

Preface



Three slender things that best support the world: the slender stream of milk from the cow's dug into the pail; the slender blade of green corn upon the ground; the slender thread over the hand of a skilled woman.

—Irish triad (trans. Kung Meyer), ca. 9th century

This study of the lives of Irish women on the southern Avalon emanates from more than academic interest. My maternal roots are in the area, and I have encountered there a tradition of strong, resourceful Irish Newfoundland foremothers: my great-great-great-great-grandmother Catherine, who raised a large family in Ireland, often alone while her husband worked at the Newfoundland fishery, until she finally joined him on the southern Avalon in the 1790's; my great-great-great-aunt Margaret, who came out from Ireland, became mistress of a planter household, and inherited from her first husband land and fishing premises—property which she gave to her brothers upon her remarriage and which is still in the family today; my great-great-aunt Sally, who provided board and medical services to fishermen to earn extra income for her family; my great-grandmother Bridget, who nursed her family alone during a diphtheria epidemic, carrying the black waste of infection down to the sea in the early morning under the watchful eyes of the quarantine officer; my great aunt Sarah, who kept a gracious three-story home in Shore's Cove on the proceeds of a *shebeen* she ran on the side; my grandmother Julianne, her hands as large as oven mitts and work-roughened from making fish and hay and clothing and endless loaves of bread to feed her brood of twelve; and my own mother, Gertrude, whom a priest warned my father not to marry because *Southern Shore* women had "far too much to say for themselves."

Yet Irish Newfoundland women appear to be curiously passive, when they are mentioned at all, in the historiography of early settlement in Newfoundland. In my examination of their lives on the southern Avalon, I hope to bring these women more clearly into focus in the discussion of migration and settlement experiences, to stretch the slender thread across the ocean, to understand the source of its suppleness and strength.