11

# Politics, Economy and Society in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939

ANNE DOLAN

## Introduction

This is the history of a disappointment. At least that is the impression most of the historiography of Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s seems to leave. Book after book describes a flat, narrow place that lost the courage of its own revolution's convictions, a cruel, timid place that was hard on its weakest and too much in thrall to those who preached right from wrong. It is written as stubborn and wrong-headed, too accepting of its failures, too proud of its own parsimony, too quick to sacrifice another generation just to get by. Above all, it is written in anger, anger at those who seemed content to shut out the world and to let paralysis thrive. Though praise still comes for the feat of state-building, for establishing a state in civil war, for consolidating it through the uneasy times beyond, the compliment is wearing thin. It has become harder just to admire the bricks and mortar the more that becomes known about the kinds of threadbare life inside.

## Disillusion

For all sorts of reasons disappointment might seem a natural response. Civil war made for a sorry start. For P. S. O'Hegarty, an advocate of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, it was lapsarian, a 'plunge from the heights to the depths'; it was an Eden smashed into the tiniest bits with the bitter knowledge that we had done it to ourselves. While independence demanded more than the illusions of a revolutionary's expectations, knowing that 'we were really an uncivilised people with savage instincts' was a cold place to start.[1] Some who had fought for independence found themselves with no 'wish to sacrifice myself in any

1 P. S. O'Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin* (2nd edn., Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), 91.

way whatsoever for this benighted country' even before civil war had begun.[2] While the methods chosen to put down opposition once it had emerged, executions and imprisonment on a scale never conceived by the British during 1919–1921, marked it out as an increasingly vindictive war where the point was to crush the enemy not fight towards victory or peace. For a generation that had cut its political teeth on the consequences of Easter 1916's executions, and on waging campaigns from cells in British jails, independence was never meant to start like this. The extra-judicial execution of four anti-Treatyite prisoners on 8 December 1922 in reprisal for the murder of the pro-Treatyite TD and Brigadier-General, Seán Hales, the day before, prompted Labour Party leader, Thomas Johnson, to declare 'I am almost forced to say you have killed the new State at its birth.' The Minister for Home Affairs, Kevin O'Higgins, defended the Act with 'we have no talisman except force'.[3] The Irish Free State was just two days old.

With time it grew into a particularly unpromising youth. It went awkwardly through its 'tedious years of adjustment' and maybe fearful of the chaos from which it had come, it was firm with its opponents, careful with its money and hard on those who needed its kindness most.[4] The Free State gave itself over to a frenzy of respectability; it worried about the moral welfare of its citizens, censored what they watched, what they read, fretted about how they danced, even how they loved. It made it harder to be virtuous when so many only seemed keen to see the sin. With a leader likened to 'the general manager of a railway company' in President W. T. Cosgrave, the Free State would aspire to be economically respectable as well.[5] The books should balance, and those deemed to be leading 'a parasitic existence' by J. A. Burke, the Minister for Local Government, counted fewer and fewer blessings in an Irish Free State.[6] 'The poor, the aged, and the unemployed must all feel the lash of the liberators.'[7] Reducing the old age pension by 10 per cent in 1924, admitting that 'people may have to die in this country and may have to die through starvation', believing that 'it is no function of government to provide work for anybody', independence only helped those who helped themselves.[8] While the cost of civil war had been high, spending was cut from £42 million

2 Joseph Dunne to James L. O'Donovan, 28 March 1922, MS 22,301: NLI.
3 *Dáil Debates, Official Report*, 2, col. 49 & 71 (8 December 1922).
4 V. S. Pritchett, *Dublin* (London: Bodley Head, 1967), 89.
5 *Irish Times*, 9 September 1922.
6 *Dáil Debates, Official Report*, 7, col. 3055 (25 June 1924).
7 J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124.
8 *Dáil Debates, Official Report*, 9, col. 562–3 (30 October 1924).

in 1923–1924 to £24 million within three years, but income tax was cut from five shillings in the pound in 1924 to just three in 1927–1928. The Free State settled for an economy built on agriculture. It settled even though Gordon Campbell, secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce, warned the government to be mindful of the risks: 'if a nation is to depend on agriculture it must produce mainly a population of farmers: men of patience, endurance, thrift and modest intellectual aspirations. If it produces other types it must export them at an early age if it is not to risk the continual ferment of disappointed and distorted minds denied by circumstances their exercise.'[9] Campbell was right. Many did leave, and not just the restless 'other types'. As many as 150,000 agricultural labourers left the land in the 1920s, squeezed out of an agriculture that no longer needed them, and passed over by the Free State's first Land Act in 1923.[10] There was to be no 'land for the people' as the revolution once promised, and with bad harvests, falling prices and near famine conditions in the west, the memory of the wartime agricultural boom mocked this independence all the more.

For some pro-Treatyites the pace of independence itself was just too slow. A government of Treaty supporters before it officially launched itself as a political party in April 1923, Cumann na nGaedheal squabbled within its own ranks before it settled on what independence would mean. Michael Collins proved an awkward ghost; his freedom to achieve freedom view of the Treaty was an easy taunt and Cumann na nGaedheal bore the crippling legacy of what he might have done. When that kind of talk was heard within the army, however, it presented a much more serious problem for the state. A bungled mutiny in March 1924 revealed the unresolved tensions between the state and the men whose blunt methods it had used to defend it. No longer needed in peacetime, demobilisation threatened the position of many who had power and position because of their revolutionary reputations and their capacity for violence. Some wanted more to be made of this Treaty; some just found peace an uneasy place. It came down to establishing the monopoly on the use of force, and the state seized it even if the price was the resignations of its Ministers for Industry and Commerce, and Defence.

The anti-Treatyites, broken by prison and executions and disheartened by their disastrous hunger strike in 1923, tried to make their way in an often inhospitable civilian life. With state posts denied them, with employers often fearful of attracting the authorities' displeasure by taking on these 'irregular' types, many

9 Quoted in Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, 123.
10 Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, 159.

left for Britain and the United States. Refusing to take part in the state, which to them was an illegitimate expression of the abhorrent Treaty settlement, they abstained from the Dáil, leaving a Cumann na nGaedheal government, which never attained even two-fifths of the popular vote, to rule in artificial comfort.[11] Labour, independents, Farmers' Party deputies could oppose and vote against the government, but parliament was a lop-sided, awkward thing. When the Boundary Commission, the Treaty's promise to reconsider the border between north and south, collapsed in November 1925, the anti-Treatyite Sinn Féin party was not even in a position to add to the government's woes, to point out how much the Treaty had disappointed southern hopes. Those who wanted to do more than watch 'in impotent purity while history was made by its enemies', followed Éamon de Valera into a new party, Fianna Fáil, in May 1926, leaving a Sinn Féin rump on, what its president J. J. O'Kelly later called, 'a plane too exalted for the corrupt to thrive in'. Offering nothing 'but the old unrequited service to a deathless cause', Sinn Féin was not even banned when the government moved against other republican organisations in 1931.[12]

Unlike Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil quickly thrived. It built a party machine, based around old IRA connections and kept lines blurred enough in the republican movement to build an accommodating church. It was only a 'slightly constitutional party' after all. Kevin O'Higgins's assassination by the IRA in July 1927 shook the state to its core, and part of the government's response was to compel all candidates running for election to pledge to take their seats in parliament if they won. The dreaded oath to the British King, abhorrent in 1922, became an 'empty formula', and Fianna Fáil entered the Dáil. Seemingly caught in the politics of 1923, Cumann na nGaedheal raised the shadow of the gunman, cast Fianna Fáil as an IRA front with de Valera as a Kerensky figure, a dupe for the gunmen to destroy the state. In Cumann na nGaedheal mouths, de Valera was to be the harbinger of a godless communism, and the politics of 'Red scare' went hand in hand with repressive measures to curtail the IRA and to dampen the ardour of the new Fianna Fáil mouthpiece, the *Irish Press*. Tension mounted as the general election approached in February 1932.

## Sinn Féin in Power

After an ugly campaign, power passed peacefully to Fianna Fáil. While mutterings of a coup to keep Cumann na nGaedheal in government had subsided

11 D. Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands 1912–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 188.
12 M. Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 441, 446.

by late 1931, and although some Fianna Fáil TDs brought guns in their pockets in case their opponents would not yield power, Irish democracy was healthier than that. When one of de Valera's first acts in government was to release ninety-seven IRA prisoners, many of their adversaries began to doubt its future prognosis, particularly when some, jubilant on release, promised 'no free speech for traitors' from now on. The perception that Fianna Fáil had its own private army led some within Cumann na nGaedheal to ally themselves more closely with the Army Comrades Association, a group of predominantly ex-soldiers who had banded together to protect free speech for opponents of Fianna Fáil. The party, which had in government in 1924 insisted on the state's monopoly on the use of violence, joined with a movement that took on a fascist bearing and a fascist salute. It is instructive of how much it feared Fianna Fáil's link with the IRA, of how desperate politically it had become. As clashes increased between Fianna Fáil supporters, many of them IRA members, and the Blueshirts, as this organisation became popularly known after its adoption of the eponymous shirt as a uniform, de Valera moved against the use of force by both Blueshirts and the IRA. Just as Cumann na nGaedheal had to cope with the use and threat of force that had helped to establish the state, de Valera confronted the forces he had used to win power. A sequence of murders by the IRA in the mid-1930s certainly contributed to his declaration in June 1936 that the IRA was now an illegal organisation in the state. Using the tools of his old enemies, de Valera expressed regret if his earlier indulgence of the IRA had 'led in any way to the murder of individuals in this state'.[13] It was no time to be 'slightly constitutional' anymore.

Throughout these years de Valera assailed the Treaty he despised, and jeopardised the relationship Cumann na nGaedheal had built up with London even as they pushed out the boundaries of what dominion status might mean. He legislated to remove the dreaded oath, undermined the office of the King's representative in Ireland, the Governor General, and took his chance in December 1936 while Britain was entangled in the King's passion for Wallis Simpson to remove the monarch from the Irish constitution altogether. And all of this while he was still head of His Majesty's government in the Irish Free State. The tattered constitution of 1922 was replaced by a new conception of the state. This new Éire, this republic in all but name, saw the aspirational and the actual inscribed. Staking a claim to Northern Ireland, it was ambitious or irredentist depending on which side of the border one stood on. For some it was too Catholic, for others not Catholic enough; it guaranteed fundamental

13 *Dáil Debates, Official Report*, 63, col. 112 (23 June 1936).

liberties, but was seen to inscribe paternalism at its core. The 'special position' of the Catholic Church, its view of 'woman', that it is woman rather than women, these elements have prompted most debate, most ire. But in chipping away at the trees we have sometimes missed the value of the wood.

Constitutional status aside, the quality of many lives did not improve quickly enough to satisfy the hopes placed in independence, never mind in Fianna Fáil. The party came to power in a small, still relatively open, economy in the midst of a world depression. It spent more money than Cumann na nGaedheal certainly: there was more aid, more houses built, better conditions for workers, and a greater sense that the state had a responsibility for the welfare of its citizens' lives. But need continued to grow, even though the move to increase production and the protection of Irish-made produce initially led to an unprecedented boom in Irish industry and industrial employment. An Irish market could take only so much of its own produce before it reached saturation point. The government refused to hand over the annuities due for the Land Purchase Acts, and Irish agricultural produce was hit by British tariffs and quotas in response. This economic war lasted from 1932 to 1938. While this allowed Fianna Fáil to intensify its self-sufficiency drive under the guise of a new kind of war with the old enemy, Irish farmers paid the price. Global depression had already hit them hard, but economic war added another considerable burden for the already laden down to bear. This might explain all of the extra government provisions for the unemployed, why there had to be a 'farmers' dole' in 1933. The Great Depression meant emigration no longer relieved the pressures of too many people living off too little land, and while there were some attempts to acclaim their retention as the fruits of Irish independence, Minister for Industry and Commerce, Seán Lemass, admitted a different response: 'Those 25,000 or 30,000 people who, in other years, found an outlet through the emigrant ship are remaining at home and have to be provided for at home.'[14] When emigration was that ingrained it was not an economy built to go to war.

By that war's end in 1938, the Minister for Finance, Seán MacEntee conceded as much: 'In an effort to cope with this problem of unemployment, we have increased tariffs, … we have shortened the working hours of the employed and given them holidays with pay, we have introduced quota restrictions, and we have established virtual monopolies. We have more regimentation, more regulation, more control everywhere. And more unemployed!'[15] It was

14 Ibid., 41, col. 1673 (12 May 1932).

15 S. MacEntee quoted in T. Garvin, *Preventing the Future: Why was Ireland so Poor for so Long?* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), 33.

a far cry from Todd Andrews's 'great leap forward' of 1932.[16] Nonetheless, in 1938 Fianna Fáil received its largest vote to date: 52 per cent of the electorate returned the party to government, where it remained for another ten years. Even though the economic war had bolstered the ranks of the Blueshirt movement, the new Fine Gael party that came out of the alliance of Blueshirtism, Cumann na nGaedheal and the Centre Party in September 1933, offered little but the very cuts to the public spending that so many voters had come to depend upon. Indeed, for historian Richard Dunphy, Fianna Fáil's victory in 1938 had less to do with the Anglo-Irish Agreement that ended the economic war, that returned the treaty ports and removed the final British presence in the state, but more to the dependence the party had cynically effected between itself and a growing proportion of what he sees as an infantilised electorate with little option but to keep its kind and progressively conservative master in place.[17] With a populist Fianna Fáil machine ruthless for power, Dunphy takes a grim vista and paints it black.

This whistle-stop tour of the inter-war years in independent Ireland has called at many of the familiar political sites. They are recognisable from the political histories of independent Ireland that have dominated its study for so long. However, the flowering of social and cultural history for this period has added many of the harsh narrownesses of Irish life to the itinerary for this trip. The censored, isolated culture of independence left its citizens a limited diet of westerns and romances, and chopped up films that a paternalistic state thought them fit to digest. A buoyant and increasingly confident Catholic Church may have begun worried by the irreverence of the revolutionary years, but soon became certain that 'the old restraints would be again observed'.[18] In dance halls, and in the length of women's skirts, it saw and decried the devil at every turn. Religious minorities in a state of more than 93 per cent Catholics looked carefully and quietly on; it could be a daunting place for those outside that muscular Catholic embrace. Magdalene laundries, industrial schools, institutions of all sorts kept those who transgressed largely out of sight. A child born outside of marriage was four times less likely than the progeny of its parents' married peers to reach the end of its first year; in the valley of the squinting windows respectability was a cruel and exacting king.[19]

16 C. S. Andrews, *Man of No Property* (2nd edn., Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2001), 113.
17 R. Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland 1923–1948* (Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 4.
18 P. Colum, *The Road Round Ireland* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 39.
19 F. Kennedy, *Cottage to Crèche: Family Change in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2001), 37.

While brevity has lent itself to generalisation, maybe exaggeration, even caricature, this is the kind of independent Ireland that tends to come from the pages of the historiography almost book after book. It is an historiography that is angry and disappointed with this past and perhaps Ireland's problems throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have made it hard to absolve the 1920s and the 1930s of at least some of the blame. It is easy to find reasons to be angry. Read back through the 1950s, how could it be otherwise? The 'vanishing Irish' are a bitter indictment of independence. 'No longer shall our children, like our cattle, be brought up for export.'[20] Too many of those children to whom de Valera had promised better in 1934 were gone by 1954 for us to see him or the 1920s and 1930s straight. Read back through the 1980s, again, how could it be otherwise? As more and more of the state's earliest records were released in that decade they were fathomed and framed as dole queues and as queues for American visas grew and grew, as Northern Ireland tore itself more furiously apart. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz gave a theoretical turn to the frustration of another generation of Irish historians with this past. The 'deflating experience' of living in, rather than imagining independence, strongly influenced J. J. Lee's seminal interpretation of the 1920s and 1930s.[21] It worked well with the anger of many of his conclusions, written through the 1980s, and first published in 1989. Lee presented the Irish Free State as a disappointment 'in the context of historical expectations'.[22] It is a view that has been broadly perpetuated since. More recent research has focused on how the most vulnerable were treated. A generation of historians shaped by the venomous referenda on abortion and divorce, shaped by a society still battling with its own sense of what secular means, had to speak up, if nothing else, to show how far Irish society had since come. As religious and institutional scandals made headlines this was also a history that an Irish public was willing at last to hear. Nothing was as we would have liked it to have been, and as research has developed, the 1920s and 1930s have found more and more ways to let us down.

## A Conservative State

Even though it takes in the political, social, cultural and economic, there is a striking sameness to how this disappointment was expressed. And it was

20 Quoted in T. P. O'Neill and Lord Longford, *Éamon de Valera* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), 334.
21 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 235.
22 Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, 173.

there long before Lee. F. S. L. Lyons's discussion of 'the partitioned island', begins: 'That the revolutionary of today is the conservative of tomorrow is a truism of politics in no way contradicted by the recent history of modern Ireland.'[23] Within a few pages the state slinks away to the flickering shadows of Plato's cave. By the time of the publication of Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland* conservatism was a given. A chapter on the Irish Free State could begin with 'the rigorous conservatism of the Irish Free State has become a cliché', and like most clichés it was found to have more than its share of truth.[24] Theo Hoppen went further. Independent Ireland was not just conservative. It had a 'singular capacity … for standing still'.[25] An Ireland going nowhere was his last word. Hoppen's 'definitive' evidence for this was Kevin O'Higgins's pronouncements on the 'conservative-minded' nature of Ireland's revolutionaries.[26] O'Higgins's verdict crops up with monotonous regularity in assessments of 1920s Ireland, not least because as the first Vice-President of the Irish Free State, he is an ideal witness for the prosecution's case. Indeed, O'Higgins himself, became a fundamental part of historian John Regan's thesis that not only was this a conservative state, but it had become a counter-revolutionary one, aggressively undoing the remnants of that which might have been revolutionary in the revolution in the first place. Regan concludes: 'it is the non-events, the absence of real extremes … ultimately the monotony of Irish nationalist politics which remain most compelling'.[27] Compelling they may be, but they are non-events, absences and monotony just the same. Diarmaid Ferriter's *The Transformation of Ireland* demonstrates how much this sense of conservatism has shaped the emerging social history as well. Ferriter ends by asking 'what was it all for', using Michael Moran, John McGahern's fictional veteran of the Irish revolution, to sum up the 'failures of Irish independence' itself: '… "some of our own Johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen … The whole thing was a cod"…'.[28] The kinds of personal costs Ferriter saw many people paying may have prompted this view. And backed up by research since on the cruelties at the heart of many Irish lives it is a view that has taken root. Thomas Bartlett's *Ireland* records 'plenty of fear

23 F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (2nd edn., London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 471.
24 R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (2nd edn., London: Penguin, 1989), 516.
25 K. T. Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 256.
26 Ibid.; *DE Official Report*, 2, col. 1909 (1 March 1923).
27 J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-revolution 1921–1936* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), 383.
28 Quoted in D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 758–9.

and loathing', with a 'stifling consensus at the heart of Irish life'.[29] It seems the vocabulary has been settled; the severity of the adjectives is all that is left to disagree on.

But does the conservative, inward-looking Ireland of much of the historiography stand up to a simple test? One day, one random day of a national newspaper reaching approximately 150,000 homes, does it reflect this narrow place? On 31 May 1935 the *Irish Independent* noted the stuff of another day gone by. Readers read of the 'bustle' of a coming by-election, of a police raid in Dublin, of republican offices temporarily closed down.[30] They read about Eamon Ceannt's last letter going on display at the National Museum, about 1916's rebels feted just as Cumann na mBan's typewriters were seized and went still. They read of things changing: about Limerick's new TB hospital, about the city's 380 new homes. They read about nothing changing, about poverty and relief grants, about the things that stayed stubbornly the same as well. London made a statement about the Commonwealth and Dublin retorted with a predictably pugnacious reply. A bomb was thrown in Belfast, and the journalist's brevity maybe said there was little new in that. In announcements of births, marriages and deaths, life went its own way on.

The 31 May 1935 edition gives us the historiography's familiar Ireland. There are traces of its predictable politics, its wayward economics; there is plenty to confirm the kinds of life we have been told were there to find. This national newspaper, and it could have been any newspaper, this day, and it might have been many other days, gives its own clear hints of the society the state had built itself upon. But in this one newspaper, on this one day, in all that lived cheek by jowl with the new houses and the old politics, there is the challenge of far more than we have come to expect to find. Noticing that this newspaper carried a considerable amount of foreign news is not enough, even if its extent and its reach crudely question any easy assumptions that the Free State was a closed-off place. Of course, readers on 31 May 1935 read of the fall of the French government, of Roosevelt's meeting with the Industrial Recovery Board. But Japan is there issuing warnings to China; shots are fired at strikers at Rhodesia's mines, and peace is hoped for between faraway Bolivia and Paraguay. Yet, far more than this, the wider world is rushing in, revealing in a quiet and taken-for-granted fashion that lives were being lived in ways that an historiography convinced of homogeneity and isolation has not really sought

29 T. Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 445.
30 *Irish Independent*, 31 May 1935.

to uncover. Front-page advertisements vied with one another to whisk readers off to Naples, Madeira and Cadiz. Cruise ships promised Egypt, Ceylon and the Straits. With facilities on board 'for holy mass', Lamport and Holt Cruises knew their Irish market or perhaps assumed they did. A 300-page brochure of Cook's tours is unsettling reading for an Ireland apparently at its wits' end in economic war. 'Seeing Soviet Russia' is a puzzling invitation if this is the Free State of 'Red scares', of so many prayers offered up to save the world from socialism and communism and to bring about the conversion of Russia most of all. The *Irish Independent* of 31 May 1935 captures a place that seems hungry for the newest, the most modern of everything: 'Brownie crystal sets', 'every Decca record in stock', Hillmans or Hupmobiles. For all that has been assumed about inwardness and isolation, it is clear even in the columns of easily passed over classifieds that this Free State thought itself, or was cajoled by the advertisements to think itself, an up-to-the-minute type of place. No frugal, homespun Ireland here.

From the second-hand wedding rings to the 'strictly private . . . loans by post' for the middle-class spendthrift, the Irish Free State was keeping up appearances and there were appearances to keep. Mr Morosini-Whelan offered private lessons claiming dancing is now 'a social necessity'. As a 'teacher of dancing to Castleknock, Clongowes Wood, Blackrock, and Terenure Colleges' he taught the coming men of an aspiring Catholic elite: however, quick-steps and foxtrots on the curriculum of the best Catholic schools strike a jarring cord with the chorus of clerics who currently populate the historiography railing against dancing as the source of most sin. On 31 May 1935, regardless of censored scenes, Dublin cinema audiences enjoyed Dashiell Hammett's '*The Thin Man*' starring William Powell, Myrna Loy, and Asta, their fox terrier. On the same night, the Bohemian Cinema offered '*Jew Süss*'. Having played to packed houses for several weeks, there was clearly a popular audience for this critique of the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime. Other days' examples suggest a greater openness still. In October 1934 the *Irish Press* promised forthcoming concerts featuring Paul Robeson, Beniamino Gigli, and Vladimir Horowitz.[31] Conservative, isolated, censored, repressed – they do not sit so easily with the experience or at least the opportunity for dancing and Russian holidays, with all the interest taken in a wider world, or with sitting in the dark and lusting after Myrna Loy. We package a period and a people neatly up at our peril, particularly when just some of one day's newspaper can turn it all awry.

31 *Irish Press*, 11 October 1934.

Of course, the experience of Dublin cannot speak for the rest of the state. But one day, one random regional newspaper, on 26 September 1925, stands up to the same scrutiny.[32] The weekly *Anglo-Celt*, serving the readers of Fermanagh, Westmeath, Meath, Leitrim, Monaghan, Cavan, Longford and Louth, presents all of the same prospects almost a decade before. The stuff of the familiar narrative is there: news of disgruntled ex-IRA men meeting in Longford, reports of local councils, the detailed record of the most local of local news. 'Emigrating – a number from Carrigallen and other parts of Leitrim have left for the USA' came just as a statement of accepted fact. It was a commonplace thing like the death of a 'respected resident' or the poisoning of a dog. There is all of the disappointing Ireland we have come to know. A column on religion, 'The Church', comes with all the certainty of that definite article; there was only one faith worth writing about. But even this does not sit easily. It is not a sanctimonious listing of local piety and prayer; instead it records the Pope's concern for the Czechoslovakian church, and notices a new basilica in Quebec. It crows certainly about the ordination of a Jewish convert in Oregon, but though the terms and the tone may sit uneasily with us, this is still one day of a wider Catholic world than we have come to expect. Equally 'news for the week' ranged far and eclectically wide. While a Mrs McCarthy was 'badly injured by a freshly-calved cow', and there were arrests and fines and other run-of-the-mill local and national things, readers also got '500 Druces' [*sic*] killed in Syria and they got Lady Cynthia Mosley declaring herself 'an out-and-out Socialist' into the bargain. Cavan and Meath and Leitrim and Louth were even offered the latest gossip on the King of Spain. He had arrived in Paris for 'the monkey gland treatment', and Cavan and Meath and Leitrim and Louth did not need an explanation of what that meant. What maybe matters more is what passed as a given: 'A party of Irish farmers arrived in Denmark' to learn new methods and to bring that knowledge home. While it is one thing to accept that the Department of Agriculture hoped to encourage Irish farmers to follow Danish ways, that simple passing sentence in a local paper shows the message was hitting home. An advertisement just two pages before for 'Denmark's Pig Powder', with its claim that it 'is now used throughout Ireland by all far-seeing Pig Feeders', may just have been brash and topical advertising, but it took the attraction of foreign, modern methods as a given, and behind it lay the assumption that Cavan and Meath and Leitrim and Louth wanted to be 'far-seeing' most of all. The *Anglo-Celt* told its female readers about new trends in furs, that 'Paris

32 *Anglo-Celt*, 26 September 1925.

has gone in strong for lace gowns'. While the farmers' wives of Shercock and Killashandra might well have scoffed, they kept an eye to Paris all the same. Like the dancers of a decade later *Anglo-Celt* expressed no anxieties about any possible occasions of sin. With 'proceeds in aid of a parochial object', with another dance 'in aid of funds for repairs of curate's house', the Catholic Church's view of dancing was not so straightforward after all. It is not only the sophisticated metropolitans who pass the test.

This is not a plea for a swing to the other extreme, for the kind of revisionist debate that has shaped the history of inter-war Britain. Some have strayed from *The road to Wigan Pier*, because for them too many spent too much on cars and golf clubs and bungalows for Orwell to have it all his own way. But it is not about replacing the disappointed version of Irish independence with some blindly buoyant view, trading in the 'worst of times' for the 'best of times' because a few advertisements said 'we had everything before us' after all. It is more of a plea for context in all its forms: the context of the local and the particular, the kind of disruption that just one copy of the *Anglo-Celt* brings, but also the context of what people at the time defined as their own expectations and norms. We can, for example, rail against the nature of poverty in the Irish Free State, but poverty is relative to its own times, abject according to each period's ways of making ends meet. In 1923 Frank O'Connor got a job as a trainee librarian in Sligo's Carnegie Library on thirty shillings a week.

> I found lodgings near Sligo Cathedral at twenty-seven and sixpence a week and had a whole half-crown for laundry, cigarettes and drink. Mother had worked it out that it would be cheaper to post my laundry home than to get it done locally, and every week I posted home my shirt, my underpants, a pair of stockings and some handkerchiefs.

While this tells us something of his priorities, about the expectations that a man should have money for cigarettes and drink, while it may tell us more about his mother who borrowed to buy him a cardboard suitcase, who agreed to add half-a-crown to his weekly wage which she had to go out and earn, it gives us a scale, not thriving, not sinking either, but a sense of what it took to get by. And if that was getting by, one shirt on, one shirt off, in what many would have thought a respectable job where the day ended with no dirt, with no calluses on O'Connor's hands, we have a far better sense of what poverty meant in 1923. His pity for the 'poor country girl' found sleeping in the garden of his lodgings because she had been 'thrown out by her parents and had nowhere in the world to go' said what he thought poverty was.[33] We cannot

33 F. O'Connor, *My Father's Son* (3rd edn., Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1994), 13–14.

chart the course of the haves and the have-nots without the struggle of the strivers in between.

## What did Irish People Actually do?

While our understanding of the lived experience has broadened, we have been quickest to find the cruelties that court records allow us to find; infanticide, abortion, rape and child abuse have all been explored to quite striking effect. Indeed, much of this work has informed the acknowledgement that past wrongs have to be put right. Happiness, or what passes for it, has been harder to find; it leaves fewer traces, and not as many pressing reasons to search. Yet, it is needed, if nothing else to set the awfulness against; even a glimpse of happiness makes misery hurt the more. For Frank McCourt 'the happy childhood is hardly worth your while', but Alice Taylor's *To school through the fields* makes *Angela's ashes* hit harder home.[34] However, happiness is also needed on its own terms. So much of the history of Irish sexuality centres on its repression and control, but is there any sense of love, even love aspired to or sentimentalised, even love reduced to the practical demands of the matrimonial classifieds? Two individuals, perhaps stirred by spring to find a mate, set out their terms in March 1930: 'Gentleman, 30, strict T[ee] T[otal], with a nice capital [sum] would wish to meet a Young Respectable Lady, with a business or farm of her own'; 'Young Lady Protestant, good family, some capital, wishes correspond [*sic*] varsity man or banker, age 40, view matrimony; genuine.'[35] In both, there is a sense of what was meant to impress; in both there is the tangle of respectability and class and, maybe eventually, love. There are enough marriages captured on newsreels, smiling at their outset in wedding photographs, enough idealised romances in cheap novelettes, enough concern about the nature of courtship in darkened cinemas, in ditches, in the back of cars to suggest that there was at least some pleasure taken, some happiness glimpsed, even if only for a short while.

Writing in the context of censorship, Ferriter has argued that 'perhaps historians have fallen into the trap of becoming consumed with what Irish people were supposedly not permitted to do as opposed to what they actually did'.[36] While the extent of the exhortations to stop might suggest that widespread moral laxity was the norm, Ferriter's principle could be extended

34 F. McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 1; A. Taylor, *To School through the Fields: An Irish Country Childhood* (Dingle, County Kerry: Brandon, 1988).
35 *Irish Independent*, 7 and 14 March 1930.
36 Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 10.

far beyond that which was prohibited in cultural or sexual terms; it could be a broader plea for experience in all sorts of contexts. While we know that people danced on despite the bishops' urgings, that they watched on despite the film censor's propensity to snip, the scope for the experience of 'what they actually did' could be broadened in all kinds of ways: how they worked, how they spent the money they did or even did not have, how they lived and died according to their own lights. In a period of new political parties, new movements, new religious organisations, what was it, not just to be counted as, but to be, a member, to participate, to play a part? The whist drives and dances, the outings and excursions, the strong social dimension built into every group whether Fianna Fáil, the Blueshirts or the Irish Countrywomen's Association, suggests room to understand any and all of these groups as more than the sum of their manifestos or their well-meaning aims. The same *Anglo-Celt* carries notice of the first annual dance of the Mountnugent branch of Cumann na nGaedheal: 'Gents' two shillings in, 'ladies' only 1s 6d, both significant sums when the likes of Frank O'Connor were expected to live on the little left of his 30 shillings a week.[37] A social history of politics makes sense when tens of thousands joined Fianna Fáil's 1,300 cumainn by late 1927, when some 50,000 joined the Blueshirts, and danced and cycled and picnicked their way around their heartlands, socialising with those of the same class, of the same political mind. The back pages of party newspapers hum with the life of movements that have only been looked at in political terms. That much of the tension between Fianna Fáil supporters and Blueshirts expressed itself, according to Department of Justice files, at rival dances is suggestive in itself. The same case might be made for religion. The sociability before and after religious practice in rural Ireland, where the week might not have brought a single face, or in urban Ireland, where the week might have brought none friendly or none known, cannot be underestimated. While it may have served to reassert a social order, a hierarchy of the holier-than-thou over those who stood at the back and held their own court, none the less, the increase, particularly in Catholic lay organisations in this period, suggests the appeal of filling evenings with all sorts of sodalities and companionable good works. That the coming of BBC television to Dublin in the 1950s coincided with a fall in attendance at evening devotions says something of this social role, a role that possibly played a far greater part in married women's and older women's lives, regardless of creed or church.[38] None of this is to undermine faith, or to

37 *Anglo-Celt*, 26 September 1925.
38 L. Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002), 226.

question the sincerity of party allegiance; it is just to suggest that politics and religion meant more than party and church.

## Religion

Majorities pose a problem no matter what they are made of. Convenience assumes homogeneity as a given, partly because the leaders leave more records than the followers, and it is easier to assume most dissidents left, and that most adherents did as they were told. Catholicism in Ireland poses a considerable problem in this regard. The experiences of religious minorities have been more sensitively and more extensively explored. Ian d'Alton has carefully teased out the type of 'parallel Irish Free State' created by much of a 7 per cent Protestant population of 1926 that had been 10 per cent in 1911. While that decline continued an already existing trend, outbreaks of sectarianism in the south during the revolutionary period had encouraged many Protestants not to rise above the parapet thereafter. Nonetheless d'Alton has mapped out the survival of a strong economic position for that 7 per cent, which still accounted for over 50 per cent of the bankers, over 20 per cent of the doctors, 40 per cent of the lawyers and more than 25 per cent of the large farms in the state in 1926.[39] Ignorance and bigotry certainly expressed themselves, particularly when even attending a Protestant service was a sin for a Catholic which could only be expunged by a bishop, but the expression of faith was guaranteed, even if the sheer force of Catholic numbers made any minority feel uneasy in this place. While the diversity of Protestant experience has been thoughtfully considered, curiosity about Irish Catholicism has largely concentrated on the hierarchy's grip on the new state. Inquiries into clerical and institutional abuse, the often painful progress to a more secular conception of personal morality, have made it even more problematic to understand the experience of the 93 per cent who ticked the box for Catholic on 1926 and 1936 census forms. The sense of an authoritarian church leading a pliant state by the nose is still a strong one; the role of the laity is harder to find never mind the range of complex negotiations any individual made with their own faith. The comfort of faith is easily diminished, and the fear of sin, or its consequences, is probably unfathomable now as Vatican II brought a far more merciful God. The rise of indulgences in this period to offset time in purgatory is easily mocked for the shallowness of its own obsessions. The

39 I. d'Alton, '"A Vestigial Population"? Perspectives on Southern Irish Protestants in the Twentieth Century', *Éire-Ireland*, 44 (Fall–Winter, 2009), 14.

challenge is to allow for the meaning people took from this, from their own piety, whatever form it took. Equally, there is a glorious disparity to upset any easy summation of Irish Catholic life. On *The road round Ireland* Padraic Colum noted the diversity even from parish to parish: 'In Father Michael's parish, for instance, people are terrified of having a dance at their house, and young men and women can meet only in the most furtive way. In the next parish, however, there is absolute freedom.' He found that being seen to be pious was as much about the tyranny of neighbours' expectations as any priest's. He noted that women in rural Kerry 'put on their boots coming into the town, so that they will be respectable-looking at Mass'; respectful of their religion, perhaps, but not giving their 'betters' the satisfaction of sneering at their bare and dirty feet.[40] For all sorts of reasons Catholicism in this period has been easy to caricature, but there is far more to fathom in the nature of faith between the good intentions of a Sunday morning and the temptations of a Saturday night.

The Catholic Church has been key to the disappointment the historiography has expressed for so long. Gerard Hogan, a constitutional lawyer, has taken historians' interpretations of the 'special position' of the Catholic Church in the 1937 Constitution vigorously to task: he argues that it was meaningless in law, was overpowered by the freedom of expression of faith safeguarded by the same article, and in any case was liberal by comparison to many contemporary European states, such as Britain and Norway, where law enshrined an established church. The Constitution's explicit recognition of the Jewish faith, given the wider European context of 1937, has been largely overshadowed by the obsession with predictable concerns. Hogan has identified a range of international influences on the Constitution, including the American Constitution, the Weimar Constitution, and admits that while aspects of Catholic social teaching are also evident, he asks whether we should default so readily to criticism of the source if the articles had a positive practice in law. While some historians' sense of the Constitution as a document drafted by de Valera along with 'Jesuits and other clerical advisers' has subsided to something more nuanced, the issue of influence Hogan raises presents a challenge to the broader historiography.[41] The sense of an Irish state shutting out the world under the sway of a narrow Catholicism is undermined by the kinds of Catholicism that were growing in prominence. The rise

40 Colum, *The Road*, 31, 474.

41 G. Hogan, 'De Valera, the Constitution and the Historians', *Irish Jurist*, 40 (2005), 293–320; Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands*, 230.

of lay organisations such as the Legion of Mary, the growth of groups such as Muintir na Tíre inspired directly by the 1931 Papal Encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, present a Catholic firmament bristling with all sorts of international influences. Catholic social teaching expressed itself in a multiplicity of ways, just as it did across Europe, from the Muintir na Tíre approach of local people working together to address local need, to the more extreme expressions of people like Fr Denis Fahey, Professor of Theology at the Holy Ghost Fathers' seminary, who was enthused by strains of continental Catholicism that saw Jews, Communists and Freemasons plotting world conspiracy at every turn. Catholic social teaching's amorphous capacity for best and worst was part of a wider ferment of discussion about how society might be structured, how the state might emerge. That much of this talk came to nothing should not underestimate the energy expended in the debate. The legacies of Catholicism from this time may well be the very things that underline the narrowness and the inwardness that disappoint so many with this period, but this was part of the wider world rushing in. Looking back, it may seem to be the essence of conservatism, but we cannot say it was not international and modern just because we do not like the parts that stuck.

## The International Context

All the prayers in favour of faith and fatherland in Spain, all the novenas to save the world from communism, even the fear that prompted James Hogan to ask *Could Ireland become Communist?* in 1935, are part of this same engagement with a wider world.[42] That the majority sided with Franco's cause in Spain, may not endear its instincts to us now, but those instincts were utterly modern and international for all that. When Patrick McGlinchy died in April 1933, the Donegal publican bequeathed a hall for public use in his parish. He left a clear stipulation in his will: 'No communist or anti-God organisation is ever to have the use of the Hall, and no Communist shall ever be elected a member of the Committee of Management.'[43] With his dying breath he was fighting communism on his own front; Raphoe was his Guadalajara, his Guernica. Fear, particularly fear of something that never comes to pass, is easily, often mockingly dismissed. The fear of the modern, the outrageous forecasts of doom should a dance be danced, or a book read, may seem ludicrous once the first step is taken and the world does not end, but in both the raging

42 J. Hogan, *Could Ireland become communist? The facts of the case* (Dublin: Cahill, 1935).
43 *Leitrim Observer*, 8 December 1934.

of all the King Canutes, and in the force and the frequency of all the waves, Ireland was thoroughly transnational in its instincts, its fears, and its appetites. The difference may well be in degree, but the perspective is where the challenge begins. France, Belgium, Italy, prohibited the sale of contraceptives in 1920, 1923, 1926 respectively; it took the Irish Free State until 1935.[44] Emigration of Irish citizens beyond Europe, admittedly curtailed to America by quotas after 1924, saw 1,031 Irish leave in 1935. That same year, Italy lost 26,829, Poland 34,623 and Greece 11,652: rates two, three and five times higher per capita than independent Ireland. How many of England and Wales's 25,036 migrants were Irish the *Statistical Abstracts* are shy to say, but even the envied Denmark lost 2,214, again twice the Irish rate.[45] That the state saw itself, recorded itself, noted its problems, its achievements, in the context of the international information it could get suggests a sense of a place in the world we sometimes underestimate, a sense of comparison that ranges far beyond the historiography's obsession with the Anglo–Irish relationship. In 1939, birth and death rates for independent Ireland nestle between those of Hungary and Italy, and the list ranges from Austria to the Federated Malay Straits, taking in Costa Rica, New Zealand and the Argentine along the way. Independent Ireland was one of forty-eight states noted, including three separate categories to cover the complexity of birth and death in the USSR. Certainly the disappointments of independence clearly come through in the *Statistical Abstracts* of that same year. While independent Ireland's population could boast a comfortable 27.6 per cent of 0–14 year olds against a Swedish low of 22.2 per cent and a Portuguese high of 31.9 per cent, too many had left for the state to rank so well in the category of 15–34-year-olds. Only France had more citizens over 60 years of age than independent Ireland; one of Europe's older populations certainly, but this place clearly brought the expectation of a longer life.[46] The state thrives or fails on a variety of scales, depending on how one chooses to judge. The same comparisons could be made for rates of unemployment, and for every other tabulated experience between birth and death. What is striking, however, is the attempt made to understand the state in comparative terms, an instinct expressed in the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI) and its journal long before and after independence, by journals such as *Studies*, even in the daily newspapers, and in the cut and thrust of Dáil and Senate debates. The range of countries referenced by contemporaries on

44 Kennedy, *Cottage to Crèche*, 19.
45 *Statistical Abstract 1938* (Dublin, 1938), 205.
46 *Statistical Abstract 1939* (Dublin, 1939), 212–13.

topics as diverse as rates of illness or penal policy, the instinct to see the state beyond isolated Irish terms, undermines the easy assumption that this was an insular and, most of all, an exceptional place. Any single year of papers read to the SSISI through this period suggests a will to compete and to be bettered by the comparative experience of the wider world. Indeed, choosing to see the protectionist policies of the 1930s as emblematic of de Valera's conception of an isolated, self-supporting economy says more about the lure of hindsight than it does about Irish policy in the wake of the Wall Street Crash. Protectionism could not have been more international in the 1930s; John Maynard Keynes told his audience in Dublin this when he lectured on 'National self-sufficiency' in April 1933.

The reluctance to undermine Irish exceptionalism is perhaps expressive of a fear that, without it, the state simply fades into a kind of also-ran. Comparatively, the Free State had a small civil war: its dead came to between one and two thousand. By contrast 36,000 people, over 1 per cent of Finland's population, died within six months in its civil war. The state returned to stability at a quite striking pace compared to Europe east of the Rhine. However much Kevin O'Higgins saw the threat of 'Irregularism' at every turn, this was no Hungary and no Poland. Indeed, part of the shock of O'Higgins's assassination was it seemed like an intrusion of the methods of previous years. Economic fortunes, when viewed in isolation, were poor; more might certainly have been done, but for all the subsistence, even for the tragedy of starvation in Adrigole, County Cork, where a family died of hunger in March 1927, this was not the poverty Richard Titmuss described in the North of England and Wales, where he estimated that between 1928 and 1938, 150 Britons died from malnutrition every day.[47] The Great Depression saw exports fall by 65–70 per cent in the Free State between 1928 and 1929 and 1932 to 1933, but the fall was precisely the same in Argentina, Canada, Holland, Estonia, India, and Spain; it was 75–80 per cent in China, over 50 per cent in twenty-two other key exporters at the same time. Even the economic war has to be reassessed as more than de Valera's private battle against Britain: Britain's new National Government of August 1931 was committed to the protection of British agriculture before de Valera even came to power.[48] How can we write of the 'failures of Irish independence' without a sense of what we mean by, what anyone at the time could have conceived, as success?[49]

47 R. Titmuss, *Poverty and Population* (2nd edn., Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 301.
48 K. O'Rourke, 'Ireland and the Bigger Picture', in D. Dickson and C. Ó Gráda (eds.), *Refiguring Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), 347–8.
49 Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 759.

The sense of the state as a conservative place is striking in the historiography. Conservative is a relative term, but in much of the analysis it is not clear who calibrated where 'radical' begins and 'conservative' ends. There is an acceptance that what passed for a political divide in Irish politics was simply a continuation of the civil war, that there was not the kind of natural division between right and left common to the rest of Europe, that there was a persistence of the 'national question' to the detriment of a genuinely left-wing outlook in the state. The natural corollary of this is the fascination with the type of political cultures that found themselves more and more likely through the inter-war period to take their rhythm from the beat of a fascist or a communist jackboot. The value of stability was not lost on Kevin O'Higgins who, when speaking two days after an election in Britain in October 1924, pointed out to his audience in Oxford University that since becoming a member of the Irish government, 'I have shaken hands with four English Prime Ministers, and may be meeting the fifth any time now.'[50] While he was hammering home that the Irish were capable of ruling themselves, the comparative stability of the Free State is none the less clear. And there were far more unstable places beyond the British Isles. Fourteen parties won seats in Czechoslovakia's elections in 1920; thirty-one featured in the Polish result in 1926. Neither state existed by the end of 1939. Indeed, of the twenty-two democratic constitutions Mirkine-Guetzevitch enumerated in 1920s Europe, the Free State's was one of the few that survived.[51] Eric Hobsbawm counted only five states in inter-war Europe where 'adequately democratic political institutions' continued to function without interruption, and the Free State was one.[52] Stability was a valuable commodity in inter-war Europe, however much it seemed to look like stasis after 1945.

## The Shadow of the Revolution

The sense that the state lived in the shadow of its revolution, that its political life was defined by the civil war divide, underestimates the intensity of bread and butter politics from the very outset. It is there to be found in the extent and the range of legislation passed, while the frequency with which questions of land arose in the Dáil in this period is suggestive of a polity moving

50 K. O'Higgins, *Three Years Hard Labour* (Dublin: Cahill, 1924), 12.
51 Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, 80; M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 5.
52 E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1995), 111.

naturally and ploddingly on.[53] The election literature of all parties, across the period, shows that pounds, shillings and pence mattered when it came to the ballot box. A Cumann na nGaedheal supporter saw his party's defeat in 1932 in very plain terms:

> I met some hard-headed wealthy middle-aged large-familied Mayo shopkeepers that I know in the train. Their enthusiasm and determination for the FF policy of high protection and development of the country's resources by strong measures was astonishing and the most curious thing was that they had no delusions about DeV's own personality and culpability in '22. 'But what matter now, he has the right policy and we'll see it through and make it succeed.' Voilà![54]

This questions David Fitzpatrick's view that 'affiliation to de Valera's Fianna Fáil was primarily determined by the legacy of the civil war rather than by the appeal of specific policies'.[55] One party certainly presented itself as the 'men of no property', aimed to 'speed the wheels' and 'speed the plough', and even had the arrogance to promise to 'abolish unemployment' in 1933. For economist Kevin O'Rourke 'the claim that Irish party politics have been informed not by economic differences but rather by idiosyncratic quasi-tribal factors is not supported by the evidence'.[56] The civil war mattered; it remained a handy register of abuse, but we take too readily for granted that politics in the state was bound to 'be disfigured by the hatreds, betrayals, and disillusionment of the civil war'.[57] In the 1920s and 1930s Military Service Pension applicants from both sides requested supporting references from old civil war enemies; it seems to have taken the historiography longer to get over the divide. It is still looking for the divisions, not what put this place back together again.

In March 1923 George Russell lamented that 'the mass of people in the country continue to think as they did before the revolution', revolution 'triumphed solely in externals'; the fundamental fabric was not expected to change.[58] For Patrick Lynch, writing in 1966, independence amounted to the 'social revolution that never was', and most historians have accepted his traditional sense of what that revolution should have been. Lynch blamed the dead hand of the civil service in the new state; the continuation of nigh on 98

53 T. Dooley, *'The Land for the People': The Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004), 3. See also the chapter by Dooley on the Land Question in this volume.
54 Quoted in Regan, *The Irish Counter-revolution*, 305.
55 Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands*, 197.
56 O'Rourke, 'Ireland and the Bigger Picture', 350.
57 F. McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-made Hero* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 114.
58 G. Russell (AE), 'Lessons of Revolution', *Studies*, 12 (March 1923), 2.

per cent into independence meant the 'conventional wisdom of Whitehall' far outweighed that of Connolly or Pearse.[59] That same continuity of service could also be the reason why the state survived. There were relatively robust institutions functioning relatively quickly, and Lynch's assumptions fail to take account of that or to recognise the fundamental rights and liberties enshrined in the state from the outset. The sense of an absent social revolution may instead reflect a will to impose a chronology that simply does not fit: social revolution possibly predated the political one. We may need to look to the changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of land ownership and local government, and in terms of the changing expectations of more relief that came with the old age pension in 1908. A small farmer was able to speak in the mid-1920s of 'what had been gained by the land-revolution – what had been gained by the political revolution had not yet come into his consciousness'.[60] Whatever either revolution meant to him they were distinctly separate things.

While the Irish welfare system lagged far behind its British equivalent, improvements were made none the less. Changes came, whether with more pensions, more allowances, or more reforms of the conditions of work; that there was still so much to do maybe emphasises the value of the little that was achieved. Because the source of much of the change was Fianna Fáil, because, as Seán MacEntee has already admitted, in spite of it all there was still 'more unemployed', many have refused to accept that if there was a social revolution, MacEntee's party might well have been its only source. When Minister for Local Government and Public Health, Seán T. O'Kelly bragged in 1937 that the 'Labour Party had no more responsibility for the passing of the Widows and Orphans' Pensions Act than the King of Bulgaria', he had a point.[61] Hindsight might hope to find a different kind of social revolution, but if electoral results are any measure then independent Ireland showed little appetite for more than what it got.

If independence was a far cry from the Limerick Soviet of 1921 where V. S. Pritchett was told to leave his hat on because 'they had finished … with bourgeois manners', indeed, if bourgeois manners were the very thing that triumphed in the Free State, maybe there were other kinds of social revolutions to look for.[62] They may have come in the shape of a crystal radio set;

59 P. Lynch, 'The Social Revolution that Never Was', in D. Williams (ed.), *The Irish Struggle 1916–1926* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 53.
60 Colum, *The Road*, p. 25.
61 *Irish Press*, 23 June 1937.
62 V. S. Pritchett, *Midnight Oil* (London, 1973 edn.), p. 117.

for George Bernard Shaw, one radio in a small place meant 'overnight the village was in the twentieth century'.[63] They may have come with the crackling of gramophones breaking the silence, in the records that brought jazz to Belmullet and Caruso to the tenements. They may have come with access to running water, to electricity, to more shop-bought goods, with more sociability, more houses, more bicycles, and more cars. The Shannon Scheme was not just a symbol of the modern in the state; it was a means of social change. Perhaps above all, they came for Miss Newton of the 'Big House' who told Padraic Colum 'we have had a great come down; we were once everything in the country, and now we count for hardly anything at all'. For her 'the real signs of an accomplished revolution' came in who administered local power. The head of the Civic Guard in her area was the 'son of the smith who used to shoe Miss Newton's horse'. Colum saw it in a trader's widow who could put up an altar in the chapel 'at the cost of a thousand pounds'; he saw it in the grandson of a labourer who was now the 'richest man in the place'.[64] It was perhaps born of narrow ambition, but it was a social revolution none the less.

There is much work to be done in order to understand the nature of social mobility in the new state, to grasp the gradations of class, particularly in rural Ireland, and to measure the power that tuppence ha'penny exerted over tuppence. Even Frank McCourt had someone to look down on in Limerick's lanes. There may have been no social revolution of the sort expected, but respectability ran rampant and, in fathoming that, we will begin to see why some prospered and some failed, why some daughters were kept at home, why others were put away out of sight. Its history is in the steady slights. A tender for the construction of fourteen houses by Birr Urban District Council was advertised in October 1934 in the *Irish Press*. They were fourteen of the government's tally of more than 82,000 homes constructed between 1932 and 1942.[65] Building on the approximately 25,000 houses funded by Cumann na nGaedheal governments from 1922, each one can be acknowledged as a key part of what little amounted to social change. But the tender called them '14 working-classes [*sic*] houses'.[66] Even in that misspelt word we begin to see why some were never allowed to forget the help they got. The power of local charity over local need, of local credit over local debt, the power of parents

63 S. O'Faolain, *The Irish* (3rd edn., London: Vintage Books, 1980), 147.
64 Colum, *The Road*, 15–16, 34–5.
65 C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 440.
66 *Irish Press*, 11 October 1934.

over daughters and sons, spouse over spouse, the tyrannies of propriety in a small place need to be understood. The concentration of power in central government in the new state has been noted, but who ordered out the everyday in society as a whole?

## Conclusion

Sean O'Faolain, reflecting on three decades of independence, noted 'we have had our protesters, sometimes violent, rarely articulate or creative, but they have been all too few', so that if a politician asked 'what exactly do they want' then '"they" rarely do know'. For Diarmaid Ferriter, writing nearly sixty years after O'Faolain, 'the real surprise is that more unrest was not shown by those most distressed'.[67] It is as if George Bernard Shaw's view still holds. Voicing his disappointment with the prospect of censorship in 1928, he complained 'the average man is a coward', and so much of the disappointment with this period of Irish history seems to echo this sentiment.[68] And yet, so much that is now perceived as conservatism in the state often had overwhelming popular support, even had advocates prepared to push for what seems even greater repression. The voices that spoke up for women's rights were largely ignored, the concern some fathers had that the farmer's dole might undermine their control of their sons, the failure to raise the school-leaving age because the need for a child's labour was too pressing for too long, these and so many other examples suggest people were not always thwarted: they just were not prepared to do as we hoped they should have done. The number and extent of inquiries instituted by the state in these two decades suggests that curiosity was there to see and perhaps improve people's lives, but most investigations were shelved and not acted upon. That tussle between the instinct to know and the inability to act has more to give us than just the disappointment that nothing was done. There were eloquent contemporary critics of independence, and much eloquent criticism since, but the experience of the 1920s and 1930s is too diverse to settle for criticism alone. Colum leaves us with the home of Pierce Moynihan in the midlands, a four-roomed house, a 12-acre farm. Moynihan had several children in America, two sons and one daughter still at home. With pictures of America on the wall, his daughter was in a hurry to be on her way: 'she had no need to leave … still she had no wish to settle here'. The youngest son 'was very

67 O'Faolain, *The Irish*, 160–1; Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 318.
68 G. B. Shaw, *The Irish Statesman*, 17 November 1928, 207.

hostile to the government – they were spending the people's money on themselves; the people were better off under the British, and all that sort of thing'. The eldest son, who had fought in some way for this freedom, had a different view: 'he is interested in agricultural organization abroad, and had heard of conditions in Denmark. All that he said about the conditions and problems of the countryside was thoughtful'.[69] He was looking outward, hopeful for the future, for change. In these four rooms, 12 acres, and three siblings there is more than the sum of our disappointment; the lives that were lived were more vivid than that.

69 Colum, *The Road*, 24–7.