Dogs in the Picture
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Dogs in the picture: restoring the queer history of the Irish family

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Dogs in the picture: restoring the queer history of the Irish family

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**ABSTRACT**
Taking the Irish pianist and music teacher Dorothy Stokes as a case study, this article explores alternative formulations of kinship in independent Ireland. It analyzes Stokes’s family life from two perspectives. The first is through her articulation of dogs as family within her abundant archive of photograph albums. The second is through her uneasy relationship to marriage as revealed in her correspondence with her lovers. The article argues that Stokes used the language and visual economy of marriage and family to claim her own ability to be a partner and a parent, despite her legal status as an unmarried. In a legal and social context that emphasized marriage as the sole legitimate basis for family life, Stokes’ alternative kinships are all the more striking and significant. They indicate the need to think differently, and more queerly, about the history of the twentieth-century Irish family. While recognizing the extraordinarily rigid and violent family norm promulgated by the state, the churches, and society in Ireland, this article seeks to explore how to write histories of the Irish family that are not tethered to that norm, recognizing instead the diversity of ways that Irish people practiced kinship in real life. The alternative visions of kinship that Stokes created never mapped neatly or consistently on to the normative categories they echoed – wife, husband, mother – and, in their potential to escape the logics of those norms, they could be understood as what Harlan Weaver has called ‘queer affiliations.’ They were never utopian or antinormative escapes from the family, but instead direct our attention to the messy abundance of family as it was lived in twentieth-century Ireland.

**1. Introduction**

On a driving tour in the 1930s, Dublin pianist and keen amateur photographer Dorothy Stokes paused several times to take snapshots of herself and her friends. Near Warrenpoint, overlooking the Carlingford Lough, she posed beside the car with her dog, Barney. Placing the image into an album later, she added the caption: ‘STOKES Family!’ (Figure 1)
Born in 1898 in South Africa to two musicians, Dorothy Stokes studied piano and went on to teach at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and the Alexandra College. She also worked as an accompanist and private piano teacher. Analyzing Stokes’ photograph albums, cultural historian Erika Hanna distinguishes between family life and what Stokes filled her life with instead. Hanna argues that the snapshots ‘display the sociable and full life of a single woman, comfortable at the centre of a large and unconventional circle of friends of musicians and actors’ (Hanna, 2020, p. 26). Reading the image taken by Carlingford Lough, Hanna argues that it is evidence for Stokes’ discomfort with the expectations of Irish family life. Her ‘status as a single woman without a family … caused her unease in front of the lens,’ Hanna writes, and the ‘STOKES Family!’ image was a joke that ‘played on this disjunction’ (Hanna, 2014, p. 98).

While indebted to Hanna’s work, I want to ask a different question here: What would it mean to take Stokes’ caption seriously and to ask, not how she made her life outside of family, but how she used the category of family in order to understand her own affective and intimate ties? Using her photographs of dogs as well as her correspondence with friends and lovers, I argue that Stokes elaborated alternative visions of kinship that
centered non-marital partnerships and cast her as a kind of parent to her canine kin even as she lived publicly as a single woman whose primary familial roles were daughter, cousin, and aunt.

I use the method of micro-history, building up a detailed account of one individual’s perspectives and experiences using, mainly, the ego-documents of letters, photographs, and wills, together with a small amount of genealogical research (Earner-Byrne, 2015; Laite, 2020). It is not possible to position Stokes as a ‘typical’ example: her profession, class, and social world set her apart from the majority of Irish people in the twentieth century. Stokes came from a well-known Church of Ireland family with ties to the medical profession and to the British empire. She largely grew up and then lived in well-off areas south of central Dublin including Glendalough and Sandymount, in households that included servants. Her work as a pianist placed her squarely within artistic circles in an era in which calling someone ‘musical’ was a euphemism for saying they were homosexual (Oven, 1981). All of these factors could be seen to loosen the hold that strict norms of sexual morality had on Stokes. Of them, probably Stokes’ professional and social circle were the most significant. Although the Church of Ireland was often seen as a challenger to Catholic moral law, in practice historians have found that social and cultural norms differed only very slightly by religion in Ireland (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 9; Hill, 2007; Jamieson, 2017; Richardson, 2019). Like most subjects of micro-history, Stokes was neither entirely representative nor utterly exceptional. Instead, her particular choices illuminate the landscape of possibility for a woman building a non-normative family in this specific and unusually constrained time and place.

Stokes’ archive raises important questions about the spoken and the unspoken within the practice of the Irish family, and it points, I argue, toward a means of thinking differently, and more queerly, about the history of the twentieth-century Irish family. That history has been dominated by the extraordinarily rigid and violent family norm promulgated by the state, the churches, and society. Using Stokes’ archive as a starting point, I ask: How might we write histories of the Irish family that are not tethered to that norm, recognizing instead the diversity of ways that Irish people practiced kinship in real life? How were Irish people able to imagine family otherwise, even as their lives and their horizons were constrained by the violence of this normative structure? The alternative visions of kinship that Stokes created never mapped neatly or consistently on to the normative categories they echoed – wife, husband, mother – and, in their potential to escape the logics of those norms, they could be understood as what Harlan Weaver has called ‘queer affiliations’ (2021, p. 19). Yet I stop short of reading them as utopian or antinormative escapes from the family, concluding instead that they should direct our attention to the messy abundance of family as it was lived in twentieth-century Ireland.

2. Writing the Irish family

The Irish family in the twentieth century was defined by exceptionally narrow norms, articulated in legal, religious, and cultural realms, that exalted the married couple and their children. This norm was codified in the 1937 Constitution, which recognised ‘the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights’ (Constitution of Ireland: Article 41, 1937). The constitution enshrined marriage as the anchoring feature of the
family. Furthermore, it structured that family through binary gender roles. Irish law, according to Dara Purvis (2019, p. 203), has, down to the present day, ‘repeatedly stressed the centrality of the family, while simultaneously defining family as produced by marriage’. The family’s purpose, according to this religious and cultural ideology, was not only moral but social. It was seen as the building-block, in particular, of an idealized Irish rural society organized around the family farm. And it was underpinned by increasingly strict cultural norms around sexuality. In their survey of marriage in Ireland between 1660 and 1925, Luddy and O’Dowd (2020, p. 157) find that premarital sex was increasingly seen as sinful, so that, ‘while young couples had more freedom to choose a partner by the 1900s, they had less freedom to spend intimate time with each other.’

The focus of Irish law and Irish norms was on verticality in the family: the dyadic partnership formed by marriage and its descendants, or as Diane Urquhart (2020, p. 3) puts it, ‘the rural stem family with its defining features of male inheritance, heir-based marriage, legitimate progeny and intergenerational residence.’ Like many norms, however, it was more an expression of anxious desire than a reflection of reality. Urquhart (2020, p. 3) dismisses the stability of the rural stem family and points instead to a ‘story of crisis,’ and Earner-Byrne (2008, p. 360) agrees, arguing that the Irish Free State’s family ideal ‘emerged at a time of great strain and profound anxiety regarding the viability of the Irish family assaulted by modernity, immorality, a low marriage rate and poverty.’

As a generation of scholars of singleness have emphasized, marriage was never universal, and single people played important roles in social and family life (Holden, 2007, p.2, 15; Vicinus, 2010). Although marriage rates increased in many places by the middle of the twentieth century, they remained unusually low in independent Ireland. In 1926, nearly a third of Irish women aged 35–44 were not married (Earner-Byrne, 2015). The Irish stem family ideal relied on extended families, specifically lateral networks of unmarried adult siblings who made often enormous sacrifices in financial and personal terms in order to sustain the ideal of the stem family on the farm. Single men and women migrated in large numbers, to cities in Ireland and overseas, where their work produced cash that supported the exceptional core family (Daly, 2006; Earner-Byrne, 2008). Irish society was marked not only by late marriage but also by sibling-headed households, and Earner-Byrne (2018, p. 644) argues that there is ‘plenty of evidence to suggest that the Irish were creative in forming surrogate families through a network of celibate siblings, uncles, aunts and fosterage.’ The Irish unmarried woman in the twentieth century rarely stood alone outside of family ties. In fact, she often filled some very definite and very important family roles. In her role as sister, she might contribute to sibling networks, taking on domestic or professional labour – or indeed becoming a sister religious – in ways that directly supported the maintenance of the extended family. She could become an aunt, a figure whose role in sustaining families in emotional and material ways is the subject of new scholarly interest and is worth more research (Barnwell, 2022; Khubchandani, 2022; Zaman, 2023).

Despite their crucial work in sustaining Irish families, unmarried adults provoked considerable concern. The figure of the farmer who married late or not at all is an enduring feature of post-Famine Irish culture, although the reasons for his exceptional celibacy remain contested (Luddy & O’Dowd, 2020). As Madden (2019, p. 181) puts it, the ‘established cultural narrative’ cast ‘the Irish bachelors of the early twentieth century’ as ‘geographically immobilised by issues of land and inheritance, or displaced into
immigration.’ In Dáil debates in the 1940s on family and welfare policies, ‘There was much talk of the country’s “big percentage of bachelors and spinsters” and the conviction that this was because people could not face “the difficulties and responsibilities of marriage because their incomes are not sufficient for the purpose”’ (Earner-Byrne, 2008, p. 366). Even when celibate and contributing to the stem family, in other words, the unmarried were cast as problems to be solved because they revealed that the nuclear family was not, in fact, self-sufficient and self-sustaining across generations.

Still, unmarried women like Stokes could dwell acceptably in the lateral spaces of kinship – as sisters and aunts. Stokes did precisely this. She was a sister and an aunt and a cousin. Her photograph albums include snapshots of days out with her nieces, and her papers include lengthy letters about settling a cousin’s estate in England after the cousin’s death. However, as I argue here, she also engaged in family practices that took her outside of the lateral support roles and into the verticality of lineage as a romantic and sexual partner and a head of household. She was a sister and an aunt, but she was also a sexual partner who understood her lovers through the rubric of marriage – yet without ever marrying. She claimed a kind of parenthood as well with respect to her dogs – and perhaps more important, she claimed a head-of-the-family status, a place at the apex of vertical family logic instead of a role in the lateral network.

This was dangerous territory. Homosexuality remained entirely unacceptable, and heterosexual sex outside marriage was also sinful. If celibate aunts and uncles were a source of worry, unmarried parents – especially unmarried mothers – were the targets of collective fear and punishment. They were repudiated in law: an unmarried mother and her children were not automatically regarded by the courts as constituting a family according to the Irish constitution (Earner-Byrne, 2008; Purvis, 2019). Single fathers were barely recognized: ‘If the parents are unmarried … only the mother of the child held guardianship rights automatically as part of her natural rights to the child’ (Purvis, 2019, p. 206), although these natural rights were regarded as ‘a second-best source of familial rights’ (Purvis, 2019, p. 209) compared with marriage.

But if single fathers were defined out of existence, single mothers, with their children, were multiply stigmatized and indeed criminalized (Garrett, 2020). Some left Ireland in order to hide their pregnancies. Although, as Redmond (2018) demonstrates, most Irish women who migrated were not pregnant, the experience of migrating to hide the shame of an illegitimate pregnancy was an isolating and harrowing one (Caslin, 2016; Moulton, 2014). The situation was exacerbated by the difficulties of obtaining contraception, especially for the unmarried, and, later, the need to travel to Britain to obtain an abortion (Cloatre & Enright, 2017; Girvin, 2018). Within Ireland, an extraordinary network of carceral spaces represented the punishment that awaited those women who transgressed sexual norms, particularly through the sin of single motherhood (Earner-Byrne, 2008). ‘Between 1922 and 1996 it is estimated that more than 10,000 women and girls were incarcerated in ten Irish Magdalen Laundries’ alone, leaving aside the other convents, industrial schools, and mother and baby homes which were the joint project of state, medical, juridical, and community authorities (Haughton et al., 2021, p. 5). This system only began to change toward the end of Stokes’ life. The introduction of an ‘unmarried mothers allowance’ in 1973, not least through the self-advocacy of single mothers via the newly-formed group Cherish, provided both legal recognition and, for many, a means of avoiding institutionalization (Grimes, 2023; Haughton et al., 2021). As Earner-Byrne (2008, p. 363) puts it,
‘There was little room for sexual individualism in a society that considered the family guilty by association with very real consequences.’ In transgressing her allocated kinship role, Stokes risked not only her own status but that of her family. Her kinship claims, as a result, were muted – half-unspoken but nonetheless real and significance.

Taking those claims seriously is one way of writing the history of the Irish family differently. The gravitational pull of religious and state rules is very strong. Even when we write about families who have been excluded by those rules, we often do so largely with reference to them. The history of families stigmatized and excluded by the Irish state becomes a history first of their exclusion and then of the processes by which they have gained social and legal legitimacy – how they have entered what cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin (2012) influentially described as the ‘charmed circle’ of what then counted as ‘good’, acceptable forms of sexuality. As Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin (2017, p. 499) argues in his important work on gay fathers in Ireland, ‘the politics of the family have entered a new era in Ireland, where paths to parenthood, models of parenting, and family structures are no longer following the dominant, traditional nuclear family model of the mid-20th century.’ But the roots of these new practices lie in earlier experiments in living as much, if not more, as in recent legislative changes. Attention to these antecedents is crucial. Otherwise, we risk giving the impression that alternative family forms are entirely novel. In Lindsay Earner-Byrne’s agenda-setting chapter on the history of the Irish family, for example, queer families, as such, enter only in the very last lines:

In 2015 Irish people became the first to vote for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. Irish primary school children are currently taught that there is no one type of family more privileged than any other through the ‘Different Families, Same Love’ campaign. Though it would be misleading to give the impression that this plurality of vision in relation to the Irish family is uncontested, nonetheless it is legally and democratically enshrined. (Earner-Byrne, 2018, p. 672)

But what about the queer families that existed well before a referendum on marriage equality could even be dreamed of? How can we map the landscape of Irish families, more generally, in ways that are not focused on religious or legal sanction, or its absence? Writing about the same era but a very different setting, Saidiya Hartman (2019, p. xiv) reconstructs the experiments in love and sex and alternative kinship of working-class black women in American cities: her endeavour is, among other things, ‘to untether waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology’. Untethering the history of diverse family forms from the legal, religious, and medical norms that pathologized them is an important part of restoring these families to the history of the Irish twentieth century. One example of this work is O’Toole’s (2016, p. 68) use of the idea of a ‘chosen kinship group’ in her analysis of the networks of support that Roger Casement built after he was ‘cast off from the Casements of Magherintemple.’ This network included ‘blood’ relatives such as his cousins in Liverpool, Gertrude and Elizabeth Bannister, but also a circle of ‘New Women’ (O’Toole, 2016, pp. 69–70). O’Toole (2016, p. 67) argues that they ‘circumvented this fixed heteronormative and patriarchal structure’ of family ‘by creating lateral support networks of their own, alternatives to more hierarchal family structures’ that ‘unsettled fixities of family and national affinity in Irish culture.’ Stokes and her dogs and her lovers offer another example and build up the evidence that
Irish people in the past did practice family in diverse ways that went well beyond recognized norms.

In order to analyse Stokes’ archive in a way that untethers it from norms, I draw on insights from anthropology and the burgeoning field of queer kinship studies that cast kinship as a practice. Anthropologists such as Carsten (2004), Franklin (2013), and Sahlins (2013), have, in different ways, articulated most clearly their discipline’s shift toward thinking of kinship as something you do, rather than something you are or something you have. Rather than focusing on rigid distinctions between ‘real’ kin, and metaphoric or fictive kin, they note the multiple, evolving, and sometimes contradictory ways that family has been defined using ideas about shared blood, DNA, or other substances as well as using formal institutions such as marriage and adoption. They also now see kinship as an important arena of creativity. Taking up these frameworks, queer theorists have also asked how non-normative practices of kinship among gender and sexual minorities might expand and reinvent notions of family (Butler, 2000; Eng, 2010; Evans, 2023).

Bringing these ideas into the history of the Irish family, I argue, allows for a more multi-dimensional consideration of practices of kinship that did not necessarily center around heterosexual procreation. Taking family as something that people do, rather than as a structure to which they are subjected, also allows me to move beyond a focus on the ideal and the normative when thinking about the history of the family. The question I pose is not ‘Was Barney a member of Stokes’ family according to existing norms?’ but ‘Why did Stokes use languages and practices of family to represent her relationship to Barney?’ The evolution of norms of family life, and the legal, religious, and social structures that produced them, are crucially important subjects. They are not, however, the sum of historical family life. We know that people ignore and transgress and transcend norms all the time. This article is a case-study in what we gain from switching our focus to the weird, vibrant, vital things people do with the concept of family. It is an exploration in historical kinship studies beyond normativity and beyond anti-normativity.

3. Dogs in the picture

The ‘STOKES Family!’ photograph is just one of dozens of images of dogs in the nearly thirty albums of Stokes’ amateur photography held by the National Library of Ireland. Tabulating all of these images and analyzing their form and visual grammar, I find that dogs are central elements of the networks of family and friends that Stokes is documenting in these images. To put it more strongly: Stokes used the medium of photography to construct a form of Irish family that includes dogs. In specific, I suggest that she locates dogs-as-kin somewhere between children and partners, but much closer to the former than the latter. Stokes is claiming dogs as family members in her staging of relationships in these images. Her claim is both playful and sentimental, but it is significant and intricately elaborated, enduring across decades. She makes this claim partly through the use of family language in captions, but even more strongly through the use of the vocabulary of family portraiture and images of domestic pets, which would have been familiar to her through her social context and her efforts to become a freelance photographer.

In the albums held by the National Library of Ireland, I found sixty-four images that included dogs, plus another four that included no dogs but animals of other kinds: some
cats, plus a donkey and a pet bird. The images mainly were taken between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s, with one image an outlier, in color, from the 1970s. They can broadly be described as snapshots taken in Dublin or elsewhere in Ireland (there are some photographs from travels further afield, but none of these have dogs in them). The majority of these images are taken outdoors, although a few are in domestic interiors. One album, undated and without captions, is titled ‘Friends and Dogs’ and makes good on its promise; the others have titles related to place and date, and usually feature captions. The captions don’t follow a strict rule, but in general, they mention something about the location as well as the names of the sitters.

Dog-owning and dog-breeding were increasingly pursuits for respectable women in early twentieth-century Britain and Ireland (Quick, 2019). Stokes’ photographs of dogs place her within a middle-class, suburban lifestyle. Stokes and her friends are shown in comfortable homes in Dublin, with pleasant, abundant furnishing. They are dressed nicely in clothing that suggests none of them works in manual labour. They can go to the seaside as well as on driving tours. When pictured in rural locations, Stokes and her friends often have props such as cars and cameras as well as clothing that suggest they are there as tourists, not as members of rural communities, still less as farmers or workers. Her dogs were not kept and bred for farming purposes, but for the purposes of companionship, part of a longer shift within Irish patterns of animal ownership. Adelman (2020, p. 131) argues that the arrival of the ‘dog show’ in Dublin in 1864 signifies the moment when the status of dogs in Ireland began to change: Dogs became ‘consumer goods,’ a means of indulging in ideas about lineage and status for the middle classes. The imposition of the dog tax in 1865 furthered this link between prosperity and dog-ownership, and the number of dogs rose in well-off suburbs but declined in Ireland overall. Living in south Dublin among people who, like her, kept dogs as pets, Stokes fits easily into the overall picture painted by Adelman (2020, p. 145): ‘Strongly influenced by English trends in dog fancying and dog showing, Dublin’s reforming middle classes defined the acceptable urban dog as a taxed, pedigree animal under the control of its (middle-class) owner.’ Stokes’ dog-as-family claims represent a means of participating in a class-specific practice. The images signify her membership of an international cohort of dog-fanciers, for whom dogs are domestic companions and leisure activities rather than part of working life.

Dogs are included within the compass of human life, and family, in the captions to Stokes’ photographs. They are named in exactly the way that the people are: there are no captions saying ‘dog’, any more than there are any that read ‘man’ or ‘people’, for example. Instead, the captions assert the individuality of the figures in the image. Over the course of the images, we meet dogs named Chappie, Sing, Mela, Hio, Tito, Tutu, Brandy, Sandy, Sally, Billy, Peko, Lassie, Mickie, Maida, Tho, and of course, Barney.

In some cases, Stokes uses the language of family directly in her captions. The photograph from the road trip with which I opened is the clearest example: she names the image of herself and her dog as the ‘STOKES Family!’ In the image, she poses with Barney, looking out to a camera positioned somewhere behind the automobile in which they’re sitting. That photograph was taken at Warrenpoint, just over the border into Northern Ireland along the shore of the Carlingford Lough. Another in this album was taken just a couple miles further along the coast road, at Rostrevor. It features a similar arrangement, but this time Barney is posing in the car with Stokes’ travelling companions. This caption reads: ‘Rostrevor/Una Nell & Barney.’ Barney is listed in just the same way as Una and Nell,
a named figure; here, however, there is no evocation of family. The two images make the case that, although they were all out for the same road trip, Dorothy Stokes’ relationship with Barney was of a different kind from her friendship (presumably) with Una and Nell. By contrast, consider the image taken in 1933 in suburban south Dublin, outside of a house, whose caption reads: ‘Grianan/Barney – Mother’. Here, Barney is placed in a family frame again, alongside a woman Stokes can name simply as ‘Mother.’

On a visit to Co. Kerry in the 1940s, Stokes photographed a hearth scene in what looks like a cottage interior. The clothing, furniture, and apparent religious symbolism on the walls all evoke a far more traditional, rural, western Ireland than the middle-class suburban Dublin modernity that she usually photographed. In this image, we see two women and a dog. The whole thing is captioned: ‘Killarney/Foleys at Ballaghisheen Pass.’ Like the ‘Stokes Family,’ here, the Foleys are a family unit comprised, not of a heterosexual couple and their children, but two women and their dog.

In a series of photographs taken in 1952 on a trip to Maas in Co. Donegal, Stokes writes captions that play with the ambivalent status of a dog in the family. (Figure 2) Three of the seven images on the page of Maas snapshots feature living subjects. The first is a portrait of a handsome dog, Lassie. The second portrays Lassie again, this time in the company of a man and a baby, the latter in a pram with some dolls. This caption reads, ‘Michael and offspring,’ giving the impression that both the dog and the baby are Michael’s children. On the same page, however, another photograph portrays Michael and Lassie over the caption ‘owner and owned’. On one level, this is a reminder that the dog-human relationship is not the same as the parent-child relationship – it involves ownership. However, the caption is also playful, leaving, it seems to me, a sly ambiguity as to whether Michael owns the dog – or the dog owns Michael. Stokes used this caption on other occasions, too, to evoke her complex relationship with her car (Hanna, 2014). Taken together, the set of Maas photographs underscores Stokes’ priorities as a photographer. Lassie features in three images, including her own solo portrait, while the unnamed child is in only one, subsumed within that wry collective noun ‘offspring’.

Far more often, Stokes suggests the importance of dogs to family life through a visual vocabulary. Dogs are central actors in Stokes’ imagery, not incidental. I found only one example to the contrary, an undated photograph of two standing people with a dog in the foreground whose back is to the camera. This image stands out because it is so unique in the Stokes collection, which otherwise places dogs as the subjects of portraits, equal to if not more important than the humans they are being photographed alongside.

In these photographs, the dogs and the humans express physical intimacy. There is a sense of happiness. In a photograph taken at Rathmines Castle, we see a dog named Beacher jumping over Dorothy Griffiths’ leg, and then nestled in a basket that she holds. More often, the photographs show people are cuddling or holding the dogs, often in their laps. These images mirror Stokes’ relationship with Barney, evidenced by two images from 1933 showing her holding Barney in her arms and on her lap.

Dogs are placed in family settings. Stokes stages portraits like they are family portraits; through her framing and posing of her subjects, Stokes is positioning dogs as integral parts of the family. One of her preferred modes is the series of group of portraits on the steps of a home. In 1925, in the earliest dated album, there is a page of five photographs all taken at Dorney Court in Shankill in suburban Dublin, with six dogs posed in different configurations on the same step. (Figure 3) Stokes would
continue to develop this mode. In the 1940s, she returned to Dorney and captured a series of nine images on the steps and porch of the building. The first is the most diverse, featuring two women, a boy on a bicycle, and three dogs on leads. The rest of the images are variations on the theme of one woman – Hilda – and her dogs. She stands, she sits, she cuddles the dogs, they sit in her lap or at her feet. The album ‘Friends and Dogs’ includes more photographs along these lines. One series places a couple in a field with their multiple dogs. Another series captures different variations of another, more well-dressed couple on the steps of an urban-looking home, again surrounded by their multiple dogs. (Figure 4) The latest image in my collection dates to the 1970s and was taken in Co. Clare. It returns to the format of the ‘family portrait on the steps’ and depicts five people, spanning multiple generations, and in their midst, a dog. (Figure 5)

Occasionally, dogs seem to be positioned like partners. The ‘Stokes Family!’ picture is right below an almost-identical picture of a married couple, Mr and Mrs Cameron, posing

Figure 2. Michael and offspring in Co. Donegal, 1952. Album 233, Dorothy Stokes photographic collection. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
next to the same car in the same location. In many more cases, dogs are posed like children. Although dogs are far more frequent than children in these albums, there are enough images of children that it is possible to demonstrate that Stokes uses exactly the same visual vocabulary to depict her friends with their children and with their dogs. In other words, dogs supplant children, taking on their role in the visual economy of family snapshots. In the ‘Friends and Dogs’ album, for example, consider this juxtaposition of images. On one page, we see a woman on a sofa with a dog on her lap. Close by, on the previous page, is another similar photo with a man, presumably her partner, posed behind her and the dog. Mother and child; mother, father, and child: a sequence of composition that sits lightly but easily with the tradition of portraying Mary and the baby Jesus, with Joseph a more occasional anchoring figure. Flip forward a few pages and we find the same composition: a woman on a sofa, this time with two young children on her lap. In compositional terms – the arrangement of the figures, the lighting, the overall impression – there is little difference between the images; the only distinction is that the figures in the dog’s photograph are relatively calmer and happier testament, perhaps, to the photographer’s sympathies. (Figures 6 and 7)

In an essay on Chinese immigration to the United States during the era of Chinese exclusion (1882–1943), Johnson (2017, p. 107) analyses the photographs that prospective migrants used in order to prove to government officials that they qualified to enter as family members of American citizens. Some of these photographs were staged precisely in order to meet official requirements and were later deemed fraudulent ‘paper families’
Figure 4. Friends and dogs. Album 225, Dorothy Stokes photographic collection. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.

Figure 5. A family portrait from the 1970s. Album 223, Dorothy Stokes photographic collection. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
by government investigators. Johnson’s analysis, however, moves beyond questions of fraud to ask how photography itself could be constitutive of new forms of family. In her words: ‘family was not only constituted through the biological but also through the continual navigation of bureaucratic practices of surveillance, testimony, and state family record-keeping.’ Arguing that ‘the constructed nature of the paper family can help us reimagine how family can be conceived of in non-embodied ways,’ Johnson asserts that ‘photography can serve as an active participant in the construction of new formations of family.’ Like Johnson, I am not interested in adjudicating the ‘reality’ or the ‘truth’ of dogs-as-family-members in Stokes’ photographs. Instead, I follow her insight that the creation of families on film is itself a creative act, part of shaping and altering the contours of what family is and how we might think with it. Johnson’s ‘paper families’ may be fleeting formations, believed in by only a few viewers and only temporarily, but that does not render them meaningless.

Stokes’ photographs of dogs provide evidence of the existence of ways of thinking about and making use of concepts of family that have little or nothing to do with dominant social norms or legal structures in Ireland. And they underscore the value of
expanding the scope of family history to include unmarried women like Stokes as well as non-human actors. This raises the question of how to incorporate non-human kin. What is the family relationship Stokes is portraying? Are dogs like children, like spouses, or something else?

Historians of pets have traced a broad trajectory of their incorporation into discourses and images of the family, especially considering what Flegel (2015, p. 141) has described as the ‘blurry and indistinct’ line that separates children from pets. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Tague (2015, 2021) traces a shift from thinking about pets as either as servants or as useless indulgences, to imagining them within kinship lineages, and, by the century’s end, their absorption into new ideas about the sentimental family, bound by emotional ties. Early in the century, the linkage between pets and family formed the basis of scathing critiques of fashion, femininity, and how women could be corrupted from their destinies as wives and mothers: ‘Coddled and cuddled in the arms of their mistresses, pets usurped the role of human lovers and children’ (Tague, 2015, p. 96). By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, attitudes had shifted, so that art and literature now celebrated the bonds between people and their pets. They ‘presented pets as one more
outlet for women’s “natural” maternal care (Tague, 2015, p. 181). In sentimental family portraits, pets and children were presented as analogous, both inspiring love and requiring guidance (Tague, 2021).

The nineteenth century saw what Hamlett and Strange (2023, p. 9) have described as a ‘pet revolution,’ defined by ‘the expansion of pet keeping across different social classes and its widespread cultural acceptance.’ Dogs became ‘the most prized pet,’ in both emotional and financial terms (Hamlett & Strange, 2023, p. 13). Pets were reckoned as kin, or at least as part of domestic family life, in a wide range of nineteenth-century sources (Hamlett & Strange, 2023; Tague, 2019). The advent of photography in the nineteenth century did not disrupt the pattern of using pets within the visual economy of family representation, even as it brought with it new discourses about modernity, reproduction, and the relationship between the photographer and the subjects. Soares (2021) has examined photographs taken in the late nineteenth century in Britain by residential children’s welfare institutions which depict children with animals. While probably reflecting real relationships between residents and their pets, these photographs also served specific rhetorical aims: they ‘confirmed the institutions’ success in creating meaningful, affective family life reflected in displays of contented children attending to their pets with abundant affection’ (Soares, 2021, pp. 253–54). Similarly, Strange (2021) has analyzed amateur photographs of dogs kept by working-class families in Britain around the turn of the twentieth century. She argues that ‘photographs of working people with pets overwhelmingly skewed towards men and dogs, a reflection of patriarchal claims to extraordinary resources’ (Strange, 2021, p. 221). One echoes a ‘classic studio portrait,’ with a husband and wife posed just outside their house, visually linked by the dog who stands between them, pressed against the husband’s leg (Strange, 2021, p. 221). These examples are drawn from Britain, but there is evidence that such practices circulated in Ireland, too. In nineteenth-century Dublin, there was a dedicated ‘Studio for Children and Animals’ where photographs of these two linked categories of beloved dependents could be taken, while the painter William Osborne painted dogs for ‘the pet-owning urban middle classes’ (Adelman, 2020, p. 134). The early twentieth century also saw new ways to represent pets as their owners’ children. Quick (2019, p. 292) has argued that domestic science helped to form ‘the maternally loved, medically cared for, and scientifically maintained pet,’ a novel being that ‘relied on new configurations of womanly work, leisure, and emotional expression.’ In this connection, Stokes’ photographs echo advertisements for the new product of milk-replacement for puppies, which ‘drew inspiration from their counterparts designed for human babies’ (Quick, 2019, p. 295) and pictured puppies alone or with people, but almost never with their canine parent – emphasizing the role of humans in parenting these baby dogs.

But, as Monica Flegel argues, casting pets as children carried risks. If in the eighteenth century a woman’s devotion to her dog was a sign of frivolity, by the nineteenth it could indicate ‘failed sexuality . . . inability to successfully achieve full adulthood (marked by marriage and reproduction) and/or as an indication of queer sensibility’ (Flegel, 2015, p. 10). By the twentieth century, this was translated into the language of popular psychology which cast pets as child-substitutes that could meet – or attempt to meet – a woman’s psychological need for a maternal outlet (Holden, 2007). In a study of twentieth-century British diaries, Hamlett, Hoskins, and Preston discuss the case of one diarist, Florence, whose experience resonates strikingly with that of Stokes (Hamlett et al., 2021, p. 275). Like Stokes, Florence had several romantic relationships but ultimately remained unmarried. In her diary, she engaged directly with the relationship between parenting and caring for a dog, finding the comparison both
productive and threatening. She wrote frankly that she ‘would sooner be a dog breeder than a child breeder.’ When her mother’s dog died, she defended her own grief against simple psychoanalytic interpretations that might devalue her feelings as ‘misplaced maternal instinct or frustrated sex.’ Dogs and children could be compared; dogs might be like family; but mechanical metaphors were grating and demeaning.

Such an attitude chimes with the tradition of interpreting dogs-as-kin in ways that exceed human family ties. Surveying work on pets and families by sociologists, social geographers and psychologists, Strange (2021, p. 177) argues that this scholarship suggests that ‘these “more-than-human” families’ “kin” relationships with pet animals did not replace human-kin relationship but had their own distinctive qualities.’ While ‘popular perceptions of pets as substitute children have long historical antecedents,’ Hamlett and Strange (2021, p. 182) argue that, in their own historical work, ‘much of the affective investment in pets by those without children was grounded in animality: the particularly animal traits, embodiment and behaviours of the pet.’ Theorist Donna Haraway (2007, p. 67), too, argues that we need to conceptualize relationships with dogs in ways that go beyond mere metaphors to human-human relationships, rejecting ‘all the names of human kin for these dogs, especially the name “children”’ and longing for ‘ways to specify these matters in non-humanist terms in which specific discourse is at least as crucial as continuities and similarities across kinds.’ More recently, Weaver (2015), Malatino (2020), and TallBear and Willey (2019) have all, in different ways, called attention to what it might entail to think beyond the category of the family when conceptualizing relationships of care and intimacy.

It would be too simplistic to reduce Barney, or any of Stokes’ dogs, to partners or to children. Nevertheless, it is productive to ask what possibilities are opened when Stokes positions her dog-kin in ways that evoke partnership or parenthood. If the ‘Stokes family’ looks like a married pair – the juridical basis for a legitimate Irish family – is this a covert reference to how Stokes can see herself as a co-founder of lineal family? If dogs are like children, then is Stokes making an even more striking claim: that, as a single dog-mother, she is capable of founding and sustaining a family? And how does the doggishness of her family vision create possibilities for thinking otherwise about kin?

Such claims have particular resonance within the realm of queer kinship. Writing about the novelist Radclyffe Hall and her partner Una Troubridge, Bauer (2023, p. 996) considers ‘dog love as a queer phenomenon that challenges the primacy of the human as love object and in so doing troubles conventionally human-centric categories such as family, friendship, sexual relationships or coupledom’. Bauer examines Hall and Troubridge in their roles as dog-owners, dog-breeders, and participants in a middle-class, white culture of dog-showing that accepted them as a couple. They registered their dogs with the Kennel Club, choosing names that positioned the dogs ‘as a kind of queer canine offspring of Hall,’ but Bauer (2023, p. 999) argues that they ‘do not seem to have thought of their dogs as child substitutes: they do not refer to them as children or themselves as (dog) parents …. Instead, the bestowal of Hall’s chosen name on to the canine offspring marks a queerer form of kinship.’

What about Barney, and what about the other dogs in Stokes’ photographs? How do they feel? What do they think? Is Stokes the only active, reflective agent here in taking and captioning these images in order to express something about what dogs meant to her? It’s true that she has a great deal of power: she owns many of the dogs, she controls a good deal about their environment, she’s the one with the camera. However,
photographs are never only the product of the photographer, who, as Huber (2020) warns in her study of photographs taken by the Congested Districts Board, may be invisible and powerful but is not omniscient. As Philip Howell (2019, p. 201) puts it, ‘agency is better seen as the product of the relations between a whole series of agents in a dynamic system.’ The dogs are there. They’re doing things, too. They are making claims and affecting Stokes in ways that aren’t readily visible or comprehensible, but that we reduce to zero at our interpretive peril. Barney is so prominent in these photos that the initial family claim ought to be seen as in some way a dog-human collaboration, in which later dogs also participated. Would Stokes have interpreted and represented her dogs in exactly this way, had Barney been a different sort of dog? Barney’s own perspective remains more or less opaque to me, capable of being interpreted only through the double mediation of photography and my own inevitably human-centered understanding of what seems to be his confident, engaged physical presence within those images. In my sympathy for Stokes’ project, I might be ignoring evidence of Barney’s lack of autonomy, his status as what Yi-Fu Tuan calls ‘a diminished being’ (quoted in Tague, 2015, p. 4). Still, Barney and Stokes must have experienced what Weaver (2021, pp. 101–2) terms ‘becomings in kind.’ As Haraway (2007, p. 16) wrote about her dog Cayenne: ‘We make each other up, in the flesh.’ So, too, did the Stokes Family emerge as the shared result of what Stokes and Barney made possible for each other to experience and imagine.

As Tague (2015) points out, pets blur the boundary between human and animal, domestic and wild, and so offer unique opportunities for the articulation of new ideas about self and society. For Stokes, thinking family through the means of dogs – or vice versa – opened up possibilities for imagining family configurations that were not bound by normative categories. Under the guise of playfulness, Stokes photographed dogs in a way that allowed her to claim parenthood, adulthood, and the capacity to create a family nucleus rather than remain in more distant auntly or sisterly orbits. Of course, the photographs cannot reveal what motivations she might have had that she chose to leave invisible. Perhaps she rejected the equation of a woman’s fulfillment with the nurturing of (human) children. Perhaps she understood dogs as surrogate children, necessary to fulfill a void left by childlessness or the loss of a pregnancy or a child conceived outside of marriage, or perhaps she saw Barney not as a child at all, but as an improved version of a spouse. Perhaps she and her friends simply enjoyed understanding their dogs as kin; perhaps the dogs simply enjoyed it, too, and what these photographs record is a becoming-in-kind rooted in play and joy and unconcerned with precise definitions.

Writing about Stokes and her dogs through the lens of single motherhood might seem to risk devaluing the suffering of incarcerated and shamed single mothers of human children in twentieth-century Ireland. However, I would point out how profoundly threatening it was to challenge the centrality of the marriage-legitimated vertical family, even through the means of dogs. In her book, Adelman (2020) quotes a satirical poem from 1876 that plays on the fears than an aunt might favor her dog over her nieces and nephews when it came to inheritance. In other words, the poem suggests that the dogs might function as heirs, disrupting the lateral pattern of inheritance they assume to be normal with respect to an unmarried aunt. It ends with a plot to kill the aunt and the dog, a violent (if imagined) outcome that neatly and devastatingly echoes the annihilating exclusion visited upon single mothers and their offspring in twentieth-century Ireland.
4. Partners in the shadow of marriage

In her photograph albums – which look meant to be shared, at least with a close circle of people – Stokes elaborated a visual economy of doggish kin that situated her as parent or partner – a center, rather than an adjunct. The collection of her private correspondence and personal papers held at the National Library of Ireland suggests what might have been at stake in this semi-public performance. Here, Stokes’ experiences of marriage, or rather marriage possibilities and marriage-like relationships, are evident. With her lovers, as with her dogs, Stokes rejected normative categories and instead wove an alternative series of relationships.

Stokes’ correspondence reinforces the importance of distinguishing between the legal status of being unmarried and the broader personal or social reality of being single or unpartnered. Stokes was, emphatically, the former rather than the latter. Her passports testify to her legal status. Like British passports of the same era, they don’t record sex, but they assume that the bearer might have a wife (Moulton, 2023). As an officially wifeless traveller, Stokes occupied the role of ‘bearer’ and was fitted into Irish legal forms with a visible friction. Her letters, however, reveal that she took part in dyadic partnerships throughout her long life. She seems to have been engaged to men at least once if not several times, but she never married. Her partnerships with men could be long-lasting and meaningful, but she did not consent to translate them into marriage, which emerges, in these letters, as a kind of constraint, an unattractive offer that would have limited Stokes’ professional freedom. If she rejected marriage to men, however, she was denied marriage to a woman. The correspondence between Stokes and her last partner, Cynthia Garrett, frames their relationship in sentimental, sexual, and legal terms, demonstrating a clear awareness of the meaning and consequences of its formal exclusion from legal marriage.

Several varieties of heterosexual marriage appear in Stokes’ correspondence. Around January 1928, when Stokes was near thirty, she exchanged letters with a friend named George, a fellow musician who seems to have been an organist at a cathedral. In these letters we can see the practical dimensions of marriage as an arrangement primarily about finances and domestic labor. George is a widower; he writes at length about his thoughts on marriage and his desire to marry a young woman of independent means. Although his sister currently lives with him and helps him with the children, George wants to change that arrangement. ‘If I had no children I would live in a hotel by myself,’ he says, but he must maintain a house for them, and will continue supporting his sister even if he turfs her out.

Did George want to marry Stokes? Although he never says so outright, it seems possible from the subtext. She is, after all, a woman capable of earning her own living as a piano teacher and accompanist and also, based on other documents, the beneficiary of family wealth, so she met George’s financial criteria. In her replies to George, she seems to have suggested alternative solutions to his dilemma, such as hiring help directly, but George insists on sentiment: ‘The idea of a housekeeper would be awful having had a grand wife.’ Stokes threatens to lay bare what George wants to veil: that marrying is an efficient way of purchasing the labor of care and house-keeping. Stokes then tells George that she’s engaged. She resists his efforts to get her to reveal the name of her fiancé, although she does tell him his guesses are wrong. George, for his part, takes her news as a spur to open negotiations with a different woman, ‘a great friend whom I have known for a long time.’ Was Stokes actually engaged to
anyone else? Or was she merely finding an excuse to put George off – and to avoid further discussion of an offer that would have brought house-keeping, child-minding, and wealth to George, but precious little to Stokes beyond the status of wife? Here, in its starkest form, is the normative model of marriage that Stokes would consistently reject.

Stokes had a romantic relationship with fellow musician Harold Johnson in the 1930s (Hanna, 2014). Then, in the 1940s, she was involved with a man named Michael, to whom she became engaged. Michael wrote her very long letters, often from the Aran Islands, detailing his thoughts on the Irish language, music, culture, paganism, and more. Unlike George, Michael was not seeking financial gain through marriage, but his analysis was equally self-serving. Around 1944, when Stokes was in her mid-forties, Michael wrote her a long letter outlining his views on why marriage was essential to his work as a philosopher and an artist:

One should be able to live one’s philosophy, and this is perhaps largely necessary before considering actual expression. I think the neglect of this has been the cause of my failure to get anything written up to this. It is necessary first to submerge one’s isolated individuality, and this may be done by marriage. Therefore I think it would be an advantage to me.

He disdains any consideration of earning money. After a long discussion of his views on creativity and his plans for his complete works, Michael returns to his main theme: his need to procreate in order to succeed as an artist.

‘One has to be creative physically and intellectually, equally. I have not been satisfactorily so in either way, therefore have not been at ease. The two most complete and classical artists, Bach and Sibelius, have been settled and married men, with families.’

Whereas George wanted a housekeeper and child-minder, Michael, here, transforms Stokes into a physical portal for his own creativity.

Perhaps as a result, a distinct note of distance seems to enter their correspondence. Michael still writes lengthy letters, but he also complains about Stokes’ lack of response. In September 1945, for example, he writes: ’The only complaint I have is that your letter is very scanty, at least compared with my last, and compared with the ones you used to write.’ Stokes evidently tried to improve, but Michael continued to criticize her letters for not answering his questions and for being written in the midst of working too hard, in his opinion. Was Stokes putting him off with excuses, or underscoring the importance of her own creative and gainful employment?

In October 1945, Michael writes ecstatically about hearing from an old friend in Norway. He ‘was my best friend before we lost touch, and now I see that he still is (we don’t include fiancées in the same category as men friends. He has a fiancée too).’ The reassurance is oddly intense – is he protesting too much, and perhaps trying to hide that the line between man friend and fiancée is not so bright as he’d like? In any case, the relationship between Michael and Stokes was nearing its end. The last letters in the collection are from 1946. In them, Michael continues to complain at Stokes’ lack of letters, blaming her for upsetting his mental balance. ‘Any hint of being neglected by you upsets me enormously, as I am undoubtedly in love with you, and this leads to curious psychological aberrations.’ There’s no trace of how the relationship ended, or even which of them ended it. Michael’s complaints would suggest that Stokes ended things, but she did keep the letters.
The letters from George and Michael distill a distinctly unappealing vision of normative marriage, one that would require Stokes to focus on physical and emotional labor for her husband and (his) children at the expense of her own professional endeavours. They make clear that Stokes’ unmarried status was a choice. It’s impossible to know for certain whether she ever intended to marry her male lovers, but it seems probable that her engagement with Michael, at least, began at a moment when it seemed like a union between two unconventional artists could be equally unconventional in its dynamics. When it became clear that this would not be the case, Stokes turned away, but the possibility of a different kind of marriage remained alive to her.

In the 1950s, Stokes began a relationship with Cynthia Garrett. This is the only case in which we also have substantial numbers of personal letters from Stokes as well as from her lover, probably because Garrett and Stokes lived together until Garrett’s death. These, then, are the letters that Stokes herself chose to preserve from Garrett’s own collection. The letters between Garrett and Stokes are passionate, emotional, and shot through with the need for secrecy and discretion. Early on, Garrett, a widow living with her sister-in-law (Hanna, 2014), is frustrated about her current situation and the jealousy of those around her for her burgeoning relationship with Stokes. There is also worry about whether these letters will be discovered – Stokes writes at one point, ‘I was most disturbed when you said that you had left the letter in your other trousers, heavens above, would anybody have read it.’ At least one reference suggests that incineration of letters might have been another practice the two employed to avoid detection: ‘Darling, if you haven’t yet burnt my letter from y[esterday] may I have that one back - please.’

Some patterns are familiar from the letters with Michael. Garrett seems to be the more tumultuous and perhaps the more besotted or the more vulnerable partner. She’s stuck in this house in Galway unable to do as she pleases, while Stokes is a ‘busy woman’ in Dublin carrying on with her work – teaching piano, going to rehearsals, and so on. But rather than scolding Stokes, Garrett conjures a passive, muse-like role for herself, fantasizing about being ‘in your special little niche sleeping peacefully when you are working & coming to life when you have time for me,’ an idea she called ‘heavenly.’ And this time Stokes is in no way reticent. In November 1955, for example, she writes that she was longing to ‘take you in my arms and love you and hug you & kiss you. Oh damn, I have it very badly, like you. … you are the sweetest thing and I love you madly’.

Such open expression of love was an important aspect of the relationship, perhaps a necessary counter-balance to the requirement for secrecy in a society that condemned lesbian relationships. Garrett wrote: ‘Bless you & bless you for being so generous & so uninhibited, & telling me how much you love & need me. I appreciate it so much - I just sun myself in your love - like a smug little cat.’ Stokes may be drawing, here, on the long tradition of gendering cats as feminine, linked both with stereotypes of spinsters and with ‘domestic contentent and cozi-ness’ (Tague, 2015, p. 116) – a double connotation that might have been especially delicious to these two unmarried women seeking a shared domestic bliss. The reference to a cat underscores, too, how metaphors work in multiple directions. If Barney is a little like a partner, it doesn’t mean he can’t also be like a child, and finally something else entirely. Garrett is Stokes’ partner, but she’s also like a pet cat, and at one point like a child, when she describes herself feeling ‘orphaned’ after Stokes has gone back home.
Garrett and Stokes eventually lived together in what can be fairly described as the closest Stokes got to marriage. Like many other same-sex couples, they used their wills in order to create some of the legal security that marriage ordinarily does. They each named the other as their main beneficiary. In her will of 1963, Stokes left Garrett the income from her trusts as well as ‘any motor which I may own . . . all my furniture and articles of personal and domestic or household use’. Garrett’s will of 1978 gave some small cash legacies to other people, then leaves the rest ‘to my friend Miss Dorothy Stokes.’

In one very interesting letter, Garrett reflected on how the exclusion of their partnership from the legal institution of marriage affected them. Reacting to a quarrel they’ve had, Garrett describes their relationship as ‘too exacting & possessive’ – arguing that it is those things precisely because it isn’t a legal marriage. ‘The impossibility of a legalized situation – where one loves very deeply – is something of a tragedy - NOT that a legal tie is necessarily a permanent one – god knows – but it does give more of a feeling of security - & so eases the tension.’ Legal marriages aren’t permanent, in Garrett’s view, but they give a valuable feeling of safety. Garrett frames marriage not in instrumental terms – as a source of childcare or support for creative endeavour – but in affective ones, suggesting that the lack of social and legal recognition for their partnership actually distorted it in significant ways. This is very striking as an example of thinking about marriage and same-sex relationships many decades before marriage equality was approved by referendum in 2015. Would Stokes have refused it, just as she refused earlier offers of marriage? It is impossible to know.

Stokes was not married, but she organized her romantic life through a series of partnerships in which the shadow of marriage, to paraphrase Katherine Holden, was always present. From marriage threatened to marriage rejected to marriage denied, Stokes navigated a landscape shaped, but never fully defined, by the legal and social norm enshrined by the Irish constitution as the fundamental building-block of family life. Her personal letters support what her photographs suggest: she understood herself as the head of her own household, a full adult who worked, loved, and parented, albeit in ways that consistently exceeded the norms of her society. I’ve used Weaver’s concept of queer affiliations to understand these non-normative articulations, but it’s important to note as well how anchored they ultimately were in the logic of kinship. Stokes lived otherwise, but she did so in the language of marriage and family.

5. Conclusion

Taking Stokes’ photographs and letters seriously as kinship claims, I have argued, opens up some new possibilities for understanding the modern history of the Irish family. Stokes’ experiences were conditioned, in multiple intersecting and overlapping ways, by class, religion, and an artistic milieu. All of that gave Stokes the space and resources, both conceptual and literal, to live otherwise. But equally hers is an emblematic story. There is an important gap between a violently constrained family norm and the realities of life in Ireland. The specifics of her separate peace with that norm are defined by her professional and social contexts, but its very existence points to the need to refocus attention on the historical practice of family. This is especially important in Ireland, where the norms have been so powerful and so narrow and so reluctant to allow for the diversity of real practice, which ranges from the sibling network to the more transgressive relationships of someone like Stokes.
As an unmarried woman, Stokes’ most important family relationships were unspoken and hidden in plain sight. The norm is what is spoken: in plain sight is the lateral network of siblings that shores up and makes possible that norm. That lateral network, the sisters and the aunts, can be acknowledged but are rarely theorized. Then there’s what must stay unspoken, which is the claim by single women to be heads of households and parents. The carceral geography of Ireland existed to hide this reality in plain, ominous sight, but it was not the only location. Stokes is an example of how this reality was spoken and imagined, in ways that carefully avoided punishment but nonetheless preserved and developed alternatives. The Irish queer family did not spring into being in 2015 as a narrow variation on the norm. Instead, it had been nurtured in its diverse abundance for a long time before.

Notes

4. Album 225. (Undated.) Dorothy Stokes Photographic Collection, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
7. Album 221. (1940s). Dorothy Stokes Photographic Collection, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
8. Album 225. (Undated.) Dorothy Stokes Photographic Collection, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.

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Archival References

National Library of Ireland, Dorothy Stokes collection and Dorothy Stokes photographic collection.