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“No irregularity or obstruction can resist them”: advertising of abortion pills in the Irish press, 1890–1930

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the extent of advertising in the Irish press in the years before and after the foundation of the Irish Free State for the “female pills” widely understood to induce abortions. These advertisements appeared very frequently in a wide range of Irish publications for several decades prior to 1922, and the article establishes the ways in which the advertisements functioned as an open secret strategically ignored by both legal and moral authorities. The style and content of the advertisements themselves, which allowed this open secret to operate in plain sight, is explored in detail, along with the context in which the advertisements were produced, circulated and likely understood by women readers. The article concludes by examining the advertisements’ gradual and then complete disappearance from the Irish press, especially in light of the Free State legislation enacted during the 1920s.

KEYWORDS

Female pills; abortion; social purity; Irish Free State; advertising; Irish press

Introduction

This article will outline the history of advertisements in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Irish press for “female pills” which were intended to work as abortifacients, and the ways that they illustrate the shifting moral and financial economy of the Irish press in the years around the founding of the Free State. In particular, it will use the advertising of “female pills” to explore responses to the moral and legal landscape during these years from an Irish press which was financially dependent upon advertising. The article will explain the style and careful language of these advertisements, which were worded in order to barely skirt illegality under the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act, as well as the ways in which this coded language was likely to have been understood by the women readers who were potential purchasers. The Free State is closely associated with a culture of censorship, especially of any matters relating to sex and sexuality, and this was reflected in many pieces of legislation and policy. While this legislation had many motivations and targets, preventing access to any kind of birth control or abortion was one of its primary ambitions, and resulted in a strengthened ban on advertising and information about such products via the 1929 Censorship of Publications legislation, and eventually the outlawing of all forms of contraception in the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act – a ban which lasted until 1979. This legislation is usually discussed as

having been targeted at imported English newspapers (such as the *News of the World*) and their continued publishing of advertisements for birth control products as well as other content disapproved of by many commentators, such as the coverage of sex scandals and divorce cases. Sandra McAvoy has pointed to research indicating that in Britain itself the popular press was “teeming” with advertisements for contraceptives and abortifacients by the 1890s, and argued that “some at least of these must have circulated in Ireland.”¹

At the time considerable emphasis was laid on the claim that Irish publications were free of such content but as this article will show, the claims that “immoral” material such as advertisements for birth control and abortifacients were only seen by Irish readers when they opened imported publications like the *News of the World* were absolutely untrue. Indeed, from the late-nineteenth century until the early years of the Free State, there were very few national or local newspapers in Ireland which had not regularly published advertisements for “female pills” for extended periods of time.² This article is mainly based upon material found in the Irish Newspaper Archive and the *Irish Times* Archive. In particular, searches were made for advertisements for “female pills,” for the names of up to fifteen brands known to have been for sale between 1890 and 1930, and for the most commonly used ingredients in the pills. The frequency of these advertisements during this era was noted in twenty-two local papers and four national papers (including one Sunday publication, the *Sunday Independent*) excluding those published in what would become Northern Ireland. This information was also supplemented by instances of “female pills” advertisements found in undigitised periodicals, inevitably a less systematic source of information but useful as an indicator of the advertisements’ prevalence across almost all mass media in Ireland during this period. The risk of “false negative” results in which search terms are missed by the software are always a concern in this kind of data gathering, but the brand and ingredient names for “female pills” are usefully distinctive for such searches, and can also therefore be used to cross-check results. Papers in what would become Northern Ireland were excluded because after 1922 the legal context in which they operated was different from that in the Free State and this complicates comparisons across time. However, it is worth noting that in general newspapers published in what would become Northern Ireland appear not to have printed “female pill” advertisements either before or after 1922, something which might warrant specific further research.

Patent medicines and advertising

The economic and semiotic structures of modern advertising during the late-nineteenth century were founded to a remarkable degree on the wildly fraudulent patent medicine industry, whose products – along with those of one or two other industries such as soap manufacturers – effectively established the grammar and architecture of the modern advertising industry. As Thomas Richards has pointed out, these advertisements filled the pages of newspapers and magazines by the 1890s, claiming to cure every ill the public might suffer from, and inventing a few new ills (and their cures) for good measure, so that “the brotherhood of quacks spent two million pounds a year in advertising costs.”³ With little or no regulation to control either the contents of their products nor the claims they made for them (and at a time when official medicine was often ineffective even if patients could afford it, which most could not), patent

medicines had a powerful appeal to the public. Their appeal to the mass media was if anything even greater – their eagerness to bombard readers with daily and weekly advertisements for pills and potions provided much of the financial support necessary for the daily and weekly editions of the cheap press whose production costs were not covered by their penny or halfpenny cover price. As Bryan Denham cites, it is estimated that in the United States, “by 1900, advertising for proprietary substances accounted for more than half of newspapers’ entire advertising income.”⁴ A profitable alliance was therefore soon established between the popular press and the quack doctors, each providing the other with the necessary platform to reach their customer base. These patent medicines were also in the vanguard of branded products – by using the repetitive power of advertising, they worked to shift customers’ allegiances from their local chemist who might mix up his own medicines, towards mass-produced alternatives recognisable by their packaging and asked for by name. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, this shift towards branded products was one of the defining features of consumer culture in general, and rapidly spread to every conceivable kind of product from soap to tea – but patent medicines were some of the first and most successful at making this change.⁵ These medicines, often marketed (untruthfully) as being the patent product of a medical doctor or professor, promised to remedy baldness, restore vigour, reduce fat, smooth wrinkles, cure alcoholism, alleviate nervous complaints of all kinds, treat intestinal and liver problems, and generally undo the ravages of time and ill health, often all in the same pill, powder or potion. One of the biggest brands of “miracle pill” was Thomas Holloway’s Pill, an early arrival in branded medicine during the mid-nineteenth century, and one of several examples of patent medicines which gradually transformed themselves into “respectable” medical brands over the decades. The fact that Holloway claimed to be spending £45,000 a year on advertising by the 1890s probably assisted in this transformation, despite the typically wide and unsubstantiated claims those advertisements made.⁶ In 1907 for example, an advertisement for Holloway’s Pills which appeared in the upmarket *Irish Society* magazine promised to cure “indigestion, feverishness, dizziness, loss of appetite and energy ...”⁷

“Female pills” were both some of the earliest and most widespread examples of branded medicines, even if they tended to keep their advertisements smaller and more discreet than the cures for baldness or alcoholism which soon crowded the pages of newspapers and magazines. By the early-twentieth century there would be many competing brands, some of them more circumspect than others in how they described themselves. Probably the oldest of these was Widow Welch’s Pills, a British brand which was fairly regularly advertised in the *Nation* newspaper during the 1840s, and by the 1860s was also advertising in the *Freeman’s Journal* an average of once every two months. These pills were advertised as being recognisable by the blue wrapping of their boxes which also bore the signature of Mrs Smithers (grand-daughter to the Widow Welch, it was helpfully explained), and were available in boxes costing 2s 9d from G Oldham and Co. of Dublin, and most other “respectable Chemists.”⁸ By the end of the 1870s, the Widow Welch brand had been appropriated by another company, who for many decades sold their version of these “female pills” via post from an address on Oxford Street in London, and advertised as often as once a week in the *Irish Times* and the *Cork Examiner* by the turn of the twentieth century. Also appearing by the end of the 1870s were Towle’s

Penny Royal and Steel Pills, which was the other large-scale and relatively respectable brand (based upon the discretion of their advertisement wording), sold from an address in Nottingham and also advertised in the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Irish Times* weekly on average by the end of the century.

The sheer persistence of “female pill” advertisements was understood to be an important aspect of their success – in an article in the *British Medical Journal* in 1911 about quack medicines in general which dwelt heavily upon “female pills” in particular, a professor of midwifery and gynaecology at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast commented that not only were people bombarded by advertisements for patent medicines in every publication they read and every poster they saw, but that for many of the public, “... the continued appearance of such advertisements is in itself convincing.”⁹ Although the author was predictably condescending about the so-called “gullibility” of the general public (and especially that of the female public) throughout the article, this was nevertheless an astute analysis of how branding and persistent visibility in the mass media could work for patent medicines. It also recognised the widespread enthusiasm for advertising itself – as something new, modern and apparently indicative of up-to-date and superior products – which was prevalent at the time. While the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in Ireland were marked by unregulated advertising in many public spaces (including hoardings attached to the Ha’penny Bridge in Dublin, and many billboards erected alongside rail and tram lines), advertisements which appeared in newspapers and magazines would also have benefitted from the reflected authority of the publications they appeared in. This makes the regular and long-term advertising of “female pills” in Irish newspapers and magazines all the more significant, given the gravitas many of these newspapers had in the national public consciousness. This illustrates a very effective circularity for the manufacturers of such medicines – the vagueness of their language allowed for a wide and unchallenged dissemination of their advertisements in even the respectable press – and that wide and unchallenged dissemination of those advertisements helped to consolidate both their market share and their authority with readers who trusted the publications which carried the advertisements.

Social purity and Free State legislation

In 1908, the Reverend Samuel Hemphill – who was then the Church of Ireland Rector of Birr – published a pamphlet entitled *Murderess of the Unseen: A Tract on Race-Suicide*. Prophesying the decline of the “white races” if birth control and abortion were not stopped, Hemphill added that even in Ireland, “where this kind of thing might be least expected, I am informed that there is a certain amount of interference with the birth-rate.”¹⁰ While condemning both contraception and abortion, the pamphlet was, as its title suggests, especially concerned with the latter, with Hemphill bluntly assuring pregnant women that “if you take a drug to destroy it, you are an odious murderess; you are the murderess of the unseen.”¹¹ Hemphill’s pamphlet was an example of the Irish “social purity” movement which developed during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and operated on a number of fronts, but which were mainly concerned with aspects of sexual morality. It was part of an international movement also found in Britain and the United States among other locations. In Ireland it rapidly became dominated by Catholic campaigners, and simultaneously allied with a form of Irish nationalism which

found it strategically useful to stress the distinctive morality of “native” Irish culture and identify almost all threats to that morality as being imported from Britain. These moral threats could take a variety of forms, but campaigners gave particular focus to the crusade against “evil literature” and sensational newspaper reporting of topics such as sex crimes and divorce trials. The establishment of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) in 1899 was an important moment in the application of social purity principles to the circulation of published material in Ireland, as the CTSI was in Anthony Keating’s assessment, “in the vanguard of ensuring the protection of the Irish people from the corruption carried in the printed word,” and it began its own long publishing history of what it described as “sound Catholic literature” intended to “serve as an antidote against the poison of dangerous or immoral writings.”¹² The Irish movement was formalised by the founding of the Irish Vigilance Association in 1911 by Richard Devane SJ, which constituted the formal organisation of “purity” campaigns under the imprimatur of the Catholic Church, and which would remain prominent in Irish public life until after Independence, as would Devane himself, who became one of the most persistent voices in discussions of public morality during the Free State years. The CTSI would also continue to be highly influential in post-Independence discussions of “evil literature,” perhaps most significantly in its 1926 compilation of *The Problem of Undesirable Printed Matter*, a formal submission to the Departmental Committee of Enquiry whose work contributed to the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. The CTSI evidence strongly supported a strict censorship regime for many kinds of publication, including advocating the “penalty of a heavy fine and imprisonment for a repeated offence” for “all publications or other printed matter advocating neo-Malthusian birth control, or sterilization, or advertising (directly or indirectly) ‘birth control’ appliances, drugs, etc.”¹³

The language and tone of “female pill” advertisements

Although the actual practice of birth control and abortion during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is outside the scope of this article, it is important to consider the precise wording and implied promises of “female pill” advertisements, how they were likely to have been understood by contemporary readers, and the ways in which the language of the advertisements intersected with the laws governing contraceptive information. This is worthwhile because it reveals not only the way the advertisements had deliberately ambiguous and euphemistic wording intended to skirt around both the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (which was the legal basis for abortion prosecutions in Britain and Ireland) and the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act, but also something of the era’s understanding of birth control, abortion, and even what the difference between the two might be. Both birth control and abortion had of course an almost indefinite folk history, but the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Britain and Ireland was marked by the beginning of what John Peel usefully termed “commercial contraception” as distinguished from its previous status as knowledge or services provided through community or personal networks.¹⁴

This market was inadvertently created by the enormous press coverage of the 1877 obscenity trial in London of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant for having published *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet on birth control.¹⁵ Birth control (as opposed to abortion) was not illegal in the UK and Ireland, but advertising or promoting it in print was an

offence under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, as was distributing it via the post. This was the basis of the successful prosecution of *The Fruits of Philosophy*, and would continue to be the basis of similar cases in later years. Sandra McAvoy cites a prosecution of a Dublin medical hall for selling birth control information (their sale of the birth control itself would, ironically, have been quite legal) as late as 1920 for example.¹⁶ Such prosecutions were increasingly rare in the twentieth century however, the last UK case for sending contraceptives through the post having occurred in 1908. The Bradlaugh-Besant trial in 1877 was a key moment in the history of the policing of birth control information, mostly because of the publicity it received. The Irish press were no exception to this, and the trial received widespread and detailed coverage in all of the national papers. The tone of this coverage displayed – in Ireland as elsewhere – a distaste for even discussing the topic, as when the *Freeman's Journal* later referred to the case as a “nauseating business,” while nevertheless covering it in extensive and sensational detail.¹⁷ As such, the trial coverage inadvertently constituted a crash course in the principles of birth control for the general public, whose private views on the subject were apparently much less disapproving than the publicly expressed views of newspaper editors and other guardians of public morality. That much is clear from the apparent success of the commercial contraceptive products which began advertising in newspapers and magazines (for sale via post and chemists' shops) immediately after the Bradlaugh-Besant trial. Sales of *The Fruits of Philosophy* itself rose from 700 per year before the trial to 125,000 in just a few months after the case was heard.¹⁸ How many of those sales were in Ireland is unknown, and it was not extensively advertised in the Irish press. There were a few advertisements for it however, such as one which appeared in the *Nenagh Guardian* in October 1879, available upon application from a Fleet St address in London.¹⁹ The fact that this advertisement was in a local paper rather than a national one (none of the Irish national papers appear to have carried advertisements for the pamphlet) is the first indication of a distinctive pattern which would develop in the advertising of “female pills” in later decades, as will be discussed below. The distinctive post-Famine demographics of late marriage and low marriage rates in the second half of the nineteenth century were often interpreted as a sign that Ireland was a “notably celibate nation” in David Fitzpatrick's phrase, and that supposed celibacy was for a long time presumed to be the only significant form of birth control used by the Irish population.²⁰ However, Ann Daly has argued convincingly that the notion of late-nineteenth century celibacy has been overstated, citing both Cormac Ó Gráda and Niall Duffy's work on demographic statistics and Maria Luddy's work on the late-nineteenth century prostitution “crisis” as evidence of markets for and usage of natural or artificial birth control methods.²¹ And, she points out, “the extensive advertisements for contraceptives and abortifacients in the popular press also support this hypothesis.”²²

The language of those advertisements was distinctive, if allusively so. They often referenced particular active ingredients, such as “apiol,” “bitter apples,” “pennyroyal” or “steel.” All of these ingredients were widely known in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as potential abortifacients, and in the more discreet advertisements these terms were all that needed to be used for potential customers to understand their purpose. For example the Towle's brand always described their product simply as “pennyroyal and steel pills,” and in their smaller advertisements gave no other description of them, these terms obviously being sufficiently well-understood to be effective on their own. Generally

however, like many other patent medicines, the advertisements also included a list of the ailments which “female pills” could apparently cure. These varied, but often included hysteria, palpitations, weakness, anaemia and loss of appetite. Almost without fail however, they also promised relief from “irregularities,” and the most blatantly-worded promised to “remove all obstructions.” An advertisement for Towle’s Pennyroyal and Steel Pills for Females, for example, which appeared in *Irish Society* magazine in 1902, claimed that it could “quickly correct all irregularities, remove all obstructions, and relieve the distressing symptoms so prevalent with the sex.” Another advertisement, this one for Dr Mackay’s “Marvellous” Female Remedy, and published in the *Western People* in 1896, promised it was “never failing in bringing about all that is desired speedily and safely,” while an 1890 advertisement in the *Leinster Express* for Mrs Lebet’s Female Pills announced simply that “No irregularity or obstruction can resist them.”²³

There is no doubt that Irish readers understood the implications of these advertisements – references to ingredients such as apiol or pennyroyal (along with iron, hence the frequent claims that the pills cured anaemia) or to “curing irregularities” or “removing obstructions” would, as Kate McDonald has argued, been “understood by those whose who knew what to look for, but without attracting legal attention.”²⁴ These terms and choices of brand-name were obviously drawing upon a pre-existing, word-of-mouth knowledge among many women about how an abortion might be chemically induced, as without the existence of this prior knowledge among readers the advertisements’ wording would have been too vague to be effective. Given the nature of this knowledge, and its circulation outside of official or officially-recorded culture, we have to read between the lines for how it was disseminated, or indeed for how widespread it was. Cara Delay’s research on Irish women’s experience of abortion after Independence reveals that widespread informal networks of female information and knowledge continued to be vital for women seeking abortions, circulating via local connections such as older friends and neighbours, pharmacists and midwives, and seems to have remained a more common method for women to obtain abortions than the “back street” surgical abortions which were most likely to appear in court cases.²⁵ In her study of women’s experiences of abortion in Belfast during the first half of the twentieth-century, Leanne McCormack provides a detailed reconstruction of the kinds of female knowledge networks through which abortion information was circulating, including instances of women confirming that they had been given advice from neighbours or friends of friends.²⁶ The “commercial contraception” of the branded pills attempted to supplant (or at least capitalise upon) the older and less profitable networks of abortion knowledge, and one of the ways this was visible was in the “female pill” names. As was mentioned above, many patent medicines attempted spurious authority by branding themselves as having been invented by a doctor or professor – examples included Dr King’s Hair Restorer or the really alarming Dr McLaughlin’s Electro-Vigour electric belt, both of which were regularly advertised in *Ireland’s Own* magazine in the early twentieth century. While this also occurred in the branding of supposed abortifacients, such as Dr Davert’s Female Pills and Dr Winslow’s Female Pills, more were branded using female authority, as in the cases of Mrs Lebet’s Female Pills, Madame Frain’s Female Remedy and of course Widow Welch’s Female Pills. This branding clearly sought to refer potential customers to the history of specialist female knowledge of abortifacients and in the case of the Widow Welch brand sought to do so in a way which explicitly conjured the role of older women in the circulation of

that knowledge. The branded “female pills” advertised in the press and sent by post would almost certainly have been more expensive than the mixtures sold by local chemists let alone more homemade versions, but they would also have had the advantage of anonymity, especially for women living in less urban areas. By the end of the nineteenth century however, branded products – especially but not exclusively medical products – had become so well-established that they may also have inspired more trust among consumers (however undeservedly) than the unnamed and plain-packaged mixtures from local chemists which their mothers and grandmothers had relied upon.

The effectiveness or otherwise of these pills is very difficult to determine. The herbal ingredients they claimed to contain – such as apiol, bitter apple or pennyroyal – certainly had a long history of folk medicine usage to terminate pregnancies, even if their rate of effectiveness is the matter of some debate, as is the danger they potentially posed to women taking them.²⁷ Other “female pills” in use during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries contained either iron or lead, both of which were very dangerous, and doctors in England at this time reported a large number of lead poisoning cases among women – up to 200 cases over just two years in Sheffield alone, for example.²⁸ Nevertheless, they were obviously perceived to be effective, or their use would not have continued over several centuries of home remedies and local chemists’ recipes. An important question however is whether, by the early-twentieth century, the branded pills advertised so widely in the mass media actually contained any of the “active” ingredients such as apiol or pennyroyal, even when they explicitly mentioned them in their advertisements.

In 1907 the *British Medical Journal*, exasperated by the patent medicine industry as a whole and “female pills” in particular, published “The Composition of Certain Secret Remedies,” which included chemical analysis of a number of the better-known brands (including Towle’s Pennyroyal and Steel Pills and Widow Welch’s Female Pills). They found that many of them contained significant proportions of inactive ingredients such as powdered capsicum, turmeric and liquorice. The absence of most of the advertised active ingredients was most likely to have been for reasons of cost – the replacement ingredients found by the *British Medical Journal*’s tests were probably cheaper than apiol or pennyroyal, given that this has always been the principal reason for the adulteration of food or medicines. However it is also possible that in this instance the adulteration was also because the producers of “commercial contraceptives” were acting in enlightened self-interest if they believed those ingredients were potentially dangerous to the women taking them – better to quietly defraud customers than kill them in large numbers and attract police attention, especially when the fraud was very unlikely to result in complaints, given the illegal nature of abortion. Some particularly egregious cases of fraud did attract attention, including the case of the Madame Frain brand of pills, which had been advertised in both the *Kilkenny People* and the *Kerry Sentinel* in 1897–8, but shortly afterwards was prosecuted in London for simply taking customers’ money without sending any products.²⁹ Even more sensationally, in 1898 the Chrimes Brothers were prosecuted in London for having attempted to blackmail their own customers, an ingenious way of capitalising upon the illegality of their own business.³⁰

Despite the *British Medical Journal*’s findings, it seems unlikely that all of the “female pills” sold in such large numbers for so many decades can have been entirely ineffective, or this information too would have circulated within female networks of information and

ended their business. Of course some women who bought and took the pills might have been mistaken about their pregnancy in the first place, some would have miscarried naturally, and some may also have taken other, more effective substances which successfully induced an abortion. It is also important to remember that despite the unequivocal stance of the law and the churches on the subject of abortion, many women seem to have adhered to the more traditional lay opinion that the ending of a pregnancy before the “quickening” (the point at which the foetus begins to move perceptibly, usually somewhere around 16 weeks) had no legal or moral implications. An article by a Chicago professor of gynaecology published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1900 commented on this popular acceptance of abortion attempts, explaining that, “I believe this is because the idea prevails that there is no life present until the beat of the fetal heart is perceptible.”³¹ As late as 1941, the President of the Ulster Medical Society, discussing the significant increase in abortions in Belfast and the difficulty of securing prosecutions in such cases, commented that many women presenting at a hospital suffering from the after-effects of abortion drugs would give full details of the drugs they had taken, because “they have no sense of wrong-doing in the matter.”³² As McCormack adds in her detailed account of abortion practices in Belfast at that time:

The reports from the Marie Stopes Clinic in Belfast in the 1930s and 1940s indicated a similar situation in which pregnant women regularly arrived at the clinic under the misapprehension that abortions were carried out . . . Clearly there was some confusion among women as to the legality of abortion, but also an awareness of how medical professionals could terminate a pregnancy.³³

The advertisements for “female pills” in the Irish press may have been carefully ambiguous, but they were not rare. Between 1890 and 1920, there were at least 2,500 advertisements for more than fifteen different brands of “female pills” in Irish newspapers alone. These included the relatively “big name” brands such as Towle’s and Widow Welch’s Female Pills, but also many others, including Dr Davis’s Female Pills, Dr Thomasso’s Magic Female Pills, Mrs Lebet’s Female Pills, Mackay Female Remedy and Madame Frain’s Female Remedy. These and other brands also appeared regularly in many Irish periodicals and magazines – and while the numbers of these advertisements are harder to determine (because none of the periodicals are digitised), it is noticeable that they appeared in publications across the spectrum of Irish publishing, appealing to drastically different political affiliations or readerships. For example, in 1902 the ultra-Tory, Protestant and upper-middle-class magazine *Irish Society* printed adverts for Dr Davis’s Female Pills and Madame Hypolite’s Pills (as well as for a pamphlet entitled *Advice for Our Wives*, likely to have been a similar publication to *Fruits of Philosophy* and giving birth control information).³⁴ In the following year, the generally Catholic and nationalist story paper *Ireland’s Own* (aimed at a young, working-class readership) printed advertisements for Towle’s Pills.³⁵ It is therefore worth considering range of publications in which these advertisements appeared and the frequency with which they did so.

Frequency and placing of “female pill” advertisements

In terms of advertising and market share, not all patent medicines were equal, and even within the relatively small niche of “female pill” brands advertised in Irish publications, there were clear hierarchies in terms of both duration and frequency of the

advertisements. While brands such as Madame Hypolite Pills, Dr Davis's Pills and Dasmal Pills were advertised intermittently, competitors such as Blanchard's Pills appeared more frequently, and the dominant brands such as Towle's Pills and Widow Welch's Pills were advertised in some Irish newspapers an average of every fortnight for years at a time. It is probably significant that it was also these last two brands who were often the most circumspect in the wording of their advertisements, presumably in order to have their advertisements accepted as widely as possible. As Angus McLaren noted in his study of English abortion practices during this period, "... the cautious firms, such as 'ET Towles' and 'Blanchard's', though they were among the largest purveyors of abortifacients, if one judged by the volume of advertising, were never to be prosecuted."³⁶

By the early-twentieth century, soap, branded foods and patent medicines collectively comprised the majority of advertising in newspapers and magazines, because as purveyors of relatively cheap mass market products they wanted to reach a wide and varied range of customers – unlike products such as cars, gramophones or bicycles, whose customers were a more specific (or just wealthier) group, to be reached via more specialist or niche publications. "Female pills" were an unusual example of patent medicines as their appeal potentially extended to all pre-menopausal adult women and their product was relatively cheap (1s 1½d for a box of twenty-six pills was a typical price), so their possible market was very broad. On the other hand, the pills' potential customer base was also unpredictable and constantly changing, as only women facing an unwanted pregnancy would buy them at any given time. Constant and wide-reaching advertising was therefore the approach pill manufacturers took to marketing them. The advertisements' appearances and disappearances across particular years or particular publications do not always correlate neatly with social purity campaigns, particular legislation, or the politics of the publications involved and were probably affected by the brands' own legal and financial circumstances as well. However, there are some broad patterns that can be discerned.

The first of these patterns is that the national press – regardless of political or religious affiliations – mainly printed advertisements for the two most "respectable" of the products (which were Towle's and Widow Welch's pills) rather than for other brands. Even more notable however is the fact that over the years the national papers in Ireland printed far fewer advertisements in total for "female pills" than did the local papers, with the *Irish Independent* apparently printing none, something so unusual it seems likely it was an editorial policy. This is not surprising, given that the *Independent* always closely aligned itself with the social purity movement. Mark O'Brien has pointed out that its owner William Martin Murphy attended the CTSI's first annual conference shortly before he launched the paper, and that it always adhered to the key principles of social purity, becoming "the very profitable voice of conservative middle-class Ireland," an editorial position which continued after William Martin Murphy's death in 1919 and on into the Free State years.³⁷ The *Irish Times* is a particularly clear case of the general patterns among national papers, in that it mainly appears to have advertised the relatively discreet Towle's Pills, but did so very frequently at times, the advertisements appearing an average of once a week between 1903 and 1909, for example. That number rapidly decreased to less than once a fortnight over the following two years, and after 1912 the paper printed few if any "female pill" advertisements. The *Freeman's Journal* also published quite regular Towle's Pills advertisements during the 1890s, but appears to have stopped this after 1900. In general, the patterns of "female pill" advertisements in

the national press may well point to an awareness among their owners and editors of the scrutiny they were receiving from the social purists, as their publication of the advertisements tails off quite notably within twelve months of the Irish Vigilance Association's formation in 1911. This conclusion would be in keeping with the very public obeisance usually paid to this campaign by newspaper editors and politicians in general, in order to reflect widespread public opinion as well as avoid becoming the objects of ferocious moral condemnations. Only the *Sunday Independent* continued to publish "female pill" advertisements with any frequency after the arrival of the Irish Vigilance Association, with Widow Welch's Pills adverts appearing more than once a month during the six years prior to 1917, something at great odds with their daily sister paper's apparent decision not to publish such advertisements at all.

This pattern is complicated when advertisements appearing in the local press are taken into account, however. Over the period 1890–1930, at least twenty-two different local Irish papers across what would become the Irish Free State printed advertisements for "female pills." These included papers in many different counties, and often on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis for years at a time, meaning that local papers were (in combination) much more extensive sources of information on abortifacients for Irish readers than were national ones, even prior to the significant influence of the Vigilance Association. In fact, it was during the 1890s that the difference is really clear, with many local papers printing hundreds of "female pill" adverts a year while the national papers were much more restrained. The local papers also published advertisements for a far wider range of brands, including those which were periodically prosecuted for various breaches of the law. For example, between 1890 and 1898, the *Leinster Express* consistently printed advertising for Towle's Pill, something no national paper did for so long a period. During the same time, they also regularly published advertisements for Barnes Female Pills, Dr Thomasso's Magic Female Pills, Mackay's Female Remedy and the Madame Douglas brand of pills. Madame Douglas (real name Luisa Fenn) was prosecuted in 1897 – the same year that the advertisements, which promised a "Certain Cure for all forms of irregularities, no matter how caused or how long standing," had appeared on a weekly basis for six months in the *Leinster Express*. Stuart Anderson notes that at her trial, Fenn revealed that during the six months in which the Madame Douglas brand had been in business, she had spent £600 on advertising, which as Anderson points out represented approximately twelve times the annual wage of an ordinary working man of the time.³⁸ Although the *Leinster Express* and other Irish local papers would have received only a tiny fraction of that income, it serves as a useful reminder of newspapers' prime motivation for printing advertisements which risked attracting the attention of either the authorities or moral campaigners. This is underlined by the fact that the *Leinster Express* was not particularly unusual in its regular printing of these advertisements. Among others, the *Connaught Telegraph*, the *Southern Star* and the *Western People* all accepted fortnightly or monthly advertisements for Towle's Pills as well as Dr Thomasso's Magic Female Pills, Barnes Female Pills and the Madame Frain's Female Remedy (another brand which was prosecuted in Britain) during the 1890s. Not only were all publications reliant on advertising revenue in general by the start of the twentieth century, but English sources suggest that many publications there charged up to five times their usual rate for publishing "female pill" adverts, so if Irish papers did the same then the financial motivations for risking moral condemnation by printing them are very clear.³⁹

The brands' motivations for seeking out small local papers across Ireland to advertise their products – especially given that all of these brands were English, usually using London postal addresses – may be less obvious. There would seem to be several explanations for this distinct pattern, however. In part, especially for the brands which used more explicit wording, such as Dr Thomasso's Female Pills' claim to be "the BEST and MOST RELIABLE for all Irregularities and Obstruction, They NEVER FAIL," there may well have been a belief that local papers generally attracted less forensic attention from either the authorities concerned with the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act or, after the turn of the twentieth century, from more active members of the social purity movement. Local papers may also have been understood as a more reliable way to reach a wider proportion of women readers than the national papers, which did not have so wide a circulation as did each local paper within its own region. As Mark O'Brien has noted, by the end of the nineteenth century Ireland had a particularly vibrant regional paper landscape, as a result of equally vibrant local political networks.⁴⁰ Women readers living in villages or small towns may also have been particularly enthusiastic customers for the relatively anonymous postal service offered by these products. And finally, the particular rhythms of local newspaper publishing may have provided a potential advantage for the particular rhythms of abortifacient advertising. Almost all of the local newspapers which regularly published "female pill" advertisements during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were published weekly, as opposed to the national papers' daily publications. For patent medicines seeking an audience of women concerned about an "irregularity," weekly or fortnightly advertisements in weekly newspapers were more certain to be seen by more of their target market in that locality than weekly or fortnightly advertisements in daily national newspapers. Advertising in weekly local papers was therefore more cost effective, matching the rhythms of publishing to the rhythms of women readers' cycles.

Like the national newspapers, local papers seem to have sharply decreased the number of "female pill" advertisements they printed after the turn of the twentieth century, until by the end of the new century's first decade many of them published none at all. There were a handful of minor exceptions to this, in which a particular paper would publish a flurry of advertisements for one or two particular brands for a year or so – for example the *Skibbereen Eagle* printed advertisements for Dr Davis' Female Pills during 1907 and again in 1910 while otherwise printing none at all during the twentieth century, and the *Leitrim Observer* (which had never previously advertised "female pills") advertised Towles' Pills and Widow Welch's Pills quite extensively during the early years of World War One. In general however, Irish newspapers ceased advertising "female pills" in any volume by 1911 or 1912. The fact that this not only predated the founding of the Free State and its censorship legislation of the 1920s, but also corresponded to the founding of the Irish Vigilance Association in 1911 and the national organisation of "social purity" campaigning, strongly suggests that what we might term the "moral atmosphere" of the Free State reflected the views of the purity campaigns from its very foundation, with the actual legislation formalising existing practice rather than vice versa.

However, the main exception to this general pattern was so striking that it warrants some examination. The *Limerick Leader* was founded in 1889 as a Parnellite paper, and was taken over in 1900 by local businessman Jeremiah Buckley, also a committed nationalist who would later become closely associated with Eamon de Valera. He was sufficiently devoted to the nationalist cause to go to prison in 1902 for an editorial supporting local

campaigners who were occupying land from which tenants had been evicted.⁴¹ In 1910, Con Cregan was appointed the paper's editor, a role he would hold for fifty years, until his retirement in 1960. Cregan is described by Christopher Doughan as a "devout Catholic," and the paper was an enthusiastic supporter of the social purity movement from the earliest years of his editorship.⁴² Approximately a year after Cregan became editor for example, one of the Irish social purity movement's most dramatic incidents occurred in Limerick. In October 1911 a crowd of demonstrators estimated at several thousand gathered at Limerick station to meet the train bringing imported Sunday papers directly from Rosslare port. This crowd was determined, as the *Limerick Leader* described it the following day, to "make a strong protest against the literary rubbish which the English filth vendors have been dumping on the city for the past few years."⁴³ When the train arrived, the crowd seized the papers and took them to the People's Park where they were set on fire, after which the crowd was addressed by the local priest. The *Limerick Leader* went on, "The papers . . . were taken . . . and . . . torn into shreds by the people. The road was quickly carpeted with torn papers, thrown by the angry crowds into the gutter – their rightful place."⁴⁴ The objections to British Sunday newspapers were extensive, tending to focus upon their sensationalist reporting of sex crimes and scandals, including their particular focus on the salacious details from the divorce courts.⁴⁵ The *Limerick Leader* therefore appeared to be a paper with a clear commitment to the intertwined nationalism and social purity position which was very common in Irish public life during the years before Independence. And it would continue to support such causes, reporting approvingly in 1915 when a group who it described as "Arch-Confraternity men" stormed the stage of a Limerick theatre to stop the performance of a musical revue on the grounds of public decency, as well as inveighing against Irish "flappers" during the 1920s and supporting the Anti-Jazz Campaign in the 1930s.⁴⁶

In keeping with its social purity position, at the point when it approved of the 1911 burning of imported British papers, the *Leader* had never published an advertisement for female pills in over twenty years in business. But from Christmas 1912, advertisements for Widow Welch's pills began appearing in the *Leader* and quickly increased. From 1913 until 1926, the paper published an average of more than one advertisement for Widow Welch's Pills per fortnight, until they suddenly ceased in March 1926. An advertisement promising that the brand was "prompt and reliable for Ladies" appeared in the paper the same week as the "Vigilance Revived" report of purity campaigners storming the stage of a local theatre in 1915.⁴⁷ That the *Limerick Leader* published these advertisements fairly regularly during the first few years of the Irish Free State is especially notable – after 1922 mention of "female pills" became vanishingly rare in every other newspaper in the country. By far the most likely reason for the paper accepting these advertisements is that of financial considerations, as they were clearly a regular source of income during these years. Nevertheless, given the *Leader's* clear commitment to social purity principles throughout this period, it does also seem an example of a willingness not to recognise the true nature of these advertisements. That a paper which had explicitly sided with the social purity movement in 1911 (and would continue to do so for many years) should publish "female pill" advertisements in fact underlines the broader point that almost all of the papers which printed them would – if publicly challenged – have roundly condemned the purpose for which they were intended. As Angus McLaren points out, during the Chrimes trial in Britain in 1898, *Reynolds Newspaper* expressed surprise that any "respectable" paper would accept advertisements for such

products, yet “in the same issue were a dozen ads for surgical appliances and five for abortifacients.”⁴⁸ The carefully coded language of advertisements for a product which cured “irregularities,” or simply referred to active ingredients such as apiol and penny royal, provided the newspapers printing them with a thin veil of deniability had they ever been challenged about the products’ true purpose.

In 1925 the Irish Vigilance Association’s founder Richard Devane SJ published a pamphlet entitled *Indecent Literature: Some Remedies*, in which among other topics he discussed abortion and birth control advertisements, and argued that although “the Irish papers are singularly free from such advertisements,” their extent in English publications imported into Ireland meant that “... the demand for ... legislation in the Irish Free State cannot be considered faddist or unreasonable. *There is nothing to prevent the Race-Suicide fanatics from introducing their ‘monstrous campaign’ into this country*” [original emphasis].⁴⁹ As was discussed above, it was clearly not true that Irish papers were free from such advertisements. Even as late as 1925 when Devane was writing it was still not entirely the case that Irish papers were “free” of such advertisements, but over the previous couple of decades in which he had been involved in the social purity movement, it had been entirely untrue, with literally thousands of advertisements for “female pills” appearing in Irish newspapers and magazines during those years. The denial of this fact is unlikely to have been based on ignorance of it, given how widespread the appearance of advertisements was, and therefore the statement was likely to have been a politically-expedient position. The Irish social purity movement had always tended to identify the threats to national morality as being British in origin, not only because this made their campaigns compatible with the nationalist movement but also because the alternative would have involved direct confrontations with Irish publishers, editors and journalists in ways which might have undermined popular support for their position with readers. The vaguely-described threats of moral degradation risked by “evil literature” from abroad served a useful purpose in this respect, and Devane’s refusal to engage with – and indeed outright denial of – the widespread printing of abortifacient advertisements in the Irish press is a particularly blatant example of his calculations in this respect.

Conclusion

These advertisements therefore stand as a remarkable example of secrets hiding in plain sight in the Irish press. The widespread use of “female pills” to attempt abortions was being quite literally advertised in the pages of almost every newspaper in the country at different times until several years into the Free State, during an era in which even the reporting of divorce cases was regarded as an “evil influence,” publicly condemned by influential campaigners and generally avoided by Irish newspapers. And rather than condemn these advertisements – which would have provoked considerable scandal and also perhaps hostility from the press in its aftermath – even the leaders of purity campaigns and legislative advisors simply denied that they existed, as Devane did in 1925. The advertisements therefore stand as a reminder of the slippage between official discourse and actual practice in Irish cultural and social history, especially (although not exclusively) with respect to sex and sexuality. There are effectively no official records to reflect the attitudes or behaviours suggested by those advertisements, and we therefore have few ways of really knowing what women actually thought, believed or did in this

respect. These advertisements – their frequency, range of publication platforms, and longevity – are one of the very few indicators we have left of a hidden culture which must have been an open secret in all but the most sheltered lives at the time. So they provide a salutary lesson not to take official or dominant narratives at their own estimation. Irish life during and immediately after the establishment of the Free State is often understood in the purity campaign's own terms – especially the view that only a few “radical” figures were resistant to its strictures, particularly with regard to controversial issues such as birth control or abortion. Yet the quiet background hum of advertisements for “female pills” hints at a very different reality.

At the same time, it is also an instructive example of the limits for such open secrets. While the patterns of the advertisements' appearances and disappearances from particular papers for particular years are uneven and open to multiple interpretations, what is exceptionally clear is their almost total disappearance from 1926. This was the year that formal work began to draft what would become the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act began, with the setting up of the Departmental Committee of Enquiry to receive submissions such as the Catholic Truth Society's report *The Problem of Undesirable Printed Matter*. This advocated that, “... legislation should provide for a banned list on which would be placed, under penalty of a heavy fine and imprisonment for a repeated offence, all publications ... advocating neo-Malthusian birth control ... or advertising (directly or indirectly) ‘birth control appliances, drugs etc.,” a suggestion broadly in the line with the legislation which would be introduced three years later as the Censorship of Publications Act.⁵⁰ That specifically identified advertisements for products which claimed to result in the “prevention or removal of irregularities in menstruation” as being banned, with a fine of up to £100 and up to three months' imprisonment for the editor or owner of a publication which printed them.⁵¹ This was of an entirely different order of opposition to that of even the most vigorous social purity campaign, and it is quite obvious that no Irish newspaper editor ever felt that the revenue from printing “female pill” advertisements was worth the legal penalties the Free State could impose.

In conclusion, some clear and rather unexpected patterns can be seen in the range and frequency of abortifacient advertisements in the years surrounding Irish independence. Despite the strictures of the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act and the very real power of the social purity movement in the early-twentieth century, carefully-encoded advertisements for “female pills” appeared with great frequency in the majority of Irish newspapers at various times prior to Independence and even in the early years of the Free State, prior to being finally eradicated by the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. The advertisements appeared in publications of many different kinds, from newspapers to women's magazines and story papers. Of these publications however, local newspapers published considerably more of them than most, and certainly more than national papers – likely due to a relative lack of scrutiny by legal or moral authorities, combined with the importance of local newspapers in reaching the pills' target audience of Irish women facing unwanted pregnancies. To further evade scrutiny, these advertisements all used a careful coded phrasing (usually a combination of their supposed ingredients along with the conditions they could cure) which was simultaneously recognisable to women seeking abortion medication but also indirect and vague enough to avoid immediate notice by others and even provide plausible deniability for Irish editors if they were detected by those who would object to them.

Notes

1. McAvoy, "Its Effect on the Public Morality," 38.
2. See O'Brien, "Policing the Press," 15–30; and Rains, "'Nauseous Tides of Seductive Debauchery,'" 263–280 for discussions of the Irish social purity movement's targeting of the British press.
3. Richards, *Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, 172.
4. Denham, "Magazine Journalism in the Golden Age of Muckraking," 113.
5. Gurney, *The Making of Consumer Culture*, 82–85.
6. Loeb, "George Fulford and Victorian Patent Medicine Men," endnote 118.
7. *Irish Society*, 7 September 1907, 2707.
8. *Freeman's Journal*, 24 May 1862, 1.
9. Byers, "Quackery – with Special Reference to Female Complaints," 1240.
10. Hemphill, *Murderess of the Unseen*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 12.
12. Keating, "The Uses and Abuses of Censorship," 68.
13. Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, *The Problem of Undesirable Printed Matter*, 15.
14. Peel, "The Manufacture and Retailing of Contraceptives in England," 115.
15. Knowlton, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, 1877.
16. McAvoy, "Its Effect on the Public Morality," 40.
17. *Freeman's Journal*, 13 February 1878, 5.
18. JA Banks and Olive Banks, "The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial," 24.
19. *Nenagh Guardian*, 11 October 1879, 2.
20. Fitzpatrick, "Marriage in post-Famine Ireland," 117.
21. cited in Daly, "'Veiled obscenity,'" 19.
22. Daly, "'Veiled obscenity,'" 25.
23. *Irish Society*, 4 January 1902, 3236, *Western People*, 1 February 1896, 8, *Leinster Express*, 16 August 1890, 8.
24. McDonald, "Women and their Bodies," 71.
25. Delay, "Pills, Potions and Purgatives," 7–8.
26. McCormick "'No Sense of Wrongdoing,'" 132–6.
27. See Delay, "Pills, Potions and Purgatives," 5–6.
28. Knight, "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England," 59.
29. Brookes, *Abortion in England, 1900–1967*, 4.
30. McLaren, "Abortion in England, 1890–1914," 388.
31. Lewis, "Facts Regarding Criminal Abortion," 944.
32. Holmes, "The Incidence of Abortion at the Jubilee Hospital, Belfast," 2.
33. McCormick "'No Sense of Wrongdoing,'" 128.
34. *Irish Society*, 4 January 1902, 3236 and 3251.
35. *Ireland's Own*, 14 October 1903, 23.
36. McLaren, "Abortion in England, 1890–1914," 389.
37. O'Brien, *Fourth Estate*, 7.
38. Anderson, "From 'Bespoke' to 'Off-the-Peg,'" 50.
39. McLaren, "Abortion in England, 1890–1914," 381–1.
40. O'Brien, *Fourth Estate*, 12.
41. Rouse, "Jeremiah Buckley," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.
42. Doughan, *The Voice of the Provinces*, 163.
43. "Limerick's War," *Limerick Leader*, 30 October 1911, 3.
44. *Ibid.*, 3.
45. Rafter, "Evil Literature," 412.
46. See Condon, "'Offensive and Riotous Behaviour,'" for a discussion of the stage invasion in Limerick, and Ryan, "Locating the Flapper" 98 for mention of the *Limerick Leader's* position on Irish flappers.
47. "Vigilance Revived," *Limerick Leader*, 27 September 1915, 5.

48. McLaren, "Abortion in England, 1890–1914," 388.
49. Devane, *Indecent Literature: Some Legal Remedies*, 20.
50. See note 13 above.
51. Crowley and Kitchin, "Producing 'Decent Girls,'" 361.

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