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# Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern

Ireland

Tom Inglis

The history of Irish sexuality remains a relatively hidden, secretive area. In recent years some light has been cast into the abyss (Inglis 1998b; McAvoy 1999; McLoughlin 1994; Meany 1991; Walshe 1997; O'Carroll and Collins 1995). Most of the recent grand histories, however, have avoided dealing with sex and sexuality directly and have focused instead on such issues as censorship, the multi-faceted role of the Catholic church, fertility control, and, more recently, the sex-abuse scandals involving the Catholic church.<sup>1</sup> It is as if the old Catholic-church strategy of not referring directly to sex and sexuality—for fear that it might offend or undermine the innocent—still guides what historians research and write about.

The lack of research into the history of Irish sexuality is puzzling, although it corresponds to a general lack of interest in sexuality in Irish academia. It may be that the dominance of Catholic-church personnel in such key areas as philosophy, psychology, and sociology dampened any budding interest in the subject. But this does not explain the lack of interest among cultural historians. There is still a huge lacuna when it comes to understanding the sexual nature of the Irish. This is peculiar, given that anthropologists, ethnographers, and other commentators on Ireland have long pointed out how the Irish were so repressed sexually (Humphreys 1966; Messenger 1969; Brody 1973; Scheper-Hughes 2001). It is also peculiar because, when it comes to a demographic profile, the Irish show definite signs of being sexually unique. For most of the last century they had (in comparison with other Western societies) the lowest levels of marriage and, correspondingly, the highest levels of bachelors and spinsters. On the other hand, Ireland had the highest birth rate



or, more precisely, the highest level of marital fertility (see Inglis 1998b:34-38). This meant that those who did get married tended, in comparison with married women in other Western societies, to have a large number of children. The creation of such a sexual regime is not arbitrary or haphazard. There were forces in Irish society which created and maintained such a regime. The Catholic church and (through clerical influence) the state were major players in creating this regime. Nevertheless, the locus classicus for the key components of the chastity, virginity, and modesty as well as the piety and sobriety that had taken firm hold of most Irish people was the home with its parents (mostly mothers) and the schools with their teachers. It may well be that while the Irish are obviously unique when it comes to sexuality, the reason why this subject has been ignored by historians is that there is an absence of revealing historical records and archives. But it may equally well be that there was little will to find a way of revealing the secrets of Irish sexuality. It is as if the sense of shame and embarrassment about sex—talking and writing about sexual practices, feelings, and emotions—reached so deeply into the psyches of Irish academics, and particularly historians, that they were unable to raise, let alone deal, with such issues.

Despite the absence of any detailed history of Irish sexuality, it seems safe to argue that there have been dramatic shifts in sexual practices, values, beliefs, and attitudes in the last two hundred years. In the first part of this article I try to show how the sexuality that came to be embodied in Ireland in the nineteenth century was similar to that of the middle classes in Victorian Britain. What was different, however, was how long this Victorian regime lasted and how deeply it seeped into the minds and bodies of the Irish. Another difference was the absence, not just in the nineteenth century but also throughout most of the twentieth, of resistant discourses and subaltern voices.



The central argument of this article is that while sexual desire and pleasure are obviously rooted in the body and soul of the individual, they are also central to social order and social control. As we seek to understand the character of social control and how it was exercised in Ireland over the last two centuries, it is a mistake to concentrate on the state, the laws that were passed, or the way in which laws were enforced through policing. It is better to examine how ordinary individuals were supervised and controlled in families, schools, and communities. One of the primary mechanisms of everyday policing was the control of desire and pleasure, especially sexual desire and pleasure. Social order was maintained as long as individuals did not seek to satisfy their pleasures and desires—as long as they practiced self-denial. Over the last fifty years we have moved in Ireland from a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed, to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfilment of pleasures and desires is emphasized. While this shift reflects not so much sexual liberation as a transition from one sexual regime to another, the clash of cultures can produce insecurity and instability at the heart of ordinary everyday life, which can in turn have repercussions for the general way that people deal with desire and pleasure.

### **Irish Sexuality and Social Control**

The control of sex, sexual relations, and sexuality—especially the announcement and pursuit of sexual desire and pleasure—**have** been central to civilization, the civilizing process, and the creation and maintenance of power and social order. Following Sigmund Freud (1961 [1930]), Herbert Marcuse (1987), and Michel Foucault (1987), we can say that the way in which individual personality is constructed, and how individuals read, understand, and interpret themselves and the



world in which they live, are linked to the ethical regimes within which individuals limit, balance, and control sexual drives. Indeed, it is in this very process, through the way in which desire and pleasure are explored and controlled, that people constitute their personalities and souls and realize themselves as individuals. The realization of self takes place through the embodiment of existing norms about sex. This is part of the process through which we become the same as everyone else. But self-realization also occurs through being different, through challenging and resisting existing normative standards. Sexual transgression may be closely linked to the realization of self, but it can also constitute a fundamental challenge to civilization and the existing social order. This explains why, ever since sins began to be classified and tabulated, sins of the flesh—the announcement, revelation, and pursuit of sexual desire and pleasure—have been treated most severely.

While the control of sex, mainly through marriage, has always been seen as central to social order, what characterizes modernity, and particularly modern Ireland, is the way in which, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sex came to be studied and problematized—how it became regulated and inscribed in Irish souls and bodies (Foucault 1980; Inglis 1997).<sup>2</sup> This problematization of sex and its inscription on Irish bodies were closely linked to the development of the monopoly over morality exercised by the Catholic church (Inglis 1998a; 1998b). Foucault (1979:55) insists that there is always resistance to power. Consequently, despite the church's monopoly, we should be able to find challenges and resistances to its teachings and rules about sex. But resistances to power are mostly irregular, spontaneous, and solitary. It is only when these resistances become integrated and codified that they can form the basis of a revolution (Foucault 1980:96). Such a revolution did not begin until the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland. The long nineteenth century



of Irish Catholicism meant that not only did Catholic sexual attitudes penetrate more deeply and last longer, but that it is difficult to find any traces of resistance or challenge to the existing normative order. If there were challenges—any subaltern, alternative form of sexuality—they were, it seems, confined to personal experiences within the private sphere. It is not until the second half of the twentieth century that we begin to find traces of a new discourse, a new way of reading, writing, representing, and understanding sexuality that challenged existing Catholic discourse and conventions. Outside of James Joyce and a few other writers, most of whom were banned in Ireland, it would be hard to discover many traces in Irish literature revealing something about Irish sexuality outside the dominant discourses of religion and medicine. Effectively, it is not until the 1960s that we begin to see, first in literature and then in film, the emergence of alternative descriptions and images of Irish sexuality. Much of this resistance revolved around women and especially the rejection of the modest, chaste, virginal woman championed by the Catholic church and epitomized by the image of the Virgin Mary.

### **Victorian Prudery**

To understand Irish attitudes to sexuality it is necessary to place them within the wider context of Victorian attitudes to women, marriage, and the family. Victorians were accustomed to thinking of sex in terms of sexual emotions. Sex was about dark, primeval forces, anarchic and explosive instincts that knew no values, possessed no morality, and had no sense of good and evil. Unless it was controlled rigorously, sex would overthrow all the finer sensibilities. The progress from savagery to civilization depended on the subjugation of sex, not its release or aggrandizement.



For most Victorian women marriage was the only form of sexual salvation. Unmarried women who did not remain celibate became stigmatized as adulterers or were drawn into prostitution. Under the double standard men had sexual recourse to servants and prostitutes. Victorian attitudes toward sexuality have to be understood within the more long-term process of civilization—specifically, prevailing attitudes toward the control of basic urges and drives (see Wouters 1998; 1999). As Sir George Kitson Clark remarked, Victorian prudery was “the result of a struggle for order and decency on the part of a people just emerging from the animalism and brutality of primitive society” (1970:64). One of the main strategies for civilizing society was “to ban sex as far as possible from everyday life and to enlarge to its fullest extent the interpretation of the Sixth Commandment so that it brought social anathema and hell-fire not only on adultery but on all lewd thoughts and fumbings”(Crow 1972:25). Part of this strategy was to silence and ignore sex. Thus it was banned from sight and conversation. Sex moved from being frank, open, and honest, involving external constraints on the body and behavior, to being secretive, hidden, problematized, scientifically studied, and, at the same time, internally inscribed in the hearts, minds, and souls of men, women, and children.

The family home became the basis of civilized society (Gay 1998:18). Domestic bliss was central not just to one's happiness but also to the well-being of society. Adherence to religion in Protestant England, particularly through public worship, raised the social status and moral nature of women (Rowbotham 1989:68). Throughout the nineteenth century, not only did middle-class women become confined to the home, but they also became “household angels” and professional managers of emotions (Rowbotham 1989:52). Within marriage the woman was seen as the moral savior of her baser mate (see Trudgill 1976; Harrison 1977). In 1865, Dr.



William Acton described the perfect ideal English wife and mother as “kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible, so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant and averse to any sensual indulgence, but so unselfishly attracted to the man she loves as to be willing to give up her own wishes and feelings for his sake” (quoted in Nead 1988:19).

Women were held responsible for what took place during social encounters with the opposite sex (Rowbotham 1989). It was believed that by her very existence she offered a moral ideal to which men could aspire through the agency of love—to worship her was to renounce one's sinfulness and to ascend to a purer way of life. Thus the role of wife was transfigured, for upon her was bestowed the mystical identity of a priestess through whose selfless ministrations the altar of domesticity was supposed to be kept spotless; at the same time the virtue of self-sacrifice was venerated as the quintessence of femininity (Harrison 1977:42) Good women were expected to remain emotional and childlike. To become educated about the world, to use the brain rather than the heart, and to become rational, scientific, and logical were all viewed as acts of self-indulgence, wilfully unwomanly in ways that would sap women's qualities of self-sacrifice. Women were supposed to obtain their earthly pleasure from sacrificing themselves and subordinating their talents for the love of others, whether parents, siblings, or sweethearts (Rowbotham 1989:106,112,115).

Concentration by the individual of either sex on self was seen as presenting a danger to the welfare of society as a whole, and Christianity was useful in combating selfish tendencies through “its message of self-abnegation as the way to happiness on earth and afterwards” (Rowbotham 1989:57). But it was also the way to class distinction. To restrain oneself was part of the process of becoming bourgeois; through self-restraint a member of the middle classes distinguished himself or herself



from the lazy, arrogant, corrupt aristocracy at one end of the social scale and from the peasant and working class at the other. Being bourgeois was not just about lifestyle and manners; it was, as Peter Gay (1998:14) has said, “a cast of mind”—“a courtesy and self-restraint that the middle classes had trained themselves to make into second nature.” The essence of this self-restraint was resisting the pressure of physical or emotional drives and impulses. This is what gave the middle classes their air of refinement and respectability. It was this sense of distinction that prevented the middle classes from responding to their drives and impulses and from abandoning their emotional controls. But more important, this self-restraint, because it helped people to rise above the common level of bodily enjoyment, led to a greater depth of feeling and a more intense sense of pleasure (Gay 1998:20) Classical Victorian moralism spread upwards and downwards from the new bourgeoisie. It spread at the beginning of the nineteenth century through evangelical religious movements which demanded restraints on a whole range of pleasures, such as dancing, novel-reading, play-going, ornamental dress, and so forth. Among women there was a preoccupation with dress and deportment, and consequently with needlework and knitting. The social lives of most middle-class women consisted of letter-writing, reading, sketching, and drawing, and of exchanging calls, visits, and parties with friends of their own station in life (Perkin 1993:93,101). Again, this was all intrinsic to the process by which the bourgeoisie established itself as the new ruling class. But this lifestyle set an example and gradually influenced the lifestyle of many working-class women as well:

To be a respectable working-class woman meant not living a riotous life, not drinking or gambling or using bad language, not going in for rough sports and pastimes, and not getting into debt. Respectability meant having a good self-



image, dressing modestly, and keeping up reasonable appearances. The lives of these women seemed drab and colourless to outsiders unable to understand the satisfaction and sense of moral superiority it gave those who kept their distance from the roughs (Perkin 1993:111).

### **Irish Prudery**

The dissemination of Victorian sexual attitudes and practices in Ireland was a slow and uneven process. Beginning in the east (particularly in urban areas), motherhood became the ideal role for women, and the home became the ideal place for mothers to be. Dymphna McLoughlin (1994:266) suggests that there were three main characteristics of a respectable Irish woman: (1) an overwhelming desire to marry and to remain faithful, dependent, and subordinate; (2) an unquestioning readiness to regard the domestic sphere as her natural habitat and to engage in reproduction rather than production; and (3) a willingness to accept that women's sexuality was confined to marriage. These attitudes were adopted by a new class of substantial tenant farmers and their wives and daughters. Nevertheless, given the population explosion (from 2.2 to 8.2 million) that had taken place between 1754 and 1841, the primary mechanism for reducing fertility was the curtailment of marriage. This meant that after the Great Famine, among the new class of tenant farmers, only a minority of women could look forward to marriage and sex and thus to fulfilling the ideal role for women of becoming mothers. This led to an enormous cultural contradiction: the home and motherhood were promoted as the natural vocation for women, and yet most women were denied access to this role. This contradiction had a profound effect on Irish social and cultural life that was to last for generations. J.J. Lee (1978:39) has put the matter trenchantly:



It was therefore crucial to maintain the economic dominance of the new order that all thoughts of marriage in Ireland should be banished from minds of the majority of Irish youth. Temptation must not be placed in their way. Sex, therefore, must be denounced as a satanic snare, in even what had been its most innocent pre-famine manifestations. Sex posed a far more severe threat than the landlord to the security and status of the family. Boys and girls must be kept apart at all costs.

As the nineteenth century progressed, sex became increasingly problematic. It had to be watched, supervised, and suppressed. The economic strategy of a farmer intent on improving his standard of living could be ruined by the transgressive actions of his daughters. Consequently, girls from this class were continuously watched and subjected to gossip. This served as a primary mechanism of external sexual control (McLoughlin 1994:273).<sup>3</sup> The mechanism became inscribed as a problem in the minds and bodies of each new generation of boys and girls. The silencing, hiding, and denial of sex, the confinement of talk about sex to the confessional, significantly influenced the way in which men and women perceived and understood the world (Inglis 1998a:129-30). In other words, over the course of the nineteenth century external constraints on sexual behavior slowly became combined with internal self-control.

Within the families of this new class two things began to happen. The women fortunate enough to marry, even though they often married much later than their European counterparts, continued to have large families. High levels of marital fertility became a dominant feature of Irish demography and lasted up to the end of the twentieth century. This pattern constituted a contrast with the rest of Europe,



where levels of marital fertility had begun to decline a hundred years previously. Part of this Irish pattern may have been due to lack of knowledge and information about contraception, not to mention denial of access to it. But evidence from 1988 would indicate that, in comparison to other countries, Irish men and women still saw large families as ideal (Harding 1989).<sup>4</sup> This evidence suggests that most married women willingly subscribed to the concept of the ideal mother put forward by the Catholic church. More important in this regard may have been the fact that Irish women, particularly mothers, were dependent on the church for status and authority; consequently, they may have redoubled the influence of this image among each other (Inglis 1998). The result of having large families was that Irish mothers had to enforce the same strategies of sexual control on their daughters as had been enforced on them. They inculcated in their daughters the same notions of self-denial and self-sacrifice into which they had been acculturated.

There was therefore a strong similarity with what was happening in Britain. But what we do not find in nineteenth-century Ireland, at least not to the same extent, is the type of movements to be found in Britain for women's rights and greater equality between the sexes—what Brian Harrison (1977:64) has described as the first wave of feminism. This revolved around a move toward greater property rights for married women, and gender equality gradually became enshrined in British law. But it was also reflected in a demand for greater control of fertility. In 1878, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh won the right to publish books on contraception. In the same year they published *The Fruits of Knowledge*, which reportedly sold 235,000 copies in three years. What was unusual about Mrs. Besant was that she was a married woman offering advice to other women about the best way to avoid becoming pregnant before and after intercourse (Harrison 1977:187). The availability of relatively cheap



information about contraception and birth control changed the power balance and the relationship between the sexes, particularly among the middle and higher classes. In breaking the link between sexual intercourse and childbirth, birth control removed the fear surrounding sex and allowed for greater pleasure and intimacy. Married women were no longer faced with the choice of being cold and frigid or warm and pregnant. The birth rate fell continuously from 1871 to 1900, but the biggest drops were recorded among the middle and professional classes, whose average family sizes decreased from seven or eight to two or three children. Increased legal rights, combined with control over their fertility, meant that more women were able to become employed in jobs previously limited to men (Harrison (1977:67).

We do not find in Ireland the same argument for sexual expression (Mason, 1994). Marie Stopes declared that her purpose in writing *Married Love* (1918) was to write “a book on marriage and sex that would teach a man and a woman how to understand each other's sexual problems” (Harrison, 1977:51). The book sold two thousand copies in the first fortnight. As Harrison points out, maintaining ignorance about sex was central to limiting and controlling pleasure, and this in turn was crucial in maintaining power over women or patriarchy.

Similarly, in the field of painting we do not find in Ireland the type of sexualized nudes that Frederic Leighton was painting in England in the 1860s and 1870s (Harrison 1977:77-88). Nor do we find in Ireland the type of erotic photographs of naked children produced by Lewis Carroll and Julia Cameron in the mid-nineteenth century (Mavor, 1995). There were no magazines like *Town*, which provided frank titillation and advice to the man-about-town, or like the *Saturday Review*, which, though calling for self-restraint, had a liberal attitude toward prostitution (Mason 1994:55-59).



In Irish literature Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* ([1780] 2005) written at the end of the eighteenth century, stands out as a subaltern voice born to blush unheard for generations. For the next one hundred and fifty years there was a dearth of sexually transgressive writing. Certainly, we do not find the type of pornographic literature that emerged in Britain (Marcus 1974:197-241). Nor is there any kind of autobiographical or diary writing to compare with the eleven volumes of *My Secret Life* (Marcus 1974:76-196). Again, as an exception, one might point to the diaries of Roger Casement, but they were confined to the private sphere, and in any case, like many other transgressives, Casement could be dismissed as not being representative; he was a member of the emigrant Irish Protestant ascendancy (Casement 1977).

There were of course alternatives to the ideal of the domestic angel and the chaste mother. A small but significant number of women became involved in social and political life. Many women became nuns, with some, like Mary Aikenhead, Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley, and Teresa Ball, establishing and running their own major religious orders (Fahey 1987:10). But nuns were exemplars rather than challengers of the culture of self-denial. What is missing from the beginning of the nineteenth century in Ireland is any account in literature of transgressive sexual pleasures, desires, and practices. What evidence is there of alternative writing, debates, and practices? Which women, or indeed men, broke the increasingly strict social conventions on sexuality?<sup>5</sup>

What is remarkable in Ireland is that although women played a crucial role in the struggle for independence, once this was gained, the new Free State began to pass legislation that helped to confine women to the home. Indeed, as Maryann Valuilis (1995) points out, in 1932, Eamon de Valera eulogized the quiet, modest, self-



sacrificing role played by Margaret Pearse. Like the Virgin Mary, she too had to hold the bodies of her dead revolutionary sons Padraic and William, who had sacrificed their lives for Ireland, Gaelic culture, and Gaelic tradition. Mary Condren argues that in allowing themselves to become confined to the domestic sphere and imbued with the rhetoric and ideology of self-sacrifice, Irish women confused their own self-interest with the national interest: “Not taking responsibility for, or having any clear articulation of, their erotic or other needs, they can then be exploited in the service of the war machine, preventing the international bonding and cooperation of women on terms that would genuinely support their self-interest as generators and sustainers of the human race and defenders of human life” (1995:178-79). By 1937 women’s political, economic, and reproductive rights had been so severely curtailed that women were explicitly barred from claiming for themselves a public identity (Valiulis, 1995:120).

### **Differences and Residues**

The inculcation of Victorian prudery throughout Irish society was not a universal or homogeneous process. It was a strategy of a new class of tenant farmers that emerged in the social space between the peasantry and the Protestant ascendancy class. The notion that Ireland was a country of virtuous virgins, chaste mothers, and abstemious fathers was mythical. But the myth became central to the dominant ideology of the new class, and this “imagined community” served to perpetuate the interests of its members. There were, however, major residues, differences, and transgressions. There is evidence of a substantial level of extramarital sex. In 1870, for example, 3,255 women were arrested for prostitution. There were other informal practices where women became gentlemen's mistresses in return for economic and



social rewards.<sup>6</sup> Most of the sexual alliances that took place among the poorest ranks of society were “irregular unions” that resulted from marriages conducted by “couple beggars” that were not recognized by church or state (McLoughlin 1994:270).

The sexual relations that took place outside of marriage were not transgressions of the new normative pattern. They were residues of a former era. Sex, sexual expression, and sexual relations began to be policed. Even in prefamine Ireland there was an extreme intolerance toward sexual misdemeanors (Connolly 1982:213). The successful policing of sex necessitated close supervision and control of desire, drives, urges, emotions, and passions. The quest for control involved more than gossiping. It meant instituting separations and divisions between the sexes. It also meant eliminating temptations and what the church termed “occasions of sin.” Any place where men and women met socially became problematic, especially if there was dancing and heavy drinking. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the church had tried to control drinking, above all at funerals and wakes. It was not until the temperance movement of Father Theobald Matthew in the 1830s and 1840s that teetotalism came to the forefront of Irish political and social life (Kerrigan 1992; Malcolm 1986:101-50). But in comparison to its campaign against sexual immorality, the attempt of the Catholic church to control drinking never really succeeded (Connolly 1982:176,277). It would seem that the occasions for drinking (at fairs, markets, and the pub), along with drinking itself, became mainly a male phenomenon. Indeed, there could have been a symbiotic relationship between men drinking on their own and a subliminal displacement of repressed sexual drives and passions (Inglis 1998a:170-75). This would help to explain why it is that while the drunk is a stereotypical and well-represented character in Irish literature and film, the wanton



woman, the whore, the lesbian, the pornographer, the homosexual, the pervert, and in general the sexual transgressor are usually absent.

The lack of a discourse about transgressive pleasure and desire is linked to the more general absence of a discourse about self, pleasure, and enjoyment. Throughout the nineteenth century a concerted effort was made to curtail public festivities which were associated with drinking and lack of self-control. Church and state united in the campaign to eliminate public representations of ribaldry.<sup>7</sup> According to Michel Peillon (1982:39, 47), festivities can be characterized as special, intense times in which normal rules of economy and temperance no longer apply. Ordinary constraints break down and rules are often transgressed. So successful was the curbing of public festivity that Peillon could claim in 1982 that “no festivity in Ireland seems to threaten, even in a temporal and ritual way, the canons of morality” (1982:46) There was no systematic disorder or reversal of rules, no transgression of regulations, and no plunge into anomie. The only possible example that Peillon could think of where any of these characteristics came into play was student ragweeks.<sup>8</sup>

The realization of self through pleasure and enjoyment was not so much eliminated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland as it was reconstituted. It appears that along with the curbing of public festivity, fun, and enjoyment, there was a private renunciation and denunciation. At a time of increasing literacy and education, when there were inevitably greater demands to discuss, explain, and represent oneself, there was a marked absence of people writing about their desires and pleasures. Yet the question remains about the discourse and practice of pleasure. Who wrote about pleasures, what pleasures were taken, and how were they integrated into family and social life? How, in other words, was pleasure constituted in a culture which became dominated by a Catholic Victorian discourse of self-denial?



Catholic Ireland was not unique when it came to sexual prudery. It was part of a Victorian mentality that had also spread through Protestant Britain and America. What made Ireland unique was how deeply Victorian attitudes and practices penetrated into the Irish body and soul. Also distinctive, in comparison to Britain and America, were how long these attitudes and practices lasted, and how this antisexual regime was linked to the absence of discourses and conduct that challenged or resisted the dominant obsession with purity. The obsession with sexual purity was connected to both cultural and material interests: to an attempt by Catholics to attain a symbolic victory over their Protestant English colonizers by demonstrating their moral superiority. At a more material level the inculcation of sexual purity was about maintaining a decent standard of living from farming through the enforcement of strict norms regulating inheritance. It was because these struggles for symbolic and economic power took place in and through the Catholic church that this particular institution developed a monopoly position in the fields of family life, health, education, and social welfare.

It is important to realize, following Foucault (1980), that sexuality was not eliminated from Irish culture and society. The opposite was true. Sexuality constituted itself as a major social problem. The curtailment of marriage inevitably made sex and sexual relationships full of difficulty. It necessitated increased vigilance for sins against purity, and chastity had to be imposed on Irish bodies. This central objective was achieved primarily through greater adherence to the teachings and practices of the Catholic church. But it was not always a repression of the unwilling. There were many who willingly embraced a life of sexual purity. The denial and silencing of sex was part of a wider cultural program of denying and sacrificing the self. Within this cultural program the rejection of enjoyment, pleasure, and desire obtained enormous



cultural purchase (**kudos**). The control and denial of sex was at the center of a broader cultural pattern of formal demands for self-control. This rigorous and censorious regime necessitated the supervisory eyes of priests, nuns, brothers, teachers, and parents. It problematized not just the pursuit of pleasure (particularly drinking and sex) but also and more fundamentally the expression of self. Referring to and talking about oneself, especially one's pleasures and desires, was closely monitored and censored. In Irish society generally, there was a concerted attempt to limit and control pattern days, festivals, and carnivals. But the culture of self-denial, the rhetoric and practice of foregoing pleasure, ran deeper among women than among men. This difference may help to explain why, since the 1950s, there has been a movement in Irish film and literature to constitute Irish women not just as sexually liberal and adventurous, but as rebellious against the Catholic morality that had dominated their lives for so long.

### **Transgressive Representations and Enactments**

The stereotypical image of a good Irish woman was, as Luke Gibbons (1996:108) has argued, a silent emulation of Mary, the virgin mother. She had the virtues of loyalty and forbearance and “an unlimited capacity to endure suffering.” Irish women were represented as mutually supportive, silent, resigned, and passive, as not participating in the male world, particularly in politics and the struggle for power (1996:116). Women were seen as the weaker sex and not proactive in seeking sexual pleasure. They were romantic rather than sexual—passive, submissive receivers of powerful male sexual urges. But there were challenges and resistances to these stereotypical images. Gibbons has written about how there was a transformation in the representation of women by directors such as Pat Murphy. In *Anne Devlin* the lead



character becomes embroiled in the 1798 rebellion. In *Maeve* the lead character releases her desire and takes pleasure in sex and her sexuality (Gibbons, 1996:123). She enjoys being totally contradictory in relation to the traditional stereotypes.

There have been other representations of Irish female transgressors. In John McGahern's *My Love, My Umbrella*, it is the female character who remains in control (Marcus, 1996:89-100). On her first date with the man who tells the story, she returns with him to his lodgings. But he loses his nerve and tells her that it is too risky for her to come in. It is raining. They go under some trees behind a church, and while she holds his umbrella, he undresses her, makes love, and then dresses her again. She is a virgin. They make love again, in the same place, under the same umbrella. Finally, she tells him that she does not love him and leaves him. The woman is sexually proactive and in control. The man is a passive receiver. In another McGahern story, *Like All Other Men*, Susan is a nurse from Kerry (Marcus 1996:33-42). She meets Michael, a teacher, at a dance. Afterward, having kissed him unsatisfactorily in a doorway, she suggests going to a hotel for the night. She insists on paying her own way. They go to the bedroom. She wants the light left on while they make love. Before going to bed, she tells him that she had slept with one other man. He admits to being a virgin. Later, he tells her that he had trained for the priesthood before becoming a teacher. Before leaving him, she tells him that she is going to join an order of nuns in a couple of days.

In Frank O'Connor's *News for the Church* a nineteen-year-old girl confidently and unashamedly tells a priest about how she made love with her sister's former boyfriend on the previous night (Marcus 1996:42-50). The priest, initially embarrassed and taken aback, begins to ask her intimate questions about the nature of their sexual activity. But she is able to conceal her own embarrassment and to answer



his questions courageously and straightforwardly. She is confident, and in the end it is the priest who feels jealous and sexually shamed. In Ronan Sheehan's *A Church and a Modern World* a priest leaves Paul, an altar boy, in charge of the music at a parish social event (Marcus 1996:251-5). Mary approaches him and pulls him out onto the dance floor. She places her hands first on his hips, then around his back, and then she kisses him fully and hard, forcing her tongue into his mouth. Again, the male character Paul is the awkward, embarrassed, passive receptor of these female advances and is unable to respond, except to think of praying to Our Lady.

These stories are attempts to reconstruct a stereotypical image of the young Irish woman. She is no longer the passive, virginal, pious, humble, shy colleen. She lives closer to the edge, resisting and challenging the images and representations of the ideal woman. Though we can trace female transgressors and resisters in Irish literature, and though we can identify a subaltern type of female, we have to ask how common they were in everyday life. What is remarkable about these representations of female sexual transgression is that most were produced during the second half of the twentieth century. It is difficult to find descriptions of female sexual transgressors in Irish literature prior to 1950. The absence of depictions of sexual transgression reflects the strict moral censorship imposed by church and state until the late 1960s. Even more clearly, it reflects the harsh reality of the incarceration of female sexual transgressors (or those so designated by the authorities) in mental asylums and Magdalen homes for “fallen women,” some of whom, once admitted, remained there for the rest of their lives. The stereotypical image of the shy Irish colleen, silent about herself and her emotional needs, reflects a historical reality in which there was a strict silence imposed on sex and sexuality in general and on female sexuality in particular.



There were of course exceptions. Yet when these are examined, they emerge from an exotic urban, literary, and intellectual class, many of whose members were Anglo-Irish, and many of whom had emigrated. It is no coincidence that when it comes to Irish sexual transgression, the names that stand out above the rest are James Joyce and Oscar Wilde. Another great literary exception was the actor and theatre producer Micheál MacLiammóir. But as Éibhear Walshe suggests, he was the exception that proved the rule:

In a state where homosexual acts were criminalised until 1993, and the homoerotic was censored and expunged from all official literary and cultural discourse, MacLiammoir and his partner Edwards survived, and even flourished, as Ireland's only visible gay couple. A strikingly handsome man in his youth, MacLiammoir maintained his looks into old age, Dorian-like, with the aid of paint and powder, and, theatrical, vivid, contrived **[Editorial question: Is there anything missing in connection with the three previous adjectives?]** NO, his face and figure were a familiar and popular sight on the streets of Dublin. This was no mean achievement within a culture where in 1941 Kate O'Brien, MacLiammoir's friend and contemporary, had an entire novel banned for one homoerotic sentence. When MacLiammoir died in 1978, the president of Ireland attended his funeral, as did the taoiseach and several government ministers, while Hilton Edwards was openly deferred to and sympathised [with] as chief mourner (1997:150–51).

But it may well be that MacLiammóir and Edwards were subaltern figures whose transgressive conduct could be overlooked. Since they were part of an esoteric, artistic, and urban literary élite, they did not pose a threat to the Catholic church's



monopoly over morality. They remained an exotic “other” who did not belong to the realm of Catholic Ireland. When it came to mainstream popular culture, however, the level of censorship, both formal and informal, was such that even the mildest suggestion of or allusion to sexual transgression encountered a rhetoric of shock, horror, and outrage. It must be remembered that when the initial list of banned books was produced in 1930, no Irish authors were included (Woodman, 1985:59). Moreover, as Adams (1968:64) points out, censorship was not a major social or political issue in the 1930s. It was a serious concern only within certain sections of the artistic and literary professions.<sup>9</sup> For example, a motion in the Senate in 1942 proposing that the Censorship of Publications Board had lost the confidence of the people was defeated by a vote of 32-2.

Subaltern writings on sex and sexuality reveal the other side of the face of Catholic Ireland. And yet at the same time, in the way that sexuality is written and not written about, such works are like a sample of skin; they are a micro-representation of a macro-culture of silence, denial, and secrecy. In order to understand this subaltern discourse, we need to reexamine the dominant discourse and to discover how and why discussions and portrayals of sex were, with some exceptions, confined to the religious field.

### **Challenges and Resistances**

Feminism grew steadily from the 1970s. The Irish women’s movement campaigned vigorously for a change in the laws banning artificial contraception (a significant start was made in 1979). The ban on married women working in the civil service was lifted in 1974. The number of married women in the labor force increased dramatically from 7.5 percent in the early 1970s to 41 percent by 1996 (O’Connor,



1998:193). [Editorial note: There was a quantum leap in the 1990s. I deleted “steadily.”] But in terms of a striking departure from Victorian ideals, the largest transformation was in the proportion of births outside marriage, which rose from 5 percent in 1980 to as much as 33 percent in 1999 (Inglis 1998b:12).

There has been concerted resistance to the forces of sexual liberation, evident in the opposition to the *Relationships and Sexuality Education* program that the state introduced into schools in the late 1990s (Inglis 1998b). Much of this opposition is founded on a rejection of liberal individualism in general; opponents commonly object to moving children away from being taught basic family values, toward being helped and encouraged instead to develop their own critically reflective positions on moral issues. The conflict over liberal individualism can be seen as emerging from a more general, long-term shift from a culture of self-denial to a culture of self-expression and self-indulgence. It is this transition after 1950 away from a homogeneous and almost absolute Catholic moral hegemony which has moved Ireland to becoming an unsettled culture (Swidler 1986). From the 1960s onward, sex and sexuality began to be perceived, understood, and embodied in radically different ways. Even so, there are relatively few women who have become famous representatives of the new, sexually liberated Irish woman. Instead, some women have become infamous for having transgressed traditional conventions. The American woman Annie Murphy had an affair with Bishop Eamon Casey of Galway, became pregnant, gave birth to a baby boy, and reared him on her own in the United States. Anne Lovett was a schoolgirl who became pregnant and died after giving birth to a baby at a grotto to Our Lady in her local town. Eileen Flynn lost her job as a schoolteacher because she had an affair and a child with a married man. Notoriously, Joanne Hayes also had an affair with a married man, gave birth to a daughter, and



then became the center of a public tribunal of inquiry into what became known as “the case of the Kerry babies.” This investigation focused on how it was that she and members of her family confessed to involvement in the murder and concealment of a newborn baby—a crime that the tribunal concluded they did not commit (Inglis, 2003). The fates of these women stand in stark contrast to the representations of transgressive women found in literature and film, where they are not punished but represented instead as strong characters.

Geraldine Meany (1991:7) suggests that the treatment of transgressive women is linked to the obsession of the Catholic church and the Irish state with controlling women’s bodies. She argues that, as in other postcolonial societies, the oppression of women’s sexuality has to be understood within the context of the struggle for national identity. In Ireland this battle essentially became a male-dominated affair. Meany contends that this struggle gave rise to anxieties about male power. These anxieties were assuaged by the assumption of male sexual dominance and the oppression of women. While this theory needs to be explored and tested, there is some convincing evidence that during the unsettled culture of late twentieth-century Ireland, particularly during the economic recession of the 1980s, women like Joanne Hayes may have been easy scapegoats for men who believed that there was a breakdown in the moral order of society.

## **Conclusion**

If economic activity is a major determinant of what happens in social, political, and cultural life, then we can say with confidence that Ireland experienced rapid social change after 1960 and especially during the 1990s. This led to a fragmentation of the monopoly previously exercised by the Catholic church over



morality in general and sexual morality in particular. The development of education, the growth of the media, and the gradual easing of censorship facilitated the emergence of resistant discourses about sex, the fulfilment of desire, and the pursuit of pleasure. These discourses challenged the traditional representation of Irish women as essentially humble, pious, self-sacrificing, “natural-born” mothers. Nevertheless, in spite of a revisionist representation of women in Irish literature and film, the number of living exemplars of female sexual liberation who have resisted and challenged traditional Catholic conceptions of selfhood has been relatively small. While there are numerous groups and organizations campaigning for women’s rights, especially in relation to fertility control, outside of women’s magazines there has been no social movement concentrating on the emancipation of women’s desire and sexuality. This situation stands in contrast to the significant number of women who have suffered public humiliation and occasionally death as a result of their sexual transgressions, actual and perceived.

The absence of sexual transgression and of a discourse about sexual pleasure and desire can be traced back to Victorian discourses and practices that became prominent in Britain and America in the nineteenth century. But in contrast to the experience of these countries, Victorian prudery penetrated more deeply into Irish social and personal life and lasted far longer. There was little or no transgression or organized opposition to prudery in Ireland. It is not until the second half of the twentieth century that we can find transgressive representations of sexuality and campaigns for greater sexual freedom—in some cases almost a century later than in Britain and America. The overriding reason why Victorian prudery lasted so long, ran so deep, and encountered so little opposition was that it meshed so closely with the



teachings of the Catholic church, which in turn became an essential link in the initial modernization of Irish society.

During the last half of the twentieth century Ireland became unsettled culturally, particularly in relation to sexuality, pleasure, and desire. As in Victorian Britain a hundred years previously, women were classified, represented, and constituted either as domestic angels or as exotic, desirable, wanton women. Sexually transgressive women may have been celebrated in film and literature, but in real life public transgressors were shamed and castigated. It may well be that most of the opprobrium is reserved not so much for women who transgress sexually, but for those who violate traditional notions of motherhood. This is because their violation is sacrilegious—an attack on “mother church” and “mother Ireland” (Innes, 1993:26-42). Perhaps there is a fear among men that unless these women are put down, they will rise up and destroy them (Keane, 1988).

Sexual resistance and transgression in the Republic of Ireland has emerged more from popular culture (including both discourse and practice) than it has from interest groups and intellectuals. What was once hidden, silenced, and discouraged is now openly portrayed, discussed, and encouraged (Inglis 1998c). In the numerous sex and erotica shops in Irish cities there are videos, books, clothes, and accessories that encourage and enable people to fulfil their sexual pleasures and desires. The types of adult magazines on sale in the shops of local newsagents throughout the country suggest that sexuality and eroticism have moved out from behind closed doors—from the private, darker, subaltern side of Irish life into the realm of behavior that is increasingly acknowledged, if not accepted. This development can be seen as part of increased sexual openness in Western society generally, where there is greater public acceptance of the notion that indulgence in private sexual pleasures is part of the



overall right to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. What people watch on their televisions, download from the Internet, read in books, and wear in bed are increasingly seen as being within the realm of permissible personal preferences and private pleasures. Throughout Western society there is progressive decontrol of the restrictions placed on sex. An overall process of “informalization” is occurring; strict formal external constraints on sex are being replaced by more informal patterns of self-control (Wouters, 1986, 1998, 1999). In Ireland the rules on sexual morality are being rewritten. What used to be regarded as major transgressions—premarital sex and pregnancy outside of marriage—are now commonplace (Inglis, 1998b:12).

It is important to realize that the shift from external to internal constraints in sexual matters does not mean that individuals or society are becoming less ethical. Rather, the process of becoming sexualized involves operating within a new form of discipline; it entails achieving selfhood within a new ethical regime in which pleasures are announced, pursued, and balanced among often competing social demands, expectations, and responsibilities (Foucault, 1987). But just as in the old regime, so too in the new, there are transgressions and transgressors. In the old regime the greatest scorn and punishment was reserved for the single woman who became pregnant outside of marriage and for the unmarried mother who failed to hide her shame. And it was the Catholic church, through its teachings, censures, and prohibitions enacted by priests, nuns, and brothers, that orchestrated this regime. The new regime is orchestrated by the media, and the greatest transgressors are those priests and religious brothers who have molested and abused young children. But the hunting down of such priests is part of a wider process of demonizing those who earlier sought to deny sexual pleasure. In the new regime the demand and the



common expectation is to be sexually active, to be able to announce one's desires and seek one's pleasures.

Irish culture is going through an unsettled period, caught as it is between the Catholic morality on which modern Ireland was founded in the nineteenth century and a sexual/moral revolution that has been taking place throughout Western society. This revolution is centered on greater equality between the sexes, increased personal freedom, and enhanced informality of conduct (Wouters, 1998); in intimate relationships a transition is in progress to what Seidman (1991:4) has termed an “eroticisation of sex and a sexualisation of love.”<sup>10</sup> In Ireland the revolution has led to women challenging the traditional Catholic image of themselves—an image which, Meany argues, had rendered them “unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual, and complex ordinary mortals and instead [had forced them to] cling to a fantasy of women as simple handmaidens of the Lord” (1991:5). But the revolution is far from complete. Sex and sexuality are still seen as problems rather than pleasures. There is little public debate about or advocacy of the importance of fulfilling desire and pursuing sexual pleasure. **[Editorial comment: You seem to contradict this statement in the second sentence of the next paragraph.]** And there is still a double standard in Ireland. Sexually transgressive women are more likely to be pilloried and demonized than men who violate accepted norms. When it comes to balancing romance and lust, it is still expected that Irish women will be romantic and men lustful (Wouters, 1998). The lack of public debate about these issues may be linked to the absence of interest groups and of transgressive writing about sexuality, especially in academia. Whereas in Britain and America opposition to Victorian prudery emerged as soon as it became dominant, the crucial role of the



Catholic church in the modernization of Irish society meant that Victorian morality remained dominant in Ireland until late in the twentieth century.

The transition from the old to the new regime has not been easy. Ireland is, in the terms of Ann Swidler (1986), an “unsettled culture” in which there is deep ideological conflict about sex and sexuality. **Anything having to do with sex is usually cast as a social problem, hotly debated and discussed in the public sphere.** This is readily evident in the struggle between interest groups for and against sex education in the schools (Inglis 1998b). This ideological conflict is partly reflected in the struggle that many people experience in realizing themselves as ethical individuals. Especially for women in rural Ireland, the attempt to fulfil sexual desires and pleasures can still be an awkward, shameful, and embarrassing experience. The Victorian notion that women are not interested in sex or in exploring their sexuality may no longer be accepted, but many women still find it difficult to watch erotic material, to initiate rather than respond to sexual advances, and, most of all, to propose sex to men. On the other hand, it would appear that there is a new generation of highly sexualized young women in Ireland who know what they want and have no difficulty in obtaining it.

Footnotes [just ten of them]

1. Roy Foster, for example, makes little or no reference to sexual culture or identity in the twentieth century. Yet in commenting on rural outrages in the years 1879–82, he notes (1988: 408) that “violent nocturnal group behaviour seems linked to *machismo* and sexual frustration”—a correlation which may well be true of contemporary Irish society. On the other hand, J.J. Lee, who



has even fewer references to sex and sexuality, notes that in the twentieth century there was a “preoccupation with sex” which was associated with “the virtual equation of immorality with sexual immorality” (Lee 1989: 645). More recently, Diarmaid Ferriter (2004:518), using a variety of unusual sources, has drawn attention to how Irish sexuality was wrapped in veils of innocence and ignorance up to the 1950s. Since then, while sexual attitudes and practices have become more liberal, conflicts and contradictions still occurred in the way that society dealt with births outside marriage, unsafe sex, contraception, abortion, and child sexual abuse (2004:712-18). Nevertheless, what Ferriter’s history reveals is how little we know about the sexual lives and practices of Irish people in the twentieth century.

2. Michel Foucault (1980:105–06) saw sexuality as a historical construct revolving around “the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, [and] the strengthening of controls and resistances” that become linked to one another through a “few major strategies of knowledge and power.”
3. Dymphna McLoughlin (1994:273) adds: “In this sense sexual prudery in nineteenth-century Ireland had little to do with the church and all to do with the economics of the emerging middle class.” But this is to separate two interests—the religious and the economic—which in practice had a very symbiotic relationship. The church became a primary mechanism for problematizing sex, for inculcating prudery, and for supervising behavior, all of which were in the economic interests of the new class.
4. Results from the International Social Survey Programme showed that 51 percent of Irish respondents thought that to have four or more children was



ideal; the Irish result on this question contrasted with 3.5 percent in Britain, 4 percent in Hungary, 5 percent in West Germany, and 19 percent in the USA (Harding 1989:149).

5. There is some scant evidence of transgression. Angela Bourke argues that Bridget Cleary broke the traditional mold of rural women in late nineteenth-century Ireland by accumulating economic and sexual power—the latter owing to a reputation for having had an extramarital affair. She was burned to death by her husband Michael in 1895 perhaps out of jealousy, but he claimed throughout the episode that his wife was a changeling—a look-alike left by fairies who had stolen the original person (Bourke, 1999:85,136).
6. Dymphna McLoughlin (1994:269) provides evidence of what was known as a “gentleman's miss,” which she defines as “a woman of lower socio-economic rank who was prepared to sell her sexual favours to a gentleman on her own terms.”
7. An example of this was the gradual elimination of the Donnybrook fair in the nineteenth century. Seamus O’Maitiú (1995:13) argues that this was a pleasure fair that functioned as a carnival of drink, sex, and mock violence. It was estimated that there were almost 1,300 fairs held annually throughout Ireland. In 1858, in association with pressure from the churches and zealous reformers, the state began to introduce legislation to regulate these fairs (O’Maitiú 1995:51).
8. Michel Peillon (2000:135) points out how things have changed in recent years, and remarks that fiesta, carnival, and “craic” now constitute the celebratory mode of an assertive and confident Ireland.



9. *Ireland To-day* (1937–38) included articles by Seán O'Faoláin which were highly critical of censorship and the power of priests in Irish society. Later, *The Bell*, edited by O'Faoláin, also contained attacks on censorship (Woodman 1985:68-86).
10. Wouters (1998:201-02) argues that in the 1990s there has been a revival of both lust and romance. He links this development to a more careful, sensitive, and subtle relationship between the sexes. Men have learned to connect sexual gratification with relational gratification, and women have become more open to sex, to having sex more often, and to discussing sex. This change has been associated with a decrease in the **balance of power** between men and women [Editorial question: What kind of contrast?] and an increase in the varieties of gender relationships.

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