

Ireland: Vacuum of National Purpose

Gary MacEoin

THE VILLAGE in the West of Ireland seemed fuller of young people in August, 1959 than I had seen it in half a century. They were gay, well-spoken, well-dressed and free-spending. They took advantage of once-in-a-lifetime summer weather to throng to football games on Sundays, picnic at the beaches, explore the countryside in rented automobiles and see Grade-B westerns in the village movie house.

The people are living better than ever before. The selection of material comforts is sometimes odd. An electric washing machine confers prestige rather than comfort when one must carry the water half a mile in a bucket from the river. Forty years ago the village road was worn into three deep ruts, a center one by the plodding horses and donkeys, two side ones by the narrow iron rims of the cart wheels. They were so deep a cyclist could not move from one to another without dismounting. This year I drove at eighty miles an hour (Ireland has no speed limits) over its excellent macadam surface.

But the surface does not, unfortunately, tell the entire story. The prosperous young people having a gay time are home on vacation from England and the United States. There were never so few young workers on the farms. No sooner do they finish school than they emigrate, attracted by high wages and steady work. The money they spend on vacation and the substantial remittances they send their families account in large part for the improved living conditions of those who stay.

Ireland's economy is overwhelmingly agricultural, with over 40 per cent of the population engaged in farming. The typical farm is undercapitalized and not very efficiently operated. But the currents which have affected international trade in this century have not bypassed Ireland. Agriculture, providing the bulk of its exports, must try to maintain competitive production costs, and accordingly machinery and agricultural chemicals have cut the labor input. For every four men employed on the land 20 years ago, there is room today for only three. And the trend is not yet exhausted. Output per farm worker, though up nearly 65 per cent in 20 years, is still far below that of competitors. The al-

ternative to dwindling returns is more farm efficiency, which usually means less labor per unit of production.

Fewer farm workers, each producing substantially more, give a total agricultural output some 25 per cent higher in volume than 20 years ago. The increase is praiseworthy, though far behind the typical Western European achievement of the same period. Indeed, it is doubtful if it even pays for the higher living standards today enjoyed by the smaller farm population, for these improvements represent in substantial part the remittances from overseas of a new generation of emigrants, perhaps also some depletion of capital resources.

WHY DO THEY EMIGRATE?

What to do, however, with the people displaced from the land? This problem has been vexing the country for a century. Emigration seems the only answer.

Now the average Irish boy or girl has no wish to emigrate. The persistence of the little villages and towns, where the owners of the old-time general purpose stores and saloons lean against their doorways and wait patiently for the approach of the rare customer, shows the strength of the ties. So does the energy with which those who must go accumulate their earnings in London and New York, both to subsidize those who stay and to take frequent trips back, trips that today often pledge the future under pay-later plans.

Those who stay agree with those who go in deploring emigration. At one time, there was a lot of talk of settling more people on the land. More recently, they talk about expanding industry, and there has in fact been a small but steady annual increase in industrial employment. Yet the paradox remains. The greater the industrialization, the lower the total employment.

Today, Ireland exports automobiles to the United States and television receivers to Britain. This year its first oil refinery with an annual capacity of 2 million tons has gone on stream. A West German firm completed construction of a plant at Killarney to manufacture cranes for export. Another West German firm is building a cheese factory. Two American companies announced formation of Irish companies to produce cosmetics and chewing gum.

All of this is impressive, but it does not begin to change the basic situation. No technique has been devised to overcome the economy's persistent tendency to increase imports at a more rapid rate than exports, which is another way of saying that the Irish insist on consuming more than they produce. They settle their account by exporting their children.

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I'd like to think a little about the attitude of trying to get something for nothing. Reasons exist, both technical and historical, for low labor productivity. Likewise, exposure to and facility of movement to England and the United States foster a desire for living standards which the economy does not justify. Yet, I think that the real problem is more basic. As I see it, the Irish lack a philosophy of work or, at least, a Christian philosophy of work. There is no pride of achievement, no concept of vocation, no aspiration after perfection.

This is, and is deliberately intended to be, a judgment on the moral condition of the country, for such an attitude runs counter to the whole Catholic concept of life. The existence of the attitude is, nevertheless, unquestionable. Indeed, I found no disposition to deny it. On the contrary, for many this general mediocrity is a virtue, and for others a fact of life.

"Slipshod performance is universal," a priest commented, "and still you can't say that it is inherent in our character. The Irish make excellent workers abroad. My own belief is that the climate is mainly to blame."

"On the contrary," interjected a journalist friend, "this is the way God meant people to live. We in this country have found a human tempo of living. We're doing fine."

This argument—or sophistry—is frequent. It shows up, for example, in the tourist publicity, which presents the happy-go-lucky attitudes of the native as one of the country's picturesque features.

Be that as it may, optimum production is impossible with such an attitude. There is no use, for example, having modern telephone equipment, if a switchboard operator tells you there is no reply rather than make the effort to complete a call, or if the long-distance service in a major city takes ten minutes to look up a number in the London directory. I had both these experiences, and all to whom I recounted them agreed they were normal.

Similarly, there is no hope for the new industries, no matter how excellent their equipment, if the moral atmosphere considers it neither shameful nor sinful to deliver such inferior work as it is possible to get away with. And unfortunately, the monopolistic system devised—unavoidably, often—to encourage nascent industry makes it possible to get away for a time with very inferior work and haphazard schedules. However, even the worm turns. Such practices have contributed to the high mortality among new industries.

Thinking people are unhappy and frustrated with the situation. They blame the leaders for failing to devise ways of rewarding performance. Now, as I have suggested, I don't think this criticism goes deep enough, for the problem is more moral than technical. Nevertheless, it has validity. Society functions best when individual advantage and moral obligation run together. In Ireland, performance is seldom adequately rewarded.

The property structure, not only on the land, but also in commerce and industry, erects a barrier between employer and employe. The best guarantee of advancement is membership in the boss's family. The likelihood of raising oneself by honest merit out of the rank and file is so remote that the intelligent employe—and in-

telligence is plentiful—knows that only a fool would try. "Longevity," as a cynic remarked, "is the country's greatest curse." Nobody is willing to relinquish authority while a breath remains in his body. Even the son slated to succeed to his father's enterprise is an old man before he can make an independent decision. By then, any enthusiasm or ideas he might once have possessed are atrophied. His concern is to enjoy his tardy power, not to risk it.

Politics suffers a like fate. Here, the men who fought in 1916 and in the War of Independence remain unchallenged in 1959. In the interval, they have concentrated all power in the central Government in Dublin and given to permanent civil servants a dictatorship over the lives and decisions of the people without parallel in the free world outside France. The county councils, which played so big a part in the struggle for independence, demonstrating at that time the possibilities for self-government existing in the country, have been made rubber stamps. The police, education, the law courts, public assistance, hospitals, transport, all are under central control. The citizen is a child who could not be depended upon to make any decisions in matters affecting the community in which he lives.

It would be strange if these trends and attitudes were not also reflected in the Church, the transcendental importance of which in Irish life is universally recognized. And when I say the Church, I am not thinking exclusively of the institutional framework of Catholicism, though obviously this is the major influence, especially in the Republic, where Catholics are 93 or more per cent of the total population. The statement may shock some, yet I am convinced that the moral values and social attitudes of the Irish Catholic and the Irish Protestant are all but indistinguishable. If only they could both see this plain fact, they would be two-thirds way toward ending Partition, and a long way, too, toward mending the rift in Christ's seamless garment.

The Church, taken in this broad sense as a social institution, offers, in the opinion of many, the most acute expression of the tendency to treat the general public as too immature to make its own decisions.

TOO MUCH BANNING

Censorship provides a good example. Here Church and State work closely together in censoring both books and films. The wording of the book-censorship legislation ("in general tendency indecent") parallels and was no doubt inspired by the Canon Law ("*ex professo obscena tractantes*"), but the application runs wildly beyond the rules laid down by the most rigid canonist. Such absurdities have resulted as the banning of a book carrying the Nihil Obstat of a Catholic archbishop and the condemnation of books as being "in general tendency indecent" because of a single objectionable incident, perhaps only a single phrase.

Censorship is also performed administratively by the Customs outside the framework of the Censorship of Publications Act. Such discretionary authority might be justified against pornography, but it is in fact used to seize shipments from reputable publishers to their deal-

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ers, and they have in practice no redress. A recent victim was Joyce Cary's novel *The Captive and the Free*. (Another Cary novel, *The Horse's Mouth*, is banned.)

Unofficial but real censorship exists at a third level, that of the public library. Twenty years ago, when I lived in Ireland, a librarian friend (now with God) used to select for me books she considered good and important. These were books withdrawn from circulation on the basis of instructions with which she disagreed but had to follow. Yet she was an exemplary and indeed militant Catholic, thoroughly qualified to make her own decisions. And the situation she endured has not improved.

The stress on book censorship would be less extraordinary if there was any substantial book-reading public. A recent survey of London publishers, the main suppliers of the Irish market, found them in agreement that 750 copies of a new hard-cover novel was the absolute top "best-seller" limit. In nonfiction, only the life of a saint or other Church personality, or a book of recent Irish political history, might exceed this figure, going as high as 4,000. The exception for recent Irish political history is not surprising, for politics remains an obsession, while social and economic thought is neglected. The other exception is curious. It suggests that the clergy attend to their spiritual reading, and no other.

Film censorship produces equal absurdities. For example, you can't have a bum tell a priest on the screen to go to hell. The phrase is cut out, even though it means that now the priest, without any provocation, knocks the bum into the gutter with a left to the jaw. One is left under the impression that it's quite proper for a priest to toss bums in the gutter, where presumably they should have been in the first instance. And, of course, you can't show a priest dressed in lay attire watching the floor show at a night club. So this scene is cut, turning what was a priest's pastoral concern for a parishioner's slightly errant daughter into a middle-aged cleric's infatuation for a starlet.

I apologize for devoting so much space to censorship, because I don't think it really makes too much difference to the average Irishman if the censors ban Kate O'Brien or cut a slice of tripe out of *Say One For Me*. But I do think that the attitude behind the censorship is important. It is the work of people who equate sanctity with the absence of sin, of a society which lacks any great purpose. It bespeaks a defensive mood, an anxiety to hold on and to conserve, not to push forward and to create. Here we are face to face with people who regard themselves as guardians of a completed society, one which has achieved its purposes and has no further great business to transact.

PATERNALISM

The civil servant, as I said, thinks of himself as guardian of a public incapable of pursuing its own welfare. But he in turn has his problems. On the plane from New York to Shannon, I spent half the night chatting with an Irish pastor returning from his first trip to the United States. Incidentally, his observations on his visit had confirmed his previous belief that the Catholic

Church in the United States has nothing to give the Catholic Church in Ireland but money. I mention him not for this, however, but for his exemplification of a trait frequently encountered in the clergy, a naive belief in his own omniscience and in his absolute right and duty to override all contrary opinions. He had built several churches, he told me, without ever employing an architect (something to remember, when one is looking at Irish churches), and he always rejected Education Department school-building plans and substituted his own. The civil servants, knowing what's good for them, go along. After all, it's only public money.

The Irish, however, are not fools. They have traditionally a tremendous respect and affection for their priests, who were their only leaders and protectors during centuries of defeat. And from that historic experience they have learned great patience. But their patience is being exhausted. I was horrified by the bitter criticism of the clergy I heard everywhere I went. This is something quite different from old-time European anticlericalism, which thrived mainly among nominal Catholics. Here the feeling is strongest among devout people, who remain intensely faithful to practice. And their criticism is less of the action than of the inaction of their spiritual leaders.

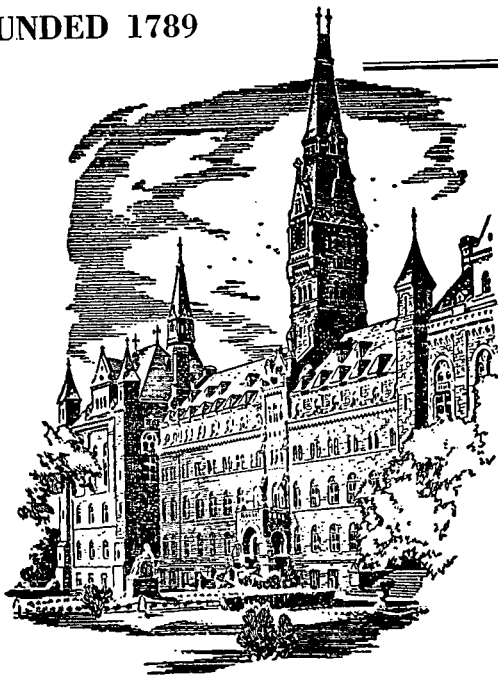
Ironically enough, one of the things that seems to have served to focus the dissatisfaction is a social action movement conceived and promoted by a remarkable Irish priest, the late Canon Hayes. *Muintir na Tire* (People of the Land) was designed to rejuvenate the dying countryside. The Canon effected a social and economic transformation in his own parish through the application of principles of extension education, self-help and cooperation. Others followed his urging and example, and the movement grew to national dimensions and achieved similar results wherever priests with his zeal and intelligence were willing to encourage without dominating.

And there's the rub. One wanted nothing to do with this new-fangled nonsense. Another made all the decisions. Yet another sought to channel the enthusiasm into an additional fund-raising organization for his own parish purposes. It is a pattern frequent in Ireland, where the tendency is always strong to subject the social and civic to the ecclesiastical—in effect a denial that the State no less than the Church is a perfect society seeking its own ends by its own independent means.

I should like to end on a note of optimism, but the truth is that I feel far from optimistic. The mood of the country is static and protective when the challenge calls for change and action. The danger, as always in such circumstances, is that youthful enthusiasm—lacking constructive leadership—will follow false prophets. The persistent attraction of the banned Irish Republican Army, pursuing an outmoded policy of force in keeping with the over-all arrested emotional development of the country, demonstrates alike the altruism of youth and the absence of legitimate objectives. It should serve as a warning to those who think of the present vacuum of national purpose as normality.

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