'A LABOURING MAN'S DAUGHTER'; CONSTRUCTING 'RESPECTABILITY' IN SOUTH KILKENNY

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Anthropologists have long collected life histories and biographies of particular individuals in order to understand both the structure of social relations and the general patterning of personal experience. The concern has been to show, through personal histories, the 'typical' developmental stages or cyclical sequences of individuals, households, age groups or occupational careers. More recently, 'there has been a notable increase in life histories' (Crapanzano 1984:953) and with it has emerged a new dimension. Instead of trying to construct a 'true and objective' biography, the new life histories '... emphasize the native conventions, idioms or myths that compose the ideas of life histories or similar meaningful narratives about individual experience, growth, the self, and emotions, as they are formed in the conversations and interviews of fieldwork' (Marcus & Fischer 1986:58).

In this view, the collection of life histories is no longer to expedite an ethnography of the society; rather, it is to create an 'ethnography of the person' (ibid.:67). Because this approach interprets an informant's meaning while the earlier one focuses on the nature of society, there are fundamental differences between the two.[1] However, by using features of both, in tandem, it is possible to describe aspects of both society and personhood as these emerged out of a wider ethnographic study of the Thomastown area of south Kilkenny.[2]

[1] The literature on the topic of ethnography and biography is expanding rapidly. A general introduction is Bertaux (1981); the recent cultural/humanistic approach is contained in Clifford & Marcus (1986) and in numerous articles in *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* and *Dialectical Anthropology*. A more political economic approach is Keesing (1985).

[2] This study, carried out jointly with P. H. Gulliver, involved intensive field work

In this paper, I present a 'life history' of Aggie Donovan.[3] I met her in 1980 when she was 84. She has lived all her life in the same townland. My data on her life came in bits and pieces as she and I, as neighbours, chatted and gossiped over a 19 month period and as she and I worked together, as anthropologists, on the genealogies of her kin, her neighbours and the local people whom she had known over several generations. We often discussed entries from the parish records and, as we established who was 'connected' to whom, I learned much about her and her life. I therefore do not have an unedited 'text' which I elicited from Aggie. I never asked her to tell me her 'biography' or to relate 'her life'; nor did I use a tape recorder. Instead, over a long period of interaction with her, I collected a good deal of factual material, anecdote, viewpoint, idiom and myth; and it emerged slowly and often unelicited – although sometimes in answer to particular questions – during the many, many hours which we spent together. It is by putting together these pieces that I am able to describe 'her life'.

In so doing, it is essential to point out that this is neither an 'objective biography' of Aggie nor a life history of a 'typical' Thomastown person. What it is, instead, can best be described by explaining what happened after I recently decided to put together Aggie's life history. First, I brought together the 'objective facts' of Aggie's life which are located in archival sources – marriage dates, birth dates, employment periods, housing allocations, court appearances, etc. These facts, however, even when strung together chronologically, are incomplete. First, much of Aggie's life is not covered by such documents. Second such sources do not impart the meaning or importance of any particular event, period or person. I therefore moved to a second level – I brought together information from Aggie herself about her life.

In reviewing both sets of material, it became clear that there were things, events and people which Aggie remembers, forgets, prefers not to speak about, thinks are unimportant, avoids, feels no one is interested in, etc. In short, it became clear that Aggie 'constructs' her life in a way which fits her image of herself, how she wishes other people to see her and how she wants her life known to an anthropologist. When reviewing my material, therefore, I found contradictions, omissions and particular emphases which skewed the picture in certain directions. This is not because Aggie lied; it is because she, like all of us, sees her life and presents it to others in particular ways. She constructs her personhood for herself and her public.

In turn, this public – her family, her kin, her neighbours, her anthropologist – permit and encourage this construction in varying degrees. In daily interaction, people seldom confront others with anomalies, remembrances of painful things, embarrassing events, etc. People in Thomastown, in face to face interaction, avoid talking about the other's 'troubles'; and they do so with Aggie – as indeed I myself did. We do so because we accept her view of her self as valid or, at least, we do not wish to disconfirm it publicly. In so doing, we help her to reinforce and to elaborate the image she projects. A third level, then, on which a life can be described, is through information obtained from others about that person and his or her life.

For me, as the anthropologist involved in this process of putting together a life from these three sources, the central issues are why Aggie constructed it in her particular way and how this relates to the socio-cultural context in which her life is being lived. Indeed, what is the milieu which 'the life' reflects and incorporates? What are the notions of locality, class and personhood which are being projected? To answer these questions is to de-code the 'conventions, idioms or myths' and to understand how individuals manage their lives and present their selves in the society and culture in which they live. It is, in effect, a way of describing a society and its people.

* * *

In piecing together Aggie's life from her own accounts and from archives and the recollections of other informants, it became clear that, for her, the context in which she lives is that of the labouring class and its central idiom, as well as her own, is that of 'respectability'.

This is reflected in the way Aggie categorises her social world. For

in Thomastown, County Kilkenny for 14 months during 1980–81 and five months in 1983. The nature of the study is described in detail in Gulliver (this volume) and some early findings are in Silverman and Gulliver, 1986. The research was financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto; and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, New York.

[3] All names are pseudonyms.

her, there are three kinds of people and each kind is addressed differently. There are those whom she addresses by their given names or nicknames, those whom she calls 'mr' or 'mrs', and those whom she addresses as 'ma'am' or 'sir'. These categories reflect complex intersections of four 'distances'. First, her labels reflect physical distance or locality. Those who live nearby are better known to her and, depending on the effect of the three other 'distances', she calls these people by their given names. Second, because post-marital residence tends to be virilocal, more women than men are 'blow-ins'; as a result, Aggie has formal relations with more women then men. Indeed, a man may be called by his first name while his wife is referred to as 'mrs'. Third, Aggie's classification reflects a tripartite division of the world into three classes: the working class, the farmers and shopkeepers, and the gentry. Class may override physical and gender differences and, all other things being equal, she is on a first-name basis with more working men and their wives than with farmers and, given that she has spent most of her life in a 'rural' area, she is on a first name basis with more farmers than shopkeepers. Finally, generation has affected her usages. Farmers' sons, for example, whom she has know since birth and who are themselves middle-aged farmers in the 1980s, may be addressed by their first name – if they are from her townland or near to it – even though their fathers would have been 'mr'. The in-marrying wives of these farmers' sons, however, are addressed as 'mrs'.

Aggie, in turn, is part of the social world of others. For these, the same four 'distances' operate although not always in an opposing and complementary way. To those of her class and/or locality, she is 'Aggie'. Relations between 'equals' and/or 'locals' tend to reflect her own constructions. However, vertical relations are not so simply structured. Many people in a class 'above her', regardless of locality, gender or age, feel that she is too 'respected' to be addressed by her first name as all working people tend to be. To them she has attained the status of 'Mrs Donovan'. A recent employer (known as 'Mrs Finlay' to Aggie), for whom the contradiction between respect and Aggie's labouring status is too great, solves the problem by affectionately calling her 'auntie'.

Late one afternoon, Aggie and I were sitting at my kitchen table discussing some parochial materials. The front door was open and in came the great-granddaughter of one of the largest and titled

nineteenth-century landowners in the county. Although an owner of a 'big house' and an employer of local labour, Jane Gordon is committed to 'counter-cultural' communalistic ideas and a view that the 'old days' have passed. As they had never met and as Aggie was unknown to Jane (although Aggie knew who Jane was), I introduced 'Mrs Jane Gordon' to 'Mrs Aggie Donovan'. 'How do you do, ma'am', said Aggie, in an 'appropriate', deferring manner. 'Don't you ma'am me', retorted Jane Gordon rather imperiously. 'My name is Mrs Gordon'. 'Yes, Ma'am', replied Aggie calmly and with 'respect'.

Aggie's socially constructed world, with herself at its centre, has possibly changed over time; but if this is so, there is no data or way to show how. Nor can it be assumed that her world is the inevitable result of a progressing life cycle or typical for all Thomastown people. Rather, in presenting Aggie's life history, I am describing a life as it was constructed in the 1980s by her – by a 'respectable' person and 'a labouring man's daughter'. In so doing, I show the centrality of the concept of 'respectability' and, equally important, I partially show how relations between members of the working class and the other Thomastown classes are culturally constructed – from Aggie's working class perspective and, therefore, not always with the mutual understanding of the other party.

* * *

The central idiom of 'respectability' is a general assessment which people in all classes have of themselves and with which others mainly agree. This does not mean that 'respectability' is defined in the same way for all classes or that individuals within classes in Thomastown behave or think alike. Nor is respectability, for working class people, attained or given by gaining high points on a series of immutable expectations. Rather, given the economic uncertainties of working class life, it is probably essential that respectability be a flexible, general attribute which is assigned or taken on the basis of numerous criteria, not all of which have to be satisfied all or even part of the time. As an overall assessment, it is perhaps best reflected in the attribution: 'he/she is a decent person'. Such a statement indicates that a person is respectable. It is an overall judgement in which certain criteria are emphasised; it also means, however, that other criteria

may be de-emphasised or even ignored.

The various criteria for assigning respectability amongst Thomastown's labouring people are based both on people's relationships to material goods and on appropriate behaviour. Respectable 'goods' refer to owning, or properly caring for, personal and private property. Respectable 'behaviour' is located in five domains: language, alcohol use, religion, work and sexuality. However, it is unnecessary for a respectable person to excel in all these areas; moreover, within each area, there is a great deal of leeway.

Respectability in relation to 'goods' generally means owning, and taking good care of, a house. However, because, objectively, this is not possible for all people, a concern with personal appearance, a garden in front of a rental accommodation, tasty soda-bread, etc. combine as acceptable substitutes. Similarly, respectable behaviour in the five domains also is flexible; this is because assessments are mainly a matter of judging degree and because 'moderation' is crucial. One may swear but the language must not be 'abusive'. Alcohol is acceptable but 'drunkenness' is not. Religiosity is good but overzealousness ('eating the altar') is condemned. A desire to work is important even when unemployment is the reality. Indeed, Thomastown people seldom comment on how often a person works because that is usually outside a worker's control. To say that someone 'is not fond of work', however, is a major moral statement. Finally, sexuality must be private; therefore, illegitimacy is very disreputable although it can be re-privatised, and hence ignored, through subsequent marriage or by the grandparents adopting the child.

In Thomastown, Aggie is known to all whom I know as a 'respectable person' and a 'decent person'. She is always very neatly dressed and has her hair curled; she is energetic, extraverted and likes an occasional whiskey. I heard several people refer to her as 'a lady'. Complementing this, Aggie sees herself as a 'respectable woman'; and this is extremely important to her. Thus, as I pieced together her construction of her life and juxtaposed her account with archival materials and the recollections of others, a logic by which Aggie constructed her personhood – for herself, for others and for me – became clear. Conversely, in putting together Aggie's life, I was able to clarify the idiom of respectability and the cultural context of the working class milieu in which she lives.

* * *

According to parochial records, Aggie's father, John Hegarty, was born in 1868 and her mother, Mary Teeling, was born in 1874. They married in 1894 and, according to Aggie, they rented a cabin in the town. A few months later, they moved in with Aggie's paternal grandfather, Thomas Hegarty, and his second wife Kitty in an adjacent street. Her parents took over the space vacated by two of Thomas Hegarty's other sons, Nick and David. Before Aggie's brother was born one year later, her parents made a third move – to her mother's parents, the Teelings, in a rural townland about one and a half miles north of the town. Although it was a thatched cottage, sub-leased from a local shopkeeper, Aggie remembers it fondly. 'The window sills were painted white, it had a big garden and it had a hut for a toilet. There was a well across the road'.

This living arrangement also did not last long. According to Aggie, her mother died in 1905 and her father, in grief, 'went back to live with his people. He began to drink heavily. He had always drunk, but it really got bad after my mother died. He was an awful man for drink, but he was a good respectable man. He had to live in the town because of his job there'. Aggie and her brother remained with their maternal grandparents in the 'country'.

It is in her description of this stage of her life and of her father and his kin that Aggie's comments depart most dramatically from archival materials and other informants. It is a departure which is important for understanding how Aggie constructs her life. For, in fact, Aggie's father's kin were plagued by inter-personal conflict and violence, both before and after Aggie's birth. In 1869, Aggie's great grandfather, Patrick Hegarty – a tailor in the town – was charged with poaching; three years earlier, his son (Aggie's grandfather), Thomas Hegarty, born in 1845 and also a tailor, was charged by the constabulary for assaulting him. The son was imprisoned for a month with hard labour. Before her father's marriage, John Hegarty also was before the magistrates at least twice. In 1891, he was a 'found-on' in a public house on a Sunday and in 1893 he was charged with being drunk and disorderly and with assaulting a man. According to the newspaper report of the proceedings, John Hegarty 'was previously fined for failing to leave a public house. His character was bad and he was in the habit of lying out'.

It was John's brother David, however, born in 1881, whose career was the most turbulent – at least in terms of public records. In 1896, their father was charged with 'having neglected to contribute to the support of his child, David, who had been sent to an industrial school by order of the court'. Although 'the defendant said that the winter was too bad and he had not been able to get any work', Thomas Hegarty, according to informants, was a superb tailor; and according to Aggie, he had a British army pension.

That is the public record of the Hegartys prior to Aggie's birth. It is of course possible that she was unaware of it. However, the conflict continued into her adulthood. In 1898, her uncle David was caught for poaching and in 1899 he was summoned for being drunk. In the latter year, her grandfather, while drunk, tried to throw his wife and children out of the house and the constable 'saw the defendant strike his wife'. In 1910, Aggie's uncle David, while drunk, 'maliciously damaged' his stepmother's house; this occurred at the same time that a case of 'unlawful assault' against another man was pending. In that case, 'the defendant said he had taken the pledge and was in constant employment'. He was fined. The same year, David Hegarty was charged with 'grievously assaulting' a constable and another man and also with being drunk and disorderly. His father and a friend stood surety for him. However, the following year, Aggie's grandfather took his son David to court for 'maliciously destroying a salmon fishing rod'. 'The chairman requested that the matter be settled out of court, saying "It is not very often that we have cases of father against son here". The complainant replied: "I don't want him at all. I wish he would keep away from me altogether". The chairman then agreed to hear the case'.

Over the same years and into the 1920s, Aggie's father was often remanded for drunkenness. Indeed, although Aggie attributed her father's decline to the death of his wife, it appears from archival materials that Aggie's father had moved out shortly after both Aggie and her brother were born and at least several years before their mother's death. In the 1901 census, Mary Teeling Hegarty and her two children, Billie and Aggie, were living in the country with Mary's parents together with two of Mary's unmarried brothers, Peter and Joseph Teeling. John Hegarty was not in the household; indeed, he was not anywhere in the 1901 census. Nor was he listed in the 1896–1902 voting lists, either in the town or in the country.

John Hegarty's homelessness conforms with later recollections of him by informants who are about five to fifteen years younger than Aggie. They remember the 'old Hegarty generation'. 'Thomas, the father, was a great tailor, but John, his son, had a terrible problem with drink. So did his brother David who built himself a tin shack on a vacant lot and lived there for years'. 'John Hegarty lived in the hayloft of a publican's barn; he had no home or house. He lived only for drink'. Interestingly, one local informant, a carpenter living down the street from the Hegartys and only about 15 years younger than Aggie, had no idea that John Hegarty had been married and had had children.

I suggest that because of this history, Aggie spent little time talking about her father's life and that of his kin. Indeed, the information which she gave me about them was unusual in that I had to elicit it by direct questions as to what each did, where each lived, etc. Unlike Aggie's other information, it was never voluntary. Equally important, it was always 'edited' and often, as a result, contradictory.

According to Aggie, her grandfather Thomas 'owned and lived in the same house as had his father Patrick, who was also a tailor'. Her grandfather made his living from tailoring and his army pension. Grandfather Thomas's sister, Stasia, had also learned the tailoring trade. 'She could made a suit of clothes better than any man and she worked in the shop until she married a man from Gowran. He was a wealthy farmer and she no longer worked'. Aggie dryly added: 'She left all her money to the priests'. As to Aggie's uncle David, her father's brother: 'He was also in the British Army. He came back and lived with his father and step-mother. He had a big pension and went back and forth between England and Ireland. He worked in England for a while and got T.B.'.

Concerning her father, John Hegarty, Aggie's description of his working life varied at different times. Once 'he was in the British army, then he worked for the railway and then on thrashing sets'. Another time, 'he worked as an agricultural labourer, he fished and he did odd jobs if he was asked. He did not bother his head with tailoring'. Aggie once said that she 'always remembered being well-off' as a child and she attributed this to her father: 'He had a railway pension, an army pension and he worked in the tannery'.

In these biographies, the numerous problems with consistency provide important insights into the meaning of Aggie's construc-

tions. The continuity in property holding which she attributed to her great grandfather and grandfather – that the latter 'inherited' the former's house – is not borne out by valuation records. Her grandfather Thomas, after his marriage in 1867, lived in a different part of town than did his father; and when Thomas moved nearer Aggie's great-grandfather in 1882, it was into a different house.

Great aunt Stasia's biography is also provocative. It is a portrait of an ideal, personal career for a woman. However, according to the parish records, she married a 'cattle dealer' whose father, a farmer, was already deceased. From this profile, it is unlikely that the husband had inherited a farm or he would have given his occupation as 'farmer'. Moreover, Stasia was 51 at the time of her 'good' marriage in 1892 – too old to have been a promising spouse for a 'strong farmer'. However, her new wealth does enable Aggie to explain why the Hegartys had no further interaction with her. Moreover, that the Hegartys inherited nothing is explained away by her leaving 'it all to the priests' – an unsatisfactory ending from the perspective of kinship and 'eating the altar' – but not unrespectable.

Aggie's construction of her father's occupational history also had important differences as compared with archival and interview materials. John Hegarty was possibly a British soldier early on; at least, several informants remember his reputation as such. However, when he married in 1894, he said he was a 'car driver' although by 1902 it was recorded, when he was a witness in a court case, that he was working locally for the railway. There are no records or recollections, however, of his having worked in the tannery. Interestingly, it was Aggie's grandmother, Thomas Hegarty's first wife, who worked full-time in the tannery during the 1870s and 1880s. On the one hand, this was before Aggie was born and possibly she did not know of it, although she knew her grandfather's and great-grandfather's trade. On the other hand, it is possible that her construction was related to the fact that industrial work for men, but not for women, is highly valued. Thus, she attributed this to her father, but not her grandmother, along with two pensions. For pensions were also an important working-class resource as was service in the British army. All three – the tannery, the railway and the British army – could mean permanent work, continuous employment, a regular paycheck and a welfare system to support the retired worker. These were working people's 'ideals' of the male role; and it was one which Aggie assigned to her father together with the appropriate pensions.

Finally, Aggie's description of her uncle David's history was the most obviously 'edited' in all respects. An informant remembered him 'as a rough character who was in gaol for fighting'. Another remembered him as a deserter from the British army. Ironically, no one remembered that when the Thomastown Volunteers were formed in 1914, David Hegarty was an active participant.

Aggie's reticence and manner of constructing the lives of her father and his kin contrast sharply with how she presents her mother's. Superficially, she creates an opposing, idyllic picture – particularly of her maternal grandparents – as respectable, rural working people. However, she does not avoid describing conflict in this context; she simply 'sees' it differently. In contrast, Aggie constructed 'inconsistent' parts of her husband's life and her own in a way reminiscent of her biography of her paternal kin.

Aggie's mother died in 1905 and she and her brother continued to live with her mother's parents in the country. When Aggie was about 13, 'the thatched cottage was getting run down, the roof was beginning to cave in and we couldn't do any more with it'. Apparently, the shopkeeper/landlord never did any maintenance. 'Anything that needed doing was done by us'. 'So we put in for a labourer's cottage and after two disappointments, they got one'. As to the first application: 'It was so crooked at the time that we lost out because Brangan [a large, local farmer] was a councillor and Ned Kenna was his cowherd. So Brangan made sure that Ned got the cottage. The second time we think that Brangan also interfered. A cottage was supposed to be built on Brangan's land and it never was. Then Donal Cleary, a councillor and the man my grandfather worked for, gave them an acre which he didn't want and he also got the Council to build the house. My grandfather gave years in Cleary's and the farmers made sure that only their own workers got the houses. The law and the houses were funny at that time'.

The Council minutes record the disappointments which her grandfather faced; and Aggie's description contains an accurate picture of the politics related to labourers' cottages at the time. Large farmers, who sat on the Rural District Council, were under pressure from the Local Government Board to provide housing under the Labourers' Act. The councillors jockeyed to avoid, as farmers, sel-

ling land for cottages and to prevent, as ratepayers, using rates for labourers' housing. The councillors, however, were not only protecting their land and money; they also were against labourers' rights to permanent housing irrespective of who employed them. For Labourers' Cottages were not tied to particular farms; rents were paid to the Council and the occupier was secure so long as these relatively low, subsidised, rents were paid. Farmers were losing a means of controlling labour, so they tried to retain some leverage by using their political power on Council, or their networks to the Council, to ensure that if free cottages had to be built, subsidised by their rates and on their land, then at least they would ensure a worker's loyalty or gratitude, if not their economic dependence, by allocating cottages to their own labourers. The effect of this, from the workers' perspective, was to entrench a firm belief that 'strings' were, and are, needed to get a cottage.

The new house had a scullery, a kitchen and two bedrooms. In the first year in the cottage, I won £1 in the Tidy House competition and this was a lot of money in those days. The walls were whitewashed, the wooden table scrubbed, the beds had white sheets and blankets, pillows and a patchwork quilt. Dr. Murphy said that we had the healthiest house in the townland – with its high roof and limewashed walls. We limewashed twice a year, before Christmas and before the summer'.

Aggie's £1 win was indeed recorded in the newspapers. The contest itself was part of the effort at the time to improve public health, particularly amongst 'the poorer classes'. Equally important to Aggie's self-image was that 'The cottage came on one acre and we had a garden. We cultivated every inch and we sold the produce. The same year that I won the contest, my grandfather won a 30s. prize for his garden. Instead of spending the money, he invested in apple trees and berry bushes. Soon he was able to sell the fruit. His money made more. We also sold hundreds of cabbage plants and kept pigs, turkeys, chickens and ducks. We sold eggs and cocks. We bought pots of Indian meal from Brangan to feed the pigs and we also fed them small potatoes. Brangan often loaned us the potato drill and the plough. Old Mr Brangan never charged us for this; they helped people who had ground'.

Aggie talked very often of the huge cabbages and turkeys which they raised and she emphasised this far more than she did the work

which her grandfather did. As a young man, he had worked for the railway; but after he married (in 1868, according to his 1911 census return), he was an agricultural labourer who 'worked for the farmers around'. Aggie also did 'part time work for the farmers around' – digging potatoes, weeding. But her main job was in their own garden and taking care of her grandparents who were getting old (they were both born in 1839) and needing help. Her mother's sister, 'auntie Breda' had migrated to Manchester and sent Aggie money to care for them.

'I could have gone to England too, just like the rest of them – auntie Breda, uncle Joe and uncle Peter [her mother's siblings]. But I stayed home to look after the grandparents and my auntie Breda asked me to do this and sent me money to keep me in clothes'.

By the 1911 census, indeed, only Aggie and her grandparents were in the cottage. Aggie's brother was living as a servant in the house of a Thomastown shopkeeper and Aggie's father was living in a lodging house in town together with his brother David. In 1916, according to Aggie, her brother also emigrated to England. Aggie only saw him once more; when he returned in 1918 'to stand for' Aggie's second child. For in 1916, at the age of 20, Aggie married. She married in August and her first child was born that same year. These dates were never mentioned by Aggie, even when I once enquired, unknowingly, why she had married so young. She smiled and said 'why not?'.

Aggie married Christy Donovan who, according to Aggie, had come to the area 'from Mullinavat to join his widowed mother who was already working in Thomastown'. He 'had been living with the Kinsellas, relations to the Donovans and big farmers'. According to the 1911 census returns, Lizzie Donovan, the mother, was 'single'. Aggie never mentioned her mother-in-law's marital status and generally spoke very little about her. Indeed, it is unlikely that the Donovans were related to big farmers – at least in any meaningful way. According to Aggie, Lizzie Donovan had been a maid in a big house in Mullinavat; and even if she were a disgraced farmer's daughter, it is unlikely that her child would have been kept on without her. The relationship with the Kinsellas must have been distant or putative; it did give Lizzie Donovan, however, respectable credentials.

Indeed, many decades later, one of Aggie's granddaughters had an illegitimate child. Aggie and I came across this information together while routinely reviewing parochial baptisms. Aggie made no

comment on the fact; she simply proceeded to tell me what a fine person the child's father was, how he had 'stood by' her granddaughter during her pregnancy and how he had married her after the child was born. I was provided with no information as to why the couple were not married, like so many other people, during pregnancy. Aggie was embarrassed; her concern was to avoid speaking about it, but, if confronted, she emphasised people's respectability even in the face of contrary behaviour.

Aggie's mother-in-law Lizzie Donovan, worked as an indoor servant in the Brangan household. Aggie's husband, Christy, was a ploughman for Brangan. After their marriage, Aggie's husband moved in with her and her maternal grandparents. In 1917, her grandmother died; the following year, uncle Joe Teeling 'brought his wife back from England'. According to Aggie, 'he came back just to get the cottage. He moved in with his father and began working on Brangan's farm. The rule was that the son should get the cottage; and I was only a granddaughter. But the cottage should have been mine. I could have gone off too, but I couldn't leave my grandparents. Auntie Breda agreed with me and kept me in clothes. But Joe and his wife were bitter against me. My uncle Peter was good; he used to write and send me money but he never came home. My uncle Bob didn't have much. He had children and his own cottage'.

At Joe Teeling's return, Aggie, her husband and their two children moved in with Christy's mother; she had a tied cottage from her employer, Brangan. 'We had planted the garden and when we left, we left everything in the ground. My husband was a good man; any other man would have uprooted and torn out everything'. In contrast, 'Joe and his wife were bitter people. My auntie Breda died suddenly and she had never made a will. Uncle Joe and his wife rushed over there and took everything. Who knows what they got. But some of it would probably have gone to me – if there had been a will. They were people like that'.

During the years that followed, Aggie was mainly a homemaker but she always worked casually 'with the farmers'. She weeded and picked turnips in season and, at harvest, she helped with binding corn sheaves during the cutting and then opening them atop the thresher. She always had a small garden and always small livestock. 'After the children were reared', she began steady work in the Brangan's house as a domestic. She did this for three years, in the mid-

1940s, but then she stayed home. I asked why she began but then stopped; had she needed the money? 'Not at all', said Aggie, 'but might as well have it'.

Although Aggie was unwilling to talk about poverty, it was clear that with her 'family reared' and with the advent of war, she was able to add to her husband's meagre income as a ploughman. The Brangan enterprise was never unionised, wages were always kept to a minimum and, to the question as to whether the Brangans ever did anything for the Donovans after all the years they gave them, Aggie's caustic reply was: 'Not a hulluva lot; they didn't do much for anyone'. But high emigration during the war caused a local labour shortage while increased farming profits enabled the Brangans to expand their work force. Aggie was able to work full-time. It is also possible that her decision to work was related to limitations on cash contributions which her children were able to make at the time. The youngest was still in school and her three eldest were in England; two were married and one had his own family. Moreover, the son at home was, as people say, 'not fond of work'. Only one daughter, in her early twenties, was working locally. Aggie, although she did not admit it, probably found the additional income useful. Yet, she maintained that after she stopped working in the late 1940s and after her husband's death in the early 1950s, 'the children all worked and gave money. And it's just the same today. It's as if they weren't married. I reared them good'.

Meanwhile, in 1940 Joe Teeling's daughter, a widow with two children who had been living with him and his wife, remarried and brought her new husband to the cottage. Soon after, she died in childbirth. 'Uncle Joe and his wife had to raise the children'. A few years later, however, her uncle Joe's wife died and soon after, his son-in-law remarried and took his new wife and the two grandchildren to another house. 'Uncle Joe was alone. He came to see me and told me he was giving me the cottage. He said if I refused it, he would hand in the key and put the house up for tender. He was giving it to me so he could die with a clear conscience. The house was mine and always was. So I took it; if he had put it up for tender, we could never have bought it'.

Aggie explained Joe Teeling's action as a correct and moral wish to alleviate a wrong. Importantly, however, she included, in this explanation, the fact that 'he was alone'. Thus, regardless of the moral

content which Aggie provides, Joe Teeling clearly wanted someone to look after him in his declining years. Aggie's genealogy of his family substantiates this. His son and family lived in England and his only other child, a daughter, lived in County Meath.

So Aggie joined her uncle in 'her' cottage after nearly four decades. It was 1955 and she moved in with her son, his wife and a grandchild. Aggie's husband 'had died before he ever knew'. Ironically, about a week after Aggie moved in, 'Uncle Joe got sick. He couldn't be looked after at home so he was put into St. Columba's. He lived on for a year'. Aggie never mentioned how ill he was, who decided to put him into the 'County home' or his reaction. However, 'Uncle Joe and Uncle Bob's children – my cousins – were against me having the cottage, even though they all went off and I stayed. Soon after, at a relative's funeral, none of them would even talk to me, just because I got the cottage'.

A few years after the move Aggie began working part-time in the Brangan house 'especially at their parties'. She also 'did bits and pieces for the Clearys'. In the late 1950s, Aggie signed the cottage over to her son. I asked if she had been afraid of doing that. She answered: 'I took my chances. But you know, my children are very good. I could live with any of my daughters, but I like living in my own townland. My daughters treat me as if they weren't married'.

In 1965, at the age of 69, Aggie began to work full-time in the kitchen of a local bakery. She worked a ten-hour day and then took a bus back to her townland. Aggie takes pride in her honesty at the job. 'They could trust me with a ha'penny. I never took a penny. And the boss knew that. He could go away and leave me and never worry for anything'. Aggie retired from her job at the age of 76.

Near the end of my stay in Thomastown, Aggie moved in, and now lives, with a daughter; as a result, she now lives away from her cottage and her townland. For her son and his wife began drinking heavily and, according to Aggie's daughter, they weren't looking after her properly. Aggie has been exiled once again. 'But sure, don't I prefer it with my daughter. The house is clean and spotless. I can't be bothered with them'.

* * *

It is interesting to analyse Aggie's life by comparing her construction

with data from archives and other informants. There were clearly certain topics which she avoided, chose not to speak about or perhaps forgot; and there were those which she revised in her own way. There were also topics which she emphasised and insisted on describing. Finally, there was a general direction or hue which she gave to her 'life'.

Aggie took great care to describe the difficulties she encountered in obtaining a house and 'an acre of ground'. Indeed, in gossiping about other local people, Aggie always distinguishes between those who have 'no ground' and those who 'have ground'. The latter lie along a continuum according to whether they have 'a bit of ground' or a 'good bit of ground'; and somewhere between those with 'a bit' and those 'with a good bit' are the 'farmers'. Like farmers, then, labouring people 'with a bit of ground' could be respectable – for were they not on the same continuum as farmers? At the same time, Aggie believes that farmers are essentially different from labourers. Recently, on a farm nearby, according to Aggie, the 'eldest son was disinherited because he married a labouring man's daughter'. So her continuum distinguished between 'farmers' and 'labourers' at the same time that it incorporated the idea that 'ground' was important for working people. Her cottage put her onto that continuum – unlike 'those without ground' – even though she did not have enough to be a farmer. This relative location was just fine with Aggie, because like other working people, Aggie has never aimed to be a farmer. She simply has aimed for that respectability which farmers have. Having her cottage – with its acre, its cabbages and its limewashed walls – gave her this.

The use of 'farmer' as a category against which labouring people counterpose themselves also occurs when Aggie links her husband's people and her great aunt to 'big farmers'. It was also apparent when Aggie and I discussed Hegarty families who live in other parish townlands and are farmers. Aggie mentioned that 'they were somehow connected to her father's family' but she 'didn't know how exactly'. The second time she added: 'But they wouldn't know us, sure, we're just labouring people'.

Aggie's life, then, as she has constructed it for herself and others, is rooted in her working class milieu and its idea that respectability is linked to property. Respectability, however, is also related to proper behaviour – not only her own, but also that of other people and the

problems created when other people's departures from appropriate behaviour limit her own ability to be respectable. This was the problem she encountered when a local man died and she met up with his widow who, at the time of her husband's death, had been living with another man. 'I couldn't bring myself to say "I'm sorry for your troubles"', said Aggie. 'How could she be out with that man and her husband not buried two days? It's terrible living with another man'.

Aggie has definite ideas about how respectable labouring men behave and what constitutes a respectable working life. She also has definite notions about women's behaviour and the sometimes unfair rights which sons hold over daughters and granddaughters. She has firm beliefs in the responsibilities of 'family' (particularly daughters), she is skeptical about the obligations of kin ('people') and she has a definite idea that in-laws – particularly children's spouses – are untrustworthy. Aggie thus accepts that kin will have conflicts; what is important, however, is the nature of this conflict. If it occurs over access to property, this does not detract from respectability provided that the dispute is neither too protracted nor too public. When it becomes so, or if it becomes overladen with other issues, such as alcohol abuse or caring for the elderly, it is often necessary for a person, even in the right, to withdraw.

Aggie also has definite ideas about respectable behaviour towards other classes. She credits good employers according to whether they fulfill their moral as well as economic obligations and she knows how to properly address members of the gentry, despite their whims. Ultimately, Aggie constructs her 'biography' as a reflection of how she constructs 'respectability' in the labouring class. The themes she chooses or avoids and the general direction she takes mirror these concerns.

It is important to point out that Aggie's concerns are not simply personal – that they are also social and that they reflect the reality of Thomastown's political economy. At least since the nineteenth century, housing has been a central issue for the working class. Moreover, the behavioural bases of respectability are similarly rooted. Steady and good employment has long been problematic and often dependent on personal ties to an employer; and employers always prefer loyal, 'respectable' workers. Similarly, inter-personal, intra-class conflict has long been expressed, as court records shows, through accusations of 'abusive language' as has family and personal

breakdown in 'drunkenness' and 'illegitimacy'. Attending Mass, too, has long connections with nationalism for all Thomastown classes; yet too much religion is regarded as hypocritical because labouring people know that it is farmers' sons who became priests but that farmers look down on working people and have fought improvements in wages, housing and sharing the tax burden.

Thus, the criteria for respectability which Aggie uses – and she does not use all equally in relation to her own life – have meaning for labouring people more generally because they are rooted in historical and contemporary circumstances. Such meanings, at a cultural level, articulate with social life. Thus, people construct their personhood – and are assessed – as they interact with others of both their own and other classes; and these constructions and assessments are based on their behaviour and or their relationship to 'goods'. Aggie's 'biography' is explicable in this way; and from it, it is possible to learn about both personhood and society in South Kilkenny.

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