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Are the Irish different sexually?


Diamnd Ferriter, a social historian from University College, Dublin, with a reputation for being controversial, argues that Ireland was late coming to the 'carnal mainstream' and that the thematic of sexual sin was underplayed until the 1990s in Ireland. He makes the unarguable proposition that 'All of us know that Irish women are the most virtuous in the world'; imposing so much responsibility for women. The costs he documents of this national obsession are horrendous: in the 19th century and well into the 20th century, penalties for rape of a young girl child were much more punitive than for the supposedly 'unnatural' acts between consenting homosexuals, or acts of bestiality; and prostitutes wore the heavy penalties (jail or the Magdalum Asylums), not to mention sexually transmitted disease in meeting the sexual desires of the tens of thousands of British military and police, and of course, the locals, who used them. Do Valera apparently cancelled the weekly issue of condoms to the Army in 1932, favouring, as the Church did, moral persuasion over physical prophylaxis. Women unquestioningly wore the blame that more properly should have attached to men precisely because of a national myth of purity. Feninter gives himself a very broad sexuality he is examining, and this leads to an unevenness of his treatment. The sexual revolution had arrived and he appears uncomfortable. That there was no adequate language for talking about sex, or that shame was an effective silencer is confounded by the range of voices Ferriter presents in this book. Between 1922-1940, the birth of the Free State, Ferriter identifies a period of increasing sexual consciousness in response to rising crime statistics: books were written (and censored), government reports produced (but not debated and suppressed, never to see the light of day); and court statistics were written about (in magazines, offshoots). Crimes were prosecuted vigorously and written up, in truncated form in newspapers. Astonishingly perhaps, in response to court sentences, the Christian Brothers conducted 30 internal formal trials of abusers, in order to protect the good name of the church, none of these Brothers ever came to trial in a period when paedophiles were being convicted in the courts. These were home-grown crimes, crimes in response to peculiarly Irish circumstances, and not blameworthy on 'foreign contaminations.' The sexual revolution had arrived tentatively on Irish shores, and the Irish response was to ramp up the Catholic moral purity campaign and articulate xenophobia ever more vigorously, the Redemptorist missions and Legion of Mary activists were key to this. Perhaps one of the most pungent manoeuvres of this book is to track how the discourses about sexuality moved from being overwhelmingly judgemental to more modern discourses that correlated better with international and psychological readings of sexuality in the last two decades of the 20th century. Ferriter sees feminist discourses as having been influential, but TV chat shows, and especially the Late Late Show in even more so. Villain Timóln is drawn upon for a memorable narrative of how in Wexford in the 1960s watching the show was a rite of passage to adulthood, and the shocked and embarrassed (and studiously silent) response of his family to M\'ae Mac an S\'ao\'i's use of the term 'sado' on the show. The show mesmerised, discomfited and normalised sexuality for a generation of viewers, according to Ferriter. Part of this liberalisation has been an increasing acceptance of homosexuality and lesbianism. Ferriter, drawing on the Irish Queer Archive, makes this painful journey a compelling one. Mary Robinson and David Norris get due recognition for their brave work in this area. Norris is reported as announcing to the Senate that he gave thanks that '[he] was (a) not heterosexual and (b) not a woman.'

The statistics Ferriter draws upon really helped me to understand the context in which the Ryan Commission To Inquire into Child Abuse (it began its work in 1990 and reported in 2009) operated. It cites evidence gathered by The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre's Sexual Violence in Ireland Report, which was commissioned by the Irish Government and published in 2002: over 1 in 20 women and 1 in 50 men were raped as children; 30% of women reported sexual abuse as did 23.6% of men. In the period 1970-2005, the most common occupational group represented in paedophilia cases was farmers. Clerical abuse, reprehensible as it is, represents a tiny fraction of these figures. Even after the publication of this report, the recommended education campaign did not happen. The Ryan Commission might achieve more in making victims aware of their rights, but there is a danger of its overshadowing the more grim statistics in the general population.

This is a truly enlightening book, well written and immensely readable. Ferriter takes a long view of Irish sexual history, provides illuminating social historical contexts, and contains a few clarifying national myths. The human faces of the victims of sexual crime often spring into very lively focus. Repression and the struggle to escape it in modern Ireland make a compelling story.

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