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Scholars Off the Page

2. Diarmaid Ferriter reads from

***Occasions of Sin: Sex and
Society in Modern Ireland*
(Profile Books)**

Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland

Diarmaid Ferriter

CHAPTER FOUR

The 1960s has been described as ‘a watershed decade for Irish sexuality; it set in motion a number of changes which prepared the ground for the profound alterations of the 1970s and 1980s’¹. There were many reasons for this, including more debate about contraception, the influence of external forces and the arrival to Ireland of television. At the personal level, many people were also challenging their religion and rejecting a teaching they regarded as conditioning them to equate flesh with sin. This sense of defiance was captured in Michael Farrell’s book *Thy Tears Might Cease* (1963), when the character Martin Reilly, having been punished and humiliated by priests about his private feelings, decides to resist them, ‘and think what thoughts he chose in the solitude of his own heart.’²

If some anecdotes are to be believed, there was a certain lessening of severity: ‘At Maynooth they laughed rather than fulminated at the story of a Galway priest who had noticed a young woman from his parish sprawled on a beach wearing a very brief bikini. The priest sent the woman a note, asking her to wear a one-piece bathing suit. She returned a quick reply: “which piece do you want me to take off?”’³

Nor should the degree of liberation be exaggerated. Many growing up in Ireland in the 1960s still found that sex was a taboo subject. Tom Inglis points out that Daniel Lord’s pamphlet *M is for Marriage* (1962) does not mention sex, the implication being it was not seen as having any bearing on the success of a marriage.⁴ Angela Macnamara believed 80% of the young girls who wrote to her would not even mention the word sex to their mothers⁵. Inglis also recalls that in the 1960s, every time the subject of sex surfaced on radio or television, his father ‘got up from his chair and walked out of the room’. He also suggests there was a continuing ignorance about the facts of life, and ‘an inability of husbands and wives to communicate their

fears, needs and desires and consequently, to negotiate when and how they wanted to have sex.⁶ One Irish mother of nine children commented to Dorine Rohan, author of the book, *Marriage: Irish Style* (1969) ‘Whoever said you were supposed to enjoy sex? Sure, aren’t we all here to suffer and the more we suffer in this life, the better it will be for us in the next.’⁷ Rohan’s book, a substantial part of which had first been published in the *Irish Times*, was described (after its launch, which the Taoiseach Jack Lynch and his wife attended) as ‘provocative and probing’, one that gave a frank overview of the internal dynamics of Irish marriage and was, in effect, ‘a concise compilation of much that has been said over the past few years about marriage in Ireland.’ It was also cited as significant that Rohan was neither a doctor, a sociologist nor a psychiatrist⁸

Donal Connery’s book *The Irish* (1968) painted the following portrait of the Irish wife: ‘...a kingsize hot water bottle who also cooks his food and pays his bills and produces his heirs. In the intimate side of marriage he behaves as if he were slightly ashamed of having deserted his male friends and his bachelorhood. He takes what should be the happy, leisurely lovemaking of marriage like a silent connubial supper of cold rice pudding. A rapid sex routine is effected as if his wife is some stray creature with whom he is sinning and hopes he may never see again. Though many Irish wives are preconditioned to such behaviour, having seen its like in their own fathers and uncles, they resent it deeply.’⁹

Notwithstanding, within Connery’s analysis lie some clues as to why things did change in the 1960s. More people were prepared to write about these subjects, and resentments that had been buried for many years surfaced and were aired. But this did not automatically generate greater personal liberation and the broader context is significant here also. The tale of international attitudes to sex and sexuality is ‘not simply a story of inevitable progress’. Jeffery Weeks, one of the pioneers in the writing of the history of sexuality, warned in 2000 about the necessity of avoiding ‘an unthinking progressivism, a sexual whiggism’ in charting sexual history.¹⁰ While it is true John Updike’s book *Couples* (1968) includes the exchange that seemed to define a new era of liberation- the female response to the man worried about contraception is- ‘welcome... to the post pill paradise’- the pill was only used by a minority of women in North America in the 1960s, and in the 1970s, 18% of French couples still

relied on the withdrawal method, while only 6% of French women were on the pill in 1970. John Ardagh (who turned his attention to Ireland in the 1990s) published his book *The New French Revolution* in 1968 and argued that the transformation of sexual attitudes in that country was more laboured than in England, and that while for women ‘old-style anti-Catholicism may be receding fast in France’, it left behind it ‘a widespread legacy of semi-conscious guilt, superstition and prudery about sex.’¹¹

Internationally, despite the preponderance of the baby boomers, ‘male ideas changed very little in a purported age of sexual revolution’¹², with a preference for compliant female partners, and ‘a strong anti-homosexual bias was obvious in much of the male push for sexual liberation.’ Some have argued that ‘the 1960s did not begin until about 1965’¹³, while in Ireland, it could legitimately be maintained that the 1960s did not begin until the 1970s. Jonathan Green has asserted that this is also true of Britain: ‘The sixties, as widely celebrated, is chronology as pure myth. Everything in the myth pertains to sex. . . the real revolution would not emerge until the seventies, a harder-edged phenomenon, shorn of the glossiness of the previous decade.’¹⁴ Alan Bestic confidently asserted in 1972 that England had ‘soared into the sexual stratosphere’, but he also maintained that in some respects the English were more physically repressed than the Irish, that they compartmentalised sex, would not talk about it within marriage due to ‘fear, guilt and ignorance’. They were coy about sex education in schools (only one third of local educational authorities producing guides or handbooks for that purpose), and overall, the terrain of the jungle of English sex life was ‘tortuous, paradoxical, dangerous.’¹⁵ In truth, if there was a sex revolution in 1960s England it was mostly urban and centred around London and the south east.

Nonetheless, there was a discernable shift internationally in middle-class female sexual behaviour. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* legitimised and encouraged the anger many women felt about their enforced subjugation and Helen Gurley Brown, editor of *Cosmopolitan* from 1964, spread the word that ‘nice girls did it’, and that freedom could be equated with sexual pleasure. William Masters and Virginia Johnson’s *Human Sexual Response* (1966) provided scientific justification for the demand for sexual pleasure for women.¹⁶ In authoritarian Catholic Portugal, despite the survival of Salazar’s regime until 1974, and the fact that ‘all-concealing costumes’ remained *de rigueur* for men and women, social culture and the conservative

traditions of the 'Grande bourgeoisie' were gradually erased 'after surviving both wars in Edwardian isolation and splendour.' The Portuguese government indicated a shift in tolerance by 'discontinuing the registration of common bawds and by ending the public health licensing of the parlours, complete with string quartets, in which young ladies catered for the private sexual tastes of Salazarian High Society.'¹⁷ In Italy, 'where femininity had long been equated with maternity', fertility limitation led to an 'amazing transformation' in female autonomy.¹⁸

By the 1960s, the Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid was over twenty years at the helm, and though he detected the winds of change blowing in the area of sexuality, he was determined to reiterate the belief that Ireland was different than elsewhere when it came to sexual morality and practice.

This ultimately led to a siege mentality, which was summed up in McQuaid's exasperated response to yet another query from the media. In March 1970 he wrote to Oscar (Ossie) Dowling, his faithful and often fawning press secretary:

'I am very tired of RTE's attention to Bishops and priests. I do not understand why they do not pay attention to the Army, the Law, Medicine and especially journalism; fruitful fields for investigators. They are not anxious to promote the Kingdom of God.'¹⁹

Herein lay the weakness of McQuaid in face of the changes of the 1960s; he was still refusing to grasp or accept the fact that sex sold, and one of the reasons why so many journalists wanted to ask so many questions was because the church (and McQuaid) were struggling with sexual issues, if not delusional about them. In April 1965, journalist Tim Pat Coogan requested replies from McQuaid to a questionnaire he had asked him to fill in for a forthcoming book (subsequently published under the title *Ireland since the Rising*). McQuaid wrote to Dowling: 'I shall not meet Mr Coogan; the questions are impertinent intrusions with my personal life or tendentious misrepresentations in several cases. Only yesterday the Bishops warned me that this man is going to write a flaming book of criticism.'²⁰

Nonetheless, McQuaid did draft replies to the questions, (which were never sent to Coogan) including the boldest one which read: 'Is it fair to say that the Irish church is obsessed with sex and fails to concern itself sufficiently with things like poverty, lack of equal educational opportunity for all, the level of widows and orphans pensions?' McQuaid's draft reply was as follows:

'No. There is probably a saner attitude to sex in this country than almost anywhere else. Family life is stable, women are respected, and vocations are esteemed. Sex, in the sense used here- illicit sex- is a sin and is the concern of the church. The other comparatives are not sins.'²¹

Coogan and others were well aware, of course, that this was a complete fallacy, and the myth that the Irish were the most sexually pure race on earth was beginning to wear thin in the 1960s. Coogan had privately joked with Dowling that 'if his Grace doesn't like the questions I'll have to leave town!', a reflection of the reputation and intimidating aura that McQuaid had created. But it was also a measure of the changing times that certain people were now prepared to employ a degree of brazenness in their dealings with the most powerful individual in the Irish Catholic church. The response of McQuaid, which endorsed the idea that sex was intrinsically sinful (Coogan had not specified 'illicit sex') revealed much about the degree to which the church was struggling to cope with the great social changes of the 1960s, and the reiteration of its core messages about sexuality and sexual behaviour began to seem increasingly archaic as the decade progressed. In some respects it suited McQuaid to be depicted and to depict himself as the 'ogre in the den', heroically resisting the tides of change, maintaining the strict line on church teaching while all sorts of sexual carnage and secularism went on outside, but it was not quite as straight forward as that.

Ultimately, McQuaid's tactics of strict control and domination that had been relatively effective in the 1940s and 1950s were not as satisfying for him in the 1960s, because the appetite for change and debate became so overwhelming, and in relation to sex, became particularly so in a country where debate on this subject had long been avoided or prevented. What was still held to by conservative Catholic opinion was the notion articulated in McQuaid's draft reply to Coogan's questionnaire- that there was

a healthier attitude to sex in Ireland than elsewhere because of the country's reverence for church teaching and a belief that what was going on outside Ireland was an orgy of indulgence, fornication and secularisation.

This was summed up succinctly by Fr Eoin Sweeney, an Irish born priest who worked in England in the 1960s, who suggested that Irish people under the age of 18 should be prevented from leaving Ireland to travel to England due to 'the obvious danger to faith in a country in which illicit sexual indulgence is glorified as a normal way of life through all the media of communication.'²² Sweeney was quoted in Donal Connery's book *The Irish*, a publication that summed up contemporary attitudes to sex in Ireland by indulging in stereotypes and making sweeping generalisations- that sex in Ireland was 'more of a function than a passion- a case of procreation without recreation', that marriage had been defined as 'permission to sin' and that the country contained the 'greatest percentage of virgins in the English speaking world'. Connery went even further, by comparing Ireland to the Soviet Union in its attitude to sex; 'at first exposure it is refreshing to experience after regular contact with the sex-drenched world of America and Western Europe...it appears to be and in many respects it most definitely is, the most de-sexed nation on earth.'²³

This was a cliché that was beginning to tire as was the notion of the artist as pariah at odds with a smug, philistine society. In 1965, Augustine Martin, critic and lecturer in English at UCD, challenged such clichés, and the out-of-touch writers fighting the battles of yesteryear, suggesting that the key challenge for Irish writers was to grapple with actual changes in Irish society, and that included challenging the jaded notion that Ireland was 'ignorant of the facts of life, [and] overcome with a Jansenistic fear of sex and the body.' Provincial life, Martin insisted, was changing and developing, reflected in the words of John Montague's poem 'The Siege of Mullingar':

'Puritan Ireland's dead and gone,
a myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain'
while the new 'great ugly dancehalls' disputed the charge of Jansenism.'²⁴

In the midst of such social stirrings, many fought a determined rearguard action, and there was no shortage of advice to youngsters as to how to maintain Irish sexual

purity and to resist the invasion of foreign sex ideas.. As Ireland's best-known agony aunt in the 1960s, Angela Mcnamara wrote for the *Sunday Press*, and recalled the typical questions she had to deal with, such as 'Is it a sin to allow long kisses?' 'Is cheek to cheek dancing a sin?' 'I've an Adam Faith poster in my bedroom. My mother said it was not nice and to take it down. Will I?' At the outset of her period as adviser to struggling adolescents, according to Macnamara, there were 'certain no go areas...what was published underwent careful scrutiny' and Macnamara did not originally discuss sexual intercourse, but gradually did. She was also a keen advocate of prayer, which not everybody wanted to countenance in the 1960s, and also received many letters from lonely widowers and bachelors seeking marriage partners.²⁵

It would be easy to selectively quote Macnamara and others and dismiss them as conservative killjoys, but to her credit, she was promoting the idea of education about sex. She spent years travelling to schools to talk about burgeoning sexuality and the facts of life, and was in fact pushing out boundaries. The very fact that she was addressing these issues in the *Sunday Press* and in the schools, however tame her replies now seem, was a new and brave departure, and she understood that teenage hormones were not to be scoffed at or ignored. When McQuaid placed more focus on marriage counselling MacNamara wrote to 'thank you personally for the courageous step you have taken', and she later told *Hibernia* magazine that she would like to see 'a wealth of counselling services available which would...make me redundant.'²⁶

As a mother of four children, in her 30s, Macnamara justified her role on the basis of first hand experience. The same could not be said of priests, but they too sought to dispense advice to Irish dating teenagers in the 1960s, often congratulating themselves on how frank they were being. A Jesuit priest, Joseph McGloin, wrote a fictional narrative, first published in the US and subsequently published in Dublin in 1960, under the title *What not to do on a date*, in which a priest, warning of the dangers of 'imitating the junk that comes out of Hollywood', discusses 'necking' and 'petting' with two girls and two boys. According to the priest, 'there is no such thing as a little innocent necking...necking is not wrong *in itself*. It is still not to be indulged in...as you perhaps know, necking can easily become a habit, and once that habit is

established, it is only a short step to sin because, for one thing, necking alone will be pretty tame after a while. It is very hard too, to believe that people indulge in necking just to show affection.'

Girls, he insisted 'get much better dates if they never even consider the idea of necking' and he spelt out the FEAR rule- 'if kisses are Frequent, Enduring, and Ardent there can be hardly any just Reason for them.'²⁷ Five years later, Fr Thomas Finnegan, a priest of the Diocese of Elphin, published a pamphlet with the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, entitled *Questions Young Women Ask*, and was unashamedly Jansenistic in his assessment of how girls could know true love: 'St Paul tells us Love is not self-seeking. True love is unselfish. To be unselfish is to suffer. Therefore to love is to suffer. Some of the pop songs say that as soon as love begins, suffering ceases. It is the exact opposite. A person who will not suffer will not love. No matter what he says.' He too offered sample questions from teenagers including the following: 'I feel that marriage is really a sort of permission to be immodest. Is it wrong to be thinking that way?' the answer to which was 'modesty is not a hard virtue to practice because God has implanted in each person an instinct of shame and fear to protect the powers of sex and the holiness of marriage...because of original sin...our bodily instincts are in revolt against conscience'.

It was also asserted that the male response to female attractiveness was physical, whereas the woman's attraction to men was psychological. Finnegan's analysis went from its doom-laden main section to its blunt and negative conclusion, which was that passionate kissing was 'mortally sinful' for the unmarried, and he came up with suggestions as to how the wholesome girl could keep lustful thoughts at bay: 'Do not think about your 'bad thoughts'. Say quickly 'Jesus save me- Mary help me' and then think of something else. If you are a domestic sort of girl picture to yourself the little house that you and your future husband are going to live in and decide on the colour schemes for the various rooms...or, if you are the athletic type of girl, pretend to yourself that an uncle has given you money to buy a car with. By the time you have decided between the relative merits of a Morris Minor and a Ford Anglia the bad thoughts will be forgotten.'²⁸

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- ¹ Marjorie Howes, 'Public Discourse, Private Reflection', *Field Day IV* p.929
- ² Quoted in Brian O'Rourke, *The Conscience of the Race* pp.20ff
- ³ Quoted in Tony Farmar, *Ordinary Lives* p.192
- ⁴ Tom Inglis, 'The Constitution of sexual subjects'
- ⁵ Farmar, *Ordinary Lives*, p.195
- ⁶ Tom Inglis, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (Dublin, 1998) p.37
- ⁷ Dorine Rohan, *Marriage: Irish Style* (Cork, 1969) p.67
- ⁸ *Irish Times* 1 May 1969
- ⁹ Donal S. Connery, *The Irish* (London, 1968) p.200
- ¹⁰ Jeffery Weeks, *Making sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000) p.12
- ¹¹ John Ardagh, *The New French Revolution* (London, 1968) pp.257-8
- ¹² McLaren, *Twentieth Century Sexuality*, pp166-174
- ¹³ *ibid* p.163
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Green, *IT: Sex since the sixties* (London, 1993) p.9
- ¹⁵ Alan Bestic, *Sex and the Singular English* (London, 1972) pp.23-134
- ¹⁶ *ibid* p.174
- ¹⁷ David Birmingham, *A Concise history of Portugal* (Cambridge, 2003) pp175-6
- ¹⁸ McClaren, *Twentieth century Sexuality*, p.192
- ¹⁹ DDA, McQuaid Papers, AB8/B/xxxx/ic Diocesan Press Office (hereafter DPO) McQuaid to Dowling, 6 March 1970
- ²⁰ *ibid*, McQuaid to Dowling, 27 April 1965
- ²¹ *ibid*, Draft reply to questionnaire of Tim Pat Coogan, 19 April 1965
- ²² Connery, *The Irish*, p.93
- ²³ *ibid* p.160
- ²⁴ Fanning, *The quest for Modern Ireland* p.170
- ²⁵ Macnamara, *Yours Sincerely*, pp.62-7
- ²⁶ DDA, McQuaid Papers, DDA AB8/B/xix, CSWB, Box 7, 'Marriage Counselling Service 1966-71', Macnamara to McQuaid, 4 March 1968 and *Hibernia Magazine*, 28 February 1969
- ²⁷ Joseph McGloin, *What not to do on a date* (Dublin, 1960) pp.7-13
- ²⁸ Thomas Finnegan, *Questions Young Girls Ask* (Dublin, 1965) pp.1-16