

Chapter 10

The Slender Thread Cast On



By the second half of the eighteenth century, the slender thread had begun to stretch across the North Atlantic, as Irish women came to the southern Avalon from the southern counties of Ireland: Wexford, Waterford, Kilkenny, Tipperary, and Cork. Like the broader waves of Irish migrants to the island of Newfoundland, they weighed their choices—balancing land shortage, economic recession, and the contraction of domestic textile work in the homeland against opportunity in the Newfoundland fishery, a potential that was always tempered with risk in this persistently uncertain industry. Leaving behind the comfort and security of familiar landscapes and broader kinship groups, they set out as single women or within nuclear family groups to negotiate their way through new territory—not just in terms of geographical place but also in terms of shifting social and economic terrains.

Given that the Newfoundland passenger trade was largely unregulated, the passage for most Irish migrants to the southern Avalon was difficult, the provisions ranging from very basic to dangerously inadequate; the accommodations, from rudimentary to appalling. Still, the majority survived the Atlantic crossing and either landed on the southern Avalon or disembarked at St. John's and wended their way southward. Some women crossed the Atlantic "on order" from local employers; others shipped themselves when they arrived. Some ventured to the New World alone, while others arrived in family groups, accompanying husbands or fathers who had already had some experience as servants in the fishery and were hoping to strike out on their own. As increasing numbers of women arrived, they had a stabilizing effect on community populations, for they tended to be permanent immigrants, and they provided marriage or cohabitation partners for the still largely transient male fishing population. Along the southern Avalon, large numbers of male fishing servants increasingly found wives among incoming Irish women and, more significantly in the nineteenth century, among first- and second-generation Irish Newfoundland women in the area. Matrilocal and uxorilocal residence patterns often featured in community formation, as male immigrants settled in the home communities of their wives. Irish women played another vital role in the establishment of the Irish population in the area as numerous English Protestant patrilineages were brought into the Irish Catholic ethnoreligious group through intermarriage with Irish Newfoundland women. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, a thriving Irish planter society had established itself along the southern Avalon.

The reception that the Irish received from British authorities on the island, however, was grudging at best. Irish servants became the backbone of the fishing labor force from the mid-1700s onwards, yet authorities greeted their ever-expanding presence with increasing alarm. In particular, official discourse focused on those who remained behind in St. John's in the off-season, equating Irishness with idleness, drunkenness, and disorder. Treachery, too, was set forth as an essential characteristic of the Irish, particularly among those to the south of St. John's, who were seen as constantly poised to take advantage of any weakness in the British defenses on the island and ever ready to join forces with the French and Americans. Part of this official discourse shaped an image of Irish women as immoral and unproductive.

Yet this was not the construction of Irish womanhood that evolved on the southern Avalon. As Irish women accommodated themselves to the new rhythms of a fishing/subsistence agriculture economy, their ability to contribute to the productive and reproductive power of their households became an intrinsic part of how they were perceived by the plebeian community and how they defined themselves. Almost all adult women worked in subsistence agriculture, performing physically challenging tasks such as clearing, digging, planting, weeding, manuring, harvesting, gleaning, and animal husbandry. Women were also responsible for processing their families' raw production for household use. Increasingly from the late 1700s onwards, women performed shore work for household production units in the fishery, gradually replacing transient male shore crews and ultimately filling the void left on shore by the collapse of the traditional planter fishery based on hired labor. Women's vital role in household production was reflected in a household division of labor that delegated work routines in terms of pragmatism and availability, not on gendered equations of men's work with outdoor, productive, or skilled labor and women's work with domestic, reproductive, or unskilled tasks.

Neither did the concept of woman primarily as *helpmate* to her husband evolve within the plebeian community of the area. In the essential work of fishery and subsistence production, women worked along with the men; and while some specific tasks were differentiated roughly by sex, there was also much overlapping of routines, with members of each sex occasionally *helping* the other as necessity demanded. Indeed, women in the plebeian community felt they had equal stakes and equal responsibilities in family enterprises. Certainly, they did not aspire to be freed from outdoor work through the hiring of servants; rather, servants were hired for domestic work to enable their mistresses to participate in more important productive work. Women also worked in various economic capacities outside household production: as domestic and fishing servants, as laundresses and seamstresses, in the hospitality trade and health care. Some combined household production with paid work and/or the sale of agricultural surplus in a

package of economic coping strategies that helped their families survive or even enjoy some small luxuries. The working woman, then, was not problematic within the plebeian community in the study area. The "good, hard-working stump of a girl"—a construction that was transported from the home country—rooted well in southern Avalon soil.

The status and authority that Irish plebeian women enjoyed in family economies spilled over into other aspects of family and community life. These women were usually the primary household managers; indeed, a woman's ability to juggle household demands and resources could make the difference between comfort and poverty, even survival for those families living close to the margin. The names of women—single, widowed, and married—appeared in various capacities in merchant ledgers, indicating that they were a significant part of the exchange economy that supported the local fishery. In general, their visible presence in the broader economic sphere—in their work routines and economic agency—was a source of power for these women well beyond the study period. Religion was another source of female power within the largely Irish plebeian community. Not only did women play a custodial role in formal religion—performing baptisms and marriages in the absence of priests, teaching children their prayers—but they also had a powerful place as mediators in the alternative pre-Christian religious system that operated in combination with formal Catholicism. And women's information networks—whether functioning as sites of networking, group preservation, female resistance, or competition—were inextricably bound up in the power relations of early communities in the area.

Irish plebeian women also wielded authority as they maneuvered within and between two systems of justice and conflict resolution. Within the plebeian population, women frequently took matters into their own hands, using verbal and physical aggression in a show of informal power that was consistent with their status and authority in family and community. As an alternative to, or sometimes in conjunction with, the politics of informal confrontation, women brought their quarrels and their abusers into the courthouse. The formal legal system, at least at the local level, was not hostile terrain, but rather a milieu that offered a viable option for these women in obtaining the justice that they perceived to be their due. Indeed, as the court system became more formalized, Irish women seemed to embrace this system based on individual right rather than discretionary justice. Granted, women were excluded from the formal system in terms of legislative or official functions; but they were a vital part of local court life: as civil litigants, as complainants and defendants in criminal matters, as witnesses and petitioners. As a result, the courtroom was more often a venue for their empowerment than a site of their oppression. Furthermore, within both systems, formal and informal, women participated not purely in an extension of their roles as wives and mothers—an interpretation that limits our understanding

of their actions to the bounds of pre-conceived gender roles—but also as self-interested parties in pursuit of individual rights. Moreover, both systems of justice were receptive to their participation on these terms.

Because Irish women on the southern Avalon were successful in carving out territory for themselves in the social, economic, and political life of their communities in the period of early settlement, there was little concerted effort within plebeian culture to circumscribe their lives. A semblance of patriarchal authority was maintained outside the home; in most families, however, this veneer masked a more equitable sharing of decision-making and production responsibilities between spouses. Indeed, a significant number of plebeian women were not bound by the legal restrictions of formal marriages and coverture, particularly up to the early 1800s, as a relatively benign regime on female sexuality permitted various informal family arrangements and the options of informal separation and divorce. But even the majority of women who did enter into formal marriages were not easily constrained in terms of informal status and authority because of their vital role as producers in family economies.

But what of outside influences—middle-class ideology and Catholic Church discourse—that were constructing femininity in terms of domesticity, fragility, sexual passivity, and economic dependence? Such rhetoric made few incursions in plebeian culture because it clashed with the reality of women's lives. Indeed, local middle-class families also showed little interest in encouraging such standards of behavior for plebeian women, because these families constituted a local mercantile network that was reliant on plebeian women's presence in public spaces: in shore work, in support services for the local fishing population, and in the exchange economy that underpinned the resident fishery. These families would have therefore been poorly served by encouraging plebeian women to move into the "respectability" of the private sphere.

But the Catholic Church found no such clash between ideology and economic reality as it pursued its civilizing mission on the southern Avalon from the late 1700s onwards. With the priests came an increasing restriction of female sexuality, a denigration of women's outdoor productive work, and an idealization of Irish motherhood based on self-denial, virtue, and domesticity. While church rhetoric often conflicted with the lived experience of Irish Newfoundland women, some impact was being felt by the latter decades of the period, as pronouncements from the pulpit and disciplinary mechanisms—such as shaming and denial of the sacraments—whittled away at plebeian women's sense of selfhood.

Still, Irish plebeian women in the study area maintained their status more effectively than did middle-class women in the area. Women of the eighteenth-century elite had been involved in the economic activity of their

families. Although they would not have been present on flakes or in fields like plebeian women, they supervised household affairs and led relatively public and active lives in their communities. By the turn of next century, however, the lives of these women were becoming increasingly circumscribed by middle-class ideology. Indeed, the economic idleness and increasing gentility and domesticity of these women helped to maintain class boundaries in small fishing communities where middle-class and plebeian men frequently interacted, thus blurring the edges of class perimeters. Although middle-class women enjoyed greater wealth, education, and physical comfort than plebeian women, they were, in many ways, less powerful than women from the plebeian community.

Irish women on the southern Avalon also maintained greater status and autonomy into the nineteenth century than those who had remained in the home country. In Ireland, the massive economic and demographic changes that occurred throughout the 1800s provoked a severe decline in the status of rural women. The transition from tillage to pasturage, the mechanization and masculinization of agricultural work and dairying, and the contraction of the domestic textile industry led to a devaluation of women's productive work. Meanwhile, the collapse of the potato culture at mid-century suspended the practices of subdivision and partible inheritance that had permitted universal and early marriage. The farming class that predominated in post-famine Ireland turned increasingly to the restrictive practices of impartible inheritance, primogeniture, and the arranged match, with family hopes and resources pinned on the inheriting son and the first-married daughter. Many rural Irish women thus found themselves as "surplus" daughters, with limited opportunities for paid work. Many responded by emigrating.

But on the southern Avalon, the continuing value of women's productive work remained unchallenged in the study period, and Irish women's status as essential contributors to family productive units endured. Furthermore, the relative availability of land for fishing premises and subsistence agriculture, disproportionate sex ratios in early communities, equitable testation practices, and the desirability of large families to share in family production enhanced women's opportunities to become mistresses of their own households. Thus, while social and economic flux eroded the status of rural women in Ireland, along the southern Avalon, Irish plebeian women's status as essential producers and reproducers within family economies remained intact and provided them with considerable influence, both within their households and throughout the broader network of community power relations. The slender thread thus proved to be quite resilient within the context of New World experiences along the southern Avalon.



