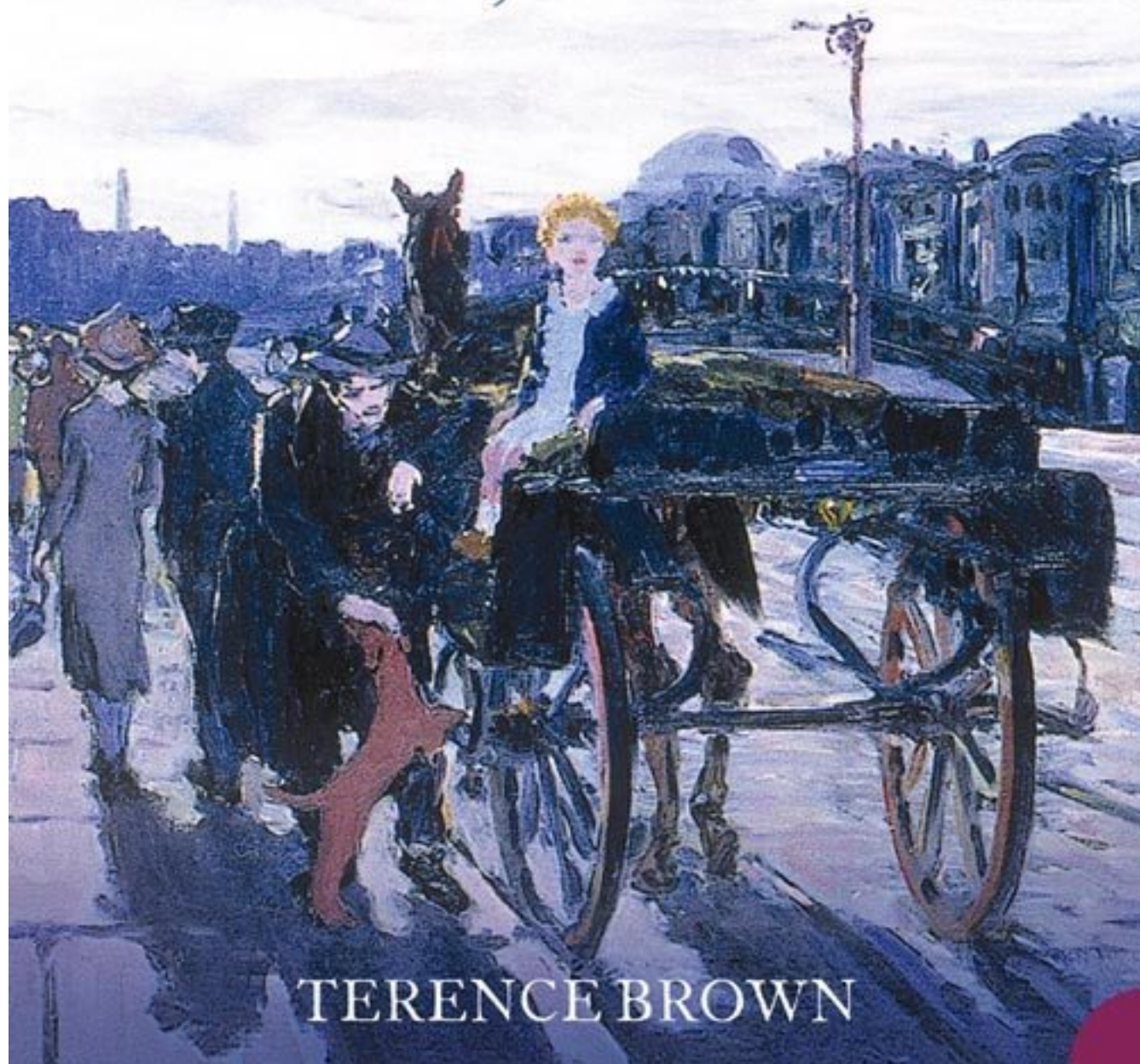


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Ireland

A Social and Cultural History
1922-2002



TERENCE BROWN

Dr. Brown

**Ireland: A Social and
Cultural History 1922–2001**

«HarperCollins»

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Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2001 / D. T. Brown —
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The seminal history of Ireland's most unusual century, thoroughly updated for the new millennium. With its starting point the bloody creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History explores how Irish identity has shifted across eighty years of unprecedented change and violence. What was the legacy of De Valera and Sinn Féin – or of remaining neutral during the Second World War? What were the effects of the establishment of a formally recognised Republic of Ireland in 1949 and thus the continued status of Northern Ireland as part of Great Britain? How has the state of virtual civil war that has existed between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland ever since altered the course of Irish history? Terence Brown evokes all the turbulent (and often confusing) events of the last century and makes sense of them, showing with skill and wit just how Irish culture escaped from W B Yeats' backward-looking Celtic Twilight towards modernity. Ireland: A Social and Cultural History is a fascinating work of synthesis – and an unforgettable book. Note that it has not been possible to include the same picture content that appeared in the original print version.

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IRELAND

A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002

Terence Brown

HARPER PERENNIAL

For Sue, again.

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Preface to the Second Edition

A new edition of a book written over twenty years ago offers various opportunities. One is the chance to correct errors that marred the earlier version. I have accordingly corrected a number of such errors and am grateful to those who brought some of them to my attention (in particular to Eamon Cantwell who directed me to a dissertation which convincingly identified the editor of the *Catholic Bulletin* in the 1920s).

Another opportunity that I have taken is to recast material so that where it read in 1981 and 1985, when earlier versions of this work appeared, as referring to recent events or to the present, it now refers clearly to the past. This has involved here and there some changes of emphases and, especially in Part III, the incorporation of some additional information. I should say however that this new edition is by no means presented as a re-written version of the book I originally published in 1981. In the preface to that volume I reflected on the difficulties of the task I had set myself then in composing a work of synthesis when so much primary research on twentieth-century Ireland remained to be done. Of course since that date, as I note in this edition, the field of Irish Studies has burgeoned and more works on the social and cultural history of the period have appeared. However, reading through my own work for the purposes of bringing it up to date in the sense that it now covers the period 1922–2002, I was sufficiently happy with the general thesis I had propounded in 1981 to allow it substantially to stand. Therefore what this book does now offer is a volume not in three parts but in four. Part IV deals with the period 1980 to 2002 (incorporating in chapter eleven some material which first saw the light of day in a postscript to the 1985 version of the text), where the first edition had 1979 as its date of termination. This section of the book is now quite lengthy, addressing as it does the quite remarkable events of the 1980s and 1990s when Ireland went from near bankruptcy to economic resurrection, when the “peace process” was inaugurated and the problem of Northern Ireland was confronted by the governments of Britain and Ireland with sustained determination. It was a period too when the Catholic church experienced crises of proportions that would have seemed unimaginable in earlier decades, as Irish society entered on a phase of profound self-questioning in an era of revelations and remembering. I trust this book will allow readers to consider developments of the last two decades of the twentieth century in the context of what had gone before and will take its place as a contribution to the ongoing debate about Ireland’s present and future.

T.B.

Trinity College, Dublin, 1 March 2003

Preface

The main focus of this work is the intellectual and cultural history of Ireland since independence. It will quickly be evident, however, that I am also interested in establishing the main outlines of the social history of independent Ireland since the Treaty of 1921. I trust that my reasons for entertaining these dual ambitions will be clear from my text, but it may be as well to indicate them very briefly here.

It was necessary to establish an outline of modern Irish social history for this study since to fail to do so would be to suggest that high culture – intellectual endeavour and debate, the arts – has a life completely independent of the social reality in which it occurs of a kind which I do not believe it possesses. Ideologies, ideas, symbols, literary and cultural periodicals, even lyric poems are social facts, just as potato crops, tractors, and new industries are, and they can be fully understood only within the material world in which they come to life. So a recurrent preoccupation of this book in its first two parts is the analysis of how, for much of the period, certain ideas, images, and symbols provided Irish people with part of their sense of national identity. For this was a post-colonial society beset by manifold problems, but anxious nevertheless to achieve an independent and distinctive life. Part III of this book looks at how these conceptions and aspirations fared in the new social order that has been in the making in the last twenty years, following the economic revival of the early 1960s. But what also concerns me throughout is how social and cultural change are involved with one another. So the modernization of the last two decades in Ireland is seen to be in part the result of social and cultural factors that had been in the making since about the period of the Second World War, when the framework that had held together since independence began to disintegrate.

It is this concern to measure change and account for it that determines the structure of the book. Part I explores in detail the social and the cultural life of the Irish Free State in its first decade. Despite some signs of change, there was a conservative continuum with pre-revolutionary Ireland, and minorities and critics in the new order had little chance to make their will felt. Part II considers both how and why that continuity was sustained well into the modern period, but detects social and cultural evidences of major change in embryo and analyzes the possible causes of these. Part III presents the social and cultural history of the last two decades in the Republic of Ireland as a period of striking change when set against the picture that Parts I and II have painted of the earlier years of independence.

In Ireland intellectual, cultural, and social history are each infant disciplines. The writer who aspires to provide a study synthesizing the three areas is faced therefore with many insurmountable difficulties, not the least that much basic research has simply not yet been attempted. As a result, this book is very much a provisional and speculative sketch, with few pretensions to completeness in most areas. It is of course the danger of such sketches, particularly of recent and contemporary history, that they become mere caricatures. But without such attempts to chart the field, more fundamental research may not proceed as it must do if more assured works are to result in the future. It is as a preliminary mapping of the territory that I hope this book may prove useful.

I am grateful to the work of those scholars and critics who have, despite the perils, ventured into the turbulent seas of twentieth-century Irish historical research. My considerable indebtedness to them is clearly evident in my notes and references. Some of them are my colleagues in Trinity College, and I am happy to record here my gratitude to them too for their efforts to respond to my often naive inquiries in the last few years. I am also grateful to Miss Geraldine Mangan and Miss Dee Jones, who typed the manuscript at various stages of its production. To my wife, Suzanne, who arranged many things so that this work might be completed, my gratitude is expressed in the dedication.

T.B.

Trinity College, Dublin, 1977–80

PART I

1922–32

CHAPTER 1

After the Revolution: Conservatism and Continuity

Canonical texts of Irish separatist nationalism have often stressed the social and cultural advantages to be derived from Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom. A free Ireland would embark upon a radically adventurous programme to restore the ancient language, to discover the vitality residual in a nation devastated by a colonial power, and would flower with new social and cultural forms, testaments to the as yet unrecognized genius of the Gael. Patrick Pearse, a martyr to the separatist cause in the Rising of Easter 1916, had prophesied in a vibrant flight of not entirely unrealistic idealism:

A free Ireland would not, and could not, have hunger in her fertile vales and squalor in her cities. Ireland has resources to feed five times her population; a free Ireland would make those resources available. A free Ireland would drain the bogs, would harness the rivers, would plant the wastes, would nationalize the railways and waterways, would improve agriculture, would protect fisheries, would foster industries, would promote commerce, would diminish extravagant expenditure (as on needless judges and policemen), would beautify the cities, would educate the workers (and also the nonworkers, who stand in dire need of it), would, in short, govern herself as no external power – nay, not even a government of angels and archangels could govern her.¹

That the revolutionary possibilities of an independent Ireland as envisaged by Pearse were scarcely realized in Southern Ireland in the first decades of the Irish Free State, which came into being following the Treaty of 1921, should not perhaps surprise. The dissipation of revolutionary aspiration in post-revolutionary disillusionment is by now a commonplace of modern political history. That, however, a revolution fought on behalf of exhilarating ideals, ideals which had been crystallized in the heroic crucible of the Easter Rising, should have led to the establishment of an Irish state notable for a stultifying lack of social, cultural, and economic ambition is a matter which requires explanation. For the twenty-six counties of Southern Ireland which made up the Free State showed a prudent acquiescence before the inherited realities of the Irish social order and a conservative determination to shore up aspects of that order by repressive legislation where it seemed necessary.

One explanation presents itself readily. The stagnant economic conditions which the Free State had inherited made nation-building of the kind Pearse had envisaged most difficult to execute. The beautification of the cities and the education of the workers could not proceed without an economic miracle that faith might generate but works in the form of major investment and bold enterprise would have had to sustain. Neither faith nor works could easily flourish in the insecure economic environment of the Irish Free State in the 1920s, in the aftermath of a civil war.

By 1920 the boom years of the First World War, when agricultural prices had been high, had given way to an economic recession made the more severe by the turbulent years of revolution and fratricidal strife which followed, until a measure of stability was restored in 1923, when the Civil War, which had broken out after the departure of the imperial power, drew to its unresolved close. The first years of the Free State, brought into existence by the Constitution of the Irish Free State Act in 1922 and approved in October of that year, were dogged by intense economic difficulty. This fact may in part account for the timorous prudence of the economic policies adopted by the new Irish administration which emerged after the election of August 1923. From the outset the government was confronted by harsh realities of a kind that might have discouraged the most vigorous of nation-builders. A serious strike of port workers lasted for six months in 1923 (cattle exports dropped by 60 percent during the strike); there was poor weather in 1923 and 1924. The summers “were harsh, gloomy and sunless, while the autumn and winter months were characterized by continuously

heavy rains which kept the soil sodden throughout and caused extreme discomfort to grazing cattle.”² Indeed, not until 1925 was there a fine June to cheer the many farmers of agricultural Ireland.

The economy that the Free State government had inherited and for which it assumed responsibility in these inauspicious circumstances had several major inherent defects. It was stable to the point of stagnation: a developed infrastructure of railways and canals was not matched by an equivalent industrialization; the economy supported too many unproductive people – the old and young and a considerable professional class; there were few native industries of any size and such as there were (brewing, bacon-curing, creameries, biscuit-making, and woollens and worsteds) were productive of primary commodities and unable to provide a base for an industrial revolution. The gravest problem, however, was the country’s proximity to the United Kingdom with its advanced industrial economy, so that, as the historian Oliver MacDonagh has succinctly stated, “the Free State...was not so much...an undeveloped country, as...a pocket of undevelopment in an advanced region, such as the Maritime Provinces constitute in Canada as a whole or as Sicily does in Italy.”³

Throughout the 1920s the government maintained a strict hold on the public purse, balancing the budget with an almost penitential zeal. Despite the protectionism that the Sinn Féin party had espoused in the previous decade as part of its economic plans for an independent Irish Republic, few tariffs were raised to interfere with free trade. The economic nationalism of the prerevolutionary period gave way to a staid conservatism that did little to alter the economic landscape. The government maintained agricultural prices at a low level to the detriment of industrial development. Accordingly, in the 1920s there were only very modest increases in the numbers of men engaged in productive industry, and the national income rose slowly. The need to restrict government spending meant that many social problems remained unsolved. The slum tenements in the city of Dublin are a telling example. Frequently adduced as a scandalous manifestation of British misrule in Ireland (they deeply disturbed that English patriot, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, when he worked as a professor of classics in Dublin in the 1880s) and also frequently investigated by official bodies, the tenements of Dublin might well have provided the opportunity for a piece of showpiece reconstruction to a newly independent nationalistic government. In fact, the opportunity so afforded was ignored. Conditions remained desperate. The 1926 census showed that in the Free State over 800,000 people were living in overcrowded conditions (overcrowding being more than two persons per room), many of them in north Dublin City. In the state in 1926 there were 22,915 families living in overcrowded conditions in one-room dwellings, 39,615 families living in two rooms, and, telling statistics indeed, 24,849 persons, living in 2,761 families with nine persons in each, resided in two-room dwellings. Infant mortality figures in Dublin, drawn from the census, tell their own sorry tale. In North Dublin City the average death rate per 1,000 children between one and five years was 25.6, while in the more salubrious suburb of Drumcondra the figure was 7.7 per 1,000 children. A contemporary observer remarked that “the story these tables tell is sordid and terrible, and calls for immediate and drastic action.”⁴ In fact, no real action was taken until 1932, when a bill designed by the Fianna Fáil Minister for Local Government was introduced envisaging a central role for the government in alleviating the situation. Perhaps poor housing was so endemic a problem in Dublin in the 1920s that it was difficult to imagine a solution.

Other kinds of enterprise were within the imaginative scope of the Free State government of the 1920s. These were to have a considerable effect on social life, particularly in rural areas. In the absence of significant private investment in necessary projects, the Cumann na nGaedheal (the ruling party) administration slipped paradoxically into a kind of state intervention that was quite foreign to its ideological cast of mind. Such enterprises as the Agricultural Credit Corporation and the Electricity Supply Board were the first of the many institutions which, established by successive governments and eventually known as the semi-state bodies, ventured where private capital would not. Indeed, the construction between 1925 and 1929 of a large power station on the river Shannon, under the

direction and control of the Electricity Supply Board, was one of the very few undertakings in the first decade of independence which might be said to represent a fulfilment of earlier separatist ambition.

It would be wrong, however, to attribute the devastating lack of cultural and social innovation in the first decades of Irish independence simply to the economic conditions of the country. Certainly the fact that at independence there was no self-confident national bourgeoisie with control over substantial wealth, and little chance that such a social class might develop, meant that the kinds of experiment a revolution sometimes generates simply did not take place. But pre-revolutionary experience had shown that artistic, social, and cultural vitality did not necessarily require great economic resources, since in a society almost equally afflicted by economic difficulties cultural life had flowered and social innovation been embarked upon. Indeed it was to those years of cultural and social activity and to the political and military exploits that accompanied them that the new state owed its existence.

An explanation for this social and cultural conservatism of the new state is, I believe, to be sought in the social composition of Irish society. The Ireland of twenty-six counties which comprised the Free State after the settlement of 1921 was an altogether more homogeneous society than any state would have been had it encompassed the whole of the island of Ireland. The six Northern counties which had been separated by the partition of 1920 from the rest of the country contained the island's only large industrial centre where a large Presbyterian minority expressed its own distinctive unionist sense of an Irish identity. Episcopalian Anglo-Ireland, its social cohesion throughout the island fractured by partition, remained powerful only in the six counties of Northern Ireland. In the twenty-six counties the field lay open therefore for the Catholic nationalist majority to express its social and cultural will unimpeded by significant opposition from powerful minorities (in Chapter four of this section I discuss the fate of those who attempted opposition). When it is further recognized that much of the cultural flowering of earlier years had been the product of an invigorating clash between representatives of Anglo-Ireland (or those who thought of themselves as such) and an emergent nationalist Ireland at a time when it had seemed to sensitive and imaginative individuals that an independent future would require complex accommodations of Irish diversity,⁵ it can be readily understood why the foundation of the Irish Free State saw a reduction in adventurous social and cultural experiment. The social homogeneity of the twenty-six counties no longer demanded such imaginatively comprehensive visions.

When finally it is understood that this homogeneous Irish society of the twenty-six-county state was predominantly rural in complexion and that Irish rural life was marked by a profound continuity with the social patterns and attitudes of the latter half of the nineteenth century, then it becomes even clearer why independent Ireland was dominated by an overwhelming social and cultural conservatism. As Oliver MacDonagh remarked, peasant proprietorship, outcome of the land agitation of the previous century "more than any other single force...was responsible for the immobility of Ireland – politics apart – in the opening decades of the...century."⁶ The revolution that dispatched the colonial power from the South of Ireland in 1922 had left the social order in the territory ceded to the new administration substantially intact. It was a social order largely composed of persons disinclined to contemplate any change other than the political change which independence represented.

The twenty-six counties of independent Ireland were indeed strikingly rural in the 1920s. In 1926, as the census recorded, 61 percent of the population lived outside towns or villages. In 1926 53 percent of the state's recorded gainfully employed population were engaged in one way or another in agriculture (51,840 as employers, 217,433 on their own account, 263,738 as relatives assisting, 113,284 as employees, with 13,570 agricultural labourers unemployed). Only one-fifth of the farmers were employers of labour. A majority were farmers farming their land (which had mostly passed into their possession as a result of various land acts which had followed the Land War of the 1880s) on their own account or with the help of relatives. Roughly one-quarter of the persons engaged in agriculture depended for their livelihoods on farms of 1–15 acres, a further quarter on farms of 15–30 acres, with the rest occupied on farms of over 30 acres. Some 301,084 people were employed in

various ways on farms of less than 30 acres; 121,820 on farms of 30–50 acres; 117,255 on farms of 50–100 acres; 61,155 on farms of 100–200 acres; and only 34,298 on farms of 200 acres and over. As can readily be seen from these figures, small and medium-sized farms were the predominant feature of Irish agriculture.

In this rural world, at least since the Famine years of the 1840s, two phenomena had been observable as aspects of the social organization of the countryside – a high average age of marriage accompanied by an extraordinary degree of apparent premarital chastity and the massive haemorrhage of emigration. Some simple statistics highlight these. The 1926 census revealed that in Ireland there was a larger proportion of unmarried persons of all ages than in any other country in which records were kept. In 1926 80 percent of all males between the ages of twenty-five and thirty years were unmarried, with 62 percent of males between thirty and thirty-five years, 50 percent of males between thirty-five and forty, and 26 percent of males between fifty-five and sixty-five also unmarried. The figures for women, while not quite so amazing, were also very high. In the age group 25–30 years 62 percent, 30–35 years 42 percent, 35–40 years 32 percent, and 55–65 years 24 percent were unmarried. These figures reflect a pattern of rural practice (the highest figures relate to rural districts) which had obtained, it seems, since the Famine. It was the 1840s, too, which saw the beginning of the modern Irish diaspora with its perennial emigration, which by the early 1920s meant that 43 percent of Irish-born men and women were living abroad:

1,037,234	in the United States
367,747	in England and Wales
159,020	in Scotland
105,033	in Australia
93,301	in Canada
34,419	in New Zealand
12,289	in South Africa
8,414	in India.

This figure of 43 percent compared remarkably with other European countries with traditions of emigration – Norway with 14.8 percent, Scotland with 14.1 percent, and Sweden with 11.2 percent (in 1921) – and most strikingly with most other European countries, where about 4 percent of their populations were overseas. The continuous Irish diaspora, under way since the Famine, kept the population of the country as a whole almost stable throughout most of the modern period.

Various reasons have been suggested for the strange marital abstemiousness of the Irish countryman and woman in the period. It has been argued, for example, that the influence of a French Jansenist professorship at the major Irish seminary, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, had an unduly puritanical influence on the Irish priesthood and people in the decades following the French Revolution and that this abstemiousness was somehow attractive to a Celtic people whose religious tradition had included masochistic excesses of penitential zeal and whose mythology and imaginative literature had combined male solidarity with heroic idealism.⁷

Rather than attributing the patterns of rural life in Ireland (marital abstemiousness and emigration) to some innate perversity of the Celtic personality, one is much more impressed with

the arguments of the social historians who have shown that these patterns have their origin mainly in the economic and social realities of Irish farming life in the post-Famine period. The argument is as follows. The Famine, in which the Irish rural population, particularly in the congested districts of the west of Ireland, suffered terribly, confronted the small farmer with the abject insecurity of his position and the economic folly of the mode of life tradition had bequeathed him. He did not own the land he worked, and he was likely to be asked to subdivide it to accommodate the domestic and social ambitions of his sons as they sought the early marriages common in the two or three generations following 1780, when, as K. H. Connell reports, “peasant children, by and large, married whom they pleased when they pleased.”⁸ In the years following the Famine Irish rural life was characterized not by the agreeable carelessness of earlier decades in matters of land and marriage, but by a calculating sensitivity to the economic meaning of marriage and in due course during the Land War in the 1880s by a political will to achieve individual economic security.

Rather than exhibiting that disinclination to bow to the “despotism of fact” that Matthew Arnold had promoted in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature* in 1867 as a distinguishing feature of the Celtic imagination, the Irish tenant farmer displayed in the post-Famine period an almost Darwinian capacity to adapt in the interests of survival and an attention to the despotism of fact that would have gratified Jeremy Bentham or Mr. Gradgrind. Fathers held on to their land as long as was possible, eventually supported agitation for land reform, which in due course came, chose which one of their sons would inherit the farm, discouraged the early marriages of their children, determined that the holdings would remain intact without subdivision, and faced the prospect that most of their offspring would be forced to emigrate, if not with equanimity then with a resigned consciousness that no other course was possible.

Irish rural life was like a raft afloat in the calm after a great storm. The Famine had betrayed so many that the survivor, conscious of the frailty of his craft and of the likelihood of future buffetings, calculated its precise seaworthiness and supported a social order that allowed no significant role in the countryside for those sons and daughters who could neither inherit the land nor make an appropriate marriage. For them emigration was the only possible route to a life without the frustrations and indignities of their position as helpers about the farm they neither owned, nor, accidents apart, would ever own.⁹ So, in the first two decades of independence, emigration was much less a reflection of demoralization in the countryside than a measure of continuity in Irish life and an indication of how powerfully the values that had taken hold in the second half of the nineteenth century still held sway.

Some historians have doubted the apocalyptic simplicity of this thesis, suggesting that the Famine rather confirmed and extended to the smaller farmers a way of life that had already established itself in the economy of the wealthier or strong farmers of pre-Famine Ireland.¹⁰ Be that as it may, even as late as the 1930s two American anthropologists, C. M. Arensberg and S. T. Kimball, found in County Clare a society and mode of life that preserved substantially intact the values and assumptions, the social and cultural forms that can most readily be accounted for in terms of an economic necessity made all the more stringent by the appalling depredations of the Famine. In the 1930s the prudent social values, reflected in postponed marriage and emigration, that had characterized the world of some larger, wealthier farmers even before the Famine, seemed dominant in smaller and larger farms alike.

County Clare, a remote county that had suffered much in the famines of the 1840s, may seem altogether too unrepresentative an Irish county to bear the weight of such a generalization, but in fact much of the farming life of the country in the early years of independence was similar to that found in Clare in the 1930s. Only in the cattle trade based on farming in Leinster in the east of the country and in dairying in central Munster to the south was agricultural activity highly commercialized. Throughout much of the rest of the country subsistence and mixed agriculture of the kind found in Clare, where farmers farmed on their own behalf with the help of relatives, was predominant.

Nor was it that the anthropologists in Clare had come upon a region which, having escaped by reason of its isolation the tides of modernization, exhibited traditional social patterns in extreme form. Rather the society they encountered there was obviously touched by modernizing forces – it was literate, open to mass communications, served by roads and railway, involved, often to an intense degree, in the democratic process, with a history of revolutionary political activity¹¹ – suggesting the degree to which the values and assumptions of the Irish countryside could be sustained despite a good deal of social and political change. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the life of most farmers in Ireland working their land with family help bore a close if not complete resemblance to what Arensberg and Kimball found in County Clare, even in districts closer to the cities, the centres of modernizing influence. That such literary records of Irish rural life in the twentieth century as we possess from different parts of the country bear out this belief is further confirmatory evidence. Patrick Kavanagh's autobiographical works, *The Green Fool* (1938), for example, and that searing indictment of the sexual frustration of the Irish countryman *The Great Hunger* (1942), set in County Monaghan in the east of the country, display striking resemblances in the ways of life they record to the picture the anthropologists paint of life in the distant west.

Arensberg and Kimball employed the term “familism” to describe the social structure they observed in the Irish countryside in the 1930s. They employed this term to characterise the mode of life of mostly small farmers engaged in raising cattle, sheep, and pigs, whose wives were responsible, in a strict division of labour, for the domestic economy of the house, for the poultry, milking, and dairying. The father was the dominant figure in the family, making all economic decisions, not even allowing his fully grown sons to handle money when produce was to be sold at the local fair in the town. A male child was exclusively looked after by his mother until his first communion was taken in the church at seven years of age. Then he came under the charge of his father and was in the company of his older brothers during that extraordinary “boyhood” which might well last until his fortieth or fiftieth year if he was the favoured heir and had not been forced into emigration or a job in the town.

Daughters of the household learned the ways of farm domesticity from their mothers until the time came for them to receive offers of marriage or to seek a life elsewhere. Marriage was a complicated process in which a matchmaker played a part in the subtle economic valuations that were necessary before the favoured son who would inherit the farm could be allowed to introduce a new bride to the household. Sometimes the introduction of the new woman to the household was effected at the moment when it was possible for the farmer to hand over the main responsibility for the farm to his heir (the old age pension allowed for this possibility when the farmer turned seventy), and when this occurred it was perhaps easier to avoid the tensions which must often have developed between mother and daughter-in-law. The centre of the house was the kitchen, and when the old couple “retired”, they ceased sleeping in that room and moved to a small room at the west of the house, where the family heirlooms, pictures, and religious symbols were displayed. As the anthropologists report, “They move in among the symbols of family unity, among the religious symbols of the house, into surroundings of a certain religious or sacred character.”¹² Their hierarchical position was maintained. The father could still occupy the nearest chair to the fire with the older men when they came to visit, and the old couple achieved an almost patriarchal status as the grandchildren were born. The society was strictly hierarchical, and the family unit was its fundamental organizing principle.

Co-operation in farming work between different farmers did exist in a system known as “cooring,” but this was not a sign of any collectivist impulse. Rather, it was a deeply felt system of obligation in the exchange of services and implements between individual households. The only interruption to this strictly familist social system was the help proffered to individuals who could not be expected to reciprocate in any way. A widow, for example, trying to keep her farm together with the help of hired hands, could expect a local family to help her out at harvest time, but again the impulse was not at all collectivist, but, in such instances, charitable. In Arensberg and Kimball's succinct

summary, 'Economic endeavour, both upon the individual farms and in the form of co-operation between farms, is controlled through the operation of social forces springing from the family.'¹³

The sons and daughters who could find no significant role in this system had a limited number of choices open to them. They might seek jobs in a nearby town, they might aspire to join one of the professions, or they might emigrate. An option firmly closed to them was the choice of finding a fulfilling role at home, for by the 1920s it was increasingly unlikely that they could find rural occupations that would allow them to stay in the district of their birth. Many of the rural trades and crafts that had flourished in nineteenth-century Ireland had declined in the face of competition from mass-produced goods, and the craftsmen and women of the countryside instead of being absorbed, as such people were in other European countries, by an industrial revolution in which their technical abilities were useful, had been forced into emigration. So even if the sons and daughters of farmers had been willing to accept the loss of social status entailed in following a rural trade, the opportunities to do so were rapidly diminishing and a future as a craftsman or craftswoman would have seemed as bleak as that of an unmarried son or daughter about the farm.

A job in the town usually meant the grocery trade to which a young man became indentured as an assistant until such time as he was able to set up business on his own account, often upon marriage to a farmer's daughter. The farmer helped with the initial capital required in the form of a dowry. Daughters were also so indentured and might have hoped in time to make a sound marriage within the trade. As exact an awareness of economic responsibilities attended the marital arrangements in the world of provisions and weighing scales as it did in the world of acreage and cattle. The values and familist social structures of the farm world were transferred to the shop and town, thereby ensuring that the cultural and political influence of the small and strong farmers in the country was augmented by that of the grocers and small traders of the town.

For those sons and daughters of farmers who chose to enter one of the professions through attendance at a seminary, at a college of the National University, or at a teachers' training college, the chances were slim that they could make their lives in their native parishes or indeed that they could even pursue their careers in a rural setting. By the 1920s only a few opportunities remained for a rural professional life in the priesthood and in the legal, medical, and teaching professions. If a boy or a girl wished to avoid emigration, a move to an Irish town or city was almost imperative where, in the trades, professions, and state service, they bore with them the values so indelibly etched upon their personalities by a rural Irish childhood.

The combined force of these two social groups in modern Ireland, the farmers and the tradesmen, together with such of their offspring as could find roles in the professions, was enormously influential in fashioning the political, social, and cultural moulds of the independent state. Their economic prudence, their necessarily puritanical, repressive sexual mores and nationalistic conservatism, encouraged by a priesthood and hierarchy drawn considerably from their number, largely determined the kind of country which emerged in the first decades of independence.

The role of the Irish Catholic church in directing Irish life into the narrow channels of a Jansenistic puritanism has, as was mentioned, been proffered by commentators as one explanation for the fact that so many people for so long in Ireland were able to behave as if those troublesome but exhilarating manifestations of human nature, passion, sexual aspiration, and the erotic principle itself, had been quite excised from the Irish experience. While social historians have been able to provide alternative, rather more credible accounts of a process whereby a society of farmers and shopkeepers developed, resolutely determined to restrain sexuality in the interests of economic realism, the contribution of the church as the institution which aided the process must also be assessed.

A study of the main developments within Irish Catholicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a prerequisite for any informed understanding of the social and cultural history of modern Ireland. The great nineteenth-century struggles in the Irish church between the centralizing, apparently ultramontanist party led by that organizational genius, the first Irish Cardinal,

Paul Cullen, and older, local, more independent forms of Catholicism had been resolved in favour of a church loyal to Rome. Concurrent with this political conflict within the nineteenth-century Irish Catholic church had occurred a remarkable devotional revolution whereby continental expressions of piety were introduced to an Ireland which adopted them with an astonishing enthusiasm, so that the texture of modern Irish religious life owes much to the period 1850–75 when that revolution was in large part effected. It was in those twenty-five years that the great mass of Irishmen and women were confirmed in loyalty to the modern Roman church and were provided with the symbols and institutions which might maintain and express that loyalty, which was a source of wonder to many a commentator on modern Irish affairs. The celebration of the mass was regularized (in pre-Famine Ireland the shortage of churches had led to a practice known as “stations”, whereby the priest celebrated mass in various houses in his parish), and new devotions were introduced – the rosary, forty hours, perpetual adoration, novenas, blessed altars, *Via Crucis*, benediction, vespers, devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the Immaculate Conception, jubilees, tridiums, pilgrimages, shrines, processions, and retreats. It was the period when popular piety began to express itself in beads, scapulars, religious medals, and holy pictures, and open religious feeling, as one historian has commented, was “organized in order to communalize and regularize practice under a spiritual director.”¹⁴ This organization included societies, confraternities, and sodalities. A programme of church-building was undertaken (in 1865 there were 1,842 churches, in 1906 2,417),¹⁵ and sound investments were made in land and property so that by the beginning of our period, reflecting on the piety of the people and on the rich inheritance of buildings and investment bequeathed by the nineteenth-century church, it should have been possible for the Irish hierarchy to feel serenely confident about its position in Irish life.

The hierarchy in the first few years of the Irish Free State, despite the inheritance of the nineteenth century, was nevertheless rather pessimistic about the future. The troubled years from 1912 to 1923 had often placed the hierarchy in very difficult political positions. During the Civil War the bishops had antagonized the republicans through their support of the Free State government, and they were disturbed by what they thought were signs of an unravelling moral fabric in a society which had experienced revolution and warfare and which was riskily open to the influence of rapidly developing mass media. Their concern was premature, however, for the great majority of the faithful were to remain loyal to the church practice of the devotional revolution until the late 1960s. Neither the political stance of the hierarchy during the Civil War nor the influence of an increasingly libertarian climate outside Ireland disturbed the religious devotion of Ireland’s Catholic believers. That it was maintained well into the modern period is attributable not only to the power of the church’s apologetic but also to the ways in which Irish Catholicism was precisely adapted to Irish social reality in the period.

Crucial to the institutional and popular achievements of the church in the period following the Famine until the 1960s was the role played by Catholicism in confirming a sense of national identity. The church, with her formally regularized rites and practices, offered to most Irishmen and women in the period a way to be Irish which set them apart from the rest of the inhabitants of the British Isles, meeting the needs thereby of a nascent Irish nationalism at a time when the Irish language and the Gaelic culture of the past were enduring a protracted decline. And the Catholic faith was peculiarly suited to play a role in that nationalist awakening. Bound up in the past with the traditional Gaelic way of life to which the Famine had largely put paid, historically associated with the repression of the eighteenth century, when the native priesthood had heroically resisted the proscription of their faith, permeated with that profound sense of the supernatural which had characterized the countryside for centuries, Catholicism was richly endowed with attributes appropriate to its modern role in the nation’s life. Strengthened by the Roman vigour of the devotional revolution, given a distinct tincture of Victorian respectability by the new discipline imposed on popular expressions of piety, the Catholic faith of the majority of the Irish people became therefore intimately linked with

national feeling. Accordingly, from the years of the devotional revolution onward Irish Catholicism increasingly became a badge of national identity at a time when the church also felt able to propound doctrines that enshrined the rights of private property. In a nation where nationalist aspiration was so often rooted in the farmer's rigorous attachment to his land, all this was to help ensure the church's continued role in Irish life, even though at difficult moments during the Land War and the War of Independence ecclesiastics felt obliged to oppose the tactics employed by political activists.

It is true, one must point out, that nationalist ideologues, at least from the time of the Young Irelanders of the 1840s, always strove to define Irishness in more comprehensive terms than the merely religious, seeking national distinctiveness in language and culture. But despite brief periods when enthusiasm for Gaelic revival showed some signs of translating itself into a major social force, transcending sectarian divisions (in the first decade of the twentieth century), Irish nationalists sometimes found themselves acutely embarrassed by the lack of immediately obvious marks of Irish identity apart from a devout, loyal Catholicism. Indeed, some of the strenuous efforts made on behalf of the Irish language were perhaps partially rooted in such embarrassment.

By contrast, few efforts were required for most of the twentieth century to develop Catholicism as a mark of national distinctiveness; the church was incontrovertibly part of Irish reality and the practice of religion an evident feature of national life. In 1926, 92.6 percent of the population of the Irish Free State were returned as Catholic in the census. From all the impressionistic evidence available, we can assume that the great majority of their number were regular in their duties and obligations. Sir Horace Plunkett must be representative of the many writers who have looked on Irish piety in the twentieth century and wondered. "In no other country probably," he wrote in 1904, "is religion so dominant an element in the daily life of the people as in Ireland."¹⁶

The Irish church was also successful because in spite of its ultramontanist tendencies, it was a national church in the sense that it drew its bishops from its priesthood and its priesthood in the main from the people. It therefore offered opportunities in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries for preferment and power in a society that had hitherto had little chance to avail itself of the one or to exercise the other.

This statement requires some expansion. Almost all observers of religious life in the latter half of nineteenth-century Ireland are agreed that during this period, significant numbers of the sons of farmers and shopkeepers were entering the national seminary at Maynooth, County Kildare, to study for the priesthood, as they were in other ecclesiastical colleges in the country. Furthermore, literary and journalistic sources suggest that the social tone of Maynooth in this period and in the early twentieth century was somewhat boisterous and uncultivated, dominated as it was by young men from the land, and that the education provided was rather less than culturally enlarging in its anti-intellectualism and sexual prudery, confirming the rural values in which so many young men had been reared. It seems many a farmer's son emulated William Carleton's hero Denis O'Shaughnessy, taking the road to Maynooth with more success than he. Gerald O'Donovan's interesting novel *Father Ralph* allows us a glimpse of Maynooth in the 1890s (it is important to remember that priests trained in this period would have exercised their ministry well into the 1930s). The novel, largely autobiographical, recounts the progress of a young boy of a wealthy Catholic family (they have houses in Dublin and in the country) from days of cloistered piety as a child to the tough practicalities of priesthood in a depressed Irish village. Ralph O'Brien at Maynooth discovers the intellectual poverty of the theological education offered in the 1890s.

During the few free days before the arrival of the general body of students Ralph... explored the College: the poky, ill-supplied divisional libraries, without catalogue, order, or classification, or any book that one wanted to read; the rather fine College library, not quite as despicable as the admirer of Marie Corelli found it, but still pitifully unrepresentative of any general culture.¹⁷

Ralph finds theological speculation of any kind dismissed by professors and students alike, all religious mystery apparently comprehended in a facile scholasticism. The best among them have a

simple uninquiring faith, while the worst employ orthodoxy as a means of personal advancement in the church. For the religious thinker there is nothing:

After a lecture in dogmatic theology by Father Malone, who demolished all the thinkers of four centuries with an axiom culled from Aquinas, delivered in a loud self-satisfied voice and accompanied by much table-thumping, Ralph often sat in his room, limp and confused, hopeless of his own future and of the future of the Church...

Ralph once ventured an opinion contradictory of Dunlea's notes. The Professor flushed angrily, but said suavely – "What is good enough for St Thomas and me ought to satisfy you Mr O'Brien. I'd advise you to read my notes carefully. They contain everything necessary to be known on the subject."

That evening during study Ralph read these meagre notes, the fine flower of Maynooth teaching, a superficial application of a knowledge theory to religion that carried no conviction. If this book was the best Maynooth could do, why had he wasted the best years of his life there? It reduced God to a series of abstractions, unreal and meaningless.¹⁸

The upper-class Ralph O'Brien also finds himself socially ill at ease in a church that appears to be dominated by the acquisitive prudery of farmer and shopkeeper. Both *Father Ralph* and a later O'Donovan novel, *Vocations* (1921), describe a social order in which church, farmer, grocer, and gombeen publican comprise a corrupt and corrupting alliance, intent on social advancement.

O'Donovan, a supporter of the Irish cooperative movement founded by Sir Horace Plunkett, and keenly interested in rural renewal, presents the church as an institution dedicated neither to spirituality nor the intellectual enhancement of the faith, but to material and social advantage. Other much less tendentious commentators suggest that his portrait of Maynooth as intellectually deficient and the church as lacking a constructive social vision was not wholly unfounded. Canon Sheehan, the priestly novelist and a really sympathetic observer of Irish ecclesiastical life, remembered in an unfinished manuscript his own days at Maynooth in the 1870s, where he was distressed by a prevailing careerism evident in such current phrases as "respectable position in the Church," "high and well-merited dignities," "right of promotion," "getting a better parish," "a poor living," concluding:

Only too soon will the young Levite learn to despise the self-effacement, the shy and retiring sensitiveness, the gentleness and humility that are such bright and beautiful ornaments of a real priestly character: and only too soon will he set his heart upon those vulgar and artificial preferments which the world prizes, but God and His angels loathe and laugh at.¹⁹

It was his judgment too that

...the general verdict on our Irish Ecclesiastical Colleges is that they impart learning but not culture – that they send out learned men, but men devoid of the graces, the "sweetness and light" of modern civilization.²⁰

Considering their future careers, Sheehan could remark, "It may be questioned whether, in view of their mission and calling, this is not for the best," but in 1897 he was moved to call for a Christian cultural revival in Ireland led by a well-educated priesthood, writing in terms that suggest the enormous changes such a revival would require:

Some of us, not altogether dreamers and idealists, believe it quite possible to make the Irish race as cultured, refined, and purified by the influence of Christian teachings as she was in the days of Aidan and Columba...

But to carry out this destiny, Ireland needs above all the services of a priesthood, learned, zealous, and disciplined into the solidarity of aim and principle, which alone can make it formidable and successful.²¹

Sheehan admired the unshakable piety of the Irish poor in a way that O'Donovan could not easily do. He valued "the gentle courtesy, the patience under trial, the faces transfigured by suffering – these characteristics of our Celtic and Catholic peasantry," and he felt himself keenly alive to "the self-sacrifice, the devotion to duty, the fidelity to their flocks, which have always characterized the

Irish priest.”²² Nevertheless, his comments on the social ambition of the clergy and their lack of humane culture tend to confirm rather than contradict O'Donovan's much more astringent analysis.

A church without intellectual or cultural ambitions of any remarkable kind was unlikely to attract to its service the most creative and imaginative members of society. Rather, it offered career opportunities to many who might have found intellectual or cultural demands upon them even more difficult to meet than the obedience, discipline, and administrative ability that were required of them by a powerfully authoritative church. Accordingly, in the first decades of the Irish Free State the church was unhappily notable in the main for lack of interest in artistic and cultural activity. The early years of the Catholic Revival in the later nineteenth century had, it is true, stimulated a good deal of architectural enthusiasm in the church, as many churches were built, some in the Hiberno-Romanesque style at the one time expressing the general medievalism of late Victorian culture and, more strikingly, attempting to establish a continuity with pre-Conquest Ireland which gratified nationalist sensibilities, but by the 1920s this style had become rather hackneyed and most church architecture and art (with the exception of some stained glass) were undistinguished. An exhibition of Irish ecclesiastical art during Dublin Civic Week in 1929 drew from George Russell's paper, the *Irish Statesman*, the regretful conclusion that “none of the Churches has thought it important to give their clergy an education in good taste as well as in dogmas,” and, that where some “natural good taste or love of the arts” does exist in the churches, “that appreciation is individual. It owes nothing to a traditional policy of the Churches.”

One comes away with the feeling that quality is of no importance, beauty is of no importance, anything is good enough for God and for his worshippers. We have bright brass vulgarities, a gaudy lustre seeming to be the only thing required, not exquisite craftsmanship, but commercialized work turned out with no more reverence than one would turn out boots or shoes.²³

Lest it be thought such a melancholy estimate of Irish ecclesiastical art was solely a response of the theosophist George Russell, it can be noted that a correspondent of the *Irish Independent* in 1932, casting about for examples of modern Irish churches which, because of their undoubted beauty and use of Irish art might reflect glory on the Irish church in the year of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, could think of only two, the Honan Hostel Chapel in Cork (1916) and Loughrea Cathedral (1904).

If then the Irishman was faithful to his church because it secured for him a sense of national identity, gave spiritual sanction to his hold on the land, and provided for his sons and daughters respected positions in society without the need for developed intellectual or cultural endowments, it is important to recognize that there was a further altogether more remarkable element in the attachment, which accounts for an important strand in modern Irish cultural history. For many Irish men and women the church was an international institution which allowed their small country a significant role on a world stage. This sense of belonging to a worldwide religious community was curiously linked to the internationalism of Irish nationalist feeling in the early twentieth century. For the phrase “the Irish race” that resounds through many nationalist utterances in the first two decades of the century was understood to refer not only to the inhabitants of the island but to the “nation beyond the seas,” “the Greater Ireland,” that vast number of Irish Catholic men and women scattered abroad (in the United States alone in 1920 there resided over four million people who could claim at least one Irish-born parent) who comprised an Irish diaspora. Indeed, it may not be unjust to see in both Irish nationalism and Catholicism of the period an effort to provide a counterweight to the international vision of British imperialism. If Britain had its material empire, the Irish could assert their dignity in terms of a patriotism and a Catholic spirituality which both transcended the island itself. Nationalist and Catholic propaganda of the period often echoes the rhetoric and tones of Victorian and Edwardian imperial celebration, and the Ireland that escaped the most cataclysmic effects of the First World War on the Victorian and Edwardian frames of mind continued to think in this oddly imperial manner

until well into the 1930s. In this mode of thought, Ireland as a Catholic nation has a peculiar destiny in human affairs.

A writer in 1937, for example, reminiscing on St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, managed a rhetoric which suggests the return of a Victorian British imperial official to his public school, seeing on the playing fields of Eton or in Rugby Chapel the destiny of nations:

In this place of memories one is apt for many fancies. To see the oak stalls in the College Chapel, darkening a little with the years, is to think of all who have been students there before my time and since. With no effort I can slip from the moorings of Past and Present, and see in this moment all rolled in one. The slowly moving line of priests down through the College Chapel is never-ending; it goes into the four provinces of Ireland; it crosses the seas into neighbouring England and Scotland, and the greater seas into the Americas and Australia and Africa and China; it covers the whole earth; it goes wherever man has gone, into the remotest regions of the world; it is unbroken, it is ever renewing itself at the High Altar in Maynooth...Some there were who prayed for a place in that endless line. They had counted the weeks and the days, even to an ordination day that never dawned for them. "Each in his narrow cell for ever laid", they are the tenants of the plot, sheltered by yew trees, beyond the noises of the Park. A double row of little marble headstones, a double row of graves all facing one way; they lie like soldiers taking their rest.²⁴

That such feeling, in a book that another writer, celebrating the hundred and fiftieth year of the college, called "a sort of second breviary...the Maynooth classic,"²⁵ represented a significant element in the imaginative life of the early decades of independence is evidenced by the fact that Eamon de Valera, on 6 February 1933, shortly after his accession to executive power, chose to open a new high-power broadcasting station at Athlone with a speech to the nation which made special reference to Ireland's historic Christian destiny. He was responding in the speech to the accusation that modern Irish nationalism was insular and intolerant. He began with an evocation of the glories of Ireland's Christian past. The new broadcasting station would, he informed his listeners, who in fact included many dignitaries in Rome,

...enable the world to hear the voice of one of the oldest, and in many respects, one of the greatest of the nations. Ireland has much to seek from the rest of the world, and much to give back in return. Her gifts are the fruit of special qualities of mind and heart, developed by centuries of eventful history. Alone among the countries of Western Europe, Ireland never came under the sway of Imperial Rome...

Because she was independent of the Empire, Ireland escaped the anarchy that followed its fall. Because she was Christian, she was able to take the lead in christianizing and civilizing the barbarian hordes that had overrun Britain and the West of Europe. This lead she retained until the task was accomplished and Europe had entered into the glory of the Middle Ages.²⁶

An opportunity now existed, declared de Valera, for Ireland to repeat her earlier triumph:

During most of this great missionary period, Ireland was harassed by Norse invaders. Heathens and barbarians themselves, they attacked the centres of Christianity and culture, and succeeded in great measure in disorganizing both. That Ireland in such circumstances continued the work of the apostolate in Europe is an eloquent proof of the zeal of her people, a zeal gloriously manifested once more in modern times in North America and Australia and in the mission fields of Africa and China.²⁷

The broadcast concluded with a call to Ireland to undertake the new mission "of helping to save Western Civilization" from the scourge of materialism:

In this day, if Ireland is faithful to her mission – and please God she will be, if as of old she recalls men to forgotten truths, if she places before them the ideals of justice, of order, of freedom rightly used, of Christian brotherhood – then indeed she can do the world a service as great as that which she rendered in the time of Columcille and Columbanus, because the need of our time is no whit less.

You sometimes hear Ireland charged with a narrow and intolerant nationalism, but Ireland today has no dearer hope than this: that, true to her holiest traditions, she should humbly serve the truth, and help by truth to save the world.²⁸

Undoubtedly this idealistic vision of the Irishman's burden helped to reconcile many a young man to the sacrifices of priesthood as he contemplated the depressing secular opportunities of independent Ireland. Indeed, since the 1920s Ireland has sent numerous missionaries abroad to serve the church not only in the English-speaking world, but in Africa, Asia, and South America. By 1965 there were to be ninety-two mission-sending bodies in Ireland,²⁹ and by 1970 the Irish church maintained "6,000 missionaries – 4,000 of them in full-time socio-economic occupation – in twenty-five African, twenty-six Asian and twenty-six Latin-American countries – evidence of a primitive energy or expansive potential in the religious life of a people."³⁰

A clear demonstration of the internationalism of Irish Catholic life was provided by the remarkable enthusiasm generated in Ireland by the Eucharistic Congress of 1932. Dublin had experienced a great demonstration of popular piety in 1929, when the centenary of Catholic Emancipation had brought half a million people to a mass celebrated in the Phoenix Park, but the month of June 1932 saw an even more extraordinary manifestation of Irish Catholic feeling in Dublin. Crowds gathered in such numbers that it is tempting to see in the occasion itself a triumphant demonstration by the Irish Catholic nation in honour of the victories won in the long years of struggle since emancipation which had reached a climax in independence. Special buildings were erected to accommodate the great influx of pilgrims; 127 special trains brought the pious to the city. For the entire week of the congress the *Irish Independent*, the most clerically minded of the national dailies, was in a state of very great excitement as it hailed the arrival of church dignitaries, including eleven cardinals from forty countries. The arrival of the papal legate, Cardinal Lauri, was headlined by the *Independent* as "The Greatest Welcome in Irish History." There were special candlelit masses held in the Phoenix Park, for men, for women, and for children. Four thousand people were received at a state reception in St. Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle and twenty thousand people attended a garden party in the grounds of Blackrock College at the invitation of the Irish hierarchy. The week culminated with a mass in the Phoenix Park, where a crowd of over a million people heard Count John McCormack sing Franck's *Panis Angelicus* and a papal message broadcast. For a moment Dublin must have seemed the centre of Christendom and Ireland truly a part of a worldwide community.

Those million people came from the remotest districts in Kerry and from the mountain fastnesses of Donegal; from Canada and the United States, from the Argentine and other South American countries; from the Fiji islands, from Australia and New Zealand; from India; from Malta; and from all the countries of Europe.³¹

Writing in the *Round Table* a correspondent reported, "It was essentially an Irish celebration, a hosting of the Gael from every country under the sun."³²

The church, therefore, provided for the needs of the Irish people in these particular ways. Occupying a role in Irish life that made it an integral part of that life, it enjoyed the unswerving loyalty of the great mass of the people. In the 1920s it used that authoritative position in Irish society to preach a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness, confirming the mores and attitudes of a nation of farmers and shopkeepers, denouncing all developments in society that might have threatened a rigid conformism in a strictly enforced sexual code.

The hierarchy was much distressed in the 1920s by the threats posed to what it sought to confirm as traditional Irish morality by the cinema, the English newspaper, and the cheap magazine, by the new dances that became fashionable in Ireland as elsewhere in the postwar period, by provocative female fashions, and even by the innocent company-keeping of the countryside at parties and ceilidhes. All occasions of sin were to be forsworn in the interests of an intensely regular life. A joint pastoral of the Irish hierarchy issued in 1927 expressed the Irish church's mind directly.

These latter days have witnessed, among many other unpleasant sights, a loosening of the bonds of parental authority, a disregard for the discipline of the home, and a general impatience under restraint that drives youth to neglect the sacred claims of authority and follow its own capricious ways... The evil one is ever setting his snares for unwary feet. At the moment, his traps for the innocent are chiefly the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress – all of which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race.³³

Pearse's programme for an independent Ireland, with which we began, had envisaged an economic, social, and cultural flowering as a necessary effect of freedom. I have suggested that economic stagnation combined with social and religious conservatism in a highly homogeneous, essentially rural society to ensure that the first decades of independence in the Irish Free State could scarcely meet Pearse's ambitions for a free Ireland (though the Pearse who precipitated the Irish revolution by his courageous self-sacrifice in 1916 would, one suspects, have found both partition and the treaty entirely repugnant, acceptance of the Free State a betrayal of the separatist faith). Undoubtedly another force was at work – the influence exerted on the country by the terrible inheritance of the civil war which followed the Treaty of 1921. In a small country made disastrously smaller by a border that had set six of its counties adrift, memories of those tragic months and the bitterness they fed perverted much goodwill and idealism, soured many personal relationships, tore at the heart of aspiration. And it would be wrong too to ignore the fact, to which J. H. Whyte alerted us, that it might be wise to see Irish cultural and social conservatism reflected most obviously in the Censorship of Films Act of 1923, the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929, and the motion of 1925 making divorce legislation impossible as merely a more extreme form of a general phenomenon "among the more traditionally-minded people all over the world"³⁴ in the aftermath of the Great War. But the fact remains that Irish repressiveness, whatever its cause, was extreme in those first crucial decades and that it severely stunted the cultural and social development of a country which a protracted colonial mismanagement had left in desperate need of revival in both spheres.

By the 1920s the depressed state of cultural and social life in most of Ireland was a theme of some ancestry in the writing of social commentators. Sir William Wilde in 1853 in his *Irish Popular Superstitions* had lamented the decline of folk tradition in the wake of the Famine, sketching a grim picture of rural desolation:

The old forms and customs, too, are becoming obliterated; the festivals are unobserved, and the rustic festivities neglected or forgotten; the bowlings, the cakes and the prinkums (the peasants' balls and routs), do not often take place when starvation and pestilence stalk over a country, many parts of which appear as if a destroying army had but recently passed through it.³⁵

Later, such writers as Sir Horace Plunkett in *Ireland in the New Century* (1904), W. P. Ryan in *The Pope's Green Island* (1912), and Filson Young in *Ireland at the Cross Roads* (1903) reflected on the dismal conditions of Irish civilization. By the 1920s the attractions of the dance hall and the craze for jazz that so disturbed the bishops had done much to put the remnants of Gaelic ways into the shadows. In the 1920s George Russell, the poet, visionary, and social activist, in his journal the *Irish Statesman* (of which we shall hear more) frequently expressed his profound depression at the spectacle of an Irish rural world without cultural hope or energy. Writing in 1924 he declared:

Nothing in Ireland so wakens in us the sense of stagnant or defeated life as to walk at night in a country district and to find here and there little knots of young men by a gate, seated on a wall, under the shelter of a tree, sometimes silent, sometimes engaged in desultory conversation, sometimes playing cards or pitch and toss. Life is in a backwater with them. Every now and then one drops out of these groups. He has gone to America. The sense of stagnation or depression becomes a little deeper with those who remain, and then another and another breaks away, flying from the stagnant life to where they believe life has fullness. The vast majority of those who go acquit themselves well in their new surroundings. They adjust themselves rapidly to American standards and become energetic

and progressive citizens. Their stagnant life in rural Ireland was not due to any lethargy, mental or physical. They had no opportunity for vital expansion. Where, in the vast majority of cases, could they meet except in the lanes? There was no village hall, no library, no gymnasium, no village choir, no place to dance except the roadside.³⁶

In his columns Russell and others lamented the lack of bookshops in the country and doubted “whether a single literary man in Ireland could make the income of an agricultural labourer by royalties on sales of his books among his own countrymen, however famous he may be abroad.”³⁷ Sean O’Casey, for example, regretted the absolute gulf between Ireland’s working class and the world of high culture, enquiring rather plaintively, “And why should the docker reading Anatole France or the carter reading Yeats be a laughter-provoking conception?”³⁸ Stephen Gwynn, the essayist, pondering whether an Irish writer had any sense of an audience, could reach no hopeful conclusion, opining sadly “men – and women – in Ireland read very little,” and, “talk is their literature.”³⁹

One of the places in which that literature was produced was the public house, a meeting place Russell, the tee-totaler, apparently could not bring himself to mention in his evocation of the deprivations of rural life. In his omission he neglected one of the more notable aspects of the Irish scene. In 1925 the Irish government commissioned a report on various matters relating to alcohol in the state. Their report presented a picture likely to give pause to the most libertarian. In the commission’s opinion there were 191 towns or villages where the number of public houses was excessive. Russell commented indignantly even as the commission was about its work:

It is merely absurd that a country struggling desperately to find its feet should attempt to maintain in proportion to its population, twice as many licensed houses as England and three times as many as Scotland. The statistics for individual towns are still more startling. In Charlestown and Ballaghadereen every third house is licensed to sell liquor; Ballyhaunis, with a total population of a thousand, has a drink shop for every twenty of its inhabitants, and Strokestown and Mohill run it close with one for every twenty-six. We wish Mr. Kevin O’Higgins had informed the Commission how many of these towns can boast a book-shop, a gymnasium, a public swimming-bath, or a village hall. Throughout the greater part of a rural Ireland such things are still looked on as ridiculous luxuries, and the mark of social progress is demonstrated by the opening of two public houses where one would normally suffice.⁴⁰

Russell would have found it difficult, as an ascetic idealist, to see anything but stagnation and cultural deprivation in a country where the only social expressions of large numbers of the population appeared to be talk, drink, and sociability. He saw, too, in emigration primarily social disintegration, not the painful dedication of the family to the inherited plot. He was surely right, however, in detecting in the extraordinary dependence on alcohol in the country and in the perennial emigration, sure signs of social waste, of opportunities neglected, and possibility frustrated.

In 1925 an American journalist travelled throughout Ireland and in his volume of observations managed a greater optimism about the country’s cultural future than Russell could achieve as the 1920s progressed. He wrote in hope, recognizing, however, that cultural life in Ireland depended much on isolated individuals:

At Enniscorthy it came to me very conclusively that scattered all about Ireland there is a small, highly-educated intellectual middle class which does not coincide with the moneyed people nor with the fox-hunting people at all – a class which, quietly living its own life and unobtrusively going its own way, is not often observed by the stranger. Nevertheless, it adds a very necessary leaven to the mind-life of Ireland, and it does not, as one of the ladies at the hotel said of herself “live to bloom unseen.” For those good and excellent people scattered over the face of Ireland, whose habits of mind force them to a certain solitude, may accept as a rather enheartening certainty the thought that when they sit alone playing Wagner instead of bridge or reading Joseph Conrad instead of someone’s palm, they are taking a place with honor in the community life of their country. There will be shy people at

the gate to listen, and there will be those in the library to receive the book. Ireland will grow slowly into its new life...and there will be an increasing number of those who will look up eagerly toward better things.⁴¹

Some of what follows in this book reflects on the experience of such solitary people and on their work to generate cultural and intellectual revival. Their experience did not bear out the confidence of this prophecy. The repressiveness, conservatism, and deprivation of Irish life in general, like the country's economic poverty, did not, unhappily, admit of such inevitable amelioration.

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