‘Cope the Modern Way’: Electricity and the Irish Housewife, 1930s–1960s

Dr Ciara Meehan
School of Humanities
University of Hertfordshire

In 1965, a feature in Woman’s Way magazine encouraged readers to ‘cope the modern way’ by purchasing a washing machine. Kirsi Saarikangas has suggested that modernity entered homes through the kitchen. Although writing about Finland, her observation has a wider application. It was in this room of the house that the benefits of electricity and piped water were fully on display.

This article explores the ways in which ESB sought to educate about the advantages of electricity in the home. It considers the manner in which advertisers attempted to sell electrical appliances to women and examines some of the impacts that electricity had on the everyday life of Irish housewives between the 1930s and 1960s. Taking a chronological approach and drawing on advertisements from ESB Archives as well as features in women’s magazines, it will show how the marketing of electricity developed from an emphasis on functionality to a promise of freedom and gracious living.

From the outset, ESB actively campaigned to educate people about the value of electricity in the home. One of the cleverest ways in which the company did this was to allow prospective customers to see the benefits for themselves. On 11 December 1934, the Minister for Industry and Commerce Seán Lemass TD opened ESB’s first all-electric demonstration house at Mount Merrion Park in Dublin’s south side. The Irish Independent described it as ‘a house that women dream of’. The language used by the journalist to describe the facilities – ‘clean’, ‘wholesome’, ‘healthy’, ‘less labour’ – replicated the style of ESB advertising both at the time and in the campaigns that would follow. The house, which inspired several others, was immensely popular. According to ESB’s annual reports for 1934–1935, it attracted over 20,000 visitors in the period up to 31 March 1935.

Several of the themes discussed in this article, particularly relating to ‘fear’, ‘functionality’ and ‘freedom’ stem from research by and discussions I have had with my University of Hertfordshire colleagues Professor Owen Davies and Dr Ceri Houlbrook for part of our joint Electric Generations project. I am grateful for their permission to use some of those ideas in this article.

1 Woman’s Way, First Fortnight in October 1965.
2 Kirsi Saarikangas, ‘Displays of the everyday: relations between gender and the visibility of domestic work in the modern Finnish kitchen from the 1930s to the 1950s’ in Gender, Place and Culture, 13, 2 (2006), p 161.
3 The Irish Independent, 12 December 1934.
The considerations given to the design of this house and in particular the kitchen, were part of a broader international trend. Writing in *The Electrical Age* published in Britain, Hedwig Auspitz offered an alternative kitchen layout that promised to save the average woman many unnecessary journeys across the room. By arranging appliances as Auspitz suggested, the flow of the kitchen was streamlined, allowing for a more efficient use of space.\(^5\)

---

Efficiency became equated with greater opportunities for leisure for the housewife. This was one of the dominant themes in ESB advertising in the 1930s. Advertisements from this period spoke of ‘new times, new ways’. Electrical appliances were convenient and easy to use. They meant that the housewife did not have to invest as much time in menial tasks with the result that she was less tired. Their functionality was such that they promised to free the housewife from ‘unnecessary toil’, leaving her to ‘rest and read and recapture that sense of buoyant joy in life which comes from congenial work and compensating ease’.

Yet despite these promised advantages, some who encountered electricity for the first time feared its power. There was a concern, albeit unfounded, about potential fire risks, particularly in places where many roofs were thatched. Nora Humphreys recalled:

> My mother was afraid of the switches because they might set fire to the place. She got accustomed to it then and was delighted with it. Before that, a double wick oil lamp used to hang in the centre of the ceiling, with a weight over by the wall so that you could drop the lamp down.

In its early years, ESB invested a lot of time educating people on how safe electricity was, especially compared to fires and oil lamps. One downside of electric light that was not mentioned however, was the brightness it brought to people’s homes and the implications that had for housework! As Kitty Fingleton recalled:

> Sure when we got electricity we didn’t know where we were, with it shining all over the place. You could see every bit of dirt in the house.

6 ‘New times, new ways’ advertisement, ESB Archives <https://i0.wp.com/ruralelectric.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/esb_30s_08.jpg>.
7 ‘Leisure’ advertisements, ESB Archives <https://i1.wp.com/ruralelectric.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/esb_30s_03.jpg>.
We used to say, ‘now you can see the dirt!’ And you couldn’t see it before with the candle and the lamps.  

As work began to connect rural Ireland to the electricity grid in 1946, the divisions between urban and rural living gradually blurred. The Irish Countrywomen’s Association (ICA) – founded in 1910 as a non-political and non-sectarian organisation – actively supported the campaign for rural electrification and the installation of piped water. Along with ESB, it played an important role in educating rural women at this time about the advantages offered by electricity.

The organisation collaborated with ESB for the Spring Show Exhibition at the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) in Dublin in 1957. ESB had had a rural electrification stand at the show since 1947 but the Simmonscourt extension to the RDS provided space for more elaborate exhibitions.  

Designed by Eleanor Butler, the kitchen was staffed by members of the ICA and ESB employees and proved hugely popular. As noted at the time, one of the principal attractions was the fact that it was a modification of an existing kitchen, showing the ease with which electrical living could be incorporated into the home. A mobile version of the farm kitchen also toured the country.

---

8 Quoted in Older than Ireland: Tales, Wit and Wisdom from the Centenarians of Ireland (Dublin, 2016), p 29.
10 Shiel, ibid, p 173.
11 The Irish Press, 9 May 1957.
Throughout the 1950s, ESB demonstrators used these mobile devices to show people the benefits of electricity in both the home and on the farm. Old and new are brilliantly captured in this image from July 1957 in which a local woman is introduced to an electric cooker.
Although domestic consumption of electricity increased steadily from the 1950s, many homes still relied on gas appliances. Consequently, when strike notice was served on the Dublin Gas Company, Dublin housewives began to prepare themselves for temporary disruption to their daily lives. Electric rings, electric kettles and electric coffee pots were in much demand in April 1961 as for example, the *Evening Herald* reported that Dublin housewives were preparing for a ‘kitchen emergency’.\(^{12}\)

This ‘emergency’ might have motivated housewives to turn to electricity but it was essentially the growth in economic prosperity during the 1960s that led to the emergence of a consumer society. Access to electrical goods prior to the 1960s was not only dependent on whether a house was connected to the electricity grid but it was also a class issue. In 1995, Caitriona Clear invited members of the public to participate in her study of housework during the period between 1921 and 1961. She noted of the responses she received, ‘women remembering their own working lives exhibited, in about equal measure, great pride at the range and application of their skills, and resentment at the deprivations they had experienced’.\(^ {13}\)

Some women were simply resigned to their lot. In an interview for *Radharc*, for example, Bridget Brown, mother of the acclaimed author and painter Christy Brown, explained about washing for her family of 20, ‘You get used to it … it always has to be done’.\(^ {14}\) In analysing her respondents and drawing on a particular comment that one bachelor son made about his mother, Clear pondered if lower to middle class and medium- to small-farming women in Ireland between 1921 and 1961 were ‘saints’. ‘There can be no doubt’, she concluded, ‘these women lived lives that were “hard” in the sense of hard-working’.\(^ {15}\) The extent to which the economic recovery of the 1960s really transformed the lives of housewives will be commented on later in this article.

Reflecting an international trend, the purchasing power of middle-class Irish women was directly targeted by advertisers in the 1960s. Agencies like the J Walter Thompson Company poured resources into understanding the shopping habits of American women so that they could advise their clients on how to market their products more effectively.\(^ {16}\) Similarly, market research was conducted in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s to produce understandings of and information about the spending habits of the housewife.\(^ {17}\) The pages of Irish women’s magazines were filled with layouts about and advertisements for washing machines, electric cookers,

---

\(^{12}\) The *Evening Herald*, 15 April 1961.

\(^{13}\) Caitriona Clear, "A living saint if ever there was one": work, austerity and authority in the lives of Irish women of the house, 1921–1961’ in Jacqueline Hill and Colm Lennon (eds), *Luxury and Austerity* (Dublin, 1999), p 213.

\(^{14}\) Extract from *Radharc*, broadcast on 18 October 1962.

\(^{15}\) Clear, op cit, p 223.


\(^{17}\) Nixon, ibid, pp 68–69.
refrigerators, dishwashers, electric whisks, vacuum cleaners and electric irons etc.

Woman’s Way, Woman’s Choice and Woman’s View were among the leading popular publications that provided a picture of modern living which had been facilitated by electricity, piped water and affordable technological advancements promising to modernise lives, give women back hours in the day and thus create new lifestyles. This was part of a worldwide trend in women’s magazines that presented the electrified house as the norm and as Saarikangas suggested, the kitchen was at the heart of this all-electric, modern house. Woman’s Way captured this evolution in its ‘Here’s the Kitchen’ colour feature published during 1966.

For working...for living...
HERE’S THE KITCHEN

Feature on modern kitchens, Woman’s Way, January 1966. Courtesy of Woman’s Way magazine

---

19 Woman’s Way, January 1966.
Electricity and piped water had transformed the kitchen from a place of work to a place for all the family and for visitors too. In opening up the space and creating a new social purpose – ‘for living’ – for the room, a higher standard of appearance was also expected. New electric-powered technologies not only had a practical function, they also displayed pieces of which the housewife could be proud. The room became an extension of her own appearance and her reputation. Domesticity was glamourised. Earlier advertisements had emphasised the functionality of electrical appliances but the theme now shifted to freedom and lifestyle. While timesaving was emphasised, there was a greater focus on gracious living, luxury and elegance.

The extent to which everyday life for the Irish housewife really matched the lifestyle depicted in such advertisements and magazine layouts is debatable. Women’s magazines after all, are considered by many scholars of popular culture to be sites of escapism that offered aspirational lifestyles or fantasies – ones that women enjoyed but were capable of separating from reality. Nonetheless, as electrical appliances – particularly items like the refrigerator, fridge freezer, cooker and washing machine – became more affordable and therefore accessible to women, they altered the day-to-day pattern of their lives.

*Woman’s Way* was not exaggerating when a feature in the magazine claimed that refrigerators offered a ‘new approach to home life’. They had the potential to completely change the housewife’s routine. The freezer component meant that she could shop less often and ‘cold cooking’ became fashionable. Titles commonly found in Irish kitchens in the 1960s included *Cold Cookery: the Electric Refrigerator Home Handbook* and *Good Housekeeping’s Cold Cookery*.

Because cold storage meant that complete meals could be prepared some days in advance, refrigerators even seemed to offer a new lifestyle that included hosting dinner parties – although this was possibly on the more aspirational end of the scale. The continuity of the timesaving theme with advertisements from earlier decades is obvious but the way in which these products and appliances were marketed to women had changed and was subsequently underpinned by a more glamorous lifestyle.

Monica Sheridan’s *Monica’s Kitchen* was one of the defining Irish cookbooks of the 1960s. With a blend of recipes for traditional and ‘foreign’ foods, her book symbolised an Ireland that was becoming self-consciously modern in that decade. The content was punctuated with pictures of kitchen layouts, one of which was captioned ‘Modern cookers have revolutionised our kitchens’. According to models advertised in women’s magazines, various merits

---


included the automatic timer that would switch the oven on, leaving a woman free to go about her day\textsuperscript{22} and the labour-saving benefits of electric cookers that could be ‘wiped clean in a whisk’.\textsuperscript{23}

Similar to the advertising campaigns for refrigerators, those for electric cookers augmented their functionality during the 1960s. Electric cookers not only meant cleaner kitchens but also cleaner clothes. The women who appeared in the advertisements were almost invariably stylish and fashionable. Advertisements for ESB’s electric cookers featured Grace O’Shaughnessy, an Irish model who had won the ‘Ideal Woman of Europe’ competition in 1966. Shortly after her victory, she was pictured on the cover of \textit{Woman’s Way} preparing a ‘tasty meal by electricity’.\textsuperscript{24} In becoming the face of electric cooking, O’Shaughnessy represented a shift in the style of advertising. There were lifestyle benefits for men too. One of ESB’s most ingenious advertisements juxtaposed two men and asked the question: ‘Which man’s wife has the electric cooker?’\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{ESB Advertisement, \textit{Woman’s Way}, May 1966.} 
\textit{Courtesy of \textit{Woman’s Way} magazine}

\textsuperscript{22} Feature on modern cooking, \textit{Woman’s Way}, 25 November 1966.
\textsuperscript{23} Advertisement for GEC Estate, \textit{Woman’s Choice}, 7 October 1969.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Woman’s Way}, 13 January 1967.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Woman’s Way}, May 1966.
Arguably, it was the electric washing machine that made the biggest difference to the housewife’s life. In 2012, Geraldine Kennedy, then editor of *The Irish Times*, asked the participants of a roundtable on feminism what invention changed their lives the most. Mamo McDonald – born in 1929 and a former president of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association – replied without hesitation that the washing machine had had the greatest impact. Along with piped water, these electric-powered machines freed women from the drudgery of fetching and boiling water and then having to handwash each item individually.

Kathleen Whelan’s recollections paint a picture of a particularly harsh life in the hills of Carrignameil in county Carlow. She would ‘bring the clothes down to the well in the field and wash them out there. And hang them out, put them out on the rushes to dry’. In the winter, the washing process was the same, although the clothes were brought into her house to dry.

Jennifer recalled how her mother would begin handwashing for her family of seven as the children left for school in north county Dublin on Monday mornings and she would still be washing when they returned home in the afternoon. When her mother got her first washing machine in the early 1970s, her life was transformed – a whole extra day of her week suddenly became available. It is hardly surprising therefore, that a 1971 survey of the attitudes and opinions of housewives towards the design of houses under three years old found that plumbing for automatic washing machines was one of the three most popular kitchen fittings for which respondents said they would be willing to pay extra.

Electricity gradually transformed the pattern of daily life for Irish housewives. The old ways, considered time consuming and labour intensive, were replaced by electrical appliances. Initially marketed as functional items that would save the housewife time, they evolved into facilitators of new lifestyles. But despite all the emphasis on progress, modernity, time efficiency and glamorous living, the subtext reinforced traditional expectations of housewifery: maintaining the home.

26 *The Irish Times*, 15 December 2012.
28 Interview between Jennifer and the author, Dublin, 27 March 2015.