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Are the Irish different sexually?


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 undeveloped until the 1990s in Ireland by the unquestioned assumption that "All of us know that Irish women are the most virtuous in the world". Proposing so much responsibility for women, the costs he describes 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 more punitive than for the supposedly "unnatural" acts between consenting homosexuals, or acts of bestiality; and prostitutes wore the heavy penalties (jail or the Magdalum 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 national mythos by which women were meant to control purity. Ferriter gives himself a very broad hook, and this leads to an unevenness of now much more dependent he is on certain bodies of 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 contains a few clarifying 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 accessible manner by human scientists who are international experts in their area.