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Are the Irish different sexually?

Diarmaid Ferriter: *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, Profile Books, London, 2009. ISBN: 9781861979186; RRP: £30

Diarmaid Ferriter, a social historian from University College Dublin with a reputation for being controversial, argues that Ireland was late coming into the 'carnal' mainstream, and that the thematic of sexual sin was underpinned until the 1990s in Ireland by the unquestioned assumption that 'All of us know that Irish women are the most virtuous in the world'. Imposing so much responsibility for women. The costs he documents of this national obsession are horrendous: in the 19th century and well into the 20th century, penalties for rape of a young girl child were much less punitive than for the supposedly 'unnatural' acts between consenting homosexuals, or acts of bestiality; and prostitutes wore the heavy penalties (jail or the Magdalen Asylums), not to mention sexually transmitted disease in meeting the sexual desires of the tens of thousands of British military and police, and of course, the locals, who used them. De Valera apparently cancelled the weekly issue of condoms to the Army in 1932, favouring, as the Church did, moral persuasion over physical prophylaxis. Women unquestionably wore the blame that more properly should have attached to men precisely because of a national mythos by which women were meant to control the 'unbridled' sexuality of men.

This book asks the question, 'Does sexuality really have national characteristics?' and probes the nationalist and nation-constructing myth of Irish purity. Ferriter gives himself a very broad canvas (contraception, sexual abuse and crime, incest, sexually transmitted disease, abortion, divorce, infanticide, illegitimacy, censorship, prostitution and homosexuality, and Church/State relations), so broad that one wonders that it can be encompassed in the whopping tome (running to 594 engrossing pages). Indeed, it is striking now much more dependent he is on certain genres of evidence in different parts of the book, and this leads to an unevenness of treatment of sources, though it has to be said he is aware of this historiographical dilemma. Despite the variety of aspects of sexuality he tackles, I'm pleased it is a more dispersed rather than narrow study.

It examines sources as diverse as the Quarter Sessions and Circuit Court

archives (and is mindful that they are negative and privileged insights into sexual intimacies gone wrong), memoirs and diaries, literary texts, magazines and archives of voluntary organisations. In deploying literary texts, it is perhaps inevitable that not enough attention is paid to genre and context, though they do offer the corrective of conveying some of the joy of sex. Mostly what emerges is a silence and a negativity about sexuality that was not entirely of the church fathers' making. Politicians frequently were proactive in seeking clerical advice and colluded with the silences subsequently enjoined, often to protect the national myth of purity, but also to paper over crime statistics that were horrifying by an international reckoning. Ferriter has much to offer by way of insight into the effect of the famine on land tenure, and on overcrowding in city tenements which led to sexual crime, and in particular rape and infanticide.

That there was no adequate language for talking about sex, or that shame was an effective silencer is confounded by the range of voices Ferriter presents in this book. Between 1922-1940, the birth of the Free State, Ferriter identifies a period of increasing sexual consciousness in response to rising crime statistics: books were written (and censored); government reports produced (but not debated and suppressed, never to see the light of day); and court statistics were written about (in magazines, offshore). Crimes were prosecuted vigorously and written up, in truncated form in newspapers. Astonishingly, perhaps in response to court sentences, the Christian Brothers conducted 30 internal formal trials of abusers, but in order to protect the good name of the church, none of these Brothers ever came to trial in a period when paedophiles were being convicted in the courts. These were home-grown crimes, crimes in response to peculiarly Irish circumstances, and not blameable on 'foreign contamination.' The sexual revolution had arrived tentatively on Irish shores, and the Irish response was to ramp up the Catholic moral purity campaign and articulate sexphobia ever more vigorously: the Redemptorist missions and Legion of Mary activists were key to this.

Perhaps one of the most pungent manoeuvres of this book is to track how the discourses about sexuality moved from being overwhelmingly judgemental to

more modern discourses that correlated better with international and psychologised readings of sexuality in the last two decades of the 20th century. Ferriter sees feminist discourses as having been influential, but TV chat shows, and especially the Late Late Show as even more so. Colm Tóibín is drawn upon for a memorable narrative of how in Wexford in the 1960s watching the show was a rite of passage to adulthood, and the shocked and embarrassed (and studiously silent) response of his family to Máire Mac an tSaoi's use of the term *naked* on the show. The show mesmerised, discomfited and normalised sexuality for a generation of viewers, according to Ferriter. Part of this liberalisation has been an increasing acceptance of homosexuality and lesbianism. Ferriter, drawing on the Irish Queer Archive, makes this painful journey a compelling one. Mary Robinson and David Norris get due recognition for their brave work in this area. Norris is reported as announcing to the Senate that he gave thanks that '[he] was (a) not heterosexual and (b) not a woman'.

The statistics Ferriter draws upon really helped me to understand the context in which the Ryan Commission To Inquire into Child Abuse (it began its work in 2000 and reported in 2009) operated. He cites evidence gathered by The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre's *Sexual Violence in Ireland Report*, which was commissioned by the Irish Government and published in 2002: over 1 in 20 women and 1 in 50 men were raped as children; 30% of women reported sexual abuse as did 23.6% of men. In the period 1970-2005, the most common occupational group represented in paedophilia cases was farmers. Clerical abuse, reprehensible as it is, represents a tiny fraction of these figures. Even after the publication of this report, the recommended education campaign did not happen. The Ryan Commission might achieve more in making victims aware of their rights, but there is a danger of its overshadowing the more grim statistics in the general population.

This is a truly enlightening book, well written and immensely readable. Ferriter takes a long view of Irish sexual history, provides illuminating social historical contexts, and contests a few cherished national myths. The human faces of the victims of sexual crime often spring into very lively focus. Repression and the struggle to escape it in modern Ireland make a compelling story.

Frances Devlin-Glass

Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Language Week) is an international Irish language festival and one of the biggest celebrations of our native language and culture that takes place each year in Ireland and in many other countries. In my home town of Brisbane it coincides with the Brisbane Irish Festival – a week full of activities (music, film, parades and so on) for the Irish community and those of Irish descent. After all the hard work I put into learning Irish and documenting my progress here on this blog, it was the perfect climax for me to travel all the way to Ireland from Australia and be surrounded by the language for several weeks. This video I made summarizes my time there in the Gaeltacht Sally Rooney is the latest in a long line of Irish women tackling weighty subjects in fiction – the difference now is that the world is finally taking them seriously. Take the great Irish poet Eavan Boland, who died in April aged 75. Boland wrote about her own life, and by extension women’s lives, including a famous poem about feeding a baby. Dismissed initially as too domestic, her stature rose steadily over the years – outside Ireland first and eventually at home – until she came to occupy her rightful place in the canon. This book examines the extent and nature of Irish social and cultural difference. It is a collection of twenty-three short essays written in a clear and accessi... Are the Irish different? Edited by Tom Inglis. Copyright Date: 2014. Note: Always review your references and make any necessary corrections before using. Pay attention to names, capitalization, and dates. — Close Overlay. Book Info. Are the Irish different? Book Description: This book examines the extent and nature of Irish social and cultural difference. It is a collection of twenty-three short essays written in a clear and accessible manner by human scientists who are international experts in their area.