0
		25-34	35-44	
<i>Transport</i> :—				
Males	91.6	52.5	25.5	
Females	100	92.2	51.8	
<i>Commerce</i> :—				
Males	94.5	61.8	33.1	
Females	98.7	90.9	64.3	
<i>Public Adm. and Defence</i> :—				
Males	93.8	63.8	29.9	
Females	98.9	84.2	58.1	
<i>Professions</i> :—				
Males	99.1	79.3	53.9	
Females	99.2	94.2	83.2	
<i>Personal Service</i> :—				
Males	95.5	65.7	36.7	
Females	98.9	92.2	73.5	

This table also illustrates the third point mentioned at the outset of this paper—the very large number of persons unmarried in the older

age groups. There does not appear to be any convincing reason for this aspect of Irish life. One possible explanation, of part of it at least, may with all diffidence be adduced—the unusual strength of family ties in this country, coupled with the operation of the Land Purchase Acts. The last sentence may well require elucidation. Take any family, living on a farm, that was born in the 'seventies or 'eighties. The father and the mother live on to a ripe old age and by the time they die even the youngest of the family is grown up. The family may well consist of six or seven. Of that one or two may at once be taken as having emigrated. Another may, if there is money enough, take up medicine—and will probably go the same way. Another enters the Church. On the farm finally there will be left a couple of brothers and a sister and as long as the mother at least is alive there will be little prospect of either of these brothers marrying. By the time they are free to marry they will have no desire to marry. They will not desire to change their habits. So they live on together, all unmarried; and of the entire family there may be the one married—up in Dublin. Where the Land Act comes in is in this way. If that family had lived a hundred years ago in pre-Famine Ireland their lives would have been completely different. As soon as the sons came to marriageable age they would have got an acre or part of an acre from the father and a similar amount from the father-in-law. Sub-division encouraged matrimony and, by the Purchase Acts, sub-division is not allowed without the consent of the Land Commission until the purchase moneys have been repaid. If the modern family could have set up for themselves every one of them could, and would, have married. It is instructive to compare the impetus given to population by the Napoleonic Wars with the almost total lack of effect upon it in the European War. It might almost be said that the Purchase Acts gave the land to the occupiers and forbade their sons to marry. It has been noted that the effect of these Acts is to stereotype the size of holdings: equally they have stereotyped the population upon them.

The same psychology may well hold true of the greater part of the population who live in the smaller towns in which life does not materially differ from the surrounding country. Only in the larger cities does a different way of life prevail, but in them the obstacles to marriage provided by the standard of living are higher than in the country. Too much time perhaps has been devoted to this point but one observation may be made in conclusion. Changing ideas may well remove the barrier which family ties present to marriage. But different measures will be necessary to remove the obstacle which the Purchase Acts place in the path of an expanding rural population.

In conclusion attention must be drawn to the effect of a low marriage rate upon the movement of population in this country. Its social consequences need no elaboration. The natural increase, small as it has been, has only been made possible by the exceptional fertility of Irish marriages. It is not amiss to recall the fact that according to the statistics obtained by the Registrar-General there has been a fall of 12% in the fertility rate between 1910-12 and 1925-27. Taken in conjunction with the fall in the marriage rate since 1920 this would appear to indicate that if such a tendency continues there will be a decline in the natural increase. This decline, it must be emphasised, would be a natural decline caused by an equalisation of deaths over births, working absolutely independ-

ently of the course of emigration. In the last resort the natural movement of population is determined by the equation:—

(Marriage rate x Fertility rate) - Death rate = Natural Increase.

A further fall in the marriage and fertility rates must inevitably result in a smaller natural increase. If the fall is great enough it must eventually lead to a stationary population. But the cycle would not end at that point. Losses occasioned by the shrinkage of births might indeed be made good by a reduction of mortality. Here much remains to be done. Such public improvements as better housing or greater care for infant welfare can do much to reduce the wastage of human lives. Medical science also may continue to prolong the average expectation of life by fresh conquests of disease. But, if the birth rate continues to fall, all this can only suffice to delay the inevitable outcome. There must be some point below which the death rate cannot be reduced. In England that point is placed at about 7 per 1,000; in the United States the opinion has been advanced that the death rate can be reduced to 4 or 5 per 1,000. (The death rate in the Free State for 1931 was 14.5.) After that point, however, wherever it be, the death rate must begin to rise as the population grows slowly older, and then there will come a time at which the death rate will exceed the birth rate. It will be remembered that in the Free State to-day there is already a disproportionate number of aged people. A similar position is within sight in many European countries at present. The first decline of population has been predicted for about 1937 in France, 1942 in Great Britain, 1946 in Germany and about 1970 for the United States. Those who desire that the population of this country should be maintained and increased must look to the marriage rate, working through the birth rate, to yield them that result. It may well be queried whether our existing social and economic institutions are of such a kind as will enable that result to be attained.