Assuming control: elite women as household managers in late nineteenth-century Ireland

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Writing to her husband in 1874, Jane, Countess Bantry (fig. 4.1) shared her delight at their future son-in-law’s treatment of their eldest daughter:

She is perfectly happy & the more I see of Him the more I feel he will be all we wish – he is so tender with and about her, and quite sees what a delicate plant she is, & what care & repose she requires a very rare quality in a man – men generally acting as if they believed women to be made of iron!

The ‘care and repose’ that Jane wanted for her daughter seems reflective of the sheltered existence of the clichéd Victorian lady, listlessly idling away the days on her couch. Jane’s own life, however, which involved the management of numerous houses, demanded the qualities of a woman ‘made of iron’ rather than a stereotypical lady of leisure.

This essay focuses on the women of eight Munster families who owned estates

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with a minimum valuation of £1,000 in 1870, which placed them among the 2,500 wealthiest landowners in Ireland at the time.\footnote{\textit{Made of iron}; Jane, Countess of Bantry, \textit{c}.1870 (courtesy of the Boole Library, University College Cork).} The households discussed range from those of titled magnates, with estates of over twenty thousand acres – such as the earls of Bantry and the barons Inchiquin and Castletown – to Catholic country gentry who owned less than three thousand – such as the Grehans of Cork and the Ryans of Tipperary. Private letters, diaries and account books, supplemented by published memoirs, from these landed families, over two generations, are used to analyse the most local, practical application of power and influence: that of the employer over her domestic servants. This is a study of power structures within the homes of a provincial gentry and aristocracy in Ireland. In all of these homes, the landlord’s wife, or a close female relative, held the key role of house manager. This duty was one that

\footnote{D. Cannadine, \textit{The decline and fall of the British aristocracy} (New Haven, CT, 1990), p. 9.}
contributed greatly to the family’s success and was recognized as a valuable contribution to the estate.

The important role played by women in the management of the Big House has not been recognized in general research on this class. Terence Dooley reasoned, in the most important work on the Irish landed class to date, that this exclusion ‘is merely a reflection of the non-status of women at the time’, as ‘they were confined to the role of mistress of the household and maid-servants’. Cannadine’s *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (which includes Ireland in its focus), has (by his own admission) ‘almost nothing to say’ about landed women. These authors have acknowledged an ‘urgent need’, to address this ‘glaring lacuna with regard to the role of women in Irish Big Houses’. Maria Luddy has similarly recognized the need for a ‘study of landed women in nineteenth-century Ireland’, and posed the questions ‘Did they play any role in the management of the estates? How did they manage their households?’

In general, historians have failed to fully recognize the integrated nature of male and female duties on the estate. Women’s roles as mistress of the household and hostess were essential for their families’ prestige and social links. K.D. Reynolds has demonstrated that women in British aristocratic circles during the first two-thirds of Queen Victoria’s reign had ‘a natural role . . . as promoters of the interests of their husbands and families’ and that ‘women had a series of roles and functions which gave content and meaning to their lives’. Landed families did not epitomize the model Victorian family, as men’s and women’s roles overlapped, and were both centred on the family and estate, rather than on ‘separate spheres’. The reality for the landed class during the period c.1860–1914 was that husbands and wives strived for the same ends. These women actively assisted their families through their position as household manager.

Some work on landed women and their household responsibilities has been carried out for Britain. Jessica Gerard has done seminal work in analysing country-house life in England and Wales. This research is a very valuable point of comparison for Ireland, and clear similarities arise between the experiences of landed women living in Munster during the period c.1860 to 1900 and their counterparts in England and Wales. This is hardly surprising, as they had a shared culture, and many women moved between the two islands on marriage. Gerard has found that women’s duties on the estate ‘were conscientiously undertaken as recognized and valued duties’ and that ‘the stereotype of idle, useless ladies is clearly inaccurate and invalid’.

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The number of servants retained by Gerard’s sample of one hundred families varied considerably, as life-stage and personal preference — and not just wealth — were influential in deciding the number of servants employed in landlords’ homes. For families with incomes ranging from £1,000 to over £20,000, in the late nineteenth century, the average indoor staff size was ten. Houses in this sample employed similar, if slightly smaller, numbers of servants to those of the same income bracket in England and Wales. The impact of the family’s life stage on servant numbers can be seen in this sample. Nursery maids, schoolroom maids, governesses and tutors swelled the numbers engaged in houses with children. This can be clearly seen in Bantry House (attached estate valued at £14,561). In the 1901 census, only three servants were returned, as the young landlord was away at Trinity College Dublin. Ten years later, he was in residence with his wife, two daughters and eight indoor servants, including a nurse to attend to the children.

So far, the only study of inter-class relations in the domestic setting in Ireland has been Mona Hearn’s _Below stairs: domestic service remembered in Dublin and beyond, 1880–1922._ Hearn utilized census data and interviews with surviving servants and employers. The chapter on the Big House discusses how house design minimized contact between the classes, and between the male and female servants. She describes the experience of servants in the Big House, and focuses on the reasons for rapid servant turnover; which included loneliness and harsh treatment at the hands of upper servants. Hearn’s qualitative research shatters the romantic illusion of the loyal retainer giving a lifetime of service to one family.

Katherine Everett (née Herbert of Cahirnane, Co. Kerry, 1872–1951, m. 1901) noted a difference between Irish and English landed families’ relationships with their staff. She visited her cousin, Countess Ferrers (née White of Bantry, Co. Cork, 1852–1907, m. 1885), at her marital home at Staunton Harold, Leicestershire. Earl Ferrers ran his estate in the ‘tradition of mutual obligations’ and approved of a life that was ‘dull and socially very formal’. Katherine Everett found the ‘pomp and formality’, where three footmen and a butler laid out the tea, ‘a little absurd’ and there was no joking with the coachman as there might have been in a more ‘casual and easy-going’ Irish house. For some landed women in Munster, there was little option but to know one’s staff, as a housekeeper was not always employed to carry out a managerial role.

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In most cases, employers preferred their staff, especially their upper servants, to share their religious affiliations. In Castlefreke, nine of the ten indoor servants employed by Lady Carbery (née Toulmin of St Albans, Hertfordshire, 1867–1949, m.1 1890, m.2 1902) in 1901 were Protestant; while in the Catholic Grehan home, only one of the seven indoor servants was Protestant. As the landed class was predominantly Anglican, their servants were generally of the same denomination. In total, 68 per cent of servants employed in Irish country houses were Protestant. In all houses, staff members were more likely to come from outside the county, with many hailing from England. English servants were deemed to be more qualified than Irish ones, and so secured the more lucrative positions.

Each house, therefore, had a wide catchment area for domestic staff, and might employ Irish, British and Continental European servants (the latter were mainly governesses). The fact that servants tended to be such a mixed group, both ethnically and religiously, suggests that, in this respect, each Big House was much like the others. New wives coming from another part of Ireland or, almost as commonly, from England did not face an alien workforce, but one of very similar make-up to that of their parental homes. This implied a sense of connection between the woman’s old home and her new one, allowing her to step easily into her role as manager, and to appear in control.

Employers knew from experience that strong relationships could develop between children and their family’s servants. One woman wrote of her childhood: ‘All the servants, both indoors and outdoors, were our friends’. Thus, employers chose servants who would help to mould their children into respectable members of the landed class. The kindly Mary O’Brien (Cahirmoyle, Co. Limerick, née Spring Rice of Mount Trenchard, Co. Limerick, m. 1865, d. 1868) was very definite about the type of environment she wanted in her children’s nursery: ‘a good Irish nurse wd be one’s ideal – & the kind of badness that Irish women generally indulge in, untidiness &c, is compensated for in great measure by their being more attachable & less inclined to be fine or hard than the English’. It was deemed important that children were surrounded by co-religionists, especially in the schoolroom and nursery, where servants contributed to the religious education of children. Katherine Everett was inspired with ‘unquestioning faith’ by her first nurse.

brogue of which she had a horror’.  

Girls received much, or all, of their education from governesses selected by their mothers. Ethel, Lady Inchiquin (née Foster of Moor Park, Shropshire, Dromoland, Co. Clare, m. 1896, d. 1940) (fig. 4.2) recognized the responsibility: ‘will write to Mrs Hunt [employment agency] about the servants soon – I have a governess to get too – which is much more serious’.  

Through their selection and control of nursery staff, these women greatly influenced the upbringing and education of the next generation of the landlord class.

Servants could also contribute to the image that their employer presented to the world in adulthood. Elizabeth MacKnight has discussed the complex ways in which nineteenth-century French aristocracy benefited from the employment of large retinues of servants. Using the concepts of ‘theatre of rule’ and ‘cultural hegemony’ discussed by E.P. Thompson in relation to eighteenth-century England, she has argued that the presence of deferential servants signalled how the rest of society should behave towards their employers, thus increasing aristocratic power.  


Ethel Lady Inchiquin to Lucius, fifteenth Baron Inchiquin, 29 June [1907], NLI MS/45.473(2).  

E. MacKnight, ‘A “theatre of rule”?’
Carbery used her maids to demonstrate her own desired detachment from the ‘squirrel cage of society’: they were ‘all alike in their black bonnets with strings, black coats and skirts, “as pretty as pinks”’. The visiting maids not half so attractive as mine are, in their “ladies” made-overs’. 29 When Ellen, Lady Inchiquin (Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, née White of Annally, Dublin, b. 1854–6, m. 1874) (fig. 4.3) went to London, she would only get out of the carriage at her own house, as she had no footman with her. 30 For her, at least, the propriety and status provided by a manservant was important. Numerous servants were essential if women were to become lavish hostesses, or to travel and maintain critical links with other landed families. The servant’s practical guide observed that, ‘without the constant cooperation of well-trained servants, domestic machinery is completely thrown out of gear, and the best bred of hostesses placed at a disadvantage’.31

The management styles of these women varied as a result of personality, wealth and training. Women did not receive any formal managerial training, but they learned from the example of their mothers and other female relatives. Esther Grehan (née Chichester of Runamoot, Co. Roscommon, Clonmeen, Co. Cork, 1860–1900, m. 1883) won first prize in arithmetic at school, which may have helped her in accounts, Katherine Everett was trained by her mother to write references for servants, and Gertrude ‘Bee’ Foster, younger sister of Ethel, Lady Inchiquin, appears to have taken on much of the responsibility of finding, and refurbishing, a suitable house for the return of her sister and brother-in-law from honeymoon.32 Living with an unmarried brother also allowed these women to run a home temporarily. After her parents’ deaths and before her brother’s marriage, Countess Ferrers acted as mistress of Bantry House, where she ‘entertained all sorts of people’.33 Nelly O’Brien also ran her brother’s new Dublin house, but only until his marriage. While she impressed him in some ways, her lack of mathematical training was apparent: ‘She, poor soul, is not over-strong in that line, either in accuracy of tots or in systematic jotting down of items’.34

Many women were diligent in their record keeping. The Viscountess Doneraile (née Lenox-Conyngham, Doneraile Court, Co. Cork, m. 1851, d. 1907) filed the receipts of wages paid to employees.35 Esther Grehan had no housekeeper but kept her own accounts in coloured calligraphy. Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, initialled all payments to her servants, and supervised the meat account for the house. Such careful record keeping was essential, as the level of food production and catering activity in these houses was equal to that of a small business. In Dromoland, over four hundred servings of meat might be required on busy weeks.36 Many of these houses regularly accommodated over twenty people; even in the more modest Grehan household, meals were rarely confined to the immediate family.37 Furniture and goods, therefore, needed constant supervision.

Esther Grehan carefully listed all the silver given into the butler’s care, and super-intended the purchasing and packing of stores herself.38 When Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, noticed discrepancies in the meat account she searched for a new cook, who could be controlled more easily by Ellen’s trusted housekeeper.39 She would not be cheated by servants and knew how much she was willing to pay them: ‘I would not get an expensive cook – £40 feeds you just as well as £60 in womankind’.40 The Inchiquins were in financial difficulties, with as many as twenty-seven servants in the

1880s, and new servants were often paid less than their predecessors. These women’s careful management of employees, and of the house and its stores, was essential to the economic success of the estate.

As managers, these women were shrewd, but in the late nineteenth century, employer–employee relationships were not merely contractual; some paternal practices were retained. Throughout the period in Doneraile, employees were given an allowance for beer and laundry on top of wages. In Dromoland, in the 1870s and 1880s, servants were allocated an equal share of meat to that of the family. Mary O’Brien felt herself obliged to ensure that young servants in her household were trained correctly.

An examination of the comments in Esther Grehan’s wage account book show that, like many Big House employers, Grehan rarely if ever paid her servants on time; it was not uncommon for wages to be two months overdue. Fines for damaged household items, such as a hair sieve from the cook, or for a ‘smashed chair’ from the housemaid, meant that wages could be reduced. Yet she was also willing to advance money to her employees, and gave out loans for medicine, clothes, travel expenses and telegrams. She also provided payment in kind in the form of presents, such as that given to the nurse after ‘baby’ got her first tooth. Esther Grehan knew her servants personally and supervised their work, reprimanding them when she felt it necessary. She used what training she had to get the best from her workforce; the fines she extracted could be for something as small as a plate, but the contents of the house were her responsibility and she would not allow them to be damaged.

In spite of any informal perks or personal attention enjoyed by servants in these houses, few remained with their employees long. Mona Hearn, using census returns and estate account books, as well as interviews and newspaper advertisements, has found that during the period 1880 to 1922, the average Big House servant remained in each position for a short time, a pattern confirmed by this case study. In the Grehan household, as many as two of about eight servants could give notice or leave per quarter. Servants working in larger establishments did not necessarily stay for longer periods. Despite the fact that Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, generally paid her servants on time, servant turnover at Dromoland was considerable.

41 See Meat and wage account books, NLI MS/14,851, NLI MS/14,848, NLI MS/14,849.
42 Account books, NLI MS/34,148(12) and NLI MS/21,514.
43 Meat book, NLI MS/14,850.
44 Mary O’Brien to Lucy Gwynn, 3 Feb. 1865, NLI MS/36 768.
46 Ibid.
48 See, for example, Esther Grehan, diary entry, 31 Aug. 1893, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/838.
49 Board of Trade Labour Department, Report by Miss Collet, on the money wages of indoor domestic servants, BPP 1899 XCII [C. 9346], referenced in M. Hearn, Below stairs, p. 84.
50 See, for example, spring and summer entries 1894, Esther Grehan, wage account book, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/306.
51 Wage account books, 1880–6, NLI MS/14,848–9. See also Hearne, Below stairs, 78.
Much was written on the ‘servant problem’ as the nineteenth century drew to a close, but Amanda Vickery has found that ‘the servant problem was an “aging chestnut”, even in 1700’. The genteel women in their north of England studies needed to become ‘impresarios of staffing’ as they dealt with the problem of absconding servants on a continuous basis. The surviving correspondence of these Munster women suggests that they accepted the conveyor-belt nature of their servants’ hall as ‘tiresome’ but unavoidable. On one holiday in France, Esther Grehan went through three cooks in one month: she thought the first was lying to her, and the second, though well liked, fell ill, and so a third had to be found. Deference, competence and honesty in staff were essential qualities for the employer. The landed class expected to employ the elite of domestic workers, as servants ‘represented their families, much as receptionists do today.’ They could not retain well-meaning servants who proved to be unqualified:

52 A. Vickery, Gentleman’s daughter, pp 141, 135. 53 Gertrude Foster to Ethel, Lady Inchiquin [1806], NLI MS/45,503(2). 54 Esther Grehan diary entry, 14–31 July 1897, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G842. 55 Reynolds, Aristocratic women, p. 36.
I am going to part with Bell – but don’t mention it, for I cannot as yet give her definite ‘warning’ . . . I am so very sorry to dismiss her, she is so very cheerful & willing & sweet-tempered; but the opportunities I have had since I came abroad of watching her day & night have convinced me that she is not fit to be head of a nursery.56

There is no evidence, in this sample, of women acting tyrannically towards their servants, but they were prone to lose patience with them, and, if they felt servants were not suitable, were quick to release them.57 Some offences resulted in immediate dismissal. Esther Grehan recorded on one visit with friends that their footman and housemaid were ‘to be packed off’.58 Other offences required a more patient approach, however, as the prestige of the family was of paramount importance. Ethel, Lady Inchiquin, felt it would not be prudent to dismiss a potentially dishonest cook until after a visit from the duke of Marlborough, as she feared she ‘might get a worse one’.59

Not all servant departures were the result of a relationship breakdown. Sometimes they left to marry or were let go as their employer could no longer afford them.60 Nursery servants and governesses were eventually laid off when children had grown up. Other servants were only employed on a temporary basis to staff a London house during the family’s stay.61 Surviving letters of recommendation show that servants who were dismissed could still get positive references. One letter from a Lady Scott in relation to an upper housemaid, whom she had dismissed over a row about the cleanliness of a carpet, found that her only fault was that she was ‘not very good about her looks’.62 With such a high servant turnover, these women needed to be almost constantly recruiting if they were to present a well-run house to guests.

The responsibility of house and servants was a constant care for the landlord’s wife. In 1887, Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, had bills and accounts, including the dairy accounts, sent to her while she was in England.63 Even before Esther Grehan was married or mistress at Clonmeen, Viscountess Doneraile and others were inquiring what changes she would make to her new home. She found it stressful. ‘It jars that I am expected to think of chopping and changing everything – before I am even married!’64 Yet she advised her fiancé on ways to make the house neater, made plans

for the landscaping of the estate and advised him on ‘the most economical sort of grate for burning coal’.\textsuperscript{65} Jane, Countess of Bantry, travelled to England to be with her daughter who was dangerously ill, having given birth to her second child. While there, she took over the house management, despite the presence of her son-in-law.\textsuperscript{66} She hired wet nurses, ordered the doctor and ‘inaugurated a regime of strictest quiet’.\textsuperscript{67} Meanwhile, she was writing to her husband at home in Bantry about the potential visit, in her absence, of a duke.\textsuperscript{68} On holiday in Tramore, Esther Grehan recruited staff for Clonmeen by mail.\textsuperscript{69} Many families owned or rented additional residences, so women had to organize staffing for each house before the family travelled there, and managed lesser houses from afar.\textsuperscript{70}

Of course inter-class relations were not only about wages and discipline. Upper servants, especially, were ever-present in their employer’s lives. For some women, such as Lady Carbery, who was left a widow at a young age, employees were the only adults whom they were sure to meet every day. For others, trapped in an unhappy marriage, or suffering under the loneliness of widowhood or spinsterhood, a hired companion might be relied upon to alleviate the sense of isolation.\textsuperscript{71} Governesses provided substitute companionship when no-one else was around.\textsuperscript{72} Women, therefore, wanted positive, if unequal, relationships with their domestics. This was certainly the case with personal servants, such as lady’s maids and nursery servants. When Esther Grehan died, her husband wrote that her maid had become ‘more like a sister than a maid’ in the final illness.\textsuperscript{73} Lady Inchiquin’s sister, Bee, wrote: ‘I have got a new ladies [sic] maid . . . she seems a nice little thing & so far I like her’.\textsuperscript{74}

Motherhood practices of the period demanded that the women of this class spent a good deal of time in the company of nursery servants. Neighbouring women, their children and nurses regularly visited each other. Nurses and governesses even entertained guests when their employers were away.\textsuperscript{75} These servants were instrumental in the upbringing of their employers’ children, so good relationships were preferable. Esther Grehan watched the children while the governess received a visit from her sister, and at another time she took the children while ‘Mademoiselle’ went to the dentist in Cork.\textsuperscript{76} Sometimes, positive relationships led these women to trust upper servants with great responsibility. The countess of Bantry, who was travelling in

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., and Esther Chichester to Stephen Grehan, 3 Nov. 1882, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/677. \textsuperscript{66} Countess Bantry to Earl Bantry, 12 May 1874, Bantry Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/B/2395. \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., Friday [n.d.] 1876, Bantry Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/B/2400. \textsuperscript{68} Ibid. \textsuperscript{69} Esther Grehan, diary entry, 1–9 Aug. 1895, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/840. \textsuperscript{70} See, for example, Esther Grehan, diary entry, 18 July 1896, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/841. \textsuperscript{71} Everett, \textit{Bricks and flowers}, pp 44, 27, 149, 156. \textsuperscript{72} Sandford (ed.), \textit{West Cork journal}, p. 76, Esther Grehan, diary entry, 10, 22 Nov. 1896, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/841. \textsuperscript{73} Stephen Grehan to Amy Chichester, 3 May 1900, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/835. \textsuperscript{74} Gertrude Foster to Ethel, Lady Inchiquin, [1896], NLI MS/45,593(2). \textsuperscript{75} Emmeline Esdaile to Countess Bantry, Bantry Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/B/2401. \textsuperscript{76} Esther Grehan diary entry, 4 Mar. 1893, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/838.
Europe, allowed her children’s governess to order other servants, entertain guests and even see to the funeral arrangements for her late daughter, Emily.⁷⁷ Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, relied heavily on the advice of her housekeeper, even when hiring other staff.⁷⁸

These women’s view of their servants was influenced by nineteenth-century notions of hierarchy. Relationships could be quite jovial, as there was such a social gulf between employer and employee. Lady Carbery allowed herself to be scolded by her lady’s maid, and, like Katherine Everett, she chatted to her coachman while driving.⁷⁹ Both of these women were nonetheless convinced of their own superiority, and approved of a hierarchical society.⁸⁰ Lady Castletown (née St Leger, childhood and marital home: Doneraile Court, Co. Cork, 1853–1927, m. 1874) obviously enjoyed laughter at the expense of the servant class, and kept comic cartoons of the foolishness of maids – along with derogatory depictions of Africans – in her scrapbook.⁸¹

These women did not just contribute to their family’s economic security through careful management of the indoor servants; they were also involved in more recognizably commercial projects of their own. The dairy and farmyard were also under the remit of the landlord’s wife. Esther Grehan’s dairymaids were engaged in a form of bonded labour, as their wages were regularly deducted in part, or in full, for rent.⁸² She was able to generate profit by selling butter, while helping her husband to collect rents. Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, monitored the price of butter before deciding when their stock should be sent to market.⁸³ In the early twentieth century, landed women became involved in even more overtly commercial activities. Esther Grehan’s daughter, May (b. 1884, m. 1923), and many others, became involved in the cooperative movement. May attempted to improve local poultry-rearing practices.⁸⁴ The energetic Mabel O’Brien (née Smyly, 4 Merrion Square, Dublin, Cahirmoyle, Co. Limerick, 1869–1942, m. 1902), who had come from an urban background, set up the Ardagh Cheese business in the early twentieth century.⁸⁵

As dairy maids were more likely than indoor staff to be recruited locally, the management of the dairy allowed landed women to forge links with tenants, thus strengthening the position of their family. Through their stewardship of house and farmyard, these women completed an important social and economic function, maintaining and even strengthening links with the local community, while contributing to their families’ financial well being.

As many of the marriages in this study were companionate, women sometimes

enlisted the assistance of their husbands to carry out managerial duties. While in Dublin, Esther Grehan’s husband, Stephen, interviewed a cook for her and decided she would do.\textsuperscript{86} He also called the police when a dismissed governess refused to leave without more money.\textsuperscript{87} Ethel, Lady Inchiquin, told her husband to find a footman while in London.\textsuperscript{88} Recruitment of men servants was technically the husband’s responsibility, but Ethel knew what positions needed to be filled. She once recruited and tested a new chauffeur while her husband was away.\textsuperscript{89} Ethel’s step-mother-in-law, Ellen, Lady Inchiquin, did not withhold her domestic worries from her husband while he was away at parliament, but asked his advice on a cheating cook, discussed possible replacements and shared her difficulties in organizing a house party.\textsuperscript{90}

At times, however, interventions by their husbands could be unwelcome. Mary O’Brien was a meek wife who usually did all she could to please her husband, and even asked his permission to attend church service.\textsuperscript{91} When (due to her having TB) he was searching for a new nurse for her, however, she would not heed his reservations about a potential candidate. She directed him as to who he should write to for references, and provided a list of questions for the interview. She preferred to trust in female opinion and directed him to include ‘any other questions Mother can think of’.\textsuperscript{92}

Not all families contained a husband and a wife to carry out their respective duties. The roles already discussed belonged to women who had a husband to carry out the external management of the estate. Circumstances sometimes dictated that women took on the entire responsibility of the property. The widowed Lady Carbery had to act as employer to the outdoor as well as the indoor staff. Lady Castletown’s husband was interned in an asylum with ‘a form of melancholia’ and so she was forced to take on all aspects of management; she examined their financial situation and tried to raise money to send him to South Africa on his release. These duties, along with her many other projects, may explain why she was so haphazard in her employment record keeping.\textsuperscript{93}

When a mistress of the house predeceased her husband he had to replace her in some way. This was not just to satisfy desires for companionship and sexual fulfilment, but also to provide the home with a manager to replace the one it had lost. Viscountess Barrington believed that an older man’s readiness to remarry illustrated his ‘happiness under the first regime, and . . . his helplessness without a wife’.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{86} Esther Grehan, diary entry, 28 Sept. 1895, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/840. \textsuperscript{87} Esther Grehan, diary entry, 4 Apr. 1895, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/840. \textsuperscript{88} Ethel, Lady Inchiquin to fifteenth Baron Inchiquin, 6 June [1909], NLI MS/45,504(4). \textsuperscript{89} Ethel, Lady Inchiquin to fifteenth Baron Inchiquin, n.d. [July 1909], NLI MS/45,504(4). \textsuperscript{90} Ellen, Lady Inchiquin to fourteenth Baron Inchiquin, 8–9 Dec., 1878, NLI MS/45,473 (2). \textsuperscript{91} Mary O’Brien to Edward William O’Brien, 16 June 1867, NLI MS/36,752 (2). \textsuperscript{92} Mary O’Brien to Edward William O’Brien, 25 and 28 June 1867, NLI MS/36,756 (2). \textsuperscript{93} Numerous friends and relations to Lady Castletown, June to Sept. 1912, NLI MS/341664. Wage account book, Doneraile, NLI MS/21,514. \textsuperscript{94} Charlotte, Viscountess Barrington, Through eighty years (London, 1986), p. 133, quoted in
Lady Elizabeth Leigh (née White of Bantry, High Leigh, Cheshire, 1847–80, m. 1874) died, her husband, Egerton, wondered how ‘he shall ever get on without her’.\textsuperscript{95} He would eventually remarry, but in the interim he relied on female family members. Egerton’s sister-in-law, sister and mother all spent time at his home. They oversaw the laying out of the corpse and the care of his daughter – his son, Edward, was already living with his maternal grandparents – and organized his late wife’s belongings.\textsuperscript{96} An old widower, who knew he would never remarry, might invite an unmarried female relative to live with him, to partly fulfil his wife’s role.\textsuperscript{97} Similarly, a bachelor with his own establishment could rely on an unmarried sister to manage his home, until he replaced her with a wife.\textsuperscript{98}

Some widowers took on their wives’ tasks themselves. When Esther Grehan was dangerously ill, her husband Stephan closed up Clonmeen, sent the children to school or to stay with friends, and took her to the spa town of Davos.\textsuperscript{99} When she eventually died in 1900, he was forty-one and young enough to remarry. He chose not to. He took on his wife’s duties as manager and promoted a trusted maid to housekeeper. He had lived alone with his father at Clonmeen after his mother’s death in his early childhood, and had assisted his wife over the years, so he had some experience of the necessary duties.\textsuperscript{1} Grehan also had the benefit of grown-up, unmarried daughters, who took on some of their mother’s responsibilities. Unfortunately, he appears to have inherited his wife’s luck with cooks and his diaries are littered with references to disputes with women in that position.\textsuperscript{2}

While both lived, spouses held complementary roles in relation to the estate. Household organization was just one of the wife’s responsibilities, which also extended from maternal duties to estate and garden management and beyond the demesne walls to the wider society. Apart from providing heirs, however, supervision of the household was the most important of the woman’s duties. It was a position of power and influence in the family. As such, it increased these women’s sense of self-worth. As a young, unmarried woman, Esther Grehan was asked her advice on ‘some housekeeping’; she held her head ‘an inch higher in consequence’.\textsuperscript{3} During her married life, Esther contributed to the success of the family and estate, with her work in the home and farmyard. Stephen’s sense of loss at her passing is evident in a letter to her sister, written shortly after her death: ‘I don’t know what I shall do without

\textsuperscript{95} L.E. Leigh to Countess Bantry, Bantry Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/B/2414.
\textsuperscript{96} For example, see Gertrude Foster to Ethel Lady Inchiquin, 6 Mar. 1896, NLI MS/45,503.\textsuperscript{97} Lord Castletown to Ethel St Leger, Apr. 1926–Mar. 1927, NLI MS/34,164(1).\textsuperscript{98} For example, see Everett, \textit{Bricks and flowers}, p. 43, and Dermot O’Brien to Mabel O’Brien, Oct.–Nov. 1891, NLI MS/36,694(1–2).
\textsuperscript{99} Esther Grehan diary entry, 7 Dec. 1897, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/842.
\textsuperscript{1} For example, Esther Grehan diary entry, 3 Oct. 1896, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/841; Esther Grehan diary entry, 6 May 1898, IE/BL/EP/G/843.
\textsuperscript{2} For example, see Stephen Grehan, diary entry, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/761.
\textsuperscript{3} Esther Chichester to Stephen Grehan, 2 Nov. 1882, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/676.
her...You can have no idea what a terrible void she will create. I haven’t an idea how I’ll manage’. Wives contributed greatly to landed estates, and to their husbands’ careers as landlords, not just as loving companions, but as active partners. Unfortunately, aside from a few ‘great women’, we know very little of the lives, or the views, of the women of the landed class. Further new research needs to be done on these women, if we are to move towards a more rounded understanding of the so-called leisured class – the elite of Irish society.

4 Stephen Grehan to Amy Chichester, 3 May 1900, Grehan Estate Collection, UCC IE/BL/EP/G/835.