

A MATTER OF CHARACTER

by William V. Shannon and Cullen Murphy

The Republic of Ireland is a small place. Its economic output is dwarfed by that of Connecticut. There are more Irish missionary priests abroad than policemen at home, and in all of Ireland, there are fewer than 2,000 lawyers. The members of the Irish Army, Navy, and Air Force, together with their spouses, could sit comfortably inside Dublin's 50,000-seat Croke Park, where the national hurling and Gaelic football matches are played every autumn. There are more sheep in Ireland than people, and twice as many cows, and both enjoy the right of way on rural Irish roads. Life in Ireland is played on a very small stage—one reason, perhaps, why Irish newspapers feature no gossip columns, and why journalists have no tradition of investigative reporting. No one wants to pry too deeply into another fellow's affairs, lest the other fellow turn out to be the son-in-law of one's closest friend.

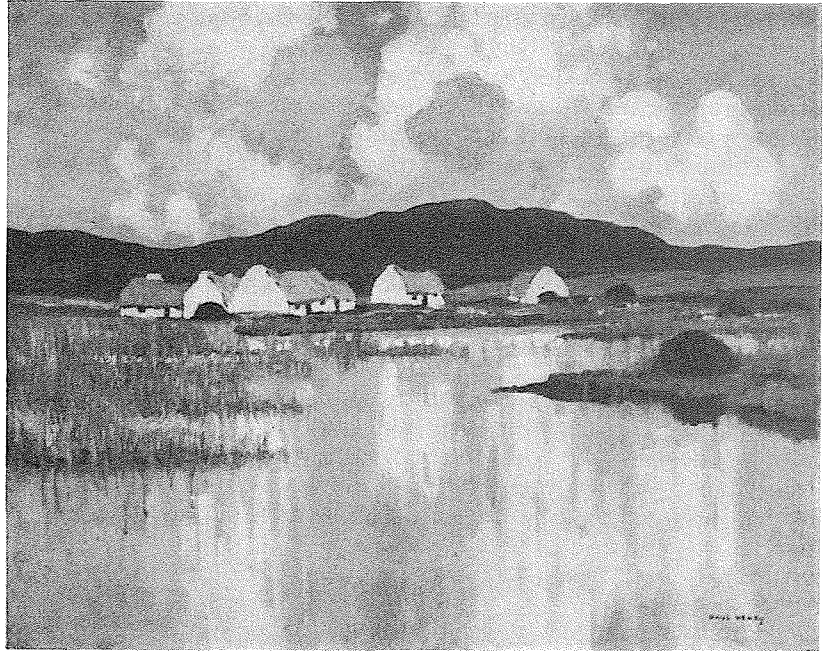
But if Ireland is small in size, it looms large in the chronicles of Britain and America. Here, on the outermost edge of Europe, the Celtic people made their last stand. They wrested a living from an ungenerous land and a history out of a long, bitter struggle against a powerful neighbor. Time and again, it looked as if that struggle would be a losing one.

When Ireland was partitioned in 1922 and the British departed from the five-sixths of the country that had opted for independence, they left behind a nation that was an odd mixture of Western Europe and what we now call the Third World.

The new Irish Free State had inherited a first-rate railroad system, adequate roads, a distinguished legal profession, an honest and efficient civil service, and several good universities (including Trinity College, Dublin, founded by Queen Elizabeth I in 1591) and teaching hospitals.

But Ireland at independence also suffered from the low standard of living, high birthrate, and meager industrial base that one associates with the underdeveloped world. Most of the houses in the countryside lacked plumbing and electricity, and Dublin's slums rivaled those of Naples as the worst in Europe. Tuberculosis was endemic. So great was emigration that Ireland's population showed a net decline, year after year.

Beginning in these mixed circumstances, the Irish slowly—and then with a rush during the 1960s and '70s—sought to over-



Irish painter Paul Henry depicted the Ireland of the tourist—also, as it happens, the Ireland of the poor. Conservative, inward-looking, familial, the Republic at birth was deemed the Sicily of Western Europe.

come their country's many deficiencies.

The early administrations focused their efforts on a few basic economic and social objectives. Thus, during the 1920s Irish engineers began throwing dams across the Shannon, harnessing the longest river in the British Isles. Hydroelectricity was soon powering new steel and textile mills, shoe and fertilizer factories, sugar beet processing plants. All of these industries, protected by high tariff walls, were encouraged by Eamon De Valera's government during the 1930s, in a drive toward economic self-sufficiency.

Successive Irish governments, meanwhile, invested heavily in providing shelter for the needy. Whole slums were razed and their inhabitants resettled, sometimes in ugly apartment blocks, more often in modest, two-story row houses that government subsidies eventually enabled the occupants to buy.* One big government success came in the field of public health. Shortly

*Today, an astonishing 70 percent of all housing units in Ireland are owned by the household head (versus 64.7 percent in the United States).

after World War II, the minister of health, Dr. Noel Browne, persuaded his cabinet colleagues to underwrite a major campaign against the scourge of tuberculosis. With new drugs such as streptomycin and isoniazid just becoming available, the investment in hospitals and clinics paid off quickly.

The achievements of the Free State's first three decades were substantial. But they were by no means sufficient. The legendary De Valera, onetime mathematics teacher and hero of the 1916 Easter Rising, who held the post of *taoiseach* ("chieftain," or prime minister) for most of the period between 1932 and 1959, was almost grateful that the Industrial Revolution had passed Ireland by. He cherished a static, bucolic, romantic vision of the kind of nation Ireland should become. It would be, he declared in a famous speech in 1943, "a land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, . . . with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age."

Stanching the Hemorrhage

This was not, to say the least, a recipe for robust economic growth. Unable to find work, an average of 40,000 people—most of them young—left the country *every year* during the 1950s for Britain and the United States. Few would return. As postwar Britain constructed a welfare state, Ireland became known as the "farewell state."

Sean Lemass, who succeeded De Valera in 1959, did much to turn the situation around. Lemass had for two decades been De Valera's principal deputy in domestic affairs. As a Number Two man, he had shown himself to be canny, discreet, loyal, reserved, and forceful. He was an executive who followed orders. But when he stepped up to the Number One job, Lemass, no sentimentalist, scrapped many of De Valera's policies.

Lemass saw industrialization as the only way to stanch the hemorrhage of emigration. Those athletic Irish youths and comely maidens would have to find well-paying jobs in the factories of what Lemass, in businessman's terms, conceived of as "Ireland, Inc." The Lemass government launched a concerted campaign to

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attract foreign investment. Overseen by an Industrial Development Authority, it offered a wide range of subsidies, including factories built to specification, free training of workers, and a "tax holiday" on profits from all products sold abroad.

The first big catch, in 1962, was General Electric (GE), which now operates four plants in Ireland. Lemass welcomed the new facility, which was built in a special industrial park near Shannon Airport, but not GE's proposed name for it: Emerald Isle Electric. "Emerald Isle!" he protested, "That is precisely the image I am trying to get away from." A compromise was reached, and the plant today is known simply as E. I. Electric.

Sorry, Wrong Number

During the 1960s and '70s, corporations from around the world responded favorably to the Irish sales pitch. Why? Apart from subsidies, it turned out that Ireland has a lot to offer. It is one of the few places left in Europe with undeveloped land. It has abundant water. Its climate is mild. Its government is aggressively sympathetic to capitalism, while its Communist Party is minuscule and politically irrelevant. Wage scales in manufacturing are relatively low—about \$5.48 per hour in 1983 (versus \$10.41 in West Germany, \$12.26 in the United States).

For American and British investors, moreover, Ireland has the added attractions of a familiar culture and a work force that is universally literate in English. Businessmen also foresaw that Ireland, while remaining aloof from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, would one day join the European Economic Community (which the Republic did in 1973). Ireland now offers duty-free access to nine other Common Market nations, with a combined population of some 270 million.

Of course, Ireland has its drawbacks, too. Irish trade unions share the worst attributes—including arrogance, selfishness, and insatiability—of their British counterparts. (In 1979, sanitation workers in Dublin went on strike because the raincoats they were given to wear on wet days made them perspire.) There are few American-style industrial unions, such as the United Steel Workers, that can speak for all employees in a single industry. Instead, most Irish workers are organized into small craft unions. Factory managers may have to deal with a dozen unions under a single roof, a strike by any one of which may shut down the whole place. In Ireland in 1982, for every 1,000 non-agricultural workers, 526 man-days were lost to strikes (compared with 254 in Britain, 102 in the United States). So far, however, labor actions against foreign manufacturers have been

few—perhaps out of fear of frightening away the goose that lays the golden eggs.

“Infrastructure” is perhaps a more serious problem. Especially in the impoverished west, where Dublin has been anxious to establish new industries, many country roads, narrow and pitted with potholes, are virtually impassable by truck. Guemael Trahan, French owner of a fish-processing plant in Rossaveal, County Galway, recently refused to pay the annual road tax until the local Connemara roads were improved. (When a judge slapped him with a £100 fine, he refused to pay that, too, and went to jail to publicize his cause.) The telephone system in Ireland is notorious. Households must wait for up to two years to have a phone installed. Every day in the back-page “Personals” columns of the *Irish Times*, the frantic managers of companies whose telephones have inexplicably ceased to function seek to alert clients and customers that they have not, appearances to the contrary, gone out of business.

Youth Culture

Despite such nuisances, Ireland today is home to more than 300 American-owned factories. U.S. investment in plant and machinery on the island now totals more than \$4 billion. Fully half of all manufacturing jobs in Ireland depend on American dollars. The chief industries: computers (Digital, Amdahl, Prime, Documatics), electronics (GE, Westinghouse), and pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies (Pfizer, Abbott, Travonol). Sherwin Williams paint products are manufactured in Ireland, as are Hallmark greeting cards and Nike running shoes. In addition, there are more than 100 West German plants on the island and a significant number of British, Dutch, and Japanese factories. In 1978, for the first time in Irish history, the number of persons engaged in making their living from industry surpassed the number of those working in agriculture.

The beginnings of the Irish industrial boom coincided with a sharp tightening of U.S. immigration law (1965). Emigration, as a result, has declined dramatically. By 1980, the Republic's population had climbed to 3.5 million (up from 2.8 million two decades earlier); the populations of all but one of the 26 counties had grown over the previous decade. While the worldwide 1981–83 recession hit Ireland severely—unemployment almost doubled, reaching about 16 percent—the quiet despair of the “hungry '50s” has not reappeared. With the majority of its young folk staying home despite the recession, the Republic of Ireland has become the most youthful country in Europe. Fully

half of the population today is under the age of 25 (versus 35 percent in Britain, 39 percent in the United States).

Downtown Dublin shows evidence of a youth culture in full bloom. "Punk rockers," their hair dyed purple or bleached white with peroxide, roam the shopping districts, where McDonald's and Burger King have gradually displaced many of the old tea shops. Rock and country-and-western music blares from the record stores. Dublin has its "yuppies" too, the smartly dressed young professionals who jog at lunchtime through Saint Stephen's Green, eat quiche, wear designer underwear, and follow the cartoon "Doonesbury" in the *Irish Times*.

Even so, much of the flavor of an older Dublin has remained. Victualers have survived as an urban adornment, the display windows of their shops filled with the muted red hues of butchered meat. Turf accountants (bookies) have their traditional offices scattered across the city. Workmen laying pipes or digging ditches toil in well-worn jackets and ties, as they always have, and the rains still come often enough to dispel, if only for a while, the pall of smoke from turf (peat) fires on a hundred thousand hearths. Dublin is still, essentially, a smallish city (population 525,000) of churches and private residences on the River Liffey, with a low skyline, little industry, and some handsome

PEOPLE ARE TO IRELAND
AS OIL IS TO TEXAS.

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

IDA Ireland

"WE'RE THE YOUNG EUROPEANS"

The IDA
Ireland's advanced and fast-growing public sector. Efficient, expert,
flexible, responsive.
FOCUS
A member of the European Central Bank, noted for its low level
of government expenditure and high quality. The most profitable, highest
quality of European EEC products.
Ireland: Home of the Irish. The young Europeans.

"People are to Ireland as oil is to Texas," proclaims this Industrial Development Authority advertisement. On the other hand, oil is to Ireland as people are to Greenland. Several major companies are drilling in Irish waters, but no commercially exploitable deposits have yet been tapped.

18th-century Georgian architecture.

But relative prosperity has made Dublin noisier than it used to be. As recently as 1960, bicycles dominated the capital's streets. Horses pulled the milk wagons. Now, the auto is the reigning status symbol, and Dublin and Cork endure Manhattan-style traffic jams. Because Ireland levies stiff excise and "value-added" taxes, a four-cylinder automobile costs the Irish roughly twice what a comparable car costs Americans. Gas is priced at about \$3 per gallon. With Ireland's income per capita of only \$5,000 in 1984—down there with that of Greece and Spain—it is a bit mysterious how so many people can afford a car. Yet two-thirds of all households own at least one. Even the "tinkers," who generally beg on the streets or sell cheap rugs from door to door for a living, now have motor vehicles. Descendants of the landless itinerant laborers of pre-Famine times, the tinkers once roamed the country in colorful, barrel-shaped wagons, stopping in slovenly camps on the outskirts of towns. Now most of them have trailers.

Thirty Acres, a Dozen Cows

Ireland is not as affluent as other Common Market countries. But the key fact is that it is more affluent than it ever has been. Real income has doubled during the last two decades, and Irish horizons have correspondingly widened. Middle-class Irish families now vacation not only in West Cork or Donegal but also in Spain, the Canary Islands, and even Florida's Walt Disney World. The Irish punt, or pound, is now linked to the West German mark rather than (as it was for so many years) to the British pound. Ambitious parents encourage their children to learn French and German, recognizing that the successful Irish entrepreneur of the future must feel at home not only in Ennis or Carlow but in Paris and Frankfurt as well. To be a computer programmer or designer of software is to ply a chic trade in Ireland today. Magazines such as *Computer Weekly* and *Computer News* can be found in the magazine racks of newsagents and tobacconists everywhere.

Perhaps nowhere has the transformation of "traditional" Ireland been so profound as it has been on the farm. Early in this century, in a vain effort to defuse Irish nationalist feeling, the British government bought out most of the English landlords and divided the great estates into a patchwork of small family farms. Deeply cherished though these farms were, they were often incompetently managed and suffered from fragmentation and lack of capital investment. A farmer owning as few as 30 acres would

often have his small holding in several scattered parcels, grazing a dozen cows in one field, raising hay in another, and cutting turf (for fuel) from a bog in a third. Outside the wealthier midland counties, such as Tipperary, with its "golden vale," where the land is more fertile than scenic, it was rare until the 1960s to see a tractor in a field, or a car on a country road.

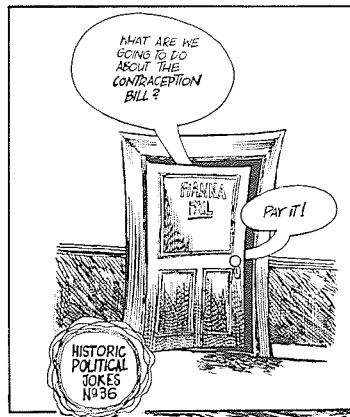
Lakes of Milk

Change has come slowly to the countryside, but it has come. Rural electrification was virtually completed by 1960. During the years since then, the ramshackle thatched cottage has either largely disappeared or, as in the picturesque village of Adare, been preserved primarily to please the two million tourists who visit Ireland every year (leaving \$524.3 million behind in 1983). Thanks to government subsidies, many farm families have been able to replace their old, look-alike cottages with look-alike modern homes of cinder block and plaster, snug and comfortable, boasting picture windows, indoor plumbing, and modern stoves. Grandfather's old home, usually moldering a few yards beyond the back door, now shelters the cows.

While Ireland remained neutral during World War II—a stance that finally convinced many skeptical Irishmen that their country truly was independent from Great Britain—the powerful Irish-American contingent in the U.S. Congress saw to it that Ireland received some Marshall Plan aid (about \$147 million) between 1949 and 1952. Dublin wisely invested much of the money in a series of agricultural research stations, of which there now are eight. Almost all of the senior staff members at these centers have done their graduate work at U.S. land-grant universities. The influence of the stations' demonstration classes and model farms has been enormous. Milking machines, for example, are common today on all but the smallest of dairy farms. Across the country, agricultural productivity has increased dramatically during the past 20 years.

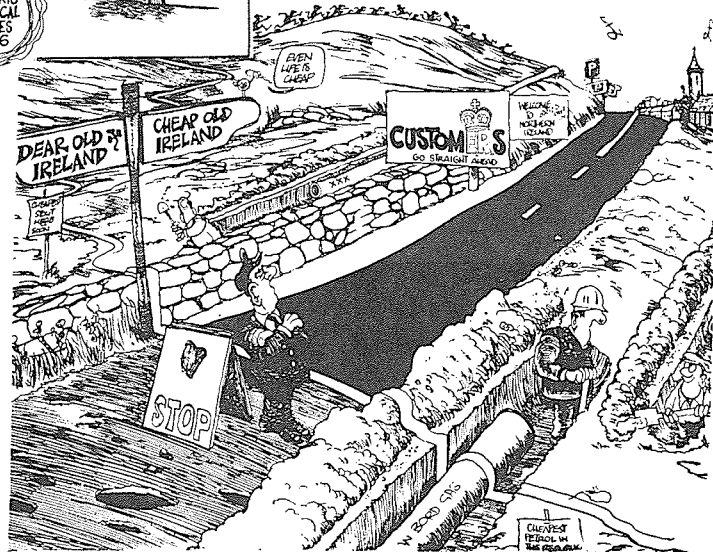
Irish farmers, like those in France and Denmark, produce the "lakes of milk and mountains of butter" that bedevil the European Community's so-called Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). They are vulnerable to any shift in that policy of high prices and unrestrained production. But Irish agriculture will never revert to the practices of the bad old days, even if CAP is somehow "reformed." Irish farmers are better educated and more progressive than their fathers were. The current trend to larger and better capitalized farms is irreversible.

Looking back on the past quarter century, the Irish realize



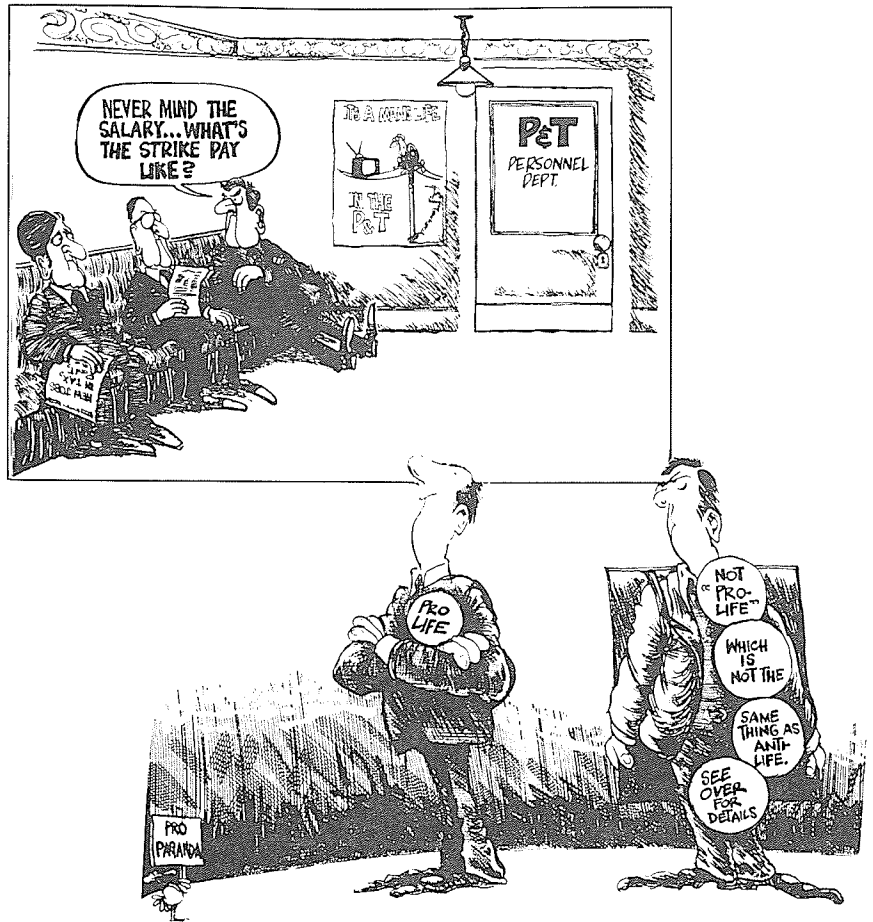
IRISH PERSPECTIVES:

The work of Martyn Turner, Ireland's premier editorial cartoonist, appears in the Irish Times. In these drawings, he comments on (clockwise from upper right) labor relations, the 1983 abortion referendum, south and north, and birth-control legislation.



that, in economic terms, they have survived a painful transition, which is still incomplete. Ireland remains vulnerable. The recent recession has certainly stifled the buoyant optimism of the 1970s. Unemployment runs high among youths just out of school. While the dole provides minimum subsistence, television, available in nine out of 10 Irish households and top-heavy with glittery American shows such as "Dallas," offers a picture of how much better life could be. In Dublin, muggings, robberies, and car thefts have become increasingly common—particularly on the north side of the city, where growing numbers of young heroin addicts inhabit what remain of the capital's once densely congested slums.

The Republic, in short, is far from paradise. Even so, the



Irish recognize how far they have come. Having long been one of Europe's poorest, most backward societies, Ireland has at last taken its place, in social terms, alongside such prosperous developed countries as Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands—countries still reliant on what the soil will yield but dependent even more on their ability to sell high-quality manufactured goods in a world market.

At the same time, the *character* of Ireland diverges markedly from that of any Scandinavian or Benelux country. The Irish have always been regarded as an imaginative people, fond of music and storytelling, and brave, even reckless, in battle. To these qualities centuries of servitude added not dourness but a feckless, devil-may-care attitude toward life. To be sure, after

the catastrophe of the Famine, most of the survivors turned inward, became hard, calculating, thrifty people, conservative, suspicious of outsiders. Yet, their manners remained soft, their speech infected still by what Sean O'Faolain called "that most Kerryish form of silence: an excess of volubility."

The easy charm that makes the Irish personality so attractive has a flip side. For one thing, it saps the capacity of the Irish people for sustained public indignation. Every week, it seems, there occurs a major fire or train wreck or industrial explosion. The death rate on highways is appallingly high. The Dublin newspapers are so full of reports of minor freak accidents—a Raheny man, for example, was injured last October when a toilet cistern fell on him in the restroom of his local pub—as to keep a wary visitor continually on his guard.

An Irish Solution

The Irish take a relaxed attitude toward such mishaps. They are prone to say of "poor Tom" or "good old Mike" that he is, after all, a nice fellow, even though Tom may have been driving while drunk (and killed four children) and Mike may have been off having a smoke when the track signals needed switching (to the detriment of oncoming trains). Arrests for speeding or reckless driving are few. Rare is the school that holds a fire drill. In all of these respects, Ireland is not likely to be mistaken for Norway or West Germany.

Irish complacency in the face of misfortune may be due in part to religious fatalism, the idea, instilled over the centuries, that one's arms are too short to box with God. For better or worse, the pervasive influence of the Roman Catholic Church also sets Ireland apart from the rest of the Common Market crowd. After Poland and Lithuania, Ireland is the most Catholic country in Europe (94 percent of its people profess the faith). And, as in Poland and Lithuania, where the church always provided a psychological bulwark against an occupier's overweening power, Catholicism has long enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with nationalism.

Inevitably, with creation of an Irish Free State in 1922, church doctrine and church preference were enshrined in civil law. The new government moved quickly to ban divorce, outlaw birth control and abortion, and enforce vigorous censorship of books and movies. Pubs could be open only during certain hours, dance halls had to be licensed (and obtain a permit from a local magistrate before holding *any* dance). The Irish constitution, promulgated in 1937, acknowledged not "We the People"

but "the most Holy Trinity" as the ultimate source of all governmental authority.

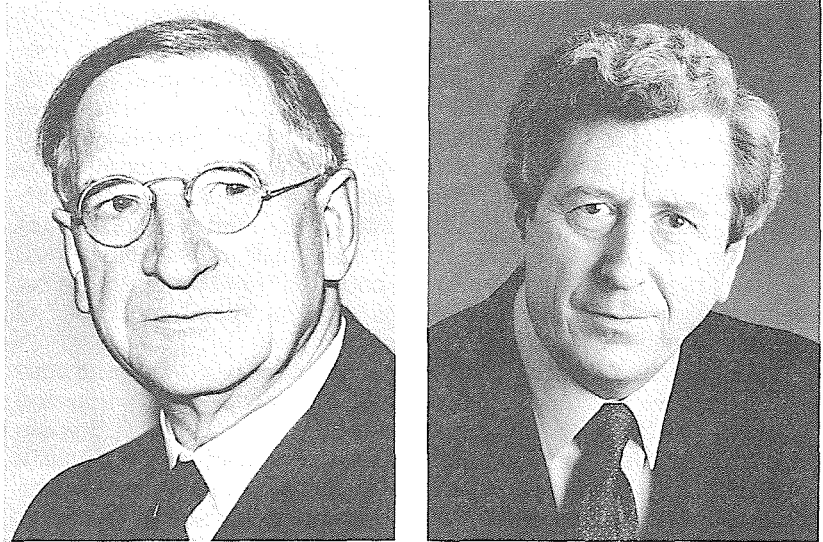
Not until the 1960s did the fabric of church-sanctioned controls begin to fray. The intellectual and institutional ferment provoked by Vatican II shook the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland as much as it did elsewhere. Fewer young people entered the convent or seminary. Meanwhile, violent and sexually explicit programs on British television, easily received by the eastern third of Ireland, made a farce of government censorship, of which everyone from James Joyce to James Bond had run afoul. In 1973, the electorate approved a constitutional amendment repealing a provision that had recognized "the special position" of the Roman Catholic Church.

That same year, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that the constitution does *not* prohibit the use of contraceptives by married women. The Irish government reluctantly complied with this decision, legalizing contraception for *wives* who obtain a doctor's prescription. Charles Haughey, later prime minister but at the time the minister of health, described the legislation as "an Irish solution to an Irish problem." (The phrase quickly entered the popular vocabulary and is used ironically to describe the bizarre approach of public policy to the management of any aspect of Irish life.) As it happens, even *unmarried* women have no trouble obtaining "the pill." Last February the Dáil (Parliament), by a narrow margin, approved legislation that may soon make contraceptives legally available to anyone over the age of 18.

'We Are Not Swedes'

But divorce is still illegal, and an estimated 70,000 Irish married men and women—about five percent of all husbands and wives—are living apart from their spouses. A recent *Irish Times* poll indicated that two-thirds of those surveyed felt that divorce should be permitted in certain circumstances. In the Dáil, a Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown has taken up the matter—very, very gingerly.

For despite its somewhat diminished prestige and the weakening of its authority in some spheres of conduct, the Roman Catholic Church, headed by Tomas Cardinal O Fiaich, remains the single most powerful institution in Ireland. Seven people out of 10 attend mass regularly. It is still common for mothers in Ireland to check with their parish priests before making any major family decisions. At noon and at 6:00 P.M. each day, the government-run radio station, Radio Éireann, pauses for 30 seconds and sounds the 12 bells of the Angelus. Saint Patrick's Day



Generations apart: Eamon De Valera (left), who guided the Free State in its formative years; and Garret FitzGerald, the current prime minister.

is both a church holiday and a national holiday and until three years ago was the only day of the year on which the pubs were forbidden to open their doors. One unintended effect was to swell attendance at the National Dog Show, held on Saint Patrick's Day on the grounds of the Royal Dublin Society, a venerable Anglo-Irish enclave where the liquor always flowed freely.

The most profound influence of the church remains in education. There are no public schools in Ireland in the American sense. With a few exceptions, the nation's 3,412 state-aided primary schools are run either by the Roman Catholic Church or by various Protestant denominations. Normally, these local "national schools" are administered by a board of management, often chaired by the local parish priest. Of the 282,000 students at the *secondary* level in 1981, more than two-thirds were in church-run institutions.

Yet, even the character of the national schools is changing. For one thing, the government announced last fall that a concerted effort would be made to introduce sex education into the schools—something that would not have been dreamt of 30 years ago. (The Department of Education's decision was spurred by the widely publicized March 1984 case of a 15-year-old country girl, in Granard, County Longford, who went to a grotto out-

side her parish church one night to give birth to a baby no one even suspected her of carrying; both mother and child died of exposure.) While the advent of sex education is denounced by some as an invitation to moral license, Prime Minister Garret FitzGerald has expressed his confidence in the Irish national character. "We are not Swedes," he pointed out recently, "We are not Danes."

FitzGerald has proved to be one of the few major Irish politicians willing to risk the displeasure of the church hierarchy. During the early 1980s, when Ireland's right-to-life movement began pressing for an amendment to the constitution explicitly forbidding abortion—it is already forbidden by statute, and the courts have held that the constitution prohibits it implicitly—the leaders of Ireland's two major political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, initially endorsed the idea. But FitzGerald, the Fine Gael chief and prime minister, later expressed reservations, on various technical grounds, about the specific wording of the amendment. When his substitute language failed to win church approval, the *taoiseach* decided to oppose the antiabortion amendment. It was approved, nonetheless, in a 1983 referendum. The outcome has no real effect. Irish women who want abortions will do what they have usually done: take the Aer Lingus shuttle to London. It is noteworthy, however, that FitzGerald, whose party holds only a slim majority in the 166-member Dáil, suffered no apparent loss in popularity by breaking with the church hierarchy on the abortion issue.

Lip Service

Ireland's two chief political parties derive their identities from the civil war of 1922–23. The issue that divides members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is, literally, the answer to this question: On which side was your father (or grandfather)? Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Destiny), organized by Eamon De Valera, is the more nationalist party, which means in practice that it takes a harder, "greener" line toward Northern Ireland, demanding total unification. Fine Gael (Family of the Irish) does not disavow reunification as an ultimate goal but displays more interest in promoting "peace and stability" between the two Irelands as the only attainable objectives for the foreseeable future.

The two parties have been vying for top nationalist credentials for 60 years. It was De Valera's Fianna Fáil that, during the 1930s, unilaterally abolished the British post of governor general and the oath of allegiance to the English king. But it was a coalition government (1948–51) led by Fine Gael that took Ire-

land out of the British Commonwealth altogether and declared the country a republic (again, without London's prior consent).

That same coalition government created the cabinet-level ministry of the Gaeltacht (that is, of the Irish-speaking areas), once more in a bid to shine its nationalist credentials, and subsequent Fianna Fáil governments have felt constrained to keep this ministry in existence. Nevertheless, it has proved impossible to revive the Irish language in everyday usage.

Rival Visions

The fate of the Irish language, which was decisively overtaken by English a century ago, has political resonance even now because it goes to the heart of the question, What does it mean to be Irish? Through centuries of oppression, their unique language was one thing the Irish could always call their own. The revolutionaries who brought Ireland to independence were Irish-speakers—self-taught. Their sort of nationalism had begun not as a political movement but as a cultural and linguistic one. Eamon De Valera once allowed that “if I had to make a choice between political freedom without the language, and the language without political freedom, I would choose the latter.” The constitution established Irish as Ireland's “first” official language, and Irish today is used (along with English) on most government documents and on all street signs. Certain television programs, including one edition of the news, are broadcast in Irish. Courses in Irish are compulsory for students in every grade, from kindergarten through high school. Candidates for civil service jobs and admission to the national universities must demonstrate proficiency in Irish.

Despite such measures, Irish has not caught on; the cultural and economic pull of England, on the one side, and of the United States, on the other, has simply been too great. The Gaeltacht areas, where native Irish-speakers receive generous government subsidies to use Irish in their daily lives, are steadily shrinking in size. Today, they are home to no more than 50,000 people, clustered in remote fishing villages and isolated farmlands along the windswept coastal fringes of western Ireland. In Donegal and Mayo, in Clare and Kerry, and in the Connemara region of Galway, it is still possible to hear Irish spoken by schoolchildren buying sweets in a shop or by farmers chatting in a pub about the price of lambs. But even in these areas, everyone understands English.

If men such as De Valera had hoped to keep Ireland a nation of Catholic, Irish-speaking farmers, there was all along a rival

conception of Ireland's destiny, one first articulated by Daniel O'Connell, the masterful 19th-century Kerry politician who led the campaign for Catholic emancipation. O'Connell had no interest in rescuing the Irish language (knowledge of which, he once pointed out, "will not sell the pig"). He hoped that Ireland would become English-speaking, secular, democratic, and politically mature, a nation of both farmers and businessmen. The Republic of Ireland today is more nearly O'Connell's country than De Valera's, and the trend away from the old nationalist, confessional creed seems to be accelerating.

Membership in the Common Market is one reason for this, but just as important is the situation in Protestant-dominated Northern Ireland. Briefly, it is clear to most in the south that the peaceful unification of the two Irelands can be achieved only if the character of the Republic's constitution—especially as it affects religion—is profoundly altered (and reunification may not be achieved even then). The New Ireland Forum, a blue-ribbon panel consisting of representatives from the major political parties in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, made this point explicitly in a widely read 1984 report.

Prime Minister FitzGerald symbolizes the Republic's current period of transition. On the one hand, he seeks no radical break with the past. He has written a book about the Irish language and is a devout Roman Catholic. But he is also a veteran "technocrat," fluent in French, European in outlook. He has broad appeal to women and younger voters. His willingness to disagree with the bishops on abortion suggests that he is the most likely politician to take on "untouchable" subjects, such as divorce and constitutional revision (though he has not yet done so).

But he is under no illusions about how far or how quickly he can lead. There are deep emotions at play. "Over a period of half-a-century," he observed not long ago, "we have created for ourselves in this part of Ireland a comfortable state, now quite an old garment, which has come to fit our present shape and which many are, subconsciously at least, reluctant to throw off for fear that the new one might pinch at some delicate points or be inconveniently loose at others, requiring a lengthy process of adjustment and adaptation before we could once again feel as comfortable as we have come to feel with our Twenty-Six county suit."

