

Elizabeth Bowen's Ireland? Film, Gender and the Depiction of 1960s Ireland

Robert Savage

Abstract: *At the start of Ireland's transformational decade of 1960s, the American network CBS contacted Padraig O'Hanrahan, the Director of the Irish Information Bureau in Dublin. They were interested in gaining government assistance for a program being planned for its popular television series The Twentieth Century. The episode envisioned would address social, political, economic, and cultural developments in the country and provide an accurate portrayal of everyday life in Ireland. The Dublin government readily agreed but was unaware that the Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, a writer with very distinct cultural and political prejudices, had been hired to write the script for the program. The narrative of the film produced by Elizabeth Bowen is revealing as it allows the viewer a unique perspective into a society undergoing significant change. The film addresses a wide array of issues including the evolving role of women in Irish society at the start of a decade characterized by rapid change. What at first may seem like a rather awkward American effort to 'capture' the real Ireland, warts and all, was a more complex effort, strongly influenced by a remarkable Irish writer. The program is also revealing as it deeply upset an Irish Government concerned about its image and desperate to present itself in the words of Taoiseach Sean Lemass as 'a progressive nation seeking efficiency'.*

In Ireland the 1950s are often referred to as the "lost decade" because of the severe economic problems confronted by Irish society. Many argue the term is overly simplistic because it fails to take into account the innovative cultural production that characterized the period (Fallon 1998). However, there is no doubt that Ireland was challenged by a stagnant economy, high levels of unemployment and relentless emigration throughout the 1950s. During this period, a variety of governments proved incapable of dealing with an economic and social crisis that threatened the viability of the state.

This began to change in 1959 when Eamon de Valera stepped down as Taoiseach and was replaced by Sean Lemass. During his tenure as Taoiseach Lemass introduced a number of critical reforms that initiated significant economic, political, and social change. His economic schemes were, in an Irish context, a radical shift from previous government

policies as they reduced tariffs, encouraged foreign investment, and recognized the need for the state to take risks in order to realize economic growth. Conservative, even protectionist policies that had held sway were discarded and the country began a lengthy process of fully engaging with the global economy. The turnaround of the economy was uneven but, given its dire state in the postwar period, remarkable.

In the 1960s, Ireland became a more modern consumer society as the economy expanded, emigration slowed, and a modest prosperity developed. In this new environment, suburbs grew, and cars, extended holidays, and new forms of entertainment such as rock and roll became features of Irish life. External reforms added to a genuine sense of progress that was palpable at the time. For example, Vatican II contributed to an easing of the authoritarian nature of Irish Catholicism, in spite of the resistance offered by some high-ranking clerics. Ireland was not immune to the vibrant youth culture that embraced a questioning of authority resulting in widespread unrest in university campuses across Europe, America and much of the world.

Opposition to the war in Vietnam, support for civil rights and equal rights for women resonated in Ireland among a generation determined to confront issues of social justice both at home and abroad. Although the sexual revolution of the 1960s may have been slowed by the strength of the Irish Catholic Church, traditional attitudes towards sexual conduct were evolving. Later in the decade the publication of the papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirming the Church's prohibition on birth control, proved a watershed in Catholic Ireland. For many it appeared the Vatican was returning to an authoritarian past where rigid rules were applied with absolute certainty. This stimulated public debate and helped provoke a major challenge to the Catholic Church from Irish women. It also helped to usher in a period of activism that witnessed the opening of the first family planning clinic in the capital in 1969, highly publicized protests and the founding of the Irish Woman's Liberation Movement in 1970. Writing about this period the political historian Tom Garvin observes that these changes were "foreseen with nervousness, anger and foreboding by some of the older generation of leaders and very obviously, by many traditionalists" (203).

It should be emphasized that the economic, social, and cultural transformation Ireland experienced in the 1960s was gradual. Although great strides were made in improving the quality of life for many citizens, there were still serious social problems that plagued the country throughout the decade. Many less fortunate citizens continued to live in poverty and in sub-standard housing in both rural and urban areas, where employment and educational opportunities were lacking. In spite of the profound change taking place, Irish society remained a deeply conservative one where the Catholic Church continued to be a powerful force. Ireland's "great modernizer" Sean Lemass shared many of the concerns of his mentor Eamon de Valera. Both men possessed an innate social conservatism and an unyielding conviction that Fianna Fáil was the only party fit for government.

A key ingredient in the transformation of Irish society through the 1960s was television. Telefís Éireann made its debut on a wintery New Year's Eve in 1961 opening wide an exciting yet often, unsettling window on the world. It enabled citizens direct access to news, information, and an unrelenting popular culture bypassing traditional intermediaries, including the church and the local and national press. Put simply it quickened the pace of modernization that began when Sean Lemass became Taoiseach in 1959.

The arrival of indigenous television was especially problematic for political, religious, and cultural elites. Many were upset with what they viewed as the medium's pronounced lack of deference. The first reaction of many politicians and senior civil servants to aggressive reporting by news and current affairs programmes was to try to control, discipline, or even censor broadcasters, insisting that they serve the state rather than broadcast programmes critical of it. Many politicians were slow in realizing that the Broadcasting Act of 1960 was a genuinely liberal document that offered a considerable amount of protection to the new television service.

Like Eamon de Valera, Sean Lemass did not have much patience for the political opposition and because Fianna Fáil dominated the decade, he and many of his colleagues regarded criticism by broadcasters as proof that those operating Irish television were political opponents intent of undermining government policy. Lemass became a vociferous critic of television, lashing out both publicly and privately at perceived slights from the station. In a famous debate in the *Dáil*, he defined Irish television as an "instrument of public policy" suggesting it should serve the government. The Taoiseach considered television a potential threat to his government well before Telefís Éireann began broadcasting Lemass in 1961. When plans were being developed to establish an Irish television service he made it clear that he believed the government should have a firm voice in deciding what should and should not be broadcast. His concerns about the power of the medium to undermine government policy were confirmed by an encounter his government had with an American network in 1960.

In the summer of that year, Isaac Kleinerman, the Executive Producer of the American television series, *The Twentieth Century*, visited Pádraig Ó'Hanrahan, the Director of the Irish Information Bureau and a close confidant of Lemass. Kleinerman told Ó'Hanrahan that his network, the Columbia Broadcasting Company, was interested in gaining government assistance for a program he was planning. CBS wanted to film a documentary that would introduce contemporary Ireland to a large American audience. Kleinerman made it clear that he would address social, political, economic, and cultural developments in the country and provide what he described as an accurate portrayal of everyday Irish life. He told Ó'Hanrahan that plans had been made to interview a number of "principal people" in the country indicating that the network hoped to interview both the Taoiseach Sean Lemass and the President, Eamon deValera.

Kleinerman pointed out that *The Twentieth Century* had an audience of eleven and a half million informed and educated Americans. He proudly explained that the

program was a prestigious, critically acclaimed series that had developed a well-deserved reputation for excellence. The program's presenter, Walter Cronkite, was a highly respected professional in the field of television journalism. The series had begun broadcasting on Sunday evenings in 1957; by 1960 over one hundred programs had been produced addressing issues that explored the turbulent history of the twentieth century.

The request by the American network was greeted with a degree of scepticism by the Director of the Government's Information Bureau, who advised Kleinerman that the Irish Government would be happy to cooperate if the program was "serious and responsible" (NAI, S16882, O'Hanrahan to Kleinerman, 5 July 1960). O'Hanrahan asked Kleinerman to forward an outline of the proposed program detailing the topics the network intended to cover. CBS complied in a correspondence that caused a great deal of consternation in government circles. The response to the network's proposal and subsequent negotiations with CBS offer valuable insight into the Lemass's attitude towards the medium. It also reveals how he hoped to use television to present an image of Ireland both at home and abroad as a "modern vibrant nation seeking efficiency."

The government was alarmed with the outline that CBS presented believing that it was seriously flawed. Government officials argued out that the network was starting off on the wrong foot by opening the program in a Dublin public house. According to CBS Walter Cronkite would open the program in Moody's Pub in Dublin to observe the Irish at "two of their favourite occupations – talking and drinking" (*Ibid.* Kleinerman to O'Hanrahan 11 July 1960). CBS also hoped to have Cronkite interview an IRA "volunteer," a proposal Lemass found not only insensitive but insulting. In 1960 the IRA was actively engaged in raids into Northern Ireland that resulted in a number of deaths and the destruction of property. Lemass believed any such interview would lend legitimacy to an illegal paramilitary organisation actively involved in unlawful acts and dedicated to the overthrow of the state. The network also wanted to explore the peculiar demographic situation it believed existed in rural Ireland by filming what it described as "Square Dance scenes showing long stag line(s) because of the girl shortage" (*Ibid.*).

This was not the image Lemass wanted projected to the affluent, educated American audience that Kleinerman had described. He was convinced that the film as outlined would portray Ireland as a backward peasant nation plagued by unemployment, political violence, relentless emigration, alcoholism, and an insincere effort to force an archaic language "down the neck" of an uninterested populace (NAI DT S14996D). It should be pointed out that Lemass and the Secretary of the Department of Finance TK Whitaker were designing a five year economic program that they hoped would stimulate economic growth and both men looked to the United States as a critical source of external investment. Lemass was therefore interested in trying to revise if not rewrite the outline that the network had submitted. With significant input from the Taoiseach, O'Hanrahan drafted a letter to CBS explaining that substantial changes would have to be made in the film if the network wanted to gain access to Lemass and de Valera. The government made it clear it objected to the network's desire to open the program in a public house

and defined as unacceptable the proposal to interview a member of the IRA. Other issues that were seen as objectionable included the networks proposed treatment of rural Ireland, its critique of the state's language policy, and the desire of program makers to concentrate on emigration.

After receiving the letter a distraught Isaac Kleinerman met informally with Frederick H. Boland, Ireland's Ambassador to the United Nations to complain about the government's criticism of his planned documentary. He made it clear that he intended to film the program with or without the co-operation of the state. After meeting the American producer Boland contacted Lemass directly telling him that Kleinerman was "very upset by the comments on his proposed film" (NAI DT S16882, 10 August 1960). Boland argued that the government should find a way to work with CBS, maintaining that without the involvement of the state the program could be injurious to the image of Ireland. Boland emphasized that *The Twentieth Century* was a reputable series, concluding, "it would be a pity if we missed the opportunity of having Ireland presented in as good a light as we can" (*Ibid.*).

A short time later Kleinerman wrote a conciliatory letter to O'Hanrahan, maintaining that he intended to portray Ireland in a manner that was "true and relevant. . . . We have no desire to alter, distort, or in any other way create a false or misleading impression" (*Ibid.*, 12 August 1960). Kleinerman agreed to accept the government's recommendations maintaining that he would make a number of substantial changes in the program. He promised that no attempt would be made to interview the IRA and agreed not to address issues the government had objected to. However, the network remained committed to opening the program in a Dublin pub but now "with a view to dispelling the half-truths and myths which exist about Ireland today" (*Ibid.*).

Kleinerman's letter convinced O'Hanrahan that CBS had made a commitment to correct what he considered flaws in the original shooting schedule. He wrote to Lemass, explaining, "I have come to the conclusion that his intentions are good and that by and large the finished project should not give rise to any really serious objections. The film may not be an ideal one from our point of view but on balance I feel the advantage will lie in our participation in it" (*Ibid.* O'Hanrahan to Lemass, 12 August 1960). Lemass reviewed Kleinerman's letter and accepted O'Hanrahan's advice. He agreed to be interviewed by the network, as did Eamon de Valera. The program was broadcast on two consecutive Sunday evenings, 29 January and 5 February 1961.

The Irish Ambassador, T. J. Kiernan reported that the film projected a depressing image of as "a poverty-stricken country riddled with backwardness, unemployment and emigration. (observing) There was a general air of fatalism and decay" (NAI DT S16882B/61, Kiernan memorandum 6 February 1961). The consulate in New York also produced detailed reports for Dublin that concluded Ireland, *The Tear and The Smile* was a terrible film that denigrated Ireland. They condemned the film arguing that it reinforced offensive stereotypes that damaged the image of Ireland.

Throughout the negotiations with the American network the government had not been aware that the Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, a talented writer with very distinct cultural and political prejudices, had been hired to write the narrative for the program. The writing of Elizabeth Bowen and the work of camera man and associate producer Bob Monks underscores the Irish influence brought to the project. Both were interested in addressing a number of serious social, economic and political problems that confronted the Lemass Government at the start of the 1960s. The consul general's office in New York reported that when its staff attended an advanced screening of the film it strongly protested arguing that parts of the program were inaccurate and even offensive. At the screening Kleinerman dismissed these objections pointing out CBS "had relied upon Miss Bowen, who was Irish, for accuracy in her text and he regretted that it was not possible to effect any changes in the script at that late stage" (three days before the public telecast) (*Ibid.*).

The first half of the program concluded on January 29 with what was described by embassy staff as "a long drawn out tearful emigration scene The background was a women singing 'The Hills of Sweet Mayo'" (*Ibid.*). It is ironic that this portion of the film is one of the most moving as it captures families painfully separating at Shannon Airport. The program captured the pained expression of the faces of men and women as they departed for the United States. The fact that the network addressed emigration, a sore spot for Lemass, was major a point of contention for his government. A week later the second part of *The Tear and the Smile* was broadcast and once again reviewed by embassy and consulate officials in Washington and New York. In reporting to Dublin it was agreed that the second program was more hopeful than the first.

However, the film was criticised for the way a number of topics were handled. In this segment the network concentrated on the role of women in Irish society asking if women were treated as equals. Bowen's narration, read by Cronkite, asked: "How does the woman fare in this predominantly rural, puritan and slumberous society where change has lagged? . . . traditions from an earlier day linger. Men tend to exclude women from their gatherings for drink and talk often the sexes separate through habit at beaches and in church. Is Ireland truly a man's country with the women relegated to a secondary and unconsidered place?" (Bowen's transcript). To answer this question the film first turned to women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. It first interviewed Barbara Dickson the editor of the woman's page of the *Irish Times*. She maintained that while Irish women may envy their American counterparts it was wrong to think of Irish women as second class citizens. Irish Government officials complained about her appearance in the film, dismissing Dickson as "very artificial and affected, (who) explained that Irish women envied American women in the comfort of their bathrooms and kitchens and said any well-to-do Irish woman who had a washing machine was lucky" (NAI, S16882B/61, Kleinerman memorandum 6 February 1961).

Barbara Dickson was not the only woman featured in the film as Bowen and Monks were careful to consider the experience of women from other segments of Irish

society. Republican Socialist and political activist Senator Nora Connolly O'Brien, the daughter of James Connolly, is perhaps the most eloquent and articulate of all the people who were interviewed in the documentary. Her working-class sensibilities are a world removed from the concerns of Barbara Dickson especially when she addresses the changes Ireland had experienced since independence. Although she argued that great strides had been made for all citizens Connolly O'Brien made it clear there was still much that had to be done noting "Irish women don't push themselves forward in public life" but pointing out that Irish women played a key role in the struggle for independence (Bowen's transcript). The film then switches to the Georgian elegance of Dublin's Merrion Square to interview the famous designer Cybil Connolly. As a model shows off a stylish ballroom gown Connolly observes in a very refined accent "I wish women could spend all their lives in ballgowns" (*Ibid.*).

The film then makes a jarring transition and moves to the rural west of Ireland considering the role of the mother in the Connemara Gaeltacht. This part of the program is beautifully filmed and succeeds in addressing rural life at the start of a transformational decade. It is clear that Bowen and Monks were determined to sympathetically feature an Ireland that many would argue had disappeared. The film portrays the family of fisherman Coleman Casey as they gather for breakfast in their home and follows the children as they head off to the nearby national school under the watchful eye of their mother. In the narration Cronkite explains: "The family unit is still the hard core of Ireland, the mother a power especially in the rural home. Some attribute the low marriage rate to this matriarchy, the mother's traditional dislike for any girl her son shows interest in. But until sons and daughters reach the marrying age, late often not until their thirties, the mother is usually supreme" (*Ibid.*). The film concludes with a traditional *caili*, again in the west of Ireland. Men talk nervously on one side of the hall, women on the other while the band plays and young couples dance. The "segregation of the sexes" that CBS agreed did not exist closes out the program.

Sean Lemass was unnerved by his experience with CBS and by the film that it produced. He was offended by segments of the program that failed to present the image of Ireland he wanted shown to an international audience. His efforts to present Ireland as a dynamic nation engaging with the modern world were undermined by a film that honestly addressed the challenges that confronted Irish society, including those faced by women. The Taoiseach was convinced that his government had been misled by the American network, which he believed had given false assurances about the content of the program simply to gain access to government leaders. His Secretary Maurice Moynihan was ordered to write a strong letter of protest to Isaac Kleinerman "letting CBS know of our disappointment and surprise at the contents of the film" (NAI, S16882B/61, DT, 16 February 1961). Lemass approved the letter of protest that was sent to Kleinerman in March of 1961. The letter expressed the Irish government's profound concern at the "distorted image of Ireland which the film presents" (*Ibid.* O'Harnahan to Kleinerman 23 March 1961). Kleinerman was told that the Irish government was deeply offended by the film.

The American producer responded that he was “both surprised and shocked” by the government’s complaints. “On the basis of our research, our discussions with the people of Ireland, and our examination of all sources of material available to us, we feel that we covered the main points of the story of Ireland today” (*Ibid.* Kleinerman to O’Hanrahan 6 April 1961). Kleinerman explained that it had not been the intention of CBS to “do another travelogue on Ireland,” explaining that he had made “an effort to examine Ireland today as it is, not as it might be or as people imagine it to be” (*Ibid.*).

The controversy the film provoked fifty years ago offers an opportunity to consider a society in transition and illustrates the tensions that challenged Ireland at the start of the 1960s. The film may have been flawed in places but overall it is a wonderful portrait of Ireland at a critical moment in its contemporary history. Elizabeth Bowen and associate producer Bob Monks succeeded in addressing a number of difficult issues and their effort to present a variety of voices from Irish women is in itself remarkable. Telefis Éireann itself was slow to promote programming designed to address woman’s issues through much of the 1960s. Programming that began to explore the politics of gender equality would only slowly gain attraction in current affairs broadcasts in the 1970s. The program provoked a great deal of discomfort within the government and served as a warning to Lemass and his colleagues. They understood that the medium could be subversive and that there would be trouble ahead with the imminent arrival of Telefis Éireann.

Works Cited

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