

Irish Immigration and Providence History Uncovered

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Claire Cordonnier Hayley Lonergan Tales from the Túath is a project curated by Claire Cordonnier ('25) and Hayley Lonergan ('26) that examines two artworks by D. Curley from the PCG permanent collection. The exhibition originated from Cordonnier and Lonergan's curiosity towards the two watercolors that depict pastoral countrysides. Across each watercolor is a caption handwritten by Patrick J. McCarthy, the 24th mayor of Providence and the city's first and only foreign-born mayor. These captions led to further research and exploration, which revealed invaluable histories of the immigrant experience and Providence politics during the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s).

The title takes inspiration from Ireland, where McCarthy and his family immigrated from in 1850. "Túath", meaning countryside or landscape in Irish, is a nod to the composition and setting of the artworks and the recently discovered historical narratives that surround them. These narratives include centuries of British Irish relations, which impacted McCarthy's lived experience and later influenced his policies as mayor. Tales encompasses themes of immigration, resistance and reform, and visual historical inquiry, all while encouraging onlookers to investigate other works in the PCG permanent collection and unearth the stories they contain.

This exhibition is the inaugural project of *Case Studies*, a new Providence College Galleries initiative that showcases research-based projects focused on objects from the permanent collection.



Wiss Mary Crouin 1923 Watercolor on paper

The transcription reads: "Miss Mary Crouin (daughter of Dennis) and her carriage taken on the highway at Nunstown, Co. Kerry (Killarney PO.) by Miss Mary Josephine McCarthy Aug 26 1904, while on a visit to Ireland. The package in the cart is a milk can used to convey large quantities of fresh milk from the farm to the creamery – women young and old do a great deal of work with the donkey and cart in Ireland. I met several in the town of Killarney on the main street. – P.J. McCarthy"

Mary Crouin, a young Irish girl, is pictured atop a donkey taking a large milk can from a farm to a creamery. The caption provides insight into her experience as a laborer and speaks to the industrialization taking place in Ireland. Dairy production was moved from home dairies to commercial creameries, stripping jobs from thousands of rural Irish women who primarily did this work.

Across his writings, Patrick McCarthy was very vocal about his reverence for the working class and the labor they exert, saying, "Labor is the natural condition to which man is born; it is his irrevocable destiny. The earth must be tilled by his labor to yield its fruit, and work is noble action." The nobility of work, in McCarthy's eyes, was deserving of a living wage and conditions, which were reflected in his policies as mayor. However, where do women come into play in the work force? His views on women were mostly focused on the domestic sphere, where childcare and rearing were the labors of women, saying, "Woman is included in the term workman. But who pays the mother? She is never thought of in discussions relating to labor. Her wages are the growth and welfare of the family". Despite this examination of women's roles in the work force, domesticity was not the reality for all women in Rhode Island at this time. Between 1880 and 1920, thousands of immigrants from England, Ireland, Canada, Italy, Eastern Europe, and Portugal came to Rhode Island in search of work, hoping to find economic and personal freedom by participating in the evolving industrialization of the state. In fact, by 1910, seven out of ten Rhode Island residents were foreign born or had children that were foreign born. The most prominent of jobs for these women were in textile mills, where many unmarried women found opportunities to be economically independent and work toward a better life. From 1900 to 1910, jobs for women in office work increased, leading them to also pursue careers in bookkeeping or typewriting as well.

Despite these opportunities, the false promises of the free market paired with patriarchal social thought kept women from advancing in the workforce. Women were paid lower wages than men and were not offered any job mobility or promotions to build her own economic independence. A woman's marriage was the ticket for exiting the workforce. They were often fired or forced to leave their jobs as soon as they were wed, as their economic standing consolidated into one with their husbands. Therefore, while new jobs opened to women during this time, this was mainly because women were a cheap labor force with limited opportunities. They couldn't rise to higher positions, didn't earn a living wage, and were dependent on marriage for financial freedom. Women's work was often seen as a transition between dependence on their parents and dependence on their husband, reflecting the hold that patriarchy and exploitation had on women workers during this time, whether at home or in the workforce.

Back in Ireland, women were also struggling under the yoke of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation of their resources at the hands of the British occupation. From 1891-1911, rural women with designated occupations dropped from 23% to 15% of the population. Mary Crouin , the young girl in the watercolor , falls under this category. She is seen transporting milk from a local farm to a larger creamery. This was a time of agricultural advancement, where better fertilizer, weed eradication, crop rotation, and better

machinery simplified the work that rural women were often tasked with. Home dairies, a major employer of rural women as exemplified in the painting, were gradually replaced by creameries, reducing the need for women in this field which they previously dominated. Additionally, British common law on factories restricted the type of work women could do, showing the shared struggle between Irish women at home and immigrants abroad in the U.S. regarding access to jobs and economic autonomy. Housework then became a larger opportunity for women in Ireland, as women sought their own means of making money to survive, often employing their children at home with tasks like sewing. In both places, women were victim to patriarchal thinking which subjugated them. Women in the U.S. and Ireland were working for the growing industrialization of their countries while reaping little of the benefits.



D. CurleyUnknown
1923
Watercolor on paper

The transcription reads: "The McCarthy Family Homestead situated in Geevagh Parish County Sligo near Boyle and Balleyfarnon, Ireland taken at the place Sept 1904 by Mary Josephine daughter of Patrick J McCarthy on the occasion of their visit. The small house was the McCarthy residence – the large one was built in the garden since they left the place and is now owned by a Ms. Clarke – wife of the schoolmaster. P.J. McCarthy"

Mary Josephine McCarthy (later Bannon) photographed these buildings on top of a rolling hill. Now depicted in watercolor, the buildings recall the remnants of the McCarthy family's Irish legacy. The brick house peeking through the trees, now property of a Ms. Clark, shows the opportunities opened for women by Ireland's Married Women's Property Act of 1882.

Despite his views of women as caretakers and nurturers as opposed to industrial laborers, McCarthy still noted the dire condition of women socially in the U.S., saying, "There is needed no long discussion to convince us that, no matter how unjust it may be, the verdict of the world is heavier against the woman than against the man. . . . she faces the world in her struggle for daily bread at a disadvantage of which man knows nothing. . . Young man, in dealing with women, think of your mother, your sister and your manner and conduct toward women will be above reproach." Acknowledging the condition of women at the time, McCarthy urges the humanity of women to be recognized and respected, a major move given the heavy patriarchal undertones of the time. This fascinating watercolor shows the impact of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, legislation put forth in Ireland that allowed married women to have personal property, including housing, which was guaranteed to her even if she became widowed. Earlier in Rhode Island in the 1840s, legislation was passed granting married women the right to own property as well. This was most likely brought about by the local economy's condition, given the Panic of 1837 which left many men bankrupt and destitute at the time. McCarthy's caption provides insight into the fascinating connection between women's property ownership in Ireland and America at the time. Both were still stunted by the patriarchal social order but were working toward economic independence and mobility for women, nonetheless.

About the Curators — Claire Cordonnier is an Art History major graduating from Providence College in December 2025. Recently, Claire has worked as a Providence College Galleries (PCG) & Visual Resource Center (VRC) Assistant and completed her summer Fellowship with PCG. Besides the curation of this exhibition, her work has included assisting the Exhibitions and Collections Manager to ensure proper art handling and care, overseeing Reilly Gallery as a gallery attendant, and training and advising new workers for the Alt-Text Connects program. This fall, Claire will be interning at the Concord Center for the Visual Arts to continue to gain knowledge in a gallery setting with a robust permanent collection and will be completing her senior Art History thesis project.

Hayley Lonergan is a senior at Providence College double majoring in History and Art History with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. She currently works as a research assistant for Dr. Virginia Thomas of the Women's and Gender Studies and Art History departments and as a gallery assistant at the Providence College Galleries. Her research focuses primarily on the construction and parameters of power in modern North American history through a lens informed by feminist and postcolonial theory. She is currently working on her senior history and art history thesis titled *Queering Camaraderie: Women, Visual Culture, and Survival in the Black Panther Party.*

