

# A Life History\*

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## 1 Introduction

American sociologist C. Wright Mills argues that ‘neither the life of an individual, nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’ (Mills 1959, 3) and it takes *Sociological Imagination* to be able to understand the intersection between biography and social structure. This paper investigates how the life of an individual is moulded by the complex conditions provided by society as an exercise in applying Mills’ Sociological Imagination.

The subject of this paper is Sarah, whom I interviewed on 3 July 2004.<sup>1</sup> The interview lasted about one and a half hours and Sarah was generous with providing detailed information about her life. She answered all questions enthusiastically, some without me asking them. This paper has been based on the information provided during the interview and additional information provided by Sarah via e-mail.

## 2 Early childhood in Ireland

Sarah was born in 1928 in Ireland. She has one younger and two older sisters. Another sister was born a year before Sarah, but died as an infant. Her father also had nine children from two previous marriages, three of which died early in life. None of Sarah’s half sisters lived with their father when Sarah was growing up, as most of them were adults. Sarah’s family was a typical nuclear family: her mother stayed at home doing the housework and her father was an electrician.

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<sup>1</sup>A pseudonym has been used to protect the subject’s privacy.

One theme emerging from Sarah's childhood is the high number of siblings that died. From Sarah's father's thirteen children, only nine survived childhood—a mortality rate of 31%! In 1926 Ireland, life expectancy at birth was 57.9 years for females and 57.4 for males (Central Statistics Office Ireland 2004, Table 3). The main reason for the low life expectancy at birth was the high rate of child mortality. This can be concluded from the fact that life expectancy for adults has not changed dramatically between 1926 and 2002, while life expectancy at birth has increased dramatically (Table 1). In 1926, an Irish woman 75 years of age could expect to live another 8.4 years while a woman of the same age in 2002 could expect to live another 11.2 years. Life expectancy at birth, however has increased by around 20 years, or almost 40%.

Sex	Period	0	5	10	15	25	35	55	75
Male	1926	57.4	59.5	55.2	50.7	42.1	34.4	19.1	7.7
Female	1926	57.9	59.2	54.9	50.5	42.4	34.7	19.6	8.4
Male	2002	75.1	70.7	65.7	60.8	51.3	41.8	23.4	8.9
Female	2002	80.3	75.7	70.8	65.8	56.0	46.2	27.4	11.2

Table 1: Life Expectancy at various ages in Ireland (Central Statistics Office Ireland 2004, Table 3).

### 3 England

In 1935 Sarah's father left Ireland to work in England. She was so crazy about her father that she insisted on joining him in England. Her mother and sisters stayed behind, but joined Sarah and her father a few months later in England. Although Sarah was awarded a scholarship to attend Grammar school, she was forced to leave school four years later. She had to find work because her father became blind and was not able to support the family. Being from a working class family and the lack of social security at the time forced Sarah to leave school.

The Second World War is arguably the single most influential event in the history of mankind in terms of its impact on the lives of individuals. Sarah met the love of her life, an American lieutenant who was stationed in England to be deployed to Europe, in 1944. Sarah met him at a dance in the Hammersmith Palais: "He danced like an angel", Sarah remembers. The courtship did not last very long, as he was killed during the battle of the Hürtgen Forrest in November of that year.

Six years later, when Sarah was 22, her mother wanted her to marry an Irish

Age	1933	1947	1961	1971	1981	1991	1996
25–34	4.7	8.0	17.3	33.0	49.0	61.3	63.5
35–44	5.3	8.8	21.2	41.3	58.4	71.3	72.3

Table 2: Participation of married women in the workforce (Fine 1999, 8).

Catholic man. Sarah resisted, as she didn't love him. She went against the wishes of her family to marry within her social group and married another man, fifteen days after she met him at a bus stop. "It was a really stupid thing to do", Sarah reflects now, as the main reason she did this was to go against her mother's expectations.

The period after the war is marked by great social change. The terror of the war made people realise that there was a need to break with old traditions and dogmas. Existentialist philosophers proclaimed that we are masters of our own life, constructing our own biographies instead of being confined by social class, gender and religion. It was in the wake of the social change that Sarah was able to resist her mother's expectation for her to marry within her own social group.

Sarah kept working after she married because her husband was not able to keep a regular job. These were hard times for Sarah and her family because there was no social welfare to speak of and Sarah depended on her community and family to help raise her children. The number of married women in the work force at that time was a lot lower in the 1960's than is currently the case. Table 2 shows that workforce participation of women between 25 and 34 almost doubled every ten years between 1933 and 1981, while the growth from 1991 onwards has stagnated.

Sarah always wanted to be a journalist, but the attitude of the time was that: "Nice girls don't become 'journos', it is not ladylike". Sarah, however, resisted gender prejudice and applied for a job with a local newspaper. The owner of the paper told her that the editor hates women journalists and that if she could persuade him that she can be a journalist, then she would have a job. She managed to convince the editor and was offered a job. All male journalists got on very well with Sarah and she did not experience discrimination. Journalism was a very male dominated profession, when Sarah became a journalist she didn't know any other women journalists. The 1960's were a time of social change with respect to married women in the workforce, and Sarah has been at the forefront of this change.

When the family lived in Essex, two missionaries from the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LDS) wanted to talk to her about Mormonism. Her reply was: "Your

wasting your time, I'm a Catholic". Somehow, however, the two young men impressed her and she agreed for them to tell her the Joseph Smith story, which was "a lot to take in".<sup>2</sup> She read the *Book of Mormon* (Smith 1830) and she was very impressed: "the minute they put the book in my hand I knew it was true".

The main reason for Sarah to start doubting her religion was because in the Catholic church: "If you are a thinker, you are in trouble". Sarah was not alone in challenging the age old ways of thinking. The strong growth of individualism in the latter half of the twentieth century has caused a great number of people to leave the churches of their ancestors. Many authors claim that the growth in individualism has caused a secularisation of society. Hughes (2001) argues, however, that this is not the case as many people who claim to have no religion or no stated religion do have spiritual beliefs. Many of the people leaving the traditional churches have joined churches like the LDS, New Age movements, the Church of Christ or any of the many other minor religions. The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints is indeed a minority religion in Australia, but has seen a great increase over the last century. In 1947 0.05% (3,499 people) of Australia's population was a member of the church while in 1996 about 0.25% (45,112 people) were members (Hughes 2001).

## 4 Australia

In 1966 Sarah migrated with her husband and children to Australia, to join her family. Four months later she divorced her husband after 16 years of marriage. Divorce in 1966 was four times less common than currently. The crude divorce rate in 1966 was 0.7, while in 2001 the crude divorce rate was 2.9 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003, Table 97).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph Smith (1805–1844) is the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

<sup>3</sup>The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces in a year per 1,000 of the mean estimated resident population in the same year.

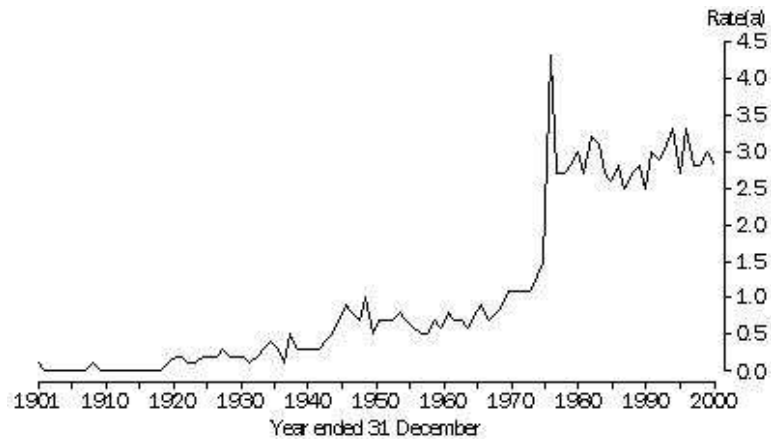


Figure 1: Crude Divorce Rate (ABS 2003).

The main reason for the extreme increase in the divorce rate is the introduction of the 1975 Commonwealth *Family Law Act*, which changed the requirements to file for divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995). The spike in 1975 is due to a backlog of people that wanted to divorce previously, but were not able to. After 1975, the crude divorce rate has been fairly stable.

After Sarah divorced her husband, she married the American lieutenant she met in 1944, through a special Latter-Day Saints ‘temple marriage’, where couples are married for ‘time and all eternity’ (Hughes 2001). Latter-day Saints believe that marriage ceremonies performed outside LDS temples are binding for this life, but they also believe that if a couple is married in a LDS temple, the marriage ties can extend throughout eternity. Temple marriage ceremonies can also be performed on behalf of the deceased, uniting husbands and wives and parents and children in eternal unions. Although ceremonies on behalf of the deceased are not recognised in wider society, they are very important to the Latter-Day Saints. Despite the fact that the Latter-Day Saints’ religious beliefs deviate much from society as a whole, Sarah has not experienced any discrimination. People in Australia are very tolerant towards the practises of her church: “Australians don’t care what you are, a Hottentot or whatever, ‘she’ll be right mate!’ ”

## 5 Carpe Diem

Sarah’s life illustrates how social structure determines an individual’s life as, for example, her social class and the lack of social welfare prevented her from com-

pleting her education. Sarah also constructed her own biography and was able to go against social expectations, illustrated by her divorce and her work as a journalist. Sarah's mother told her in 1968: "You are the only one [of my children] with guts". Sarah's life is indeed an example of somebody who has been able to construct her own biography, in the wake of the great social changes. She illustrates her strong individuality by signing her e-mails 'Carpe Diem' (Pluck the Day), the famous ode by Horace, in which he urges the reader to embrace life (Horace 23 BC).

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