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'Deeds not words' Imagining the Irish Countrywomen's Association and women's civic friendships

The Irish Countrywomen's Association and its locally-based guilds has been a site for women's social relationships for 100 years, offering women opportunities to make friends, to socialise and participate in educational and community activities. This paper begins by examining the background and history of the ICA, its main aims and activities Using Benedict Anderson's concept of an imagined community, Peter Nardi's discussion of 'civic friendship' and Michael Billig's discussion of banal nationalism, I examine how friendship is imagined in ICA's texts and publications. I will illustrate how ICA was originally imagined as the women's wing of the rural, co-operative movement and how friendship and leisure has become increasingly important in imagining the group in the present day. This paper then explores how the ICA and in particular the figure of the countrywoman, are imagined in tension with 'old' and 'modern' Ireland whilst arguing that this is a form of banal nationalism.