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# Lifting the Veil: the Arts, Broadcasting and Irish Society

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*MEDIA CULTURE AND SOCIETY*

**‘LIFTING THE VEIL’: THE ARTS, BROADCASTING AND IRISH  
SOCIETY**

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## **‘Lifting the veil’: The Arts, Broadcasting and Irish Society**

Much recent commentary on the socio-cultural life of Ireland likes to posit a major disjunction between how things are and how they used to be. Nearly eighty years after independence, there has been a dramatic turn around in Ireland’s fortunes, socially, economically, culturally, and previous impediments to progress such as nationalism, Catholicism and ruralism, have been overcome in favour of a modern, Europeanised, liberal outlook. For some, an iconoclastic debunking of a narrow, nationalist past dominated by a restrictive and philistine mentality has been crucial to the development of this postnationalist outlook, the success of which is linked to current achievements in the cultural sphere.<sup>1</sup> Demonising the past as a position, however, is not available to the cultural sociologist or historian, except as a phenomenon itself to be explained and the aim of this article is to revisit the arts and their relationship to Irish society in its first 40 years.

Seeking to contribute to a reassessment of socio-cultural history in Ireland, this article examines cultural life in Ireland and the particular role played by broadcasting up to 1960 when modernisation is said to have formally begun. I firstly examine the cultural context for the arts in early independent Ireland as a means of exploring the ambivalence towards culture as opposed to philistinism that characterises the period. Secondly, in opposition to the profound disjunction that modernisation is said to occasion, I profile some of the lines of continuity in cultural experience, particularly middle class experience of the arts that continue to inform Irish cultural life up to the present. Thirdly, I discuss the contribution of broadcasting to a middlebrow process of cultural education that along with a developing arts policy can be seen to give a different complexion to the period under review and which continues to influence contemporary patterns of cultural consumption.

### *The arts in context*

The manner in which the arts have prospered and cultural industries have flourished in Ireland since the mid 1980s has been described as a ‘cultural renaissance’, mirroring that other artistic golden age at the turn of the century, when artists of the Irish Literary Revival sought to create a new national self-confidence that would ultimately usher in the political independence that had been sought for seven hundred years.<sup>2</sup> A similar ‘efflorescence of artistic talent’ is said to accompany Ireland’s second revolution, the result of the expansionist economic and social policies of the 1960s. Following forty years of post-independence insularity, it is said, Ireland at last opened its windows to the world to proudly display its unique cultural resources, while adapting to and adopting the best of international popular and elite culture. Such forces of social modernisation can be said, following a period of economic recession in the 1970s, to have matured in the early 1990s with annual growth rates now exceeding 6 per cent, an economic boom that has earned the label of ‘Celtic’ Tiger’,<sup>3</sup> and a greater production of wealth per head of population than nearest neighbour, and former economic overlord, Great Britain. 1996, it has been argued, could be labelled the triumphant culmination of the Free State when 75 years after its foundation, Ireland had become economically independent, socially progressive and culturally self-confident (O’Toole, 1996: 12). The young, dynamic, technologically and culturally-aware nation is now part of the official iconography of contemporary Ireland, and widely drawn on in political and popular discourse.<sup>4</sup> Profiles of contemporary Ireland typically acknowledge the ‘astonishing level of cultural output, vitality and expressiveness’ in the success of artists like U2, Riverdance, Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, Neil Jordan and Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle (Ardagh, 1994: 235).

This cultural renaissance, and the singular transformation that has occurred in the fortunes of the arts, does appear extraordinary in the context of a society that has been ambivalent, and at times in its history outwardly hostile, to the aesthetic dimension. The position that the arts have occupied in the history of Irish culture is a complex and at

times a highly contradictory one. On the one hand, the Irish are represented as a profoundly artistic and imaginative people who have contributed to world culture out of all proportion to their small population size, originally in literature and poetry, and now in film and popular music as well. Yet this view of the current artistic richness of Ireland's cultural output must be set against the poor record of public support for the arts in Ireland and the pervasive philistinism that has been said to characterise much of Irish public life. The first director of The Arts Council, the former Fianna Fáil Minister, P.J. Little, observed that the Irish have been 'indifferent and almost hostile to culture with a capital 'C' (in Kennedy, 1990: 106). The arts in Irish education have historically been notoriously under-resourced (see Benson, 1979; The Arts Council, 1985); staffing and funding for the Irish Arts Council falls well below international standards and the response of local government to environmental art remains, despite incentives, very uneven.<sup>5</sup> The current achievements of the arts, when viewed against the background of years of apathy and neglect of any cultural dimension to Irish life, present something of an enigma. A typical contemporary response to this paradox is to 'draw the veil over the early cultural experiences of twentieth-century independent Ireland' (Hussey, 1993: 471) and to see Ireland's current cultural reformation as an about turn in policy and disposition. However, such a remarkable transformation from cultural conservatism and protectionism to the current dynamism of the open economy in which the arts operate marks by any standards a significant social change which needs to be explored and explained as a key feature of the contemporary cultural scene.

Lifting the veil on Ireland's enigmatic cultural history requires an examination of the particular cultural context in which the arts in Ireland are located, specifically, the competing cultural traditions that have comprised the complex and difficult notion of 'Irishness'. Current historical orthodoxy assumes that the early years of Irish independence constituted a backlash against centuries of English cultural domination and, given that the arts were in the main associated with the despised landed gentry, and seen as the preserve of a privileged Protestant elite, the cause of the arts suffered an enormous setback from which they are just now beginning to recover (see Kennedy,

1992: 14). However, this account oversimplifies Irish cultural identity which was always fragmented and the complex reality in which it is was situated both preceding and succeeding independence. Lyons (1979), distinguished between four separate cultures that, in the period leading up to the foundation of Ireland as an independent state, competed for the definition of Irish identity. These consisted of, in brief: the dominant English culture, whose hegemony was enforced over seven hundred years by conquest, economic exploitation and, in the period following the Act of Union in 1800, by political annexation. In opposition to this was the native Gaelic cultural tradition of the indigenous Irish population which, defeated and driven underground since English conquest in the seventeenth century, acted both as the residual culture of the peasantry and the ultimate source of cultural opposition within the country. The Calvinist form of Protestantism, concentrated in the North East of the country, industrious in nature and resolutely Unionist, provided another form of cultural identification which marked it apart from the Catholic majority in the country as a whole. Finally, the remnants of what in the eighteenth century had been the Ascendancy, or governing and land owning class, and known by its hybrid form of Anglo-Irish, constituted an alternative form of cultural identity, caught between its historical and blood ties to the English aristocracy, as well as its real and deep cultural attachment to Ireland.

In what became known during the increasingly nationalist consciousness of the pre-independence years as the battle of two civilisations, between the culture of English dominance and the counterculture of the Irish, the Anglo-Irish occupied a paradoxical position.<sup>6</sup> They were the descendants of Norman and English conquering forces, and were identified as the landed gentry with ownership of the vast majority of land in the country. The Protestant Anglo-Irish also constituted the main middle class force in the country with a dominant influence in public positions, private enterprise, professional occupations and, above all, in the intellectual and cultural life of the country. They were, however, no longer an Ascendancy in the true sense since The Act of Union in 1800 which ended the Protestant nation of Ireland that had flourished during the eighteenth century. Land agitation, the rise of Catholic nationalism during the nineteenth century,

the experience of the Great Famine, all succeeded in undermining their position and weakening their economic and political base, even though the society remained outwardly deferential until the First World War. The peculiar hybrid form of Anglo-Irish culture, while clearly drawing on the aristocratic manners of mainland Britain, was increasingly isolated from its English equivalent, as well as being the despised symbol within Ireland of British colonialism. It had been the ambition of the intellectual avant garde of the Anglo-Irish that a form of cultural fusion (Lyons, 1979), or in Yeats' words, 'a unity of culture', might be possible in a united and independent Ireland, which would express the manifold nature of Irish identity and draw on the strength of cultural diversity. While such a strategic alliance of the English and the Gaelic forms of culture did for a period exist, expressed above all in the work of Lady Gregory, Yeats and others associated with the Irish Literary Revival, this did not in the end provide the basis for the founding cultural principles of Irish independence which sought instead the complete 'de-Anglicisation' of Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Of paramount importance, then, in understanding the ambivalence with which the arts have been received in Irish history is a consideration of the fact that they were identified above all with the lifestyle of that privileged group of people, distinguished by religion, class and nationality, known as the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. What adds to the irony and the contradiction surrounding such identification, however, is the considerable extent to which the cause of nationalism and its cultural expression was itself the product of solidly Ascendancy elements.<sup>8</sup> The foundation of the Royal Irish Academy, for example, in 1785 provided a focus for Celtic studies and for the revival of interest in the folklore, history and language of a Celtic past, the essential precursor to the political struggle for independence. Thomas Davis, a Protestant with a Trinity College background, made the decisive identification for cultural nationalism of linking the cultural well being of the country with its language, thereby inspiring much of the revolutionary cultural activity that led to attempts to revive the Irish language (Lyons, 1979: 32). Standish O'Grady and Douglas Hyde from similar landed gentry backgrounds, provided the inspiration for the revival of interest in the legends and myths that led to the renaissance of artistic



activity in the late nineteenth century. This was a time of astonishing cultural activity in theatre, literature, the revival of interest in music, folk songs and of course the language itself: all elements of an activity that might be said to constitute a comprehensive cultural nationalism in the absence of a political one. The movement that collectively became known as the Celtic Twilight culminated in 1898 with the setting up of the Irish Literary Theatre, later the Abbey Theatre, founded by Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn, and which had as its ambition no less an ideal than to restore to the nation its soul. Later, Yeats was to mythologise the great intellectual legacy of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy from its heyday in eighteenth century Dublin and, citing the antecedents of Berkeley, Swift, Burke and Goldsmith, sought an articulation and justification of his particular brand of aristocratic and anti-democratic paternalism.<sup>9</sup> What he and fellow Anglo-Irish ideologues had earlier argued for was a model of cultural fusion, one which sought inclusion of the disparate cultural elements that constituted the Irish nation under the enlightened guardianship of a Protestant intelligentsia. With the development of a more militant form of republican nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cultural nationalism practised by Yeats and his colleagues inevitably came to be set against the more radical language question and the revival of specifically Gaelic forms of culture through such nationalist movements as the Gaelic League and the GAA. The opposition to the presence of English culture in Ireland was perhaps most vehemently expressed by D.P. Moran (1905) who portrayed the struggle for cultural identity as a battle between two civilisations and opposed every attempt at integration and accommodation with what was viewed as an alien and invading culture. The nationalist rejection of Synge's work in the Abbey became in many ways a symbol of the marginalisation of the Anglo-Irish attitude and the increasing divide between the essentially aesthetic and cultural aims of Yeats and Synge and the political struggle of nationalism itself, which by the time of independence made the language question and the opposition to English influence the predominant cultural concerns.

### *The arts in independent Ireland*

If art as a practice represented an ideologically and culturally controversial area, what then of the fate of the actual arts themselves in independent Ireland? Post-independence was for Yeats and other aesthetic idealists a profoundly disillusioning and demoralising experience. Thomas Mac Greevy, director of the National Gallery, argued that while Ireland had achieved its political independence, it had failed miserably to create ‘a cultural republic, a republic of the Irish mind’ (in Kennedy, 1992: 15). Despite the fact that there was a short-lived Ministry of Fine Arts in the Second Dáil from 1921 to 1922, the new state, ravaged and impoverished by the struggle for independence and a bitter civil war, had little time for cultural affairs and the arts featured low on its list of priorities. For the first three decades of independence, it is argued, the arts were officially neglected, treated with suspicion and occasionally contempt as a relic of the colonial British presence in Ireland. Cultural policy in the early years of independence sought a radical rejection of all major elements of non-Gaelic culture and a return to what was perceived as the source of a pre-colonial Gaelic identity (Kiberd, 1995: 286). That the arts that had played such an important role in the independence movement should have suffered such a reversal is perhaps less surprising given the economic and social dilemmas facing the fledgling state. The new state was ethnically and religiously homogeneous, predominantly rural with 61 per cent of the population living in the countryside, and in which 53 per cent of the population derived their livelihood from agriculture (Brown, 1981: 19). The rural peasant form of social organisation, rather than the urban centres of population where the arts could flourish, was foremost in the ideology of the nascent Free State (Kennedy, 1992: 18) and the economic policies of Sinn Féin, as well as the influence of Catholicism induced a belief in the values of self sufficiency and protectionism, designed to preserve the fragile elements of Gaelic and Catholic culture against the growing global dominance of Anglophone international, urban culture. Ireland also lacked in post-revolutionary times a national bourgeoisie with control over wealth and a clear programme for social development (Brown, 1981: 17; Peillon, 1982: 21). The remnants of the Ascendancy and the Protestant urban middle class which had been so central to the development of cultural life were clearly alienated

in the new state and steadily declined in number and in importance. Political power in the first Cumann na nGaedheal government was vested in the instinctively conservative forces of the Irish petit bourgeoisie, whose rigid sense of financial prudence and reactionary attitudes to external cultural influences resulted in a series of protectionist pieces of legislation that attempted to provide a type of cultural barricade for the succeeding forty years. Protectionism was also a key element of De Valera's Fianna Fáil government of 1932 whose commitment to an Ireland of 'frugal comforts' was, if anything, deeper. De Valera, it has been noted, did not have the slightest interest in the arts and considered them a luxury which the country could not afford. He admitted never having been in the Abbey Theatre and didn't see any reason for playing the work of foreign composers in Ireland when there was already a rich source of Irish traditional music (Kennedy, 1990: 29). The ideology of cultural 'Sinn Féinism' sought to make a virtue of the hardship of national reconstruction and the rejection of the trappings of what was seen as English artistic culture a matter of choice.

The dominant theme of cultural policy during these years was, following the de-anglicisation ideology of the Gaelic League, one of elimination of the influence of English culture and civilisation and the revival of Irish cultural traditions. The language question was the most important cultural issue debated at an official level and in 1924 the government announced its intention to co-ordinate, democratise and gaelicize education, making the study of Irish a compulsory and integral part of all aspects of the school system in an effort to revive Gaelic as a vernacular language. While Gaelicisation was most explicitly expressed as a language policy, it was also a feature of the dominant literary and cultural ideology of the new social order that advocated a narrowly Gaelic form of literature, subservient to the demands of creating a nationalist consciousness and rejecting any vestiges of the previous Anglo-Irish influence in culture (see, for example, Corkery, 1924). Following its golden age with the success of O'Casey, The Abbey Theatre went into a long period of decline in which its rural peasant drama adopted an attitude remarkably similar to Soviet Socialist Realism (O'Toole, 1996: 99; see also Ó'hAodha, 1974). The cultural nationalism that dominated the Ireland of the 1920s and

1930s was in part a puritanical version of the Gaelic idealism that had preceded independence, and a form of protectionism that expressed both the fear of being overwhelmed by outside influences, as well as a belief that Irish culture was in fact superior. The most notorious cultural acts of the first years of Irish government were the censorship measures introduced, including in one of its first pieces of legislation, the Censorship of Films Act of 1923, designed to combat, what the film censor James Montgomery called, 'the menace of the Los-Angelesation of Ireland' and later the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929. Such forms of cultural protectionism, while not unusual in the 1920s as a bulwark against the growing commodification and perceived cheapening of artistic forms, were pursued with a stringency and alacrity in Ireland that suggested a more deeply reactionary and moralistic exercise on the part of the Irish government. There was also an attempt to create an official Irish iconography through support of such nationalist painters and artists like Henry, O'Sullivan, Keating and Mac Gonigal, and a style which was cautious and conservative, even if the art of contemporary Ireland presented abroad was in the bolder, more modernist vein of Yeats, Hone and Jellet (Gillespie and Kennedy, 1994).

The first serious appraisal of the record of public initiatives in the arts was Bodkin's *Report on the Arts in Ireland* (1949), commissioned by the Inter Party government of 1948 - 1951, and which led ultimately to the founding of The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, in 1951. Bodkin, an art expert, later Director of the National Gallery (1927-1932), and advisor to the first Cumann na nGaedheal on arts matters, presented a searing critique of the cultural policies of the previous thirty years and the poverty of Irish artistic life. Since independence, he wrote: 'We have not merely failed to go forward in policies concerning the Arts, we have, in fact, regressed to arrive, many years ago, at a condition of apathy about them in which it becomes justifiable to say of Ireland that no other country of Western Europe cared less, or gave less for the cultivation of the Arts' (Bodkin, 1949: 9). Systematically criticising all the major cultural institutions in the state - the National Museum, the National Gallery, the National College of Art, the arts in education, the poor promotion of the arts at home and

abroad - for the apathy and hostility with which the arts had been treated, Bodkin's report is an uncompromising indictment of official neglect. Without public support, a change in attitudes, and crucially a commitment to cultural leadership in government, in universities and in the major cultural institutions, the arts, he argued, would have no future whatever in Irish public life. The government responded with the setting up of The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon which, while ill-equipped and underfunded (Arnold, 1982), did promote a campaign of public propaganda on behalf of the arts and had the appearance of shaking off official complacency and stimulating public awareness.

### *The arts and everyday life*

Against the received version of the official, perilous position of the arts in Ireland, the description of Ireland as a deeply conservative and culturally impoverished nation must also, however, be tempered with a more balanced account of the reality of social life at this time. Farmar's social history of Irish middle class life (1991) is one instance of an alternative perspective to the cultural ethos of these times. Centring on the three defining years of 1907, 1932 and 1963, it details the continuities of experience around such issues as housing and household economy, education and leisure - always prevalent middle class concerns - and about which the most noticeable feature was the gradual replacement of a Protestant bourgeoisie with a nationalist and Catholic one. Brown (1981: 135) in his social history of the period also argues that, in spite of the exceedingly cautious approach to public intervention in the field of culture, as well as the repressive atmosphere of an overarching Catholicism in the state, ordinary (middle class) life in pre-1939 Ireland, by and large, resembled that of any other part of the English-speaking world. The missionary zeal associated with Gaelicisation and the attempt to create an Irish-Ireland, it is suggested, is not something that can be attributed to the population as a whole. Provincialism, rather than traditionalism, more accurately describes the state of public opinion, and the norms of a petit bourgeois lifestyle were far more relevant to the majority of the population than the revolutionary ideals that preceded independence. It is

to this that the film censor referred, arguing that ‘Los Angelesation’ rather than ‘Anglicisation’ posed the greater danger to Ireland (Rockett, 1991). This was illustrated in the rapid growth of cinema throughout most major towns and especially in Dublin, as well as in the popularity of radio, dance band music and jazz. Equally, public life was not without vestiges of Anglicised culture and throughout the 1920s and 1930s theatre and concert-going remained an important element of middle class social life, particularly in Dublin. It was, as we see below, this potential for middlebrow arts appreciation that radio so successfully nurtured from the late 1930s on.

There was a gap, as accounts such as these suggest, between the ideology and the lived reality of the period, evidence for which is also to be found in some of the neglected aspects of the cultural achievements of the period. The Abbey Theatre received a government subsidy in 1924, for instance, making it the first state-sponsored theatre in the English speaking world. While its policies would always remain controversial, it was always popular with Dublin audiences, and O’Casey whose bitterness towards the Abbey is legendary, it must be recalled, was also one of its most popular playwrights (O hAodha, 1974: 113). As Fallon has argued in his reassessment of the period (1998), this was also the great age of the Irish short story, the time in which the painter Jack Yeats flourished, when Kavanagh, Behan, Clarke and other literary figures were household names even in the shadow of the giants of Yeats and Joyce in twentieth century literature. Where public concert-going had fared poorly during the first two decades (Fleischman, 1952), the tireless efforts of P.J. Little, the Fianna Fáil Minister responsible for broadcasting, to awaken public interest in orchestral music began to take effect. The Radio Éireann orchestra, which had begun with just 4 musicians in 1926, had forty players by 1942. The orchestra played to capacity audiences throughout the war years and stimulated the public demand for the establishment of a national concert hall. This was also an important period for the visual arts with the establishment of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art whose founders, Mainie Jellet, Evie Hone, Louis Le Brocqy and Norah Mc Guinness, brought a modernity and international dimension to painting, in opposition to the dominant academic and representationalist approach of nationalist

painters like Keating and Mac Gonigal (Pyle, 1969). The celebrated painters of Irish modernism, including Hone, Yeats and Osborne, did much to introduce a sense of diversity and revolutionary fervour in Irish artistic life even if it remained for many years much more celebrated abroad than it was at home (White, 1955).

While it may appear that the arts were treated with outright hostility by the first two administrations between 1922 and 1939, again, the reality is not always so clear. Both Cosgrave's and De Valera's governments did attempt a number of important cultural initiatives within limited means and at a time when the concept of state support for the arts simply did not exist. The short lived government from August 1921 to January 1922 did include a Ministry of Fine Arts and Thomas Bodkin was invited to submit further proposals for the operation of such a department. Cosgrave's government (1922 - 1932) maintained a close relationship with Bodkin and hoped that his proposals, circumstances permitting, could be put into action. In 1924 the contribution of the Irish literary movement was acknowledged with a grant-in-aid being given to the Abbey Theatre. The Gate Theatre founded in 1928 by Edwards and Mac Liammóir established a loyal following for experimental European drama. In the same year, Mac Liammóir also founded *An Taibdhearc*, the Irish-language theatre based in Galway. Broadcasting was established on a public footing, similar to the BBC in 1926, and while it was obliged to embody many of the policies of Gaelicisation, its contribution to the artistic and musical life of the country with a permanent orchestra and its tradition of literary talks was an important one. Reports were commissioned on the Metropolitan School of Art and on the National Museum in 1926, both strongly urging a progressive and interventionist approach to arts education even if the government felt unable to activate their proposals.

De Valera, who was reputed to be less in favour of the arts than his predecessor, also nurtured a number of ambitious cultural projects which, had they come to fruition, would certainly cast a different light on the perception of the public profile of the arts at this time. Among the various proposals considered by the Fianna Fáil government were such

capital projects as the establishment of a new national theatre, the refurbishment of the Rotunda, that landmark of eighteenth century Ascendancy Dublin, as a national concert hall and cultural centre, extensions and refurbishment of the National Library and National Museum and the possibility of a national film studios. Discussion was also given to the founding of a Cultural Relations Committee to promote Irish art and artists abroad and methods of improving the quality of design in industry. While none of these may have succeeded prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, many of these proposals did in fact come on stream in the years ahead, thereby indicating that caution and financial prudence were as much responsible for the delayed social and cultural development of the country as the supposed repressive ideology of these years (Keogh, 1994: 28).

In the post war period, the arts in Ireland clearly entered a new phase of development that was characterised by a broadening of outlook and a gradual change in attitude. In intellectual circles vocal opposition to the dominant Gaelic and Catholic ethos was prominent. Journals such as *The Bell* were an important catalyst for such debate and stimulated vigorous discussion of censorship, of the bourgeois philistinism that appeared to have the country in its grip. The decade of the 1950s, traditionally represented as deeply marked by stagnation, crisis, mass emigration and the continuing dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland, also coincided with a vibrant counterculture to which many artists and writers contributed and which undermines the view of the monolithic nature of Irish Catholic culture at this time (Keogh, 1994: 223). The immediate consequence of Bodkin's report, the founding of the Arts Council in 1951, was a portent of change for official attitudes to the arts in Ireland. Public finances in this period were gradually expanded, the Irish economy in the years after the second world war performed extremely well and despite the mass emigration that became such a feature of the decade, there was a sense that Ireland was embarked on a more modern, open and more internationally-minded course. Certainly in the years that followed there was much evidence of increased cultural activity and an enthusiasm for participation in amateur arts activity that runs against the image of this decade as culturally barren. Opera, for instance, which always had a central place in the social life of Dublin (Allen, 1998),



flourished in the 1950s, with the establishment of the Dublin Grand Opera Society and the Wexford Opera festival, bringing international attention and acclaim to a town of no more than 12,000 people. Similar operatic and amateur drama societies were to be found in small towns across Ireland (Acton, 1968) stimulated by the success of Anew McMaster's touring theatre who since the mid 1920s had brought a classical theatrical repertoire to almost every town in Ireland. The cultural life of the country was described as 'vibrant and charming' and, while not on a grand scale, was pursued with an enthusiasm and a lack of formality that was greatly welcomed by outsiders.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the success of the Wexford Opera Festival, other notable features of the decade included the locating of the Chester Beatty Museum of Oriental Art in Dublin, the consolidation of the Radio Éireann orchestras, the acclaim of modernist painters such as Jack B. Yeats, and the cultivation of an active literary scene centred in Dublin based around internationally renowned writers like Behan, Clarke, Kavanagh and Myles na gCopaleen. New literary and critical journals such as *Irish Writing*, *Poetry Ireland* and *Envoy* joined such established titles as *The Bell* and *The Dublin Magazine* and similarly expressed a new critical confidence among a younger generation of writers, artists and academics.

### ***Broadcasting and cultural policy***

The most important institution for the cultivation of the arts and for serving the needs of arts audiences up to the 1960s was broadcasting. Prior to the setting up of The Arts Council in 1951, radio provided the only organised system of patronage and performance of serious literature and music. This was not necessarily what its founders had intended, though a particular policy comparable to Reith's vision for the BBC was never thoroughly worked out. Over the course of its history, Irish broadcasting has undertaken the responsibility of creating and projecting an image of the new Gaelic nation state, reviving its language, preserving its heritage, and later with modernising its attitudes and opening the society to new cultural influences. Most such ambitions were hopelessly unrealisable and, as radio data of the time indicates, often ignored by

audiences (Forecast, 1955; Fitzgerald, 1959). However, given the centrality of broadcasting to cultural and political development in the country, its history can be seen to mirror many of the changing attitudes to the arts described above.

Following overtures by Marconi and other entrepreneurs in the early years of the state and a brief flirtation with the idea of a commercial franchise for broadcasting in Ireland, the first Free State government decided in 1924 to establish a state-run and Exchequer-funded system of public broadcasting, modelled closely on the BBC then being established in Great Britain.<sup>11</sup> A Dáil special committee had concluded that “broadcasting should be a State service purely - the installation and the working of it to be solely in the hands of the Postal Ministry”.<sup>12</sup> The Minister responsible, J.J. Walsh, had expressed misgivings about the state becoming involved in what he felt was an entertainment medium and had invited tenders from the private sector to run an Irish Broadcasting Company. However, following a controversy concerning political interference in the tendering process, and the political view that broadcasting was too serious a matter to be left to broadcasters, a state-run system within the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs was agreed. The legislative arrangement under which radio was formed was to have a constraining influence on its development for the next 40 years until the 1960 Broadcasting Authority Act, when broadcasting still on a public service model was established under a semi-state system and run by a government-appointed authority. Prior to this, radio (television was not introduced until 1961) suffered under the tight purse strings of the Department of Finance, civil service conditions of employment for broadcasting personnel, as well as being subject to direct Ministerial control.

From its inception, broadcasting was seen to be of vital importance to the Free State’s national interests. In spite of the warnings of those like J.J. Walsh, that broadcasting with only a subsidiary degree of ‘amusement value’ would fail, the new radio station 2RN opened with a speech by Douglas Hyde that clearly signalled the cultural role envisaged for radio as a medium of national reconstruction and public education: “Our enterprise

today marks the beginning not only of the New Year, but of a new era - an era in which our nation will take its place amongst the other nations of the world. A nation has never been made by an Act of Parliament...A nation is made from inside itself; it is made first of all by its language, if it has one; by its music, song, games and customs..." (in Gorham, 1967, 24). Such a view was visionary rather than realistic (Cathcart, 1984: 42) though clearly broadcasting was seen as a strategic means of projecting an image of cultural confidence within the new fractured nation, torn by civil war and disputes about the value of what had been politically achieved. The limited programming possible on 2RN in its first years partly reflected the cultural ambitions of its political masters and partly an expedient solution to understaffing and poor resources. Programming was dominated by large amounts of live music, much of it in the traditional ceilí mode favoured by Seamus Clandillon, first director of broadcasting and a well known musician and Irish revivalist. A small station orchestra was also formed which, though numbering just four, was an important feature of radio programming throughout the succeeding years and provided the nucleus of the future symphony orchestra. Talks and features, sometimes didactic and sombre in nature, on subjects as diverse as 'history, gardening and poultry keeping' provided the topics for speech programmes, in addition to language lessons and Irish language material (see Browne, 1992; Cathcart, 1984; Clarke, 1986; O'Tuathaigh, 1984). Sports and Gaelic games were another feature of 2RN programming and its commentary on the 1926 All-Ireland final made broadcasting history by being the first live sports commentary in Europe (Boyle, 1992).

The ethos of the formative years of Irish broadcasting has been described by Barbrook as a hybrid of the aspirations of the cultural nationalism of the founding government and the public service ideology of broadcasting then being formulated by Reith (Barbrook, 1992: 205). For Gibbons, radio was a crucial transformative medium: creating a national audience for Gaelic games, for example, or projecting a selective image of traditional music centred around the ceilí band, and marginalising regional and other variations (Gibbons, 1996). It is true that given the reliance of public broadcasting on some measure of commercial support, whether through sponsored programming or direct

advertising, that its broadcast mission has been somewhat compromised. In relation to the arts, however, I suggest that radio in Ireland, particularly as it matured through the mid 1930s, was deeply influenced and suffused with Reithean values of cultivating an appreciation for the anglicised cultural forms of music, literature and drama. As such, it expressed the middlebrow aspirations of a new urban middle class whose national profile was of increasing importance and whose influence on broadcasting policy was to be an enduring one. This was consolidated with the increased investment in radio in the post-war period which brought better transmission facilities, plans to launch an international service on short wave and a Gaeltacht station broadcasting in Irish (see Gorham, 1967: 150 - 167; Kelly, 1976). In 1947 the repertory company, the Radio Éireann Players, was formed. The orchestra was greatly expanded, outside broadcast facilities were provided and higher production values succeeded in not only in professionalising the service but also extending the range of programmes that could be offered. A move to the higher cultural ground was signalled in the preponderance of orchestral and symphonic music in the European tradition, as well as programmes devoted to poetry, literature and drama. It also marked the point where broadcasting acquired middle class respectability, expressed in its high-minded approach towards broadcasting with some concessions to popular culture, but with a much greater degree of emphasis on the middlebrow project of cultural education and self improvement.

It is in the music policy of Radio Éireann that this cultural mission is most evident. Long thought to have suffered following independence because of its Protestant association, the contribution of broadcasting to the musical life of the country has been acknowledged as a crucial one (see Fleischman, 1935; Pine, 1998) and its role in the dissemination and preservation of traditional Irish music, particularly during the 1950s, when it embarked on a major countrywide project of recording, has been widely noted (O' Tuathaigh, 1984). Of equal importance, however, is the contribution that radio played to the promotion and performance of orchestral music, particularly in Dublin (Acton, 1973; Donoghue, 1955; Fleischman, 1952; O'Broin, 1998). At the turn of the century, concerts provided one of the main forms of public entertainment and traversed

the range from popular ballads and music hall to operatic and symphonic works. Musical societies such as the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society, and later the Dublin Grand Opera Society satisfied a huge public demand for opera. Ireland was not noted, however, for having a serious music culture. A music critic for *The Irish Press* wrote: ‘the love of music is not very deep-rooted in Irish people... they have a superficial love of music and an emotional reaction to it, but the music must be both simple and familiar’ (O’Neill, 1952: 260). Another critic wrote that music in Ireland was unadventurous, satisfying the middlebrow tastes of a small coterie of artistically-minded, bourgeois concert goers but with no major public or institutional support for the development of serious music, the stimulation of composition or for the development of new musical languages in the Irish idiom (Donoghue, 1955).

Music policy in radio adapted to this situation and, from a weak initial base, attempted to broaden musical horizons. When 2RN began it employed a part time music Director and a station orchestra of four. Programming was limited though a large proportion of broadcasting time was devoted to music which, according to one critic, ‘followed the lines of the better-class concerts’ (O’Neill, 1952). The increasing profile of serious music in the running of the station can be measured by the growth and development of the station orchestra which increased to twenty four in 1936, to forty in 1942, and to sixty two in 1948 (O’Braonáin, 1952; O’Kelly, 1998). Given the absence of any other professional orchestra in Ireland, the Radio Éireann Orchestra functioned as a *de facto* national orchestra. In its early years, it had no full time conductor and had to rely on the Army School of Music for a succession of musical directors and occasional visiting and guest conductors. Of particular note were the series of public symphony concerts begun by the orchestra in 1938 and which reached a peak of popularity during the war years.<sup>13</sup> The symphony series of the winter season from 1941 on, played to capacity audiences and was an important milestone in the musical life in Ireland. Following a particularly barren period for concert music during the 1930s, the series of subscription concerts was an indication of a changing attitude towards music and aspirations among urban audiences for a wider choice of cultural expression. In addition to public concerts, the

orchestra broadcast regular studio concerts and from 1943 onwards, began to commission new works by Irish composers. With the enthusiasm of a number of key individuals, including civil servants and ministers such as Leon O’Broin, P.J. Little and Erskine Childers, resources were channelled into the orchestra and a thriving concert life began to take shape in Dublin. This compared favourably to cities of equivalent size elsewhere despite the lack of appropriate venues and revealed a depth of interest in orchestral music that belied the official dominance of the Gaelic and traditional mode (Acton, 1968c, 1972).<sup>14</sup> The post war years also brought the benefit of a number of talented European soloists and conductors who were eager to take up appointments in Dublin from a war torn Europe. Aloys Fleischman, a seminal figure in the development of musical culture in Ireland, had in 1935 been wholly despondent of the future of music in Ireland, seeing the gulf between the two traditions of Gaelic and European music as unbridgeable. By 1952, considerable progress had been made in his view and a much more positive outlook was recorded during a national symposium on the state of music (see Fleischman, 1935, 1952). Contemporary surveys revealed flourishing local interest and participation in music in cities, small towns and villages across Ireland (Grocock, 1961:94). Numerous amateur and part time organisations involved in music were also supported by Radio Éireann which broadcast the work of Musical Art Society, the Dublin String Orchestra, Dublin Orchestral Players, University Art Society, and the Cork Symphony Orchestra.

As well as the field of music where RTE radio has had a long involvement, the literary tradition also provided an important source of arts programming in radio. Because of the necessity of pre-scripting ‘radio talks’, radio directors generally relied heavily on writers and literary broadcast personalities capable of writing for the medium. The literary tradition in Ireland adapted to the medium with ease, and poets and writers such as Sean O’Faoláin, Frank O’Connor, Patrick Kavanagh, Austin Clarke, Benedict Kiely and others enjoyed a long association with radio. Radio Éireann in its attention to poetry was ahead of its time and its near neighbour the BBC in broadcasting regular poetry programmes, verse competitions and involvement of poets in the broadcast service (O’Farcháin 1976:

38). A feature of radio in the 1950s also was its contribution to drama, much of it commissioned and which included both popular and experimental work by Behan, Clarke, Plunkett and Fallon (Fallon, 1998: 147). Anthony Cronin, a frequent contributor at this time, characterised radio as being an inherently serious medium which represented the only accessible vehicle of contemporary and avant garde art and ideas. In contrast to cinema and later to television which were always predominantly oriented towards popular entertainment, radio, he argued, was for 'serious listeners' and provided an intellectual and aesthetic pleasure unique to the medium (Cronin 1976: 66).

How in practical terms did this cultural emphasis translate into programming? In common with the experience of other countries, music, much of it live, occupied the greater part of programme material on Radio Éireann for much of its early history. In 1935, 67 per cent of programme output was music. The category of light music accounted for 33 per cent of total broadcasting, serious music was 22 per cent and Irish music consisted of just 10 per cent of programme time (Kiernan, 1935: 43). By 1955 news, drama and daytime programming were established in Irish broadcasting and the proportion of music to other forms of speech programming was reversed to the ratio of about 1 to 3.<sup>15</sup> Where in its early years, traditional Irish music predominated on 2RN, this was notably modified after 1935 by its new director, Dr. T.J. Kiernan who questioned the reliance upon 'desultory playing' of Irish jigs and reels and urged that Irish broadcasting had 'an important function in stimulating an interest in all kinds of music' (Kiernan, 1935: 42). The fostering of a serious music culture was enthusiastically undertaken by Radio Éireann and typical programme schedules in the post-war period show the impact of this policy. The Sunday schedule for January 12th 1947, for instance, began with 'The Choir Sings' and 'Music of Grieg' from 1.30 to 2.30 p.m. The Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra broadcast live in the afternoon from the Capitol Theatre, Dublin featuring a programme of Holst, Sibelius, Elgar and Haydn. Light classical music was played by the station's smaller orchestra between 5.45 and 6.30 p.m. News and literary review programmes preceded the most popular item on the schedule at 8 p.m., the long running quiz programme, 'Question Time' which was broadcast from different

locations around the country. A radio play, 'The Christmas Candle' originally commissioned for the BBC and translated from the Welsh, was broadcast between 9 and 10 p.m.. Programmes concluded with live ceilí music at 10 p.m. and the sponsored programme for the Hospitals' Trust which was also a long time favourite because of its popular dance music content.

Commentaries on radio programming of the period drew the conclusion that Radio Éireann, in particular its music, plays and features made for very heavy listening and 'that more sugar should be added to the pill'. Of the 55 hours broadcast during that January week in 1947, 11 and a half hours were devoted to serious music, 10 hours to light music, 2 hours to song recitals and just under an hour each to 'very light music' and ceilí. Of speech programming, drama occupied an hour and a half, general talks including book reviews 2 hours and 3 hours was devoted to children's educational programming. The news service which was coming into its own at this time accounted for 5 hours while Irish language programming occupied just 3 hours 40 minutes of the total.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the more popular fare of European stations proved irresistible for many listeners. It became clear when listener research was first conducted in 1953 that news, variety and sponsored programming featuring popular music were the only programmes achieving significant audiences. Serious music and Irish language programming saw a mass exodus of Irish listeners to the BBC Light programme, Radio Luxembourg and AFN (Fitzgerald, 1959) and some vociferous debate about Radio Éireann's programmes was to be heard. A correspondent to *The Radio Review* complained: "It may be all right for the "Highbrows" but after all they've got the entire BBC Third Programme. What RE wants is more variety shows and less talks and plays. Why don't they present dance bands...Ireland is very much behind with music. Tune into any station of the world's leading countries and you will hear swing bands. Why shouldn't we have swing bands here?"<sup>17</sup> A poll conducted by the same journal likewise voted programmes such as *Question Time* and *Fungalore* as its favourites and RE symphonic broadcasts as the least popular.



Radio in Ireland over the course of the 1950s tenaciously defended its cultural role and while listener research did have the effect of steadily expanding the news service and providing more accessible daytime programming, the arts and serious music programming remained a core feature of Radio Éireann fare. This period represents the indisputable golden age of Irish radio during which it was the sole voice of Irish broadcasting prior to the introduction of television and earned a centrality and importance in public life that can still be seen in its dominant, though now weakening, market position. Taking into account, the considerable obstacles and difficulties facing its development, the success of the cultural project of radio in Ireland can be measured by the affection and loyalty it ultimately received from the majority of the population. Not alone because of its monopoly position, but because of the generally isolated and limited nature of communications, radio was a sole point of access for culture, the only means for many people of listening to classical music, a unique reflection of literature, drama and poetry and a key agent in the preservation and wider dissemination of the diversity of traditional music. An inevitable period of demise set in with the preparations for the launch of television in Ireland (see Savage, 1996). Gorham, director of radio during this period and later its historian, acknowledged that with the arrival of television ‘radio takes a back seat’ (Gorham, 1967: 323). The new medium benefited from heavy investment and an influx of new personnel and talent. In Irish social history, it was the influential medium *par excellence* (see Dowling, Doolin and Quinn, 1969; Mc Loone and MacMahon eds. 1984) and radio by contrast languished in its old GPO premises with inadequate resources to meet the interests and demands of a new generation of radio listeners. The whole ethos in which Radio Éireann worked was now perceived as ‘drabber, more penny pinching and conformist’ than that in which its broadcasting counterpart Telefís Éireann started (Coogan, 1976: 59). On the other hand, Leon O’Broin, former secretary to the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and an influential figure in the development of broadcasting in Ireland, saw radio alone as maintaining the tradition of public service broadcasting, ‘the mantle of culture’, which for years it was obliged to carry as the instrument of public policy in a way that television, being more controversial and more responsive to commercial dictates, could not and did not (O’Broin, 1976).

## *Conclusion*

The evidence considered above in relation to the fate of the arts in independent Ireland and the role played by broadcasting in cultural development presents a quite different picture to that portrayed in revisionist accounts of Irish socio-cultural history. At the very least, it indicates that Irish cultural life prior to 1960 was varied, complex and interesting. It is accepted that the fine arts were of marginal interest to the first political leaders of the Irish Free State and little support was offered publicly to artists or to art in the first two decades of the state's existence. However, the professed ideology of gaelicisation and its supposed monocultural reality does not give an accurate portrayal of actual socio-cultural experience. The reality was that while the arts were viewed as culturally problematic by the ideologues of gaelicisation, they were and remain the undisputed markers of social class distinction. Thus, patterns of cultural consumption in Ireland followed lines of stratification whereby the fine arts of serious music, literature and the visual arts remained the preserve of a small elite, substantially Anglo-Irish initially and subsequently more nationalist in origin with the growth in prominence of an indigenous Irish bourgeoisie. For the growing urban and petit bourgeois population, the remains of a middlebrow, Edwardian popular culture alongside the rise of a new commercial culture on broadcasting and in cinema were of much greater relevance. It was against the latter that a number of crude attempts were made to buttress the artificial and largely mythic image of a pure Gaelic culture. Into this contested cultural terrain, broadcasting, following a half-hearted and officially imposed attempt at gaelicisation, sought an accommodation with high culture. When it came to planning an international short wave service in 1947, Radio Éireann looked to Reithean models of public service broadcasting and produced a programming service that was cultured and refined, artistically innovative, but also universalist and educational in its aims. In this, it had much in common with the BBC of the 1930s which sought to convey serious culture in appropriately popular ways (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991) and following a decade of a monopoly in broadcasting underwent a similar loss of its audience to more populist radio stations and to television. However, this was not before broadcasting had established

itself as a credible and powerful institution in Irish society, an authoritative news provider and a significant patron of the arts.

The legacy of this diverse range of cultural influences remains a mixed one. Positively, it can be argued that the unpropitious circumstances for cultural development in post-independence Ireland were successfully overcome to arrive at a point where the expression of a self-confident cultural identity was possible. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the patterns of cultural stratification that existed in pre-modern Ireland continue to exist (Clancy et al, 1994). The revisionist portrayal of a liberation from an isolationist and conservative society with a narrow, philistine outlook, is a false one. Even the most notorious protectionist features of Irish cultural life were neither atypical for the extraordinary historical times involved nor as extreme as some other societies. It may, perhaps, be better represented as a period of transition in which the rising urban middle class sought an accommodation with and ultimately adopted the mores and cultural forms of an anglicised, bourgeois lifestyle. Such a view suggests that there is as much continuity as disjunction between the seemingly effortless success of Ireland's contemporary cultural entrepreneurialism and its historical forebears and that the contending social and political forces in Ireland's revolutionary past worked ultimately worked in favour of a grand historical compromise.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kearney (1997) is the best known exponent of postnationalism while O'Toole (1996) provides a good example of postnationalist cultural criticism. The publication of Fallon (1998) was the first major riposte to revisionist accounts of Irish cultural history.

<sup>2</sup> President Robinson's description at the opening of the exhibition in Paris of *L'Imaginaire Irlandais* *The Irish Times* 12/6/96.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ireland's transformation is so dazzling...one of the most remarkable transformations of recent times: from basket case to 'emerald tiger in ten years', 'Europe's Shining Light', *The Economist*, 17 May 1997, cited in Sweeney (1997: 6).

<sup>4</sup> Bord Fáilte, the Irish Tourist Board, controversially sought new ways of presenting the shamrock which is now viewed as being out of step with the modern Ireland *The Irish Times*, Oct 1, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> *Art Matters*, information bulletin of The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíonn, Issue 21, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton has argued that the Ascendancy in Ireland was a failed hegemony. It succeeded neither in maintaining British rule nor in co-opting the upper stratum of the native population, thereby losing their

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natural role in supplying political leadership and ultimately sealing their own fate with the virtual elimination of their class in the early twentieth century (Eagleton, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Hyde's influential phrase in 'The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland' which opposed the slavish cultural conformism to everything English, thereby setting the agenda for the cultural reconstruction of a Gaelic Ireland (in Hyde et al eds., 1894).

<sup>8</sup> O'Broin (1985) provides a vivid account of Protestant nationalist deviationists such as Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Ernest Blythe, Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne who in revolt against the deepest instincts of their class contributed in a very significant way to the cause of Irish nationalism.

<sup>9</sup> This, however, was when the Anglo-Irish minority was approaching its own twilight in Irish history and when Yeats felt that Irish society had moved in a decisively intolerant and narrowly sectarian direction. See Lyons study of Yeats (1983).

<sup>10</sup> This was one of the features that attracted Chester Beatty to Dublin from the much more formal cultural world of London. See Kennedy (1988) for an account of how the Chester Beatty collection came to be located in Ireland.

<sup>11</sup> Reith served on the interview board to appoint the first Director of 2RN. The definitive history of Irish broadcasting is Gorham (1967). See also Cathcart (1984).

<sup>12</sup> *Dáil Éireann*, Vol. 6, Col. 2611.

<sup>13</sup> See Frederick May's account of the Radio Eireann symphony concerts in Fleischman (1952).

<sup>14</sup> Acton's largely optimistic view which was as much to encourage activity in music was severely challenged by Donoghue (1955) who criticised the amateur nature and the poor quality of playing as well as the very middlebrow nature of music in Ireland.

<sup>15</sup> Statistics on broadcasting for this period are available in Kealy (1981).

<sup>16</sup> This informal analysis is based on a contemporary discussion of RE programming in *The Radio Review*, Vol.2, No. 43, 1947.

<sup>17</sup> *The Radio Review*, Vol. 2, No. 47, p. 3.

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