Title

Assess the impact of print advertising, if any, on the decline of breast feeding in Ireland c. 1900-1950.

Abstract

This essay examines the impact advertising and print media had on breast feeding patterns in Ireland from the period of 1900 to 1950. The principle primary sources utilised for this essay were medical journals, newspaper reports, Irish censuses and oral testimonies. Academic research examining the cause for the decline of breastfeeding amongst Irish mothers in the early twentieth century is still limited in scope. The combined effects of an increased medical and Irish State’s intervention, or lack thereof, during Irish motherhood, in the early to mid twentieth century, has been argued as a reason for the decline of breast feeding in Irish history for the first time since the 1940s. Thus, the aim of this essay is to examine the role print advertising had, if any, on the decline of breast feeding. During a period when infant mortality was high, print advertising grew increasingly aggressive in its advertorial campaigns from 1900 to 1950, in its’ bid to attract increasingly anxious mothers to feed their babies artificially. From research, it became evident that Irish mothers were under huge pressure to provide the best nutrition for their newborns but the replacement of the local handywomen with a busy doctor, meant that many women were forced to bottle feed their baby. Furthermore, many Irish mothers were actually too starved to naturally produce sufficient milk and had no choice but to bottle feed. However, advertised bottle feeding formulas gave Irish mothers a choice in an area of their lives in which they had very little. It was a new form of modernity which was fashionable and practical. Bottle feeding allowed for fathers and older siblings to play an active role in the newborns upbringing. This essay adds a new perspective in the historiography of breast feeding in Irish society.
During the period of 1930 to 1950, bottle feeding formulas surged in popularity, just as breastfeeding declined for the first time in Ireland. Infant feeding formula was developed by the end of the nineteenth century due to a demand amongst the middle and upper classes who no longer wished to use wet nurses for fear of syphilis and loose morals to be passed to the innocent infant. Companies such as Nestlé began to scientifically manufacture a formula that was designed to mimic the natural components of breast milk. In Ireland’s case, prior to the introduction of bottle formula, most infants were primarily fed either with breast milk or cow’s milk. However, cow’s milk posed the risk of passing tuberculosis if it was not pasteurised. Due poor living and social conditions, many Irish mothers were starved and could not produce sufficient breast milk. An infant who could not be breast fed and had little access to uncontaminated cow’s milk, had a slim chance of survival. Bottle formulas provided Irish mothers to feed their infants with another alternative. Bottle feeding was not without its drawbacks; inadequate refrigeration and lack of proper bottle sterilisation caused germs to breed in the formula and in warm weather, babies frequently developed, ‘summer complaint’, a potentially fatal diarrhoea caused by contamination. In Ireland’s case in particular, lack of electricity and access to clean water, meant that infants were at risk of contacting gastroenteritis, as some bottle formulas were made with water. In 1937, Dr C.J Mc Sweeney, the Cork medical superintendent noted that, ‘of the 45 infant deaths from gastro-enteritis under one year, no less than 42 were artificially-fed babies’. Thus, by 1940 breast feeding became the main focus for combating infant mortality and was to prove pivotal in the both the medical and State’s campaign to involve the mother in her newborn’s survival. Nonetheless, bottle formulas still usurped the breast during this period.

The historiography of breast feeding in Ireland is limited but three academics have made attempts to explain why breastfeeding declined in the 1940s. Pauline Dillon Hurnley suggests that the failure of the then Irish government to address the underlying social problems resulted in the decline of breast feeding in Ireland as the Irish state’s free milk scheme was just a short term strategy. Lindsey Earner-Byrne claims that like Britain, the promotion of breast feeding in Ireland became central to maternity and child welfare and was

---

fuelled by a desire to see a decline in the infant mortality rate rather than eugenics or pronatalism like in Germany. Like Dillon Hurnley, Earner-Byrne argues that the Irish state’s free milk schemes did not tackle the root cause of infant mortality, which was extreme poverty and a poor health service. By the 1940s, the State’s free milk scheme was not sufficient to combat the adverse social conditions in which many mothers were living and mothering, illustrating how the state only had a short term solution planned to decrease infant mortality.

Catríona Clear, unlike Earner-Byrne and Dillon, disagrees with the suggestion that the decline of breastfeeding was a failure of the State, and suggests instead around the mid-1940s women of the house, both rural and urban, would appear to have insisted on certain comforts in their lives of unceasing hard work. The bottle enabled the father and other family members to share responsibility in certain aspects of infant care. Contraceptives were prohibited, so a mother had limited choice in controlling her family’s size, but she had a choice in methods of infant feeding. The practice of breast feeding, particularly with a large family, was both constant and isolating; bottle feeding seemed an easier alternative. Clear suggests that, in an Irish context in the 1940s, breast feeding declined because of Irish mothers’ own choices about their health and comfort. Despite, the various opinions in why and how the bottle formula usurped the breast from 1900 to 1950, all historians agree that too little research in this area means that only suggestions can be made. Therefore, this essay will assess the impact advertising had on the decline of breast feeding.

In the Freeman’s journal, 2 May 1905, a brief advertisement stated ‘Baby’s nurse…under stands spoon and bottle feeding’. This advertisement does mark a point in history when wet nurses were no longer required and bottle feeding was considered the best way forward for a child to develop during its early years in life. The bottle came to epitomise modernity. As the bottle signified a family’s wealth and status, this was a factor that led to the decline of breastfeeding in Ireland and in the Western world by the 1940s. Formula companies marketed their proclaimed ‘miracle’ formulas to ease a mother’s anxiety regarding her infants’ health. The companies made sure their product were medically endorsed by enticing the medical profession to the benefits

---


6 Ibid. p. 64


8 *Freeman’s Journal*, 02 May 1905.

of their product. It was noted that doctors accepted free samples in exchange for lavish gifts and research grants.\textsuperscript{10} The fact that motherhood became increasingly professionalized during this period also facilitated the rise of the bottle. Handywomen were untrained midwives, who not only delivered the baby, but also cared of the mother in the post natal period. During the early 1900s, a slow erosion of this culture began, as the power and expertise of the medical profession rose due to scientific mothering.\textsuperscript{11} Scientific motherhood emphasised the importance of medical and scientific expertise in the development of the proper childrearing techniques. While women retained the responsibility for child care, as a result of the concept of scientific mothering, they also needed expert advice in order to perform their duties successfully.\textsuperscript{12} Consequently, the knowledge and experience of the local ‘handywomen’ who supported and advised mothers on breast feeding, were replaced by doctors, who generally could not give the same level of time and support to a mother if she had difficulty breast feeding, so a shift to the bottle began to increase. The collusion between the medical profession and formula companies did have an impact in the rise of the bottle. As advertisements consistently claimed that their formulas were medically endorsed by world renowned doctors, it gave the impression that formulas were on par, if not better, than breast milk.

As early as 1901, amidst growing public and professional medical concern regarding the high rate of infant mortality, particularly in Dublin city, a committee comprised of members of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland was formed specifically to draw up instruction on the subject of infant feeding. The following year it published its ‘plain suggestions as to the care and feeding of infants’, stating that ‘the mother’s milk is the most natural and therefore the proper and most wholesome food for the infant’. However, instructions regarding hand feeding were also given, but there was a unanimous agreement that breast feeding was the best method of infant feeding.\textsuperscript{13} Physicians William Langford Symes and John Lumsden, both produced pamphlets on infant feeding, again unanimously advocated breastfeeding as the best practise but were both adamant about the importance of regularity irrespective whether

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Cassidy, \textit{Birth}, p. 243.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Dillon Hurnley, ‘Infant-feeding’, pp 44-5.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Apple, \textit{Mother and Medicine}, p.97.
\item \textsuperscript{13} ‘Section of State Medicine, Medical Miscellany: On the mortality of Infants under one year from Improper or Imperfect feeding, with suggestions for Public Instruction to Parents and Nurses on the subject’, \textit{Dublin Journal of Medical Science}, 112 (1901) pp.378-386.
\end{itemize}
the infant was fed with bottle or breast. The emphasis on regular feeding made the bottle a more attractive method for Irish mothers.

Advertisements in the Irish print media in the 1900s gradually pushed the promotion of the bottle feeding in favour of breast-feeding. As many expectant mothers were actually starved, they could not breast feed their child, making the infants survival rates quite low. Initially companies such as Ovaltine (fig. i) claimed their products enabled ‘mothers to breast feed their babies’, and thereby marketed their products as necessity good for expectant mothers. However, even as early as 1900s formula companies such as Neaves (fig. ii) and Sister Laura’s Food (fig. iii) marketed their products for mothers that could not breast feed but also to those who could.

“Ovaltine” contains the concentrated nourishment extracted from Nature’s most valuable tonic foods—fresh dairy milk, ripe barley malt, and eggs from our own and selected farms.

There is no food beverage comparable with “Ovaltine.” It is the richest in food value, the cheapest in cost, and the most economical in use.

OVALTINE
Tonic Food Beverage
Enables Mothers to Breast Feed their Babies

---

15 Irish Independent, 14 Jun. 1927.
Formula companies such as Neaves, claimed that if a mother was unable to fulfil her ‘first duty of fully nourishing baby’ she could do so by using the formula. Most mother and wives fed their husband first as he was the bread winner and what was left went to the children. The reasoning behind the self denial was that the mother wished the bread winner to remain healthy and be able to provide, so it was a form of self preservation. The medical profession were aware of this, as chairman of the Irish Public Health committee, Edward Coey Bigger explained in 1917, that:

An ill-nourished mother may, at the expense of her own resources, bring forth a well nourished baby, but she will not generally be able to supply it with a sufficient quantity or quality of breast milk. It has been shown fairly clearly that the nourishment of the mother especially during pregnancy has a definite effect on her capacity to suckle her infant.

And as late as 1945, professor of medicine in University College Dublin, T.WT Dillon, stated, ‘The mother starves herself to feed her children’. Coey Bigger’s and Dillon’s comments illustrate the medical awareness of how vital the nourishment of expectant mother was in enabling her with the ability to breast feed her baby. As scientific mothering was influential many mothers thought they were better off to feed their infants with bottle

---

17 *Connacht Tribune*, 2 Mar. 1929.
Companies aggressively marketed their formula with free hints and tips in booklets, regarding care of the infant. During a period when infant mortality was common and medical discourse varied regarding feeding, Mellins Foods, like other formula brands published free books on all aspects of infant care but with a specific emphasis placed on their product. This is illustrative of the clever techniques used by breast milk formulas to entice mothers into buying their products. As medics usurped all aspects of motherhood, mothers no longer received advice if their child had difficulty taking to the breast. Thus, formula companies used their free books to advise mothers in the how to hand feed a child, thereby giving free support and increasing sales. This marketing ploy illustrates that as early as 1905, booklets were used to subliminally emphasise the easiness of formula milk rather than breast milk. Companies also had free samples (fig. vi) and money off coupons attached in their adverts further enticing women to try their products. Adverts often used testimonies from other customers to boost prospective buyers and profits. As highlighted in fig iv and fig v glowing reviews from ‘fellow mothers’ would have enticed expectant mothers to try the new product rather than breastfeed.

21 The Irish Times, 26 Aug, 1905.
22 Irish Independent, 15 Sept. 1925.
23 Anglo Celt, 15 Feb. 1913.
Infant formulas were increasingly advertised as the next best if not better way to feed an infant, rather than breast or cow’s milk. Adverts like Glaxo claimed to have had mothers’ approval and doctors’ recommendation, thereby giving the illusion of a beneficial food for a young infant. It is especially interesting that by Irish standards, to witness the transgression of competitive advertising regarding bottle formula. The increase of companies such as Robinsons, Glaxo, Scotts, Mellins and Bengers highlights how there was a definite demand from mothers for infant formula by the 1930s. Bottle formula companies were willing to take on government and medical professional’s claims that, ‘breast was best’, and instead claim, as is the case in this advert, that infant formula was just as good.

Yet, in spite of all the advertisements, all doctors generally agreed that breast milk was the superior option for infants. According to Doctor Kerry Reddin, in 1934, ‘public health legislation dealing with maternity and child welfare was adopted with the object of lowering infantile and maternity mortality by following the axiom that “prevention is better than the cure”.’ Reddin’s analysis of maternity care highlights how doctors and nurses informed parents that breast milk was the best formula for a child, and even followed up with a home visit to stress the importance of breast feeding. Reddin claimed:

---

24 *Sunday Independent*, 27, Apr. 1924
26 *Sunday Independent*, 30 Mar, 1930.
27 *Irish Independent*, 27 Aug, 1940.
The welfare nurse for the area visits the house as closely as possible to tenth day after confinement: up to that day the mother is in charge of midwife or hospital. The nurse sees the baby and mother and advises the latter on the superiority of breast feeding, and the necessity for regular feeding. However, medical discourse on regular feeding arguably had a knock on effect on the decline of breast-feeding. As previously mentioned, some mothers were severely malnourished making breast feeding impossible. Reddin’s claim that welfare nurses also advised on the necessity for regular feeding highlights the contradictory advice placed on the typical Irish mother in the 1900s to 1940s. The fact that superiority of breast feeding is outlined made it easier for the medical professionals in that they did their part and advised the best medical advice for the mother and baby. Dr Hazel Chodak Gregory, who read a paper on ‘The Education of the Medical Student in Child Welfare’, stated ‘students should promote breast-feeding’ not because of the nutritional benefits in the development of the child but ‘so that they might not be constantly hearing the mother’s say “My doctor advised me to take him off the breast and try the bottle”’. The medical profession were arguably more concerned with performing their duty rather than practically of their advice for the majority of Irish mothers. The advice on the importance of regular feedings would have put an immense pressure on the average Irish mother as many of the devout Catholics had numerous young children and between attending to a new born, toddlers and keeping the home tidy and prepare a meal for their husband, regular breast feeding would have had been almost impossible. Examining various censuses from Ireland in 1901 and 1911 many mothers had big families but with only a one year between each child. The Lynch family of St. Mary’s Place in Limerick had six children ranging from 12 to a new born. The O’Mara family of Sheep Street, Limerick, had seven children with ages ranging from 18 to 2. The Lynch family of Cappamore town Limerick, had 10 children ages ranging 21 to 3. The Scanlon family of Main Street, Castleconnell Limerick, had five children from the ages of five and under. The censuses of both 1901 and 1911 highlighted just how large the average Irish family could be. This along with the pressure that weighed on mothers to breast feed her young infants along with an array of other household duties would have been noting short of exhausting. The fact that contraception was banned

---

29 Ibid., p.99
30 *The Irish Times*, 17 Aug., 1928.
31 Census of Ireland, 1901, St Mary’s Place, Limerick [http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/St__Mary_s Place/1497336/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/St__Mary_s Place/1497336/) (1 April 2014)
32 Census of Ireland, 1901, Sheep Street, Limerick [http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/Sheep_Street/1497313/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/Sheep_Street/1497313/) (1 April 2014)
33 Census of Ireland, 1911, Cappamore Town, Limerick [http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Cappamore/Cappamore_Town/633160/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Cappamore/Cappamore_Town/633160/) (1 April 2014)
34 Census of Ireland, 1911, Castleconnell, Limerick [http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Castleconnell/Main_Street/623069/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Castleconnell/Main_Street/623069/) (1 April 2014)
meant that large and multiple children with only a year or two between each child was a common, making breastfeeding an isolating, exhausting and impracticable experience for some mothers as family sizes were just too large for a mother to cope. Formula companies hence took advantage of high expectations for mothers and made it easier for them to switch to the bottle in order to suppress their guilt of not wanting to breastfeed.

An advisory article for expectant fathers again instilled the importance of breast feeding but also referred to bottle feeding. The advice stated:

Encourage your wife to breast-feeding her own baby. Bottle fed babies have to be fed on cow’s milk. Cow’s milk is intended for calves—not for babies. Breast milk contains food substances which no other milk contains. If a baby is not breast fed, it starts the battle of life under a severe handicap."

Even in 1933 expectant parents were being explicitly advised that breast milk was nutritionally naturally tailored as the best form of food for infants. The fact that the author highlights how even cow’s milk is not suitable for infants illustrates the maintained medical advice that breast is best, regarding infant nutrition. The author further claimed, “I was once talking to the matron of a fashionable lying in house West End home, and when I asked her what percentage of the babies born in her nursing home were breast fed. “Oh, we are not particularly keen on breast feeding in our home” Would you believe it? That lady have been put on the treadmill for a month and fed on snakes and ladders’. This remark highlights the two polar opposite medical opinions which confused mothers. On the one hand you had certain medical doctors, matrons, nurses and food scientists claiming that bottle formula and bottle feeding in general was the best form of nutrition for young infants as it was scientifically formulated and there was no problem with it not being in supply. On the other hand you had doctors, matrons and women in general, claiming that breast milk was naturally superior and no manufactured alternative could provide infants with the same benefits as natural breast milk. Interestingly, through capitalism and marketing, this new emerging food industry played these two opposing sides to their own means. Advertisements for infant formulas played upon young mothers insecurities that coincided with the alarming rates of high infant mortality rates. If a mother could not provide even the most basic natural function of motherhood by providing nutrition for her new born then these new heavily marketed and applauded formulas by both mothers and medical professionals seemed to ease the mother’s guilt.

35 *The Irish Times*, Jul 25 1933.
There was also a concept of moral responsibility incorporated into this medical model of breastfeeding, in light of the high mortality rate. Dr Lumsden was very vocal on this point, claiming that ‘the bounden duty of every mother who has any sense of her responsibilities or desire for her child’s well being to breast feed it, unless ordered by the doctor not to do so’. Therefore, once specifically designed formulas were advertised as benefitting the mother’s supply of breast milk and emphasising how breast milk was the best for the baby, than its hardly surprising how slowly but surely breast milk formulas allowed for break milk fed babies to be in a decline since the 1950s. The exhortation to women to fulfil their duty in this regard contained the implicit assumption that to do otherwise was to act irresponsibly and to be less than a good mother. In 1938, Dr Collis of the Rotunda warned against becoming ‘fanatical’ on the subject as he claimed to have seen nurses ‘take up an almost moral attitude upon the matter and subject unfortunate mothers, who cannot feed their babies for perfectly legitimate reason, to long tirades…making any possibility of even partial breastfeeding impossible’. This sentiment is backed by a testimony from Olive A, who recalled how a midwife (who was also a nun), said that cow’s milk was only fit for calves. Dr Spain in 1945 blamed the poor lying in time for mothers that resulted in poor milk supply. Therefore, bottle formula was easier despite the moral responsibility and nagging.

Breast feeding declined not only because of a rise of a milk surplus worldwide, changes in lifestyle, but also because childbirth and mother craft were ‘taken over’ by medical personnel who knew very little about how it worked, and who gave advice that was difficult to follow that mothers gave up in confusion. The idyllic picture of a mother breast feeding her child ignored the real problems and difficulties faced by Irish women such as in the early days, exhaustion, sore nipples, engorgement and breast milk fever. An article in the British Medical Journal concluded in 1949, that:

ultimately most of the difficulties in infant feeding can be ascribed to doctors and nurses in the practical details of infant feeding and to the concentration in their teaching on the rare and the obscure, and on complex laboratory

37 J., Lumsden, Hints to Mothers in the Management of their Homes, the feeding of their Children and the prevention of Disease (Dublin, 1906) p. 2.
38 Hurnley ‘infant-feeding’, pp 40-1.
40 Clear, Woman of the House, p. 137
42 Clear, Woman of the House, p.181.
43 Patricia Kennedy, Maternity in Ireland, a woman centred perspective (Dublin, 2002), p 101
investigation and procedure, instead of on the really common problems which they will meet every day in general practise.44

This is important in Ireland’s case as the mothers orally interviewed by Catríona Clear recalled how in their laying period, nurses bottle fed babies, thereby, setting up the infant to be bottle fed rather than breast fed.

Motherhood in Ireland from the period of 1900 to 1950 was especially hard as no contraception, electricity or running water, made the task of raising multiple young children, usually alone, an especially difficult and challenging task. The introduction of the bottle was one such invention which allowed the responsibility of the task of raising a child to be shared and allowed the mother to carry on which other chores. From research carried out for this essay, arguably, the impact of advertising pushed the idea of modernity, choice and consumerism into the realm of Irish motherhood. Thus, as the advertising of infant feed formulas during the early twentieth century, did market the product as virtually the same as breast milk, it did play a role in the decline of breast feeding, as it made it easier for women to switch. The most important as aspect of infant formula was that the bottle gave to mothers a choice. However, even though the bottle feeding liberated Irish mothers to a certain extent, it also made her a target for commercial interests.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Newspapers

Freeman’s Journal 02 May 1905.

The Irish Times, 26 Aug, 1905.

Anglo Celt, 15 Feb. 1913.


Sunday Independent, 27, Apr. 1924

Irish Independent, 15 Sept. 1925.

Sunday Independent, 30 Mar. 1930.

Irish Independent, 14 Jun. 1927

Irish Times, 17 Aug. 1928.

Connacht Tribune, 2 Mar. 1929.

Irish Independent, 11 Aug. 1929.

Sunday Independent, 30 Mar. 1930.

The Irish Times, 25 Jul. 1933.

Irish Independent, 27 Aug. 1940.

Medical Journals


Law Horace, S., ‘Section of State Medicine, Medical Miscellany: On the mortality of Infants under one year from Improper or Imperfect feeding, with suggestions for Public Instruction to Parents and Nurses on the subject’, Dublin Journal of Medical Science 112 (1901) pp.378-386.


Books


Lumsden, J., *Hints to Mothers in the Management of their Homes, the feeding of their Children and the prevention of Disease* (Dublin, 1906).

National Archives of Ireland.


Census of Ireland, 1901, St Mary’s Place, Limerick. (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/St__Mary_s_Place/1497336/) (1 April 2014)

Census of Ireland, 1901, Sheep Street, Limerick (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Limerick/Limerick_No__1/Sheep_Street/1497313/) (1 April 2014)

Census of Ireland, 1911, Cappamore Town, Limerick (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Cappamore/Cappamore_Town/633160/) (1 April 2014)

Census of Ireland, 1911, Castleconnel, Limerick (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Limerick/Castleconnell/Main_Street/623069/) (1 April 2014)

Secondary Sources


Kennedy, Patricia, *Maternity in Ireland, a woman centred perspective* (Dublin, 2002).