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978-1-107-14592-4 - Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957–1973

Mary E. Daly

Excerpt

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Introduction

Ireland is not the place it used to be. The sweet, slow, sorrowful land of cheerful indolence and doleful memory is being overtaken by something called progress. Ireland is changing. It is changing today more profoundly than at any time since the Great Hunger of more than a century ago.¹

This is a book about change and continuity in the years 1957–1973: the tensions and interaction between the two as Ireland embarked on a programme of economic development and a campaign to join the EEC. The independent Irish state which came into existence in 1922 was the hybrid product of revolution and democratic elections. Despite its turbulent birth, it settled down to become a stable, conservative democracy. The main preoccupations of the new state were asserting its independence and preserving/creating (we could debate which) a rural, Gaelic society, whose values were closely aligned with those of Catholicism, the religion of the overwhelming majority of the population. The social and cultural values were, at least in theory, the obverse of those embraced by a modern industrial, anglicised world. Government policies privileged the family farm and rural life, Gaelic culture and Catholic teaching. There was an obvious contradiction at the heart of the new state between the aspiration to achieve a united Ireland and the failure to take account of the differing religion and culture of Northern Ireland's Protestant/Unionist majority. The ideology of the newly independent Ireland fostered a predisposition towards introversion and separation, which might be intelligible in a new country trying to come to grips with its independence and the fallout from the struggle for independence and subsequent civil war.²

Ireland was neutral in the Second World War and did not join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) despite sharing its opposition to communism. Strict censorship of film and print media insulated

¹ Donald Connery, *The Irish* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969), p. 11.

² Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and social communication. An inquiry into the foundation of nationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), p. 83.

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society from what was seen as the decadence and sexual permissiveness of modern life. This isolation should not be over-stated. With emigration increasingly directed towards England, there was a constant traffic between the two islands. Returning emigrants brought home stories of life in England – which probably played down the hardships and often-squalid living conditions, while exaggerating the high pay and more exciting aspects of their lives. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other foreign stations gave households with a radio some exposure to a wider world. British newspapers and magazines circulated freely, provided that they did not carry advertisements for contraceptives. Up to 400,000 English Sunday newspapers were imported every week in the 1950s.³ Delaney points out that Irish people had quite a sustained engagement with modernity during the 1940s and 1950s ‘in the sense of experiencing aspects of life or value systems that were widely acknowledged to be new and very different’, and he identifies the cinema, British newspapers and emigration as some of the sources for these experiences.⁴ Yet while emigration provided a window into a wider world and was a potential agent of modernity, it also reinforced social stability: providing jobs for those who could not find a livelihood in Ireland, reducing the proportion of young adults in the population, removing potential malcontents and social misfits. Social stability was especially evident in Ireland’s marriage and fertility, where the patterns that emerged in the decades after the famine survived into the 1950s. Almost one-quarter of adults never married, and those who did, married at a late age, but families were large – averaging four to five children in marriages that lasted for twenty to twenty-four years. Family size was almost unchanged from the 1920s until the late 1950s.⁵ The decade or so after the end of the Second World War was the period when Ireland became most out of step with Western Europe. Successive governments embarked on programmes to expand the health services, and tackle shortfalls in housing, but this activity was not matched by a corresponding expansion in agriculture or manufacturing industry. At a time when other countries were enjoying full employment, a rapid rise in living standards, a post-war marriage boom and an expanding urban population, Ireland only experienced these forces vicariously, through the net emigration of over 500,000 young men and women to Britain.

³ Enda Delaney, ‘Modernity, the past and politics in post-war Ireland’, in Thomas E. Hachey (ed.), *Turning-points in twentieth-century Irish history* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), p. 109.

⁴ Delaney, ‘Modernity’, p. 111.

⁵ Mary E. Daly, *The slow failure. Population decline and independent Ireland, 1920–1973* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 130.

The conventional wisdom is that all this changed in the late 1950s – a decade ‘of crisis leading to a transition from protection to free trade’.⁶ Ireland’s economic policy changed course. The economy began to grow. Rising living standards resulted in a marriage boom and some liberalisation of society, which was marked by the coming of television, and a weakening of the authority exercised by the Catholic Church. In 1959, Eamon de Valera, the dominant politician in the early decades of the new state, was elected President of Ireland, a largely symbolic role. His departure from active politics is seen as marking the transition to a younger generation, and the dilution or abandonment of their political and cultural values – such as a united Ireland and the revival of the Irish language. Seán Lemass’ announcement in August 1961 that Ireland would apply for membership of the EEC signalled a commitment to abandon economic protection in favour of joining a European economic union. The historic 1965 meeting between Lemass and Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O’Neill, the first such meeting of the two heads of government since 1922, is viewed as evidence that the Irish government had abandoned its traditional dogmatic line on partition. As Garvin commented in *Preventing the Future*, ‘(I)t took what was seen as the economic disaster of the mid-1950s and the ageing of the Boys of the Old Brigade to force real change’ – changes that nullified the special interests of older business, ecclesiastical, cultural and labour elites.⁷ A ‘political New Departure’ coincided with major shifts in the economy and ‘ecclesiastical upheaval’.

The patriots had come reluctantly or otherwise to the conclusion that economic and cultural protectionism would have to be abandoned in favour of free trade, and that multinational capital would have to be used to supplement local capital. It was also concluded that cultural protectionism in the form of book and film-censorship was stultifying and that, in particular, education designed to produce pious patriots and nationalist priests would have to be replaced by education and training for economic growth. ... Essentially this is what duly happened, and happened very rapidly.⁸

Garvin’s account suggests that Ireland had embarked on the inexorable path towards modernisation, where economic development was accompanied by the emergence of a more liberal and secular society. Terence Brown – in one of the earliest accounts of this period – suggested that in the late 1950s economic growth became ‘the new national imperative’,

⁶ Brian Girvin, *Between two worlds. Politics and economy in independent Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1989), p. 196.

⁷ Tom Garvin, *Preventing the future. Why was Ireland so poor for so long* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p. 27.

⁸ Garvin, *Preventing the future*, p. 144.

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and Ireland made ‘this major cultural and ideological shift without undue strain’, partly because the scale and pace of urbanisation was moderate.⁹ He writes of a country under the influence of ‘the modernizing virus’.¹⁰

Girvin provides a more cautionary account:

During his short period as Taoiseach, Lemass shifted the balance of power within Irish society. His administration initiated the most comprehensive attempt at modernisation which had occurred in Ireland. In a broad sense Ireland acquired ‘modernity’ during this decade, becoming increasingly industrialised, secularised, urbanised and bureaucratised. In retrospect the achievements of the 1960s were partial: more traditional norms quickly reasserted themselves; yet the achievements were real.¹¹

In 1968, US journalist Donald Connery identified five recent events that ‘converged to revitalize Ireland’: the new demands and new confidence resulting from economic growth; a shift towards more outward-looking national policies; ‘the sweeping in of all manner of foreign influences’; the arrival of television; and a more liberal Catholicism inspired by Pope John XXIII.¹² While all of the above is correct, I would argue that the degree of change is overstated. More importantly, it suggests that Ireland decided, of its own volition, to abandon protection, whereas I would argue that there was no alternative if the nation was to survive in a world where international trade and economic integration were seen as pre-requisites for economic growth. With net emigration in the 1950s running at levels last seen in the depressed 1880s, it was evident that Irish citizens would not accept living standards that were significantly inferior to other Western nations. Once we start from the position that Ireland had no alternative, other than to abandon protection and work to become a member of the EEC, the focus shifts somewhat, and it implicitly requires greater analysis of the pressures and the difficulties involved in this process of change. There has been a tendency to understate the difficulties involved in this major change of direction; a failure to acknowledge that while many were more than willing to embrace the benefits, they were not necessarily prepared to accept the costs, above all a tendency to hype the achievements.

The focus on Seán Lemass, or ‘the Lemass era’,¹³ has tended to concentrate attention on the early/mid-1960s, with the later 1960s and the early 1970s being treated in a more cursory manner. In 1969, Lemass,

⁹ Terence Brown, *Ireland. A social and cultural history 1922–1979* (London: Fontana, 1981), pp. 202–3.

¹⁰ Brown, *Ireland*, p. 245.

¹¹ Girvin, *Between two worlds*, p. 200.

¹² Connery, *The Irish*, p. 37.

¹³ Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era. Politics and society in the era of Seán Lemass* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2005).

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now retired from politics, told a journalist that ‘Progress once it is properly started must accelerate all the time you see: this is the law of life.’¹⁴ Yet by 1969 the momentum for economic growth had slackened; the numbers at work were static or contracting; politicians were failing to confront thorny problems such as a regional development strategy and a sustainable local taxation base. Elections were increasingly transformed into bidding wars, with parties promising tax concessions or higher spending. EEC membership in 1973 was a major achievement that could not have been taken for granted in the early 1960s. But the gap between Ireland’s growth rate and living standards and those of other Western European countries actually widened between 1960 and 1973; the only gap closed was between Northern Ireland and Britain. The numbers at work in 1971 were almost identical to 1961 and significantly below the 1951 figure, at a time when developed economies of Western Europe enjoyed full employment.

The argument that Ireland experienced modernisation, that it was transformed during the 1960s, comes into question when we look at the 1970s and 1980s, and here the analysis of social scientists is unequivocal. Breen et al., writing about the post-1973 period, noted that ‘despite the depth of the transformation Ireland experienced since 1958, in some crucial respects stability rather than change proved to be the chief outcome. . . . The “rising tide” had not sufficed to erase some of the continuities of Irish society.’¹⁵ Higher economic growth between 1958 and 1973, though disappointing by European standards, was not sustained. In the early 1990s, Ireland remained one of the poorest countries in Western Europe, and the gap between Ireland and the EU average was almost identical to 1960.¹⁶ Ó Gráda and O’Rourke describe Ireland as ‘clearly a bad underachiever from the standpoint of GNP/capita growth’.¹⁷

Continuity with earlier times was not confined to the economy. Fahey noted that for Irish Catholicism the 1960s gave ‘the appearance of a watershed’, but he concludes that ‘change has not been so dramatic’.¹⁸

¹⁴ Quoted in Garvin, *Preventing the future*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Richard Breen, Damien Hannan, David Rottman, and Christopher T Whelan, *Understanding contemporary Ireland: state, class, and development in the republic of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ Kieran A. Kennedy, ‘The context of economic development’, in John H. Goldthorpe and Christopher T. Whelan (eds), *The development of industrial society in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 7–12.

¹⁷ Cormac Ó Gráda and Kevin O’Rourke, ‘Irish economic growth 1945–88’, in Nicholas Crafts and Gianni Toniolo (eds), *Economic growth in Europe since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 395.

¹⁸ Tony Fahey, ‘Catholicism and industrial society in Ireland’, in Goldthorpe et al., p. 255.

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Small agricultural holdings survived – often owned by the same family – despite all the doomsayers, though many landholders were now part-time farmers, whose main income came from a job in a factory, or construction – and they continued to exert a strong influence over politics and society.¹⁹ When Liam Ryan compared social values in Ireland with those in other Western European countries in the early 1980s, he concluded that ‘It is scarcely surprising to learn that what marks Ireland off from the rest of Europe is largely a matter of conservatism – conservative in religion, in morality, in politics, in views on work and marriage and the family.’²⁰ The 1980s referendums on the right to life of the unborn and divorce left ‘Ireland in a quite exceptional position in developed countries on these issues’.²¹ In 1990, Coleman described Ireland’s demographic transition (to a low rate of natural increase) as ‘still incomplete’, going on to note that ‘Ireland’s demography challenges demographic theory. It cannot adequately account for Irish exceptionalism.’²² Whether Irish politics is exceptional remains a topic for debate, though Peter Mair does suggest that during the period covered by this book, it is possible to detect the emergence of an ideological distinction between Fianna Fáil and Labour/Fine Gael.²³

Once we accept the importance of ‘continuities’, the question is how to explain them? I would argue that far from embracing economic growth in an uncritical fashion, and abandoning the political and cultural priorities of earlier decades, in the 1960s the process of economic and social development was carefully controlled – insofar as this was possible – to preserve strong elements of continuity with the past. So while Ireland had no alternative other than to modernise its economy, dismantle economic protection, apply for EEC membership and recruit foreign-owned firms, there was a determined effort to ensure that the impact was contained. While the 1960s is seen as the decade when Ireland moved from being an agricultural economy, the key policy changes of the period – the 1965 Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement (AIFTAA) and EEC membership – were designed to preserve the rural, farming community, and the major costs of both developments were carried by industrial firms established under the protectionist regime of the 1930s and their workforce.

¹⁹ Damien Hannan and Patrick Commins, ‘The significance of small-scale landholders in Ireland’s socio-economic transformation’, in Goldthorpe et al., p. 102.

²⁰ Michael Fogarty, Joseph Lee and Liam Ryan, *Irish values and attitudes: the Irish report of the European value systems study* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1984), p. 97.

²¹ Fahey, ‘Catholicism and industrial society in Ireland’, p. 258.

²² D. A. Coleman, ‘The demographic transition in Ireland in international context’, in Goldthorpe et al., p. 52.

²³ Peter Mair, *The changing Irish party system: organisation, ideology and electoral competition* (London: Pinter, 1987).

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While many of the factories that disappeared or shed jobs were based in Dublin and the larger cities, the new foreign-owned successors tended to locate in small towns whose hinterland and culture was dominated by agriculture and rural life. So, while superficially Ireland ceased to be a predominantly agrarian economy, continuities with traditional life styles and values remained strong, though there were obviously some discontinuities. Despite doomsday predictions that thousands of smaller farms would vanish, they survived – bolstered by a favourable welfare system and by a refusal to implement any measures that would interfere with farm ownership. In 1981, 44 per cent of the population lived in rural areas, and many of those living in small towns (classified as urban) remained closely associated with rural life. Indeed, we can argue that Ireland never really became an industrial economy – it moved from an agrarian economy in 1961 to become a modern service economy at the end of the twentieth century, with an uncertain hybrid existence in the intervening period.²⁴

The 1960s brought new wealth to certain groups in Irish society, but the weakness of the industrial sector meant that the expanding native business elite was concentrated in property development and the service economy – a concentration that can be seen as a continuation of the value system associated with the family farm. The failure to become a fully industrialised economy might in hindsight have been auspicious since Ireland was not left with massive numbers of redundant workers from heavy industries such as steel or shipbuilding – an IDA advertisement in the 1990s boasted that Ireland had avoided the Industrial Revolution. But industrial policies that were designed to shore up provincial/rural Ireland and to limit the emergence of large urban, industrial complexes undoubtedly weakened the post-1970 industrial structure. The consequences were fewer jobs, greater poverty and more emigrants. Emigration did not end in the 1960s. For much of the 1970s it was simply replaced by rising unemployment; it revived again in the 1980s as economies elsewhere boomed; Ireland did not succeed in closing the gap in living standards with other Western economies until the 1990s.

Ferriter criticises the failure in the 1960s to address social ills and social inequalities, ‘squalor and neglect in the midst of a new-found opulence: the degree to which promises of a more egalitarian Ireland had been continually reneged on over 40 years of Irish independence’.²⁵ Yet these comments are made with the benefit of the hindsight afforded by the

²⁴ Hartmut Kaeble, *A social history of Europe 1945–2000. Recovery and transformation after two world wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 57.

²⁵ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (London: Profile, 2004), p. 537.

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explosion in professional research on social and economic inequality, and he too readily accepts the official rhetoric of 1960s economic success. Ireland remained significantly poorer than other Western European countries; the ‘new-found opulence’ was limited. The multi-factoral causes of social inequality and their deep roots were not adequately understood by social scientists at this time, either in Ireland, where social science research was in its infancy, or internationally, and many ambitious programmes launched during these years have produced at best mixed results.²⁶ Delaney is more perceptive when he suggests that ‘the challenges to cultural orthodoxies through the media, especially television, and the attempts to reduce social inequality by allowing greater access to the secondary and university system may be paradoxically seen as merely the political establishment following on what were widely perceived by the state’s citizenry to be the basic features of a developed equitable and “modern” society’. He suggests that there are ‘tantalsing questions about how subaltern groups drove on social and cultural change in post-war Ireland’.²⁷ While the expansion of educational opportunities is generally and rightly lauded as one of the major achievements of the 1960s, most of the additional school places were created in existing academic schools, the majority of them under church control. Ownership and control tended to remain in the hands of the church; the syllabus was much as before. It may not be coincidental that Ireland’s economic boom – the so-called Celtic Tiger – was delayed until the 1990s, a time when an expansion in service employment – more suited to the educational values of academic secondary schools and related third-level courses, and the wishes of Irish parents – became a major driver of economic growth.

Improvements in health and social welfare can also be described as modifying rather than transforming the previous arrangements. They preserved the principle of a health service that differentiated between people on the basis of need, rather than uniform, universal access as a right – as in Britain’s National Health Service. Health and welfare continued, like education, to be a partnership between the state and voluntary agencies – and once again this partnership was renegotiated to take account of changing circumstances, but it did not disappear, and there was a general assumption that the Catholic Church should retain a significant role in Ireland’s voluntary health and welfare sector.

Demography is a more complex story. On the one hand, rising living standards resulted in a wave of earlier marriages, and a rising marriage

²⁶ For an evaluation of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger (eds), *Legacies of the war on poverty* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013).

²⁷ Delaney, ‘Modernity’, p. 118.

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rate, which enabled Ireland to belatedly join the international post-war marriage and baby boom, which ended elsewhere in the mid-1960s. The total number of births continued to rise until 1980, and Irish fertility remained significantly out of line with other Western countries. This distinct population profile is partly a reflection of the continuing strength of Irish Catholicism and traditional family values, including the valorisation of large families which was particularly pronounced in farming and rural communities, where fertility remained above the national average. However, it also reflects the frustrations of earlier decades when lack of economic opportunities prevented many men and women from marrying and having children. Girvin and Murphy concede that in the early 1970s, ‘the moral community reflected in the 1937 Constitution and the influence of the Church on policy and society remains largely intact’.²⁸ This is confirmed by statistics of religious practice; most Irish people continued to attend church at least weekly well into the 1980s, and while for some this may have been a matter of conformity, their attendance gave the Catholic clergy an opportunity to exercise their influence with respect to critical issues, especially sexuality and reproduction. While the numbers of newly ordained priests, nuns and religious brothers fell from the mid-1960s, the decline from a post-famine peak in numbers did not cause an immediate crisis. The immediate fall-out from the 1968 Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* among religious and laity was much less evident than in the United States or Europe. Admittedly the late 1960s/early 1970s brought contraception to Ireland, with the contraceptive pill, and the opening of the first family planning clinics, and there is evidence of a more liberal attitude towards sexual relations on the part of young people. However, the strength of more traditional values is evident in the protracted political campaigns relating to divorce, contraception and the ‘pro-life’ campaign.

Politics is one of the greatest examples of continuity. Expectations that the retirement of the founding fathers of the state, coupled with a growing economy, would bring a realignment of political parties on a clearer ideological, left/right basis were not fulfilled. The existing party system survived, though all parties took opportunistic advantage of more buoyant tax revenue to make commitments for increased public spending, and elections came to be dominated by competing promises of additional benefits or tax relief. The ‘parish pump’ – local constituency needs – remained paramount; indeed, with a more dynamic economy and higher government spending it offered additional scope for political patronage.

²⁸ Girvin and Murphy, ‘Whose Ireland? The Lemass era’, in Girvin and Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era*, p. 10.

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As for Northern Ireland, Lemass' emphasis on economic growth, his overtures to Northern Ireland businessmen and the Northern Ireland government can be seen as a new approach to securing a united Ireland – an argument built on economic interests in place of traditional nationalist rhetoric; it should not be seen as an abandonment of the traditional aspiration. The outbreak of violence in 1969 showed that ethnic and religious identities and historic grievances continued to be potent forces in both parts of Ireland, and the rhetoric of militant republicanism and a united Ireland still resonated with some voters.

So this is the story of how Ireland accepted a need to make some critical changes, and then ensured that the impact of these changes was moderated in such a manner that many of the core institutions and core values survived and even thrived. It would probably be unwise to assume that the political and administrative leadership made a conscious decision that 'we must change in order to stay the same'.²⁹ It is more probable that those in authority – whether political, social or economic – lacked the capacity or the commitment to transform the state and the economy, and they consciously or unconsciously adopted measures that would modify such a strategy in order to protect their own interests and placate farmers, constituents, the Catholic Church and other interest groups. The practice of circumscribing economic goals with social criteria, which was the keynote of Fianna Fáil policy in the 1930s, continued in the 1960s; all the key goals of the 1930s, such as decentralising industry, and promoting jobs for men rather than women survived, with one notable exception – the aspiration to economic self-sufficiency. Lemass' commitment to economic and political change is not in question; what is more doubtful however is the extent to which this was supported by other leading politicians. Lee commented that 'Nor was there much evidence that the younger generation had more fire in their bellies than the young, or even the old Lemass'.³⁰ His successor, Jack Lynch, may have deployed similar rhetoric in many speeches; however, Lynch's first period as Taoiseach (1966–1973) was marked by a loss of momentum and a greater tendency to placate groups such as farmers or opponents of a selective regional development policy. It is no coincidence that Fianna Fáil's electoral support became stronger in rural areas under Lynch's leadership. By the late 1960s, EEC membership was increasingly seen not only as the major economic objective – which indeed it was – but as a means of resolving demanding socio-economic aspirations: protecting markets and living

²⁹ Giuseppe de Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, (London: Collins, 1960), p.40.

³⁰ J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985. Politics and society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 390.