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The Art of Popular Culture: From 'The Meeting of the Waters' to *Riverdance*

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Neutrality and Popular Culture

The idea of popular culture depends on its opposite – high or literary culture. In recent years, studies of nineteenth and twentieth century popular culture in Britain and the United States, have tended, in the very broadest terms, to associate it with mass consumption and with industrialisation. For obvious reasons — not least the lack of a booming industrial base outside of the North— this doesn't fit the Irish case all that well. Yet the effects of the association of popular culture with industrialisation are apparent in Ireland. The rejection by a conservative Catholic hierarchy, often backed up by conservative elements in government, of commercial entertainments such as dog-racing, of cinema, of cheap imported fiction, whether romance or westerns, of modern dance music— all of this was couched in terms of a battle between modern, mechanised, industrial and 'individualist' foreign culture, and the art and entertainment of Irish Ireland: favourite examples were mountain hare coursing, traditional music and dancing, and Gaelic games. Yet Irish literary culture was also seen as infected by this modern, debased populism. We can see this, for example, in the 1942 censorship debate in the Senate, in which Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices* was seen as equivalent to birth control literature in its capacity to undermine public morals. One member of the Censorship Board argued that Ireland's writers should not try writing anything other than short stories. Their attempts to write in the alien genre of the novel were simply stories 'padded out with sex and smut', to make them attractive to English publishers. Another senator on the Board insisted that if the young literati were having their books banned they had only themselves to blame, for seeking higher sales 'by pandering to the lowest instincts of human nature.'[1]

Any straightforward distinction between popular and literary culture is collapsed here. At the same time the idea that popular culture has its roots in the social changes brought by mass industrialisation obscures the forms of Irish popular culture which developed through, rather than in opposition to, a Catholic and ruralist cultural ethos in the early years of the twentieth century. These might include Catholic Truth Society fictions and religious pamphlets, *Our Boy's* — the Christian Brothers' alternative to imperial adventure stories, *Ireland's Own*, or popular Catholic novelists such as Francis McManus and other best-selling versions of nineteenth century historical fiction. If popularity is gauged by print-run, and audience numbers, we should add publications such as the Irish Messenger, local and national newspapers with their serialisations of fiction, publication of popular ballads, women's advice and cookery columns, and the serials, magazine programmes, music and comedy sketches on Irish radio. But— for example with the *Messenger*—we have moved so far away from ideas of mass entertainment that we must question whether the term 'popular culture' is helpful, unless this is interpreted in its widest sense, as the culture of everyday life.

The question I want to think about today is: how did the sphere of Irish popular culture, and perhaps even the culture of everyday life in Ireland, develop and change during the Second World War? One of the enduring stereotypes of Ireland, and Irish culture, during the Second World War, is that it was isolated and inward-looking, cut-off from the conflict, and from the social and economic

consequences of a war effort. And cut off too from contemporary currents of thought in Europe and the wider world.

Like most stereotypes there is some truth in it. For a start, travel restrictions had a real impact on cultural as well as economic life. Dublin's middle and upper middle classes had been used to frequent travel and contact with England and the continent, especially France. But by mid 1940 travel to England was hedged around with difficulty (unless you were a member of the Forces, or you were going on a labour contract) and it was impossible to go further afield. While for holiday-makers and occasional travellers this meant mostly inconvenience, for writers and artists, used to dealing with English agents, publishers, and galleries, and to placing material in English newspapers and magazines, cultural dialogue with England was abruptly severed. And the difficulty of getting out of Ireland was compounded by the difficulty of others getting in. During the 1930s English and French touring theatre, art exhibitions, lectures by visiting continental and American academics and writers—all had confirmed the sense that Dublin was part of the modern European intellectual environment.

This feeling of being 'cut-off' which recurs in many descriptions of the period, was compounded by wartime censorship. The Board of Censors had been established in 1929 with the aim of protecting impressionable Irish readers from the steady stream of low-brow periodicals, mildly scandalous popular fiction and pamphlets on birth control flowing from England. Wartime censorship had a different aim, to suppress partisan reporting on the war, and as far as possible maintain a neutral stance on the belligerents in the public media. The fear was of re-igniting civil war animosities.

As the newly appointed Minister for the Co-Ordination of Defensive measures, Frank Aiken put it, 'if we are to have a very hot controversy here … we may split the unity of our people, and the net result will be that the people will lose their balance in the whole affair, and it is not neutral a lot of them will be'. [2]

Historians have debated the impact of censorship on Irish citizens' knowledge and understanding of war itself, particularly in relation to stories of Axis atrocities—but my concern here is with its impact on popular culture and entertainment.[3] The government fear that popular feeling might at any moment be unbalanced by 'biased' coverage of the war was focused in particular on the cinema. At the start of the war there were upwards of 150 picture houses across the country, with a combined seating of more than 100,000. Most were filled several times a day, most days of the week. In Dublin alone there was seating for 32,000 people at each sitting. Mass popularity made film a well-recognised and valuable form of propaganda for both sides in the war, though given the fact that Ireland was part of the UK distribution network, Irish citizens were most 'at risk' from British and American versions of events.

The Irish film censor Richard Hayes commented on the resulting headaches in an interview in the journal *The Bell*: 'a full ninety-per-cent of films we get from England and America these days have more than their fair share of propaganda, even the non-war films. And it's the devil's own job cutting it out.'[4] Hayes persevered in his work nonetheless in a grim, even desperate pursuit of impartiality. Large numbers of feature films were cut, and *Dublin Opinion* entertained its readers by parodying the impossible-to-follow plots which resulted. Other films were banned altogether, as posing a threat to law and order. Hayes said, for example, of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*: 'If that film had been shown in this country it would have meant riots and bloodshed.'[5]

The requirement for neutral entertainment precluded all films dealing with war preparations (such as troop movements, or air raid shelters), war news, propagandist or partisan comments about any of the countries involved in war, films which glorified the British empire or colonial rule, and pictures of rulers, statesmen, soldiers or flags of any of the belligerents. In practice this ruled out most newsreels, and an increasing number of British and American feature films. Frank Aiken believed that 'if a newsreel is shown in which one belligerent or another is prominent, somebody may start to "booh" and somebody may start to cheer, and we do not want that sort of competition to start'.[6]

One of the unforeseen consequences of the censorship of newsreels was a boost for Irish filmmaking, as cameramen were sent out to shoot footage of the Irish army, and Irish defence preparations, to fill screen time. For the audience, however, the effects were a narrowing of the type and style of films shown, and an almost complete lack of exposure to the new genres of war film. Later in the war, electricity rationing – because of the shortage of coal - meant that cinemas could put on fewer screenings. This went along with a general contraction of the media and of commercial entertainment in Ireland outside of Dublin – the very opposite of the expansion in popular entertainment which rode on the back of the war effort in Britain.

By the middle of the war, petrol rationing and lack of coal for the trains, meant that newspapers printed in Dublin and Cork were no longer delivered regularly to rural areas. The censors regularly banned British newspapers so that circulation of foreign press also fell dramatically. Supplies of zinc had run out so that many radio batteries were dead, and wireless only reached the minority of listeners in the cities with mains electricity. Paper shortages meant that newspapers themselves became thinner and thinner, and some Irish publishers ceased production. The most populist Irish publisher, the Talbot Press in Dublin, kept up sales and production however. By the 1940s it could boast a large and respectable list – over 500 titles, which ranged from middle-brow fiction, religious books, lives of the saints, to Abbey Theatre Plays, and work by Synge, Pearse and MacDonagh. Contemporary writers published by Talbot included Daniel Corkery, D.L. Kelleher, Francis Macmanus, Brinsley MacNamara and the popular romance novelist Annie MP Smithson. This list again suggests a rather fluid relationship between the popular and literary. And, though this must have been hard given the paper shortages, another small press, the Runa press, actually started up during the war. One of its stated aims was to produce plays and fiction for the growing phenomenon of local reading groups in provincial Ireland. These reading groups, unlikely as they may seem, were one consequence of the breakdown of transport across provincial Ireland. With rationing of petrol and of coal, people had to walk or use bicycles to get together, and to fall back on more local entertainments. In many ways the story of what happened to popular culture during the war years is the story of its increasing localisation.

If we were to go by the representations of popular entertainment in the provinces in the literature of the wartime period, it would probably be limited to meeting in the pub, card-playing in local houses, and trying to listen to a radio that doesn't work. I have in mind here work by Patrick Kavanagh, M.J. Molloy, George Sheils. Though we may dispute the reasons for this, commercial entertainments such as the cinema, and licenced dances feature hardly at all. It may well be that the craze for local dances, that frequent subject of Lenten pastorals, did fall off in certain areas during the war as more and more young people left for war work in England. On the other hand dance halls in Dublin did great business, catering for British and American soldiers on short leave from their postings in the North.

But the pressures on popular culture and entertainment were more than simply practical. Just as in Britain the war effort coloured culture and entertainment, from forces dances, to propagandist war films, to the new democratic style of the BBC, so too in Ireland cultural production at all levels was shaped by the concerted efforts of the state to encourage neutral-mindedness, through what was termed 'positive' neutrality censorship. This was a determined effort to mould public opinion in Ireland against war and for neutrality in newspapers, on the radio, and in public speeches. We can see the effects of this in the national Call to Arms which was designed to encourage mobilisation in the Irish defence forces in the spring of 1940. At this point, after the invasion of the European neutrals and the fall of France, it looked likely that Ireland too would be invaded, and volunteers joined up in large numbers. As the new Defence Forces journal put it in 1940, it was a case of 'Ireland versus the foreigner'.[7]

Here I want to focus on the aspect of the mobilisation which picked up on popular forms of entertainment. In addition to the more obvious forms of spectacle—military parades, precision marching to pipe bands, and parades of armoured cars and weaponry—the army also put on a number of theatrical displays and tableaux, with the enthusiastic encouragement of assistant chief of staff Major-General Hugo MacNeill, a devotee of amateur drama.[8] Historical tableaux representing the Irish national struggle down the centuries had been a popular form of entertainment since the founding of the state—they featured, for example, in the celebrations of the Tailteann Games inaugurated in the early years of the Free State.[9] The use of tableaux was in part an attempt to harness the popularity of traditional religious festivals, such as the annual Corpus Christi celebrations, which featured processions of floats and tableaux pulled through the streets of towns across Ireland (indeed during the war the Local Defence Force marched behind the religious in Corpus Christi processions). The Eucharistic Congress in 1932 had featured a number of tableaux vivants, including symbolic representation of the dawning of the age of Irish freedom. One of the attractions of these pageants, particularly when they featured a generalised 'mother Ireland' figure, or representations of ancient, mythic battles, was that they were able to make their appeal across a wide political spectrum. Both pro- and anti-treaty forces could respond to representations of the eleventh century Battle of Clontarf, for example.

In July 1940 the army mounted a three-week theatrical extravaganza designed to enhance recruitment. 'The Roll of the Drum' was performed at the Theatre Royal in Dublin three times a day and more than 100,000 people witnessed the combination of military display and national pageant – with actors miming battles in dumb show, and a final tableau showing the emergency services gathered to protect a female figure of Ireland, and bearing weapons reminiscent of skirmishes down the ages. This patriotic, emotional appeal was backed up by a celebration of military strategy for its own sake, as actors mimed episodes of significant historic European battles. 'Representation of historic scenes went back for generations, even to Fontenoy, and the attention given to detail and historical facts could not be surpassed'. The emphasis on battle strategy rather than ideology was part of an attempt to sidestep potentially divisive or 'unneutral' allegiances. As an approving member of the Dáil put it, the Theatre Royal show had managed against all the odds to appeal to 'people of every blend of political thought'.[10] This was theatre as festival—the gathering together and celebration of a community.

The success of the Theatre Royal extravaganza, and its particular combination of aesthetics and morality, led to calls for recruitment drives across the country to include theatrical elements, along with sporting events and competitions. Local Security Force (and later Local Defence Force) Fairs, often lasting for several weeks at a time, were held at regional centres across the country. Alongside

marching displays by the Emergency services, and recruiting parades, they might include sporting contests, hurling and football matches (usually the Army against the LDF), point-to-point, rifle shooting competitions, Army Band recitals, free cinema performances for members of the services, fun fairs, military tableaux, and even amateur dramatics competitions. Each night of the fair would conclude with dancing in a marquee (sometimes with 'Kaleidoscopic Lighting Effects'). A Fair at Ennis, for example, which was shown on Irish newsreels, included competitions such as tilting buckets, greasy pole, the high jump, children's dancing, pony jumping and even duck racing.[11] Athletics and gymnastics were intended to recall the customs and public fairs of ancient Ireland.

Such displays made a virtue out of participation at all levels of the local community, and at the same time offered up the spectacle of vigorous, active, defence-minded local districts to cinema audiences across the country as a whole. Other events—such as marching parades—insisted instead on the separation between ordinary people and the defence forces: those out of uniform could only watch. The intended message was not only that the country was safe in the protection of these forces, but that individuals could only become truly part of the new unified community by volunteering. Joining in meant joining up.

A similar relationship between the local and national lay at the heart of the pageant competitions and the presentation of Historical and Topical Tableaux. Local amateur dramatics societies, which had increased in popularity throughout the 1930s, really began to thrive during the Emergency. This was partly because the difficulty of travel made it harder for the provincial middle class to manage the journey to Dublin or Cork for entertainment, and forced them to consider creating their own local forms of amusement, but also because of the fillip given to regional theatre and even film by the activities of the army and the LDF. A Step Together fair in County Longford, for example, concluded with a tableau of Mother Ireland (a local girl called Chrissie Mahoney) surrounded by a synchronised display of the might of the local defence forces with rifles and bayonets, massed together on a specially constructed stage. Like many of the fairs, this event was put out on newsreel. The poor quality film shows a creaky, overcrowded stage and the amateur display, clearly executed on a shoe-string, appears slightly ridiculous—but the local, home-made, nature of the event is part of the point. This is no slick, well-lit, centrally organised and orchestrated creation but the product of the efforts of a local committee, probably comprised of members of the Step Together board, along with local church dignitaries, active members of Muintir na Tire, and the great and the good among the provincial middle class. The films celebrate the fairs as a display of the strength of local community bonds, because effective defence is local and home-made too.

At their most elaborate, Step Together fairs provided the focus, and excuse, for fully fledged local drama festivals. Local dramatic societies, and the annual round of provincial and rural drama competitions, were one reflection of the growth of a provincial middle-class in small towns across the country. Amateur dramatics had a long and respectable history in the major cities, Dublin, Belfast and Cork, and some purchase in regional centres such as Galway and Limerick. The inclusion of the category of drama in the Tailteann games after 1922 gave publicity and lent a kind of urban cachet to the activities of local drama societies, and may have been in part responsible for their increased popularity throughout the 1930s. But progress in the regions also depended on a sufficient number of educated people with enough energy and leisure time to commit to finding a play, rehearsing, making scenery, costumes and so on.

The overwhelming preference of the drama societies was for realist or naturalist plays by contemporary Irish dramatists such as George Shiels (chosen by five

different societies at one festival in 1940), T.C. Murray, Louis D'Alton and Lennox Robinson, but there was often a showing too for Eugene O'Neill, T.S. Eliot, Lady Gregory, and sometimes the controversial Paul Vincent Carroll (if his criticisms of small-town pieties could be got past local clerical opposition), as well as plays by local writers. There were limits however, to how far literary drama would be taken up in local forms of entertainment. Writing a series on the Country Theatre in the journal *The Bell* in 1940 and 41 Michael Farrell – a frequent judge of regional drama festivals – attempted to suggest some suitable plays for rural amateur societies, including Synge, Ibsen, Shaw and Yeats, only to receive a slew of mail objecting to his choices and asking for more comedy, farce, melodrama, and thrillers, and more parts for women.

Country theatre was taken seriously and not just in the provinces; festivals were generally reviewed in the national papers, and in literary journals such as the *Irish Monthly*, the *Dublin Magazine* and *The Bell*. Features on regional theatre were broadcast on Radio Eireann. As the war progressed this national interest was focused on increasingly local festivals, remote from the cities and large towns. In 1941 the Sligo Féis, for example, drew competitors from Ballina and Bundoran, from smaller towns such as Ballymote and Dromore West, and from tiny villages in Sligo and Donegal such as Croagh and Glenties. Sligo was a town of 12,000 inhabitants, with no industry to speak of, and had been hard hit by the war.

As Michael Farrell put it, from a distinctly metropolitan perspective, in *The Bell,* 'One can imagine what a boon this week of competition and possible triumph must be to the scattered towns of the West where nothing ever seems to break the monotone of repose except the shunting of some empty cattle-wagons within sight of a creamery's blank wall and the incongruous whistle of a new factory dredging up to the skies all the melancholy of the landscape.'[12] For the middle class, and for women, local drama offered opportunities for involvement and socialising that others found in the GAA, in local politics, or in religious confraternities. But an element of entrepreneurship also played a role, as local communities attempted to draw tourists to their areas. For the Irish middle-classes now forced to holiday at home a trip to the theatre might prove an attraction. In 1943, a summer Drama Festival was launched in the tourist spot of Killarney, and in 1944 in Bundoran, and even in Tubercurry in Galway. By 1946 there were thirteen amateur festivals across the country. Underlining the trend, a tourism feature in the Cork Examiner in May 1940 wasn't above treating the blitzkrieg as a marketing opportunity: 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. In this light Ireland should stand to gain in its tourist traffic from the disturbed conditions on the continent.' [13]

Those disturbed conditions also put a stop to foreign touring by the Abbey Theatre and forced them into home-grown tours, such as the circuit of the Irish provinces in the spring of 1940 which was organised and managed by playwright Louis D'Alton. D'Alton's background was in fit-up – where he had learnt his trade writing melodramas for his own company in the 1920s and 30s.[14]

No survey of popular culture in Ireland in this period would be complete without mentioning the touring companies, which were not killed off in Ireland until the advent of television – it's an era nicely evoked in Harold Pinter's recollections of the Shakespearian fit-up actor and manager Anew Macmaster.[15] Travel difficulties during the war were a mixed blessing for the fit-up companies. On the one hand it was hard to get about; on the other, since alternative sources of entertainment, such as the cinema, were contracting, audiences tended to be good, and responsive. After the 1940 tour with the Abbey, D'Alton formed a new touring company in 1942, which had great success in the larger towns, such as

Kilkenny. Here again, with the Abbey company being led around the provinces by an ex-fit-up actor, the distinction between popular and literary culture is hard to maintain – though this was precisely one of the complaints about the Abbey Theatre under the directorship of Ernest Blythe, that it had descended to melodrama and farce. Yet a closer relationship between the national literary theatre and the regions did encourage new playwrights, such as the local Galway writer M.J. Molloy, who had his first play, *The Old Road*, produced on the Abbey Stage in 1943. Molloy was clear about the influence of local amateur drama and fit-up on his own work: 'The rural Irish audience is an Elizabethan audience. They're very tough – they come out for a night's fun and if they don't get it from the stage they'll make it for themselves in the auditorium.'[16]

I've discussed the effects on local leisure and organisation of the government's attempt to foster civic neutral-mindedness. But neutrality propaganda also affected Irish writers. Here again the analogy with British wartime writing is instructive. As the war progressed more and more writers in Britain took on work for the Ministry of Information, in film, in radio and in journalism. Through the involvement of writers and artists in propaganda, surveillance and intelligence work a unique and short-lived alliance developed between popular and propagandist cultural production, and literary work. One example might be the features produced for the BBC by Louis MacNeice. Closer to home, the playwright Denis Johnston was employed by BBC Northern Ireland to write features designed to encourage Irish support for the British war effort. He was involved, at least in the initial stages, with the BBC's plans for a new comedy programme, 'Irish Half Hour'.[17] The aim of the programme was ostensibly to entertain Irishmen and women in the British forces, but its underlying message to the Irish at home was to encourage the friendly relationship between the two countries. By rights—despite being produced by the BBC—'Irish Half Hour' should lay claim to being one of the most popular wartime cultural entertainments in Ireland, harnessing as it did the winning combination of comic Jimmy O'Dea as Biddy Mulligan, and the songs of Count John McCormack—an Irish 'ITMA'. In the opinion of John Betjeman, then press attaché with the British representative in Dublin, the programme was of great propaganda value for the British.[18] But there are two reasons to question this assessment. Firstly the combination of wartime propaganda and stereotypical stage Irishry in the comic sketches set in the town of Ballygobackwards was apparently too much for some listeners; but a more general problem was the shortage of high tension batteries. In the counties of Donegal, Galway and Kerry, for example David O'Donoghue has estimated that as few as one in thirty has any access to a working radio.[19]

So much for the relationship between literary writing and wartime propaganda in Britain. If we want to analyse the effects on Ireland's writers of the neutral-minded consensus which was encouraged at all levels of social life we need to look at the development of provincial realism in the war years. The 1930s was well-known as the era of the provincial novel and short story, exemplified by the work of Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain. The caustic strain of this work does continue through the war years, particularly in O'Connor's stories, but also famously in Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*. But at the same time a distinctly nostalgic tone enters the work of even the more literary writers. It is connected with the wartime impetus to value and protect local everyday life—to build through co-operation strong rural communities on the home front, able to defend themselves militarily and to survive economically. The comic Paddies of the BBC's small town of Ballygobackwards were opposed by a particular blend of rural realism and nostalgia. Many of the wartime images of country life were aimed at people living in Irish towns and cities, for whom rural Ireland was only a generation away, at most.

This combination of realism and nostalgia had initially been spurred by the growth of Ireland's fledgling tourist industry. As excursion trains became more and more fashionable in the late 30s, and motorcar ownership rose, the market grew for material aimed not solely at the foreign visitor, but at the Irish city dweller, who was encouraged to discover his own country. Sean O'Faolain's travelogue, *An Irish Journey*, which he had been researching on the outbreak of war, envisaged a new sort of readership, in addition to the English and American tourists targeted in the past.[20] He wrote too for the burgeoning Irish middle class. The book reflected—much as his journal *The Bell* was to do — provincial not primitive Ireland, the life of the towns rather than the rugged coast, English-speaking Ireland rather than an idealised Gaelic culture.

O'Faolain was not alone in combining the roles of social critic and provincial romantic. Patrick Kavanagh enjoyed the beginnings of a career in documentary journalism in articles he wrote for the national press, including one on country farmers' reluctance to marry, and a series on religious pilgrimages. But he was also forced by economic necessity to jump on the nostalgia bandwagon when he arrived in Dublin (by way of London) in 1939. An 'authentic' countryman turned littérateur, he lived partly by churning out articles for the newspapers 'on the pleasures of country life which, fifty miles away, calls me to return.' He wrote for the *Irish Times* on corn threshing, on Christmas in the country, on country marriage, on the Dundalk market train; for the *Standard* on cutting turf, on harvesting, on the November fair, on Sunday in the country; for the *Irish Independent* on bogs, and on ploughing.[21] Fantasies of rural Ireland, like nostalgia for an unspoilt England, were solace for those bruised by the effects of the war. They represented the known, the familiar, that which we like to imagine continues elsewhere despite all the chaos and disruption of our lives, and they made Kavanagh money, though not vast amounts of it. Newspaper editors could bank on readers' interest in benign and evocative portraits of rural life.

The public's appetite for rural reminiscence was high, and could be satisfied by novels, memoirs, even recipe collections. In books, magazines and newspapers the vogue for misty retrospection was fed by readers' appetite for reminders of what was being lost in Ireland's struggle to become modern. This went along with more practical attempts to preserve rural culture. The Irish Countrywomen's Association and the Homespun Society, although founded earlier, were both very active during the war holding summer schools, shows and fairs, and co-operative country markets, and giving lectures on crafts. Despite travel difficulties in March 1943 the Homespun Society began a four-year survey of traditional crafts throughout the state, and lobbied for greater emphasis on crafts in rural vocational education. At the same time, however, there was an acceptance that crafts such as home-spinning and weaving were dying and from 1941 society members began sending artifacts for preservation in the National Museum (the collection which would later become the Folk Life Collection). This uneasy relation between 'active' and 'passive' preservation of rural customs was replicated in the work of the Irish Folklore Commission. The Commission's massive *Handbook of Irish Folklore* was published in 1942, a 'comprehensive guide' for folklore collectors intended to facilitate the garnering of endangered traditions.[22] Meanwhile there were numerous popular novels and short stories about village and small town life, often set at the turn of the century. More highbrow writers such as Bernard McLaverty and Mary Lavin produced literary versions of this homesickness for the recent past. Though there was often rather more sting in the tail of their depictions of rural life, they contributed nonetheless to the phenomenon of rural—or at any rate, village—Ireland being recycled for consumption in the cities and towns.

It was no accident, then, that one of the most popular novels in Ireland for much of the war was *Never No More*, Maura Laverty's idyllic story of growing up in a village on the edge of the Bog of Allen.[23] First serialised in *The Bell*, Laverty's novel was published to huge popular acclaim in 1942. Its attractiveness undoubtedly had to do with its unbridled nostalgia for an unspoilt Ireland, the simplicity of childhood and youthful innocence, and a land of burgeoning plenty. (Laverty was a cookery writer and her novel dwells on traditional recipes which must have been mouth-watering for those unable to get hold of ingredients during the war). The elements of rural custom, neighbourly co-operation, petty jealousies, first dances, and above all lack of want, compared especially to the unhappy life of the towns, were replicated in a score of less accomplished fictions. Laverty's novel ends as the central character Delia Scully leaves childhood and rural Ireland behind (like Laverty herself, and Kate O'Brien, she travels to Spain to work as a governess). The association of childhood with the Irish countryside was bound to resonate for a large majority of Laverty's readers in the 1940s, since so many had been forced to leave the economically stagnant rural areas to seek work in Cork and Dublin, if not Manchester, Liverpool or London.

Laverty's novel was sentimental, but—as O'Faolain saw when he serialised it—there was no necessary contradiction with its realism. The novel was certainly read for its depiction of contemporary country life. In 1942 it was referred to in the Dáil in a debate on tuberculosis.[24] Laverty's description of a young man dying in the Bog of Allen, having waited too long for a place at Newcastle sanatorium was used to highlight the problems of underfunding and lack of equipment in the treatment of TB.

The Bell's attempt to create an Irish literary culture which spread beyond the confines of a small Dublin elite to the towns of provincial Ireland was one result of the closure of the English cultural market. It was also a way of looking outward, to the countryside beyond the Wicklow hills, without having to deal with the Gaeltacht, and with the version of traditional culture in vogue at the Department of Education. Unlike British documentary realism of the 1930s, much of which was underpinned by political utopianism and socialism, Irish realism was about discovering and documenting modern Ireland. It was in the service of creating a modern Irish identity. In the end the provincial focus of the writers associated with *The Bell* fitted in well with the government's drive towards an independent Irish consensus, fostered through Step Together, frugality campaigns, and even country theatre.

The drive to nurture 'national life' rather than allow it to become swamped by cheap cultural imports also underpinned the wartime developments in Irish film production. There had been a number of campaigns championing the power of film to promote Irish culture during the late 30s, and these gathered strength during the war.

A very few Irish fiction films were made during the 30s, but they were expensive to produce and required a good deal of equipment. Interest soon focused on the documentary. The members of the Irish Cine Club, for example, were keen to use film in the manner suggested in the 1936 Papal Encyclical, *Vigilanti Cura*, which warned against the moral harm films could do (not only because they told immoral stories, but because they did so in a seductive way, with pretty pictures and music, and even in the dark). But the Pope also argued that, in the right hands, moving pictures were a useful tool for instruction and education.

The Irish Cine Club was in effect a film branch of Catholic Action; they made 16mm film shorts of religious pilgrimages, accounts of saints lives, Catholic social work in Dublin, and the St. Vincent de Paul holiday camps for poor children. They

got a lot of coverage in *The Standard*. The paper's editor took the Catholic nationalist film project seriously and published long debates about the need for Irish-made films—which meant an Irish production company, studios, technical training, and above all investment. Much of this material was written by the film enthusiast Fr Richard Devane SJ, who in 1938 managed to persuade de Valera to set up an inquiry into the viability of a National Film Institute, which would encourage, educate and help fund large scale productions on standard film.[25]

Meanwhile short documentaries on sub-standard 16 mm film were in vogue. The rural corporatist movement Muintir na Tire set up a mobile film unit early in the war to make educational films—records of Muintir na Tire agricultural summer schools, the work of the folklore institute, films about milk production, pigs, cattle and dairy farming.[26] There was no shortage of black and white sub-standard film, which accounts for the almost obsessive documentation of every aspect of army life and army training during the war. Some of this went into the Irish newsreels; some was for educational use inside the army itself, and some went into the government propaganda films such as the 1940 Step Together recruitment film. The architect Michael Scott was pulled in to help make other government shorts, including the 1943 tillage campaign film, 'Our Daily Bread'. Even short tourist publicity films were conceived in documentary style, not least because of the tremendous success of Robert Flaherty's 1934 film *Man of Aran*. O'Flaherty's film had carefully shaped island life to depict it as a struggle between nature and community. It was a romanticisation of folk life which also claimed to be 'real'—a potent mixture which tourist publicity shorts did their best to emulate. It seemed that everyone with a camera—including a significant number of priests and Protestant ministers—was making films about 'real' Irish life. In 1943 Father Devane produced the *Irish Cinema Handbook*, covering every aspect of films from production, censorship and distribution to the design of the cinema interior. The Handbook included a survey on 'What Kind of Films Should We Make?'.[27] There were calls for the production of Irish plays and novels, including Kickham's *Knocknagow*—then a long running and popular radio serial. But nearly everyone consulted voted for documentary. Realist pictures would be 'in the national and cultural interests of the people'. For the Gaelic League, documentary film offered the opportunity for the 'Gaelicisation of the screen'. Screen drama-documentaries were the natural way to develop the already 'distinctively Irish' brand of theatre of the Abbey and the Gate.

Much of this rhetoric recycled the arguments for 'Ireland versus the foreigner' except that this time the foreigner most at fault was American. The moral crusade against modern romance focused on Hollywood, with Elstree running a poor second. In fact Irish film campaigners could take comfort from the documentary movements in countries such as Denmark and Britain. When Father Devane called for realistic publicity films to be made by the Electricity Supply Board, the Cement Company, the Transport Company and the Gas Company he was clearly thinking of John Grierson's influential films made with the British GPO film unit. 'Night Mail' and 'The Face of Britain' had escaped the tyranny of the box office by gaining government and corporation sponsorship. This, it was argued, was the model needed in Ireland. The real enemy was not foreign film but commercial cinema.

It was partly chance that wartime censorship and travel restrictions coincided with propaganda on behalf of home-grown film. The movement for an Irish alternative to Hollywood's eternal triangle had been gathering momentum throughout the later 30s. But restrictions on imports of foreign films and the censor's zeal did offer an opportunity for Irish film to make headway. There were practical reasons for this. The need for newsreels suitable for an Irish audience forced the pace of film technology. Small teams of young men moved about the

country with the army, gaining a fast apprenticeship in camerawork and the techniques of production. (Several men who worked with the army film unit later joined Liam O'Laoghaire's film school, which championed Grierson's socially conscious documentary work). The war also brought a rather unexpected boon in shape of a German reconnaissance cameraman turned prisoner-of-war. Lieutenant George Fleischmann was downed in Ireland in April 1941 complete with high class camera, reserve lenses, and cassettes of unexposed film. In 1944 Fleischmann was granted long-term parole from the Curragh to go to university in Dublin. His camera and his experience were vital assets in Irish film-making towards the end of the war.

And the war had an impact in another way – though providing aspiring Irish realist filmmakers with a greater range of models for their own work. There was no necessary clash between the realist movement in art and corporatist publicity or even state propaganda. That much was clear from collaborations such as W,H. Auden's script for the GPO's 'Night Mail', as much as Eisenstein's work. And the link between film and state information and propaganda only deepened during the war. In Britain the GPO film unit became the Crown Film Unit, for example. It was taken over by the Ministry of Information, and set to making films about public health and hygiene. Even though many of the British wartime documentaries were censored, some work filtered through. Campaigners also pointed to the 'March of Time' series, to films commissioned by the US Navy and large American industrial firms. Irish enthusiasts could take comfort from the fact that, because of shortage of standard film, 16 mm film was increasingly being used to make documentaries and newsreels shown in small US cinemas.

In all the general excitement about the propaganda power of film, celebration of the Russian model was the most unexpected. Russian filmmakers such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovshenko could hardly be ignored in the search for film about the ordinary life of the people. But it does seem surprising that strongly Catholic, and normally virulently anti-communist, organisations should have pointed so readily to the Russian example. The manager of the Muintir na Tire film unit—dedicated to a Catholic corporatist renewal of rural areas—argued in 1943:

> We want to see a proper portrayal of simple Catholic life and its ideals, a story of Irish country life with non-professionals as actors and produced on the lines the Russians have followed so well. For once let us see the spiritual, rather than the material, values presented on our screen.[28]

This suggests again that the problem was with commercial, romantic (and therefore unrealistic) cinema rather than with foreign films, whatever the ideology behind them. But it was also a sign of wartime softening towards the Soviets following the German attack on Russia.

The war gave a boost to the Irish Film society begun in the mid 30s by Liam O'Laoghaire. By 1941 the society was running theoretical and practical classes in film-making, with a particular focus on documentary. In 1943 members began showing their films—nearly all of them documentary records of contemporary Irish life, such as Kevin O'Kelly's *Campa* (about the boys' Construction Corps), or O'Laoghaire's study of the right-wing language movement Aiseirghe. These films were dedicated to an artistic treatment of their subjects, but the subjects themselves were very similar to those chosen by the government educational film unit, or Catholic Action (which made shorts about the Catholic boy scouts and the St Vincent de Paul holiday camps). Everyone seemed to be looking at the same 'realities of Irish life'. And there was general agreement that it was all in the service of building a national consensus. As O Laoghaire argued in 1943:

> One of the uses of the modern documentary is to put the life of the nation on the screen in such a way that it will be easier for co-operation to be secured from the public as a whole in the interests of national well-being.[29]

The Film Society's goal of 'a native Film Industry truly expressive of National Ideals' was almost indistinguishable from the rhetoric of the government or the Catholic hierarchy. (It was not until after the war that members of the Irish Film Society were to produce a hard hitting social documentary, 'Our Country', which took a distinctly oppositional stance.)

As in wartime Britain it would have been difficult to put the spotlight on contemporary social issues while political and national survival seemed to be at stake—while the country was being threatened. But the lack of sustained cultural criticism, apart from persistent anger over the censorship, suggests the strength of the consensus on behalf of neutrality, and the success of de Valera's message about the need for national co-operation. The documentary film-makers' impulse to chronicle the 'real' Ireland of the 1940s mirrored the ambitions of *The Bell*. There was a certain irony in the fact that all these groups—Catholic Action, the liberal Film Society, Muintir na Tire, *The Bell*, the Gaelic League, even the Abbey Theatre—were all battling over the ground of realism while being lambasted from abroad for living in a fantasy world.

NOTES

[1] Seanad Debates, Vol. 27, 18 Nov., 2, 3, and 9 Dec. 1942, www.historical-debates.oireachtas.ie.
[2] Seanad Debates, Vol. 27, 18 Nov., 2, 3, and 9 Dec. 1942, www.historical-debates.oireachtas.ie.
[3] See in particular Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Censorship in Ireland, 1939-1945: Neutrality, Politics and Society* (Cork: Cork UP, 1996). See also Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968).
[4] See 'Meet Richard Hayes', *The Bell*
[5] 'Meet Richard Hayes', *The Bell*
[6] Frank Aiken, Memorandum on 'Neutrality, Censorship and Democracy', 23 Jan. 1940 (NA DT S 11586A).
[7] Editorial, *An Cosantóir* (Dec. 1940).
[8] See Comdt P. Young, 'Pageantry and the Defence Forces', *An Cosantóir* (Sept. 1985).
[9] See Mike Cronin, 'Projecting the Nation through Sport and Culture: Ireland, Aonach Tailteann and the Irish Free State, 1924-32', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38.3, 395-411; T.H. Nally, *The Aonach Tailteann and the Tailteann Games: Their Origin, History and Ancient Associations* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1924).
[10] Dáil Debates, Vol. 81, 20 Feb.1941, www.historical-debates.oireachtas.ie.
[11] For Irish wartime newsreels see www.britishpathe.com.
[12] Michael Farrell, 'Country Theatre', *The Bell*, May 1941. The series Farrell wrote on amateur drama during 1940 and 1941 is the source of much the information here.
[13] *Cork Examiner*, Tourism Feature, May 15, 1940.
[14] See Ciara O'Farrell, *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).
[15] Harold Pinter, *Mac* (Ipswich: Pendragon Press, 1968).
[16] Quoted in Robert Hogan, *Seven Irish Plays, 1946-1964* (Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1967); see also Robert O'Driscoll, *Selected Plays of M.J. Molloy* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998).

[17] Chapter 14 of Bernard Adams, *Denis Johnston: A Life* (Dublin, 2002) provides interesting background on 'Irish Half-Hour', as well as on Johnston's own broadcasts. See Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924-1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1984) for J.M. Andrews on 'Irish Half-Hour'.
[18] Correspondence over 'Irish Half-Hour' and written scripts for the programme are held at BBC Written Archives, Caversham. See R19/568 for policy on 'Irish Half-Hour', including objections from the Northern Irish government and Nicholas Mansergh's and Betjeman's letters on radio propaganda.
[19] David O'Donoghue, *Hitler's Irish Voices:The Story of German Radio's Wartime Irish Service* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1998).
[20] Sean O'Faolain, *An Irish Journey* (London: Longmans, 1940).
[21] See Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001).
[22] Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Education Co. of Ireland, 1942).
[23] Maura Laverty, *Never No More: The Story of a Lost Village* (London: Longmans, 1942). See also Caitriona Clear, '"I Can Talk About It, Can't I?": The Ireland Maura Laverty Desired, 1942-46', *Women's Studies* 30.6 (2001), 819-35.
[24] Dáil Debates, Vol. 87, 16 June 1942.
[25] See the series of articles by Rev. R. S. Devane S.J. in *The Standard* from 1937 onwards.
[26] See *Muintir na Tire: Parish guilds, Parish Councils: The Official Handbook* (Dublin, 1945).
[27] *The Irish Cinema Handbook* (Dublin: Parkgate Press, 1943), edited by Rev. R.S. Devane. See also Kevin Rockett, 'Documentaries' in Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Liam O'Laoghaire, *Invitation to the Film* (Tralee: Kerryman, 1945); John Martin Hayes (ed.), *The Mind of Canon Hayes: Writings and Speeches of the Founder of Muintir na Tire* (Tipperary: Muintir na Tire, 1961); Stephen Rynne, *Father John Hayes* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1960).
[28] Rev. R.S. Devane (ed.), *The Irish Cinema Handbook* (Dublin: Parkside Press, 1943) 5.
[29] Devane, 104.