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Weaving—an important skill acquired by girls during fosterage. (Illustration by Jeanette Dunne)

Fosterage
child-rearing *in* medieval Ireland

by Bronagh Ní Chonaill

In Ireland today, as elsewhere, fosterage finds its place in society as a much altered carry-over from the past. Nowadays, it arises for a negative reason: the inability of biological parents to cope, for whatever reason. Fosterage in the past was the antithesis of this. It was a form of child-rearing chosen and upheld for positive reasons, moulded not as we might expect by biological factors, but by culture. Fosterage was the acceptance of the responsibilities of rearing and educating a child in accordance with certain regulations. The child was indeed the focus in this process, but the realm of fosterage expanded beyond that of childhood. It was a lifelong contract. Intimate bonds created through fosterage carried immediate and long term consequences, which were above and beyond the day-to-day concerns of parenting. Fosterage helped to mould the medieval child, and its enduring character long out-lived the medieval period.

The origins of this institution lie in Indo-European society (c. 3000-2000 BC), the linguistic remnants of which still remain. It has been suggested that fosterage in Roman times was the result of a taboo which forbade the father from seeing his children until they had reached a certain age. Whether this emanated from Indo-European times, if indeed it is correct, we can only speculate. What is known for certain is that when Ireland emerges in the historic period (fifth century), fosterage is a well established tradition in society.

Appraising the child

With high infant mortality, procreation was the primary stimulus for polygamy in pre-Norman Ireland and partly the reason for consecutive marriages in post-Norman times. The inclusion of infertility and abortion among the number of legitimate reasons for separation, and the option of seeking impregnation outside the established coupling in the case of barrenness or impotency, further emphasise the importance of children. In early medieval Ireland, according to customary law, the maternal and paternal kin had a say in where the child was placed, thus the kin group as a whole took an active interest in the future of the child. The valued position of children—as heir, succour in life, support in old age—is why the death of a child was particularly tragic. It finds expression, for example, in a poem by Giolla Brighde Ó hEoghusa (d.1614), addressed to the wife of William Nugent on the death of her son:

> There has been taken from thee—
> how sad—
> thy son, the heir to thy heritage
> thy sorrow's cure thy only
> fosterling is dead
> thy glory in this life, Sinéad.

Seven years was traditionally regarded as the suitable age for the commencement of fosterage. This was a transitional stage for the child, who was generally regarded as having reached the age of learning and reason. The church had a lasting influence in promoting this, with the child bearing the same honour-price (the measured worth of a person) as a cleric until the age of seven. There is much evidence, however, for fosterage commencing at a much earlier stage, through the practice of wet-nursing. In legal material of the eighth century, reference is made to nursing clothes ('cradle clothes') given with the child when proceeding into fosterage. There were two sets of clothing given to the nursing-mother, a black tunic and a black mantle, returned on the completion of fosterage. The common practice was the giving of the child to a wet-nurse in her own home, who was then nursing two babies simultaneously, if her own child survived.

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The clothes worn by children of the free class (both noble and commoner) while in fosterage were of specific colours. The children of the free-man grade wore yellow, black, white and blay-coloured. Red, green and brown were the colours of the noble grade. Purple and blue were reserved for royalty. The colour of clothes and the trimmings (brooches and gold and silver ornamentation) were outward marks of distinction. Types of food were also distinguished according to rank. Porridge was given to all children, but the different flavourings reflected status: salt for the sons of the commoners, butter for the noble grades, and honey for royal children. The ingredients of the porridge itself differed, with a water-based porridge for the commoners, porridge made with new milk for the aristocratic grade, the same for the children of kings, but with extra wheat in it. In a hierarchical society, gradations permeated all aspects of life.

The basis for the type of fosterage and education a child received was the size of foster-fee (*iarrath*) paid. A legal maxim of the eighth century reads: 'the fosterage of each son according to his foster-fee', implying that rank was all-important. The foster-fee was graded, from three cows for the son of a bóaire (strong farmer) to eighteen cows for the son of a king. Fosterage of a daughter was a sét (a fixed unit of value) more expensive in each grade. The foster-fee is infrequently mentioned in the sources. In a thirteenth-century poem attributed to Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe (*Teasta eochair ghlais Ghaoidheal*), the poet informs us that the child brought with her cattle and clothing (*fríoth le buar is brat naoidhe*). The cattle would appear to be a fosterage-payment.

Education

At the core of fosterage was education to prepare the child for his position later in life. A fine of two-thirds of the foster-fee was incurred if the quality of fostering was deficient in any manner, say, through the negligent provision of instruction in a given area. Differences are evident in the type of education provided. There was a strong pastoral flavour to the education of the free-man grade. Daughters were taught how to use the quern, the kneading trough, the sieve, and the herding of lambs, kids, pigs and calves. Women were in charge of domestic matters, and therefore needed the skills of cookery, tending sheep (which would provide fleece for weaving), and tending animals. Boys were taught kiln-drying, wood-cutting and also the herding of various animals—all practical skills for the future farmer. We might have expected to find the boys receiving instruction solely from the foster-father, but this was not the case in areas where the woman held sway. In the medieval *Lives* of Abbán, Maedoc and the later life of Patrick, the three boys were tending animals. An animal is lost through negligence on the child's part, and the child fears that the foster-mother may discover the incident. Being of saintly stock, miraculously the animals return and the cause of potential anger on the foster-mother's side is removed.

The children of the higher grades, in addition to receiving instruction in agricultural matters, were taught more noble pursuits: board games resembling draughts and chess for foster-sons; sewing, cutting and embroidery for foster-daughters. Skill in handicraft was a mark of distinction in a woman. When Cú Chulainn wooed Emer, the six gifts she possessed according to the saga were: wisdom, voice, beauty, fair speech, chastity and needlework! If there were appropriate facilities, swimming was supposed to be taught. The sons of noble grades were taught horse riding, if the father supplied a horse. There were many practical reasons for learning



The archetypal nursing mother—Virgin and Child from the *Book of Kells*, c.AD 800.
(Courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin)

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how to ride, from a quick escape whilst on a foray, to travelling to residences on a circuit of hospitality.

A number of items are mentioned in legal material as being in the noble child's possession, including a hurley and a scabbard, reflecting a mixture of play and military training common for most boys. We should not be surprised to find boys playing games of skill and agility of a competitive nature. Games were also important trials of strength. In Brehon law reference is made to early playthings (*essrechta maccru*). These are explained as 'goodly things which remove the dullness from little boys, that is, hurleys, balls, hoops'. Cats and dogs are also mentioned as children's pets. Older children participated in field games and wrestling. In a thirteenth-century bardic poem (*Leacht carad ó chath Bhriain*), lamenting the death of several members of his foster-family, the poet fondly remembers games from his childhood, which he played with his foster-brothers. They would play at an imitation of an inauguration or homage ceremony, where a child was placed on a height with those remaining marching around him three times. Piggy-back games were also played, '(I) [the poet] was always the rider, he was my horse'.

Parental guidance and responsibility

A peculiarity of fosterage was the extra *sét* it cost for a female child Commentaries on legal tracts speculate as to why it cost more. Reasons ranged from uncleanliness to the fact that her handiwork was of lesser value than the chores performed by a boy. The most plausible reason given was that her attendants were more numerous. Why this should be so is a point of interest. One piece of advice in the early medieval period reads: 'three darknesses into which women should not go: the darkness of mist, the darkness of night and the darkness of wood'. Women in saga literature are reproached for wandering alone—a woman on her own was suspected of keeping a tryst. Accompaniment was a precaution against abduction, rape, or attempts to lure into sexual union. The protective role of foster-sisters was important. The position of the foster-sister is made abundantly clear in the following comment by Aongus to Curcóg found in a medieval saga, in a poem which he recites after Eithne, his foster-daughter, has been enticed away: 'though you are a foster-sister/ Curcóg is not good for guarding'. The hazards which could befall a female fosterling would also have placed the foster-father open to the charge of neglect. General ills which could befall foster-children of both sexes, and which foster-parents were warned against, included the safety of the child in the presence of animals, the danger of cliffs, precipices, and lakes, and injuries caused by spikes, spears, sticks and stones.

If the fosterage undertaken was one of affection (i.e. where no fee was levied), the foster-father or foster-mother was not liable for crimes committed by the child. The age of the child, the nature of the crime, and the number of offences previously committed, were all taken into consideration when the punishment for a crime was decided. The age of the child in relation to crime is divided in three: to the age of seven, from seven to twelve, and from twelve to seventeen. Punishment took the form of chastisement, fasting, and/or the restitution of goods.



Aristocratic foster-children were taught noble pursuits like chess. Twelfth-century ivory chessman. (Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland)

The most common crimes committed by children were assault and theft. In the late medieval *Life of Brendan* an episode from his youth relates an incident where he beat a girl who wished to play with him. He is severely reproached by his tutor. Similarly, in a thirteenth-century lament for the death of a child, by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, we are told that the child, Gormlaith, 'never struck another girl/ she never earned the sighs for a daughter'. Excessive violence while playing games involving physical contact was also punishable. The only specifics of a crime committed by a foster-child in legal material is the theft by a child under twelve years of age of a hoop or hurley (*lubóg no comán*), resulting in restitution in kind.

The foster-father paid the fines for the crimes committed, until he 'proclaimed' his foster-son to his natural father by formally declaring his foster-son's criminal tendencies, thereby legally shifting the responsibility for certain crimes to the natural father, if the foster-father was not at fault. If a child was habitually criminal and subsequently proclaimed, the means of discipline available to the foster-parents was obviously limited. According to Brehon law, if a child was blemished in any way while in fosterage the foster-father forfeited the fee. If there was a justifiable reason, two-thirds of the fee was forfeited. For noble grades there could not be 'a blemish if struck, or the shedding of blood, or one that is a bandage wound'. The overall impression is that disciplining a child was extremely difficult, and the best path a foster-parent could take was to proclaim the child. This would have been a wise financial step, as the foster-parent was held responsible for paying all the fines incurred by an unproclaimed child. As it stood the foster-father was responsible for the first deliberate offence committed by the child, which could involve a serious crime such as bodily injury or homicide. On a more positive note, the foster-father received one-third of the díre (fine) of the foster-son if he was injured in any way.

Completion

There were 'three times of fosterage completion: death, crime and choice'. The death of the child while in fosterage is not ignored in the sources. Gormlaith, daughter of Domhnall Mór, lord of Tír Conaill, died in the late 1240s at the age of five from disease while in fosterage. Legally the foster-parents had the right to return children who were diseased. A lament survives on the death of the son of a different Gorm-

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Horsemanship, one of the skills acquired by boys during fosterage—from the *Book of Kells.* (Courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin)

laith, daughter of Flann Sinna (d.916). Negligence on the part of the foster-family, the Uí Fiachrach, is strongly implied in the poem:

> Woe to her who allowed to go
> to Uí Fiachrach
> the gentle sweet voiced lad
> a land where water is plentiful
> and men are unruly

Negligence carried far-reaching consequences if the foster-father did not compensate the family of the child adequately and swiftly for their loss. The 'vengeance for the foster-child of the family' was permitted by law.

If the father refused to pay for his son's crimes once proclaimed, the foster-father kept the unspent part of the foster-fee and returned the child. A fostering contract could be terminated by choice, for example, when a girl married or took the veil. In legal material seventeen is the age of fosterage completion for boys and fourteen for girls, if special circumstances had not forced an earlier termination. At seventeen the male foster-child was held totally responsible for his own crimes and had to pay full fine accordingly.

Significance of foster-ties

Multiple fosterages were another feature. Cú Chulainn, for example, was fostered 'among the chariot-chiefs and champions, among the jesters and druids, among learned poets and learned men, among the nobles and landlords of Ulster...so that I have all their manners and gifts'. The amount of wealth one possessed was not an over-riding factor. When a child returned from fosterage, all that was given with him (cattle, etc..) was also returned. If one could afford to place a child once in fosterage, then one could afford to foster the same child as many times as desired. What was decisive was the demand for the child. The dispute over who was to foster Cú Chulainn is evidence of such a demand. In a poem addressed to Domhnall Óg Ó Domhnaill, king of Tír Conaill (1258-82) by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, the fact that Domhnaill was of *rig damnae* (kingly material) resulted in

> all the men by the sea scarcely one
> not a foster-father
> to the high-king of Conall—it is no
> falsehood.

The possibility of multiple fosterages expanded the range of personal and political contacts.

It is our common conception that children were fostered with a subordinate family as expressed in the Scandinavian maxim, 'he is a lesser man who fosters'. In continental tradition fosterage was an upwardly oriented institution. Political motives were the most probable for fostering with a subordinate family, as it is unlikely that a child would have been sent, for no apparent reason, into fosterage with people who were not accustomed to the standard of living of the child. It was political motivation combined with the loyalty fosterage ties created, which maintained the popularity of this method of child-rearing.

The foster-child by customary law had to provide aid and maintenance (*goire*) for his foster-parents in later life. Fosterage therefore was a lifelong commitment. Fosterage ties often meant much more than maintenance. Giraldus Cambrensis noted the love of the Irish for their foster-brethren. The nature of the Irish political scene allowed the strength of foster-ties to play a prominent role in the military sphere. In 1309 Maelruanaidh Mac Diarmada, king of Magh Luirg, went into the Sil-Muiredhaigh to defend the sovereignty of his foster-son, Feidlimid Ó Conchobhair, who was subsequently made king of Connacht by Mac Diarmada. An illustration of fosterage directly benefiting the foster-family is portrayed in a poem of Maelsheachlainn na nUirsgél Ó hUiginn to Aed Mac Airt Magennis of the Uíbh Eathach. Owing to geographical location in the early fifteenth century Aed protected the gap to the north from invasion. Included in the territories were those of the Uí Néill, his maternal kin. In return for his fostering with them we are told 'he let not their folk be raided'.

From friendly advice to financial gain, the range of short and long-term benefits resulting from fosterage played a large part in sustaining the power of the institution into the early modern period. Through participation in fosterage, one not only secured maintenance in later life and the possibility of creating friendly or non-belligerent relations between families, but the child also secured support for itself and its siblings in the future. The medieval world was violent; the annals confirm this. Recurrent references to killings 'dia muintir fen' (at the hands of his own people), and to incidents of blindings, drownings, and seizings and many other violent acts, illustrate the need for support in everyday life. Foster-links did not guarantee support or loyalty, but they were one, if not the most binding, of ties, which society had to offer. Fosterage, as it functioned in medieval Ireland, was advantageous for the child, the kin and society.

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Further reading:

T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford 1993).

S. Ó hInnse, *Fosterage in Early and Medieval Ireland* (1940 MA thesis available in UCD Library).

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