

by John Horgan

It has often occurred to me that if all the books which have been written in the recent past about 'modern Ireland' were laid end to end, it would be a very good thing. Certainly the Irish cannot complain of under-exposure. Constantly looked upon as something rather strange and yet attractive, this island has, especially in the past five years or so, been the subject of a considerable number of critiques, both external and internal, which are frequently united by nothing more substantial than the deliberate desire to misunderstand what it is the Irish are up to, and why. In addition, the illusion—created partly by the country's useful geographical isolation, and partly by the mistaken belief that we speak the English language—that Ireland is a subject which can be rapidly and conveniently assimilated, encourages superficiality. It is difficult to know which is the more offensive: the kind of book which portrays Ireland as a country ruled by the expertly-wielded clerical black thornstick, straining to escape from its thralldom to alcohol and internecine warfare, or its alternative, the book about the brave new Ireland striding manfully into the twentieth century and in the process of escaping the various forms of thralldom already mentioned because it has at long last learned to embrace liberal, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon virtues.

The attitude of patronage which informs each of these kinds of assessment is perhaps to be expected: what is devastating is that so many of the Irish appear to have made it their own, accomplishing in the process what some seven hundred years of attempted English domination failed to achieve, and what the inheritors of the spirit of the 1916 Rising have so far almost failed to prevent—the assimilation and, to all intents and purposes, the destruction of a still vital and individual culture. It is worth noting, in passing, that the most offensive statements of this nature usually emanate from British or American sources—that is, from people, many of them of Irish ancestry, who persist in regarding Ireland and its people not as a country with a history and an identity, but as some extraordinary poor relation of Anglo-Saxonry: the books by Paul Blanshard¹ and Tony Gray² adequately represent this trend. Continental writers, from Simone Tery³ in the 1920s to Heinrich Böll⁴ in our own day,

¹*The Irish and Catholic Power*, Beacon Press, 1953.

²*The Irish Answer*, Heinemann, 1966.

³*L'Irlande*, Flammarion, 1924.

⁴*Irische Tagesbüch.*

have a disarming—and sometimes equally embarrassing—tendency to treat the Irish as human beings in their own right, and to situate the admittedly thorny relationship with our neighbouring island in a context of sociological enquiry and historical reality which creates a badly-needed sense of perspective. If Ireland were to enter the European Economic Community tomorrow, its economy might be shot to pieces, but its identity might be more convincingly articulated.

In talking about the quality of Irish life today—and *a fortiori* when talking about the quality of Irish Christianity—two levels must be distinguished, the level of legislation and the level of actuality. Here we immediately run into difficulties, because Ireland is, at least in the legislative sense, not one nation but two, and because it is on the failure or success of the continuing attempt to make this legislative and political division a social and culture one as well, that the nature of any distinctive contribution Ireland may have to make to the inauguration of the Kingdom will depend. On one level this may sound like facile irridentism: it must, however, be stressed if we are not to fall into a mentality about Ireland which is historically naive and sociologically suspect. It is a very prevalent mentality, and not only in Northern Ireland, whose community leaders have a vested interest in its widespread acceptance. Even in the South, the organizers of cultural functions—including at least one Government minister who should know better—have expressed misplaced gratification at the thought that the presence of participants from North of that peculiar Border helps to give such events an ‘international’ flavour. People tend to forget that Edward Carson, the leader of militant Ulster, was born in Dublin; that although the Government of Ireland Act attempted to solve the Irish tension over forty years ago by engineering a crude division between the disputants, it is less than thirty years ago since Catholic and Protestant workers marched together through the Belfast streets carrying banners inscribed ‘We Want Bread’; and that it is only a few months since the protagonists of a Civil Rights movement in the gerrymandered city of Londonderry found themselves face to face, not with an enraged Unionist mob, but by an understandably nervous (and therefore noticeably brutal) constabulary deployed by an increasingly unrepresentative Government.

If I make this point at such length and with such apparent disregard for the other side of a complicated case, it is precisely because I believe that unquestioning acceptance of the partition mentality in Ireland is one of the greatest barriers to genuine human progress towards self-understanding that still exists in this riven island, and because both the books under review are guilty of it, although in rather different ways. Mr Michael Sheehy’s book¹—which in some respects represents an advance on his earlier work, *Divided We Stand*²—makes the mistake of assuming that the problem

¹*Is Ireland Dying?* Hollis & Carter, 1968, 256 pp. 30s.

²Faber, 1955.

no longer exists: indeed, he speaks confidently at one point of the 'settlement of the vexatious partition issue' (p. 178). In consequence his approach to the very important subject outlined in his subtitle—'Culture and the Church in modern Ireland'—is bedevilled by a legalistic and oversimplified approach which more or less confines his investigation to the southernmost twenty-six counties. He is also, and this perhaps should be explained for the benefit of post-Conciliar readers, referring only to the Roman Catholic Church, and frequently only to its clergy, despite the fact that some 25 per cent of the population as a whole does not belong to it.

This is equally, although from a slightly different point of view, a fault which mars Mr Desmond Fennell's interesting book.¹ The error here is less the politico-geographical one into which Mr Sheehy falls (it is less important in the context within which Mr Fennell is writing) than a socio-religious one which, in spite of disclaimers, identifies 'Irish' with 'Catholic' to an alarming degree. The title of his book does not, of itself, necessarily imply this, and he has a brief chapter on Irish Protestantism: but when he writes that in the 1916 Rising 'the hidden Christ of Catholic Ireland was revealed to unperceptive eyes and ears by Irish Catholics' (p. 206), we are perilously close to a nationalistic Messianism that not only excludes the witness of men like Tone and Davis but is false to the complexity of the Irish nationalist tradition. It is therefore with the greatest reluctance, only slightly relieved by the despatch of a few salvoes of abuse, that one can consent to deal with these two books within the arbitrary and unrealistic terms of reference their authors seem to think necessary and proper.

The theme of Mr Sheehy's book reappears at intervals throughout its pages, but almost always in the same guise. It is that Ireland is dangerously close to death, and that Irish Catholicism must bear the major responsibility for the Irish decline because of its 'grim outlook' (p. 108) and because it promotes a Puritanism which, 'seeing the human mind as essentially corrupt, obstructs its every vital expression' (p. 9). Later on he observes: 'If Catholic Ireland kept her faith in God, she lost her faith in man' (p. 227). His thesis, admittedly a personal one, is backed up by chapters evaluating the role of the writer in Ireland *vis-à-vis* the Church, the pursuit of national culture, the welfare state, and the Irish social conscience. The obligatory section on censorship is, mercifully, included only as an appendix.

On the factual level, there is little that can be quarrelled with in Mr Sheehy's book, unless it is his undue reliance on newspapers as sources of significant information and comment (a trait not shared to the same extent by Mr Fennell, whose homework is much more thorough and in some important respects original). Newspapers

¹*The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland*, Chapman, 1968, 224 pp. 30s.

seldom reveal the real richness of a community: this is a pity, but it is unfortunately true. It is inevitable, even in Ireland, that they will reflect to a large extent the middle-class ethos of the men who edit them and who write for them. This is why they can be slightly deceptive guides through the trackless territory of the Irish mind. But Mr Sheehy's quotations are accurate, his attributions fair, and I doubt whether I discovered, in the course of a very intensive reading, more than half a dozen genuinely factual mistakes, and none of these was of any significance. Where we differ is about motivation and analysis, and here I will be forced to criticize Mr Sheehy's 'logic of intuition' (p. 14) with nothing more substantial than my own logic and my own intuition.

One of the keystones of Mr Sheehy's thesis is the by now well-known theory that Irish attitudes to human nature in general and sexuality in particular can, indeed should, be traced to the influence of Jansenist professors from France in the early days of Maynooth's existence. This charge, made trenchantly by Sean O'Faolain in his disarmingly fluent *The Irish*,¹ is adopted and endorsed wholeheartedly by Mr Sheehy. It is, in fact, a monstrous canard. It is quite true that the early French professors of theology at Maynooth were suspect in many quarters. The charge laid against them, however, was not Jansenism, but Gallicanism, a rather different thing. This is made abundantly clear by the controversy which had a brief but fiery existence in the *Dublin Review* in 1879-80, and which had been coming to the boil since the early 1800s, when certain professors (Slevin and Crotty among them) strove desperately to prove the unorthodoxy of the dogmatic teaching of their French predecessors. Dr William J. Walsh, later Archbishop of Dublin, in an article of scrupulous historicity, went some way towards refuting the Gallican charge. On the other hand he 'readily admitted', according to his biographer, 'the rigoristic character of the early moral teaching at Maynooth. But this rigorism, he pointed out, was not derived from the imported French professors. It was due directly to Roman influence, and was in harmony with the contemporary teaching and in general use throughout the Church. In fact, its adoption at Maynooth was countenanced and even encouraged by the Roman authorities; after the foundation of Maynooth the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda actually presented the college with a generous number of copies of Antoine—an anti-probabilist theologian of exceptional rigorism.'² Mr Sheehy draw quite unwarranted assumptions from the facts of the friendly relationship between Jansens and the occupants of the Irish College at Louvain (the theologian had an apartment literally within a stone's throw of the building) and largely misrepresents or misunderstands the real nature of the original accusation.

¹Pelican Books, 1937.

²*William J. Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin*, by P. J. Walsh, Longmans, 1928.

Here, on the other hand, is where Desmond Fennell makes some of his best points, arguing that the deficiencies of Irish Catholic moral teaching then and since have been substantially due, less to the influence of a foreign theological ogre than to the fusion of 'the melancholy, blinkered world-view of late Tridentine Catholicism with the myopic utilitarianism and mental isolation of Victorian Britain' (p. 150). It is arguable, even, that Mr Fennell, who develops his first point admirably, fails to make sufficient capital of the second. The influence of Victorian standards and values on official Irish contemporary Catholicism went far beyond mere utilitarianism or mental isolation. Built into it was the whole substructure of Victorian hypocrisy about sexuality, coupled with an even more powerful factor: the pathetically earnest desire of a recently emancipated Irish Catholic leadership to demonstrate to the régime which had emancipated, and even to some extent endowed, it that Irish Catholics could be as loyal (i.e. as conformist) as anyone else. It is no coincidence that the already wobbly Gaelic culture received some of its most mortal blows during this era: in many areas, in fact, the religious and social changes taking place at about this time had a class basis rather than a philosophical or theological basis. The overbearing logic of the economic situation of the day has been studied frequently enough in connexion with the decline of Gaelic culture, but all too rarely with reference to the effect it had on the religious consciousness of the Irish people, emerging in a rather bewildered fashion, and after centuries of dogged resistance, into an unfamiliar daylight.

At the same time, one cannot deny the existence of a certain dualism between what was conceived to be the physical and what was conceived to be the spiritual world. This dualism, however (and it is lucidly described by O'Faolain), owes its existence not to a mythical Jansenism, but to an ancient, even primeval dichotomy between a spirit of paganism and a spirit of asceticism, the latter partly but by no means entirely Christian in origin. This dichotomy was then and still is all the more marked in Ireland because the primitive society in which it was born was almost totally unaffected by the Renaissance. It is a natural function of the peasant mind, that empirical reality which is only now confronting the facts of urbanization and social change.

Seen in this wider framework, the related charges levelled by Mr Sheehy can be dealt with more calmly. Two of the more important ones are that the (Catholic) Irish distrust their creative writers, and that their low marriage rate can be ascribed to the same religious disease. The first accusation is to a large extent substantiated in the first place by the sheer weight of evidence about the way Irish writers have been treated, especially in this century, by their own people, and, in the second place, by the frequently detailed and even morbid attitude that some of these writers have had to a faith which

many of them ended up by rejecting. But to conclude from this, as Mr Sheehy does, that 'the writers of both countries (i.e. Ireland and Soviet Russia) have been persecuted for the same reason—a distrust of the human mind', betrays a very narrow outlook. Writers who make this charge often lack a wider understanding of human history which would enable them to tear themselves away from the faults, real or imagined, of the nation with which they are obsessed. It is undeniably true that the Irish climate of censorship in the early years of this century owed a great deal to what people, encouraged by their priests, believed to be their traditional values and standards, but were in fact the combination of Roman rigorism and Victorian hypocrisy that I have already mentioned. What it was also conditioned by, and to a far greater extent than many people recognize or than Mr Sheehy is even prepared to acknowledge, was by the kind of *nationalistic* puritanism that comes in the wake of every revolution. This is doubly true of Soviet Russia, and remains true today to a certain extent in that country. It was blindingly obvious in post-1922 Ireland, as any books which tended to portray the Irish as anything less than a race of heroes and giants fell under immediate and massive public suspicion. This is a universal human phenomenon, as people who know anything about the controversy that followed the post-Independence publication of Cyprian Ekwensi's 'Jagua Nana' (about a cheerful, bawdy, unvirtuous tribeswoman) in Nigeria will recognize. It is all too easy to criticize the attitudes of 1925 with the attitudes of 1968, but it does not really help us to discover who we are. It also ignores the very complicated question of the relationship between every artist and his community, whatever the religious environment.

Another of Mr Sheehy's targets is what he describes as 'the sexual apathy of Irishmen' (p. 202), for which almost the only genuine empirical evidence is the low marriage rate over the last hundred years or so. This is extrapolation of a quite unscientific kind, which is all the more dangerous in that it has become accepted by many people writing about Ireland—including the American Mgr John A. O'Brien in *The Vanishing Irish*¹—almost as an article of faith. One of the best essays in Mr Fennell's book, 'The Myth of the Irish', refers pointedly to the critical failure of American writers about Ireland to relate what they say in regard to sex to de Tocqueville's comments, on a journey in Ireland in 1835, on the freedom from prudery of the Irish compared to the French. These critics also fail, Mr Fennell points out, to take into account, when pontificating about Irish hostility towards marriage, the inordinately high marriage rate in the first half of the nineteenth century (p. 128). What happened half-way through the nineteenth century, of course, was the famine, inaugurating a process which effectively paralysed

¹ W. H. Allen, 1954.

the country's economic growth and ultimately reduced its population by half after decades of death and emigration. The pattern of marriage which re-emerged from this sociological chaos owed little to Jansenism, real or supposed, and a great deal to the sheer economic hardship which made it literally impossible for people to marry until the death of a landowning parent (the same poverty is also largely responsible for an Irish addiction to alcohol, usually the subject of less sympathetic interpretations). To hold, as Mr Sheehy does, that in Ireland 'rural depopulation is the result of an organic breakdown of the rural mind due to small-mindedness and ignorance' is philosophically attractive but sociologically nonsensical. (The marriage rate, for instance, has been even lower among Irish Protestants!)

These two books should be read together, if only because Mr Sheehy's work is, with one or two exceptions which I hope to mention later on, a classical compendium of all the middle-class myths about Ireland that have ever been uttered, and because Mr Fennell's book, largely culled from essays on Irish Catholicism which appeared in *Herder Correspondence* while he was editor of that journal, is a substantial refutation of them. The latter book suffers in many respects from the fact that it is chiefly a collection of articles, some of them dated, others repetitive. The most important one, apart from the critical appraisal of American attitudes towards Ireland, is entitled 'Time of Decision' and was published in 1964: but greater attention will be focussed on the editor's postscript on 'The Mind of Catholic Ireland', which runs for some 34 pages and completes the book. Briefly, Mr Fennell's thesis falls into two parts. The first has already been dealt with, and can be usefully set beside Mr Sheehy's treatment of similar themes. The second is more complicated, and is presented as an attempt to provide 'an analytic, related view of Irish Catholic life seen whole and as a human reality'. What we lack, he says, is the 'human potency of reflective inwardness' (p. 206) of which Ortega y Gasset speaks.

'The dusk (he writes) which has prevented us from recognizing the abundant and obvious elements of humanity in our lives together is the half light in which men live when they lack reflective, integrating inwardness. No hope of even taking cognizance of even this elementary "fact" about our shared life when we were not given to seeking within ourselves for ordered knowledge of ourselves in relationship to man and world. While our humanity, such as it was, lacked this decisively humanizing element, *man* in his Irish Catholic milieu was not realized in us. Our ideological self-view, once taken for granted, became a barrier to the exploration of ourselves in relationship to man and humanity, since it appeared to settle the question of identity (non-humanly) and excluded relationship by its absolutism. Thus reflective inwardness, and with it the possibility of *realizing* our humanity—in the very

act of taking cognizance of our *broken* humanity—were rendered impossible by the very nature of our self-view.’

In so far as I can translate this—and it is by no means the most obscure passage in his essay—it seems to mean that the cultural trauma which occurred in the nineteenth century effectively locked us into a frame of mind which made us incapable of looking ourselves squarely in the face. What nation, on the other hand, has ever been able to look itself squarely in the face? Looking ourselves in the face is not a faculty we mysteriously acquire and equally mysteriously lose from one age to the next, but an ongoing process which is roughly contemporaneous with what we call salvation history. And what I find ultimately inadequate and even in some respects disturbing about Desmond Fennell’s argument, if I understand it correctly, is that it contains within it the seeds of a new triumphalism which would provide Irish Catholic life with a ‘superior sense of purpose’, based on achievements which are too uncritically set forth. The last section of the book, in fact, is full of highly questionable assumptions. A ‘quality of particularized realism and effective good sense’, he argues, ‘has, on the whole, been a mark of Irish Catholic life, in its civil, ecclesiastical and personal spheres, for quite some time past’. Really? The realism which has informed much of Irish life has not been so positive. It has been a pragmatic, *laissez-faire* approach to things which is the result of inertia at least as much as of idealism. ‘An armed revolution and the establishment of a new state are the supreme test for this faculty’, Mr Fennell writes. ‘We stood the test well.’ And the Civil War, with its aftermath?

Adapting a theory of the Yugoslav writer Mihailo Mihailov, who holds that the Soviet Union, having gone far towards achieving its political and economic revolutions, was now due for a ‘third revolution’ in the spiritual and intellectual sphere, Mr Fennell suggests that for us this ‘third revolution’ would really be a return to the ‘central aim and purpose of the Irish revolution’ (p. 218), with a growth of interior dialogue to help cure the process of alienation from which we are suffering. This is a prescription that is vague in the first place and unexciting in the second, especially when we consider that the political and economic revolutions are still substantially outside our grasp. When Mr Fennell subsequently defines the overriding aim of the revolution as the ‘achievement of our humanity together’, he is not getting us very much further. What we have to realize is that the 1916 Rising ultimately succeeded, not because ‘those visionaries had divined their (i.e. the Irish people’s) deepest desires correctly’ (p. 44), but because the insane executions which followed the Rising, linked with the tactless and largely unnecessary attempt to introduce conscription, turned an overwhelmingly conservative Irish nation momentarily against the Redmondite (i.e. Home Rule) political tradition which was the most accurate articulation of its aspirations. The Irish Party was

demolished in the 1918 elections, and the Irish people have spent the last fifty years gradually waking up to the fact that they are being governed by a minority—the inheritors of the old revolutionary, prophetic tradition which in no way represents what the vast mass of the people think or feel. This is why Mr Sheehy's book is so important: it looks like a maverick attempt to denigrate Ireland's struggling progress towards cultural identity, but in fact it is the canon of the spreading middle-class belief that the whole nationalist movement was rather a dreadful mistake. Mr Sheehy has moments of insight, such as when he alludes to the defective social sense in Ireland and describes us as 'a community obsessed by the idea of bourgeois respectability' (p. 212). But it is difficult to see where, if at all, the 'bourgeois respectability' he criticizes differs from his proposed ideal of 'a vital individualism'. This is especially so when we find him lamenting, on cultural grounds, the departure of Eamonn Andrews from his position as Chairman of the Radio Telefis Eireann Authority, expressing wildly unsupported hopes about the possibility of Ireland rejoining the Commonwealth, and observing with approval that 'it is noteworthy that there exists in Eire no small affection for British Royalty' (p. 173). God preserve us!

Both writers fail ultimately, I think, in that they have their eyes fixed resolutely on goals that are either inadequate or chimerical. Mr Sheehy's thesis is unacceptable because the ideal he sets before us, in contrast to the weaknesses he claims to have discovered and analysed, is essentially bloodless, middle-class and anti-revolutionary. Mr Fennell, although he is well aware of the importance of revolution, would have it lead us backwards. 'We would first need to become again', he writes, 'as we once were, an articulated and articulate *people*' (p. 219). We have never been anything of the sort, either ecclesiastically or politically.

The task before Ireland at the moment—and it applies equally to the Irish Church—is to disentangle, but not to cut, the prophetic and the conservative strands in our approach to the creation of a community, bearing in mind at the same time that the conservative strand is still marked by the openness that it has inherited from the Irish peasant tradition. It is happening in politics, as the revolutionary old guard (and its overwhelmingly Socialist heirs) in each of the main parties becomes more and more distinct from the bourgeois succession which is pushing its way to power. It is becoming evident in the Christian tradition, where the publication of *Humanae Vitae* has uncovered, rather than created, important differences of opinion about the nature of the Church and the meaning of its presence in the world. It involves a belief about the imperfection and the perfectibility of man in community that must be proclaimed in every generation. Economic and sociological stagnation, not Puritanism, has been our besetting problem, and it is a disease that the twentieth century is powerfully equipped to cure.