

2012-2

Irish Sexuality in the 1960s and 70s

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus>

Recommended Citation

Maher, E., (2012) "Irish Sexuality in the 1960s and 70s". *Doctrine and Life*, vol. 62, No. 2, (February), pp.48-56.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

Irish Sexuality during the 1960s and 70s

EAMON MAHER

FOR SOMEONE like myself, who grew up in the Ireland of the 1960s and 70s, the name Angela Macnama is synonymous with the *Sunday Press* agony aunt column for which she had responsibility during those two decades. She was also a regular on *The Late Late Show* and other radio and television programmes at the time.

Paul Ryan, a lecturer in sociology at NUI Maynooth, has written a book entitled *Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives* (Irish Academic Press). The inclusion of her name in the title demonstrates the degree to which Macnamara's column, published in the 18 years between 1963 and 1980, became a kind of sounding board for people who were encountering problems with relationships and sexuality and had limited opportunities for discussing such matters in the sometimes closed and repressive environment in which they lived. Ryan analyses 645 letters and replies published in the *Sunday Press*, which he supplements with life history interviews with men who read the column, with a view to gauging the *Zeitgeist* of two decades which witnessed a spectacular paradigm shift, especially in Irish attitudes to sex.

The book begins with a discussion of how in 2009, having been diagnosed with bowel cancer, the author had difficulty sharing the distressing news with his family and people he was close to. He uses this example as a means of emphasising how difficult it can be to 'communicate the most intimate part of our lives to those we hold dearest'.¹ Ryan

1. Paul Ryan, *Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), p. 1. Henceforth I will simply supply the page number in parentheses for quotes taken from the text.

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in the Institute of Technology Tallaght and the co-editor, with John Littleton, of a number of books on Irish Catholicism.

marvelled at how some people can speak freely about their emotions and share their most private thoughts with almost anyone they meet. He also began to wonder about certain stereotypes, particularly the one that portrays Irish men 'as unemotional, unromantic and lacking intimacy within society' (p. 2), a view that was prevalent in the letters written by women that appeared in Angela Macnamara's column. Ryan's methodology is to contrast this view with the recollections of certain Irish older males which, he argues, present a rather different picture than the one painted in the letters.

A DECADE OF CHALLENGE

While the book revolves around Macnamara and her attempts to encourage a more open discussion about sexuality in the Irish public arena, it also deals with a society in evolution. The authority of the Catholic Church over the private lives of Irish men and women was being openly challenged before the 1960s, but the 60s was the decade when it manifested itself most obviously.

This was due to a number of factors such as greater access to education; the increased availability of the motor car which allowed more and more people to visit the dance halls that sprung up all over Ireland and to avail of the opportunities for sexual encounters they provided; the arrival of the television into so many Irish homes showing programmes where a more liberal view of sexuality was in evidence than was normal in Ireland at that time. (It has to be said that some of the home-grown Irish soaps like *Tolka Row*, *The Riordans*, *Bracken* and *Glenroe* were similarly quite daring when it came to portraying the communication and sexual difficulties that arose between men and women.)

ALONG CAME HUMANAE VITAE

In Ryan's view, Macnamara's sincerely held religious views had a definite impact on the way she reacted to her correspondents' dilemmas:

Angela Macnamara struggled to refute alternative explanations of moral issues such as contraception, masturbation and homosexuality and to restate the Church's position. This became increasingly difficult after the publication in 1968 of *Humanae Vitae*, which confirmed the Church's opposition to contraception and, in the

process, alienated moderate Catholics who now questioned this jurisdiction over their sexual lives (p. 5).

She wasn't alone in this regard: several priests also found it painful to trot out the party line in relation to *Humanae Vitae*, which, in Louise Fuller's view, 'represented a crisis of authority for the Church. While theologians had disagreed about many issues in the post-conciliar era, this was different. It went to the very core of people's lives. *Humanae Vitae* was a watershed. Things would never be quite the same after it.'² She cites the example of the theologian, Fr Denis O'Callaghan, who in a number of articles published in Catholic journals, adopted a balanced and open attitude to the encyclical, something that did not endear him to Archbishop John Charles McCQuaid and other Irish bishops. But for priests working on the ground, there was much soul-searching about the best advice they should offer women on this thorny issue.

In fairness to Angela Macnamara, she was put in a difficult spot when asked by correspondents about the Church's ban on all forms of artificial contraception in that she knew first hand that such a ban often had a deleterious effect on the physical and material wellbe-

ing of women. It must have been difficult for her also to read about so many marriages where the communication between husbands and wives was problematic and the sex unsatisfying. When one factors in the pressures caused by financial

A large number of married women felt overwhelmed, misunderstood and un-cherished.

worries and the birth of numerous children in quick succession, one can see how a large number of married women felt overwhelmed, misunderstood and un-cherished. Many couples entered marriage with little or no knowledge of sex and had as little chance of receiving any worthwhile advice on the subject. The Church's teaching was quite rigid when it came to sexuality and this helped instil an unhealthy attitude to the body, which was invariably associated with sin. Passionate kissing was strongly discouraged and within marriage abstinence was often the only option for those couples trying to avoid conception.

2. Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p. 199.

THE WITNESS OF JOHN MCGAHERN

The late John McGahern expressed on numerous occasions his belief that if there was one thing injurious about the Church in Ireland, it was its attitude to sex, which in his view made the already difficult relationship between men and women even more problematic. In spite of this, there were times when Irish men and women broke free from the constraints of society and followed their natural inclinations. In spite of the Catholic Church's dominance in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, there were nevertheless plenty of people prepared to kick against the system.

Witness the local businessman Patsy Conboy, described in McGahern's *Memoir*, who ran a local dance hall to which he brought some of the best dance bands of the time. In spite of being denounced on several occasions from the pulpit, Patsy kept the ballroom open and in the process became something of a local hero. During the summer, it was claimed that there wasn't a haycock safe for a mile around the ballroom, as couples went out to get some fresh air or to view the moon. On one occasion, a man came to Patsy looking for a job with a letter from the priest saying that he had a large family to support and needed the work. Patsy's advice was that the man should 'put a cap on that oil well of yours', which would assist him in not bringing any more children into the world: 'They have been capping such oil wells for years in America', he continued. 'Families are smaller and everybody is better off.'³

Angela Macnamara was not likely to supply this kind of advice in her Sunday column. She warned against the dangers of allowing sexual intimacy to develop before marriage. Controlling one's urges was a regular refrain in her replies to letters. Going away on holidays with a boyfriend or a girlfriend was particularly perilous, as the normal restraints often did not apply. In 1968, in reply to a worried young woman who during a holiday away with her boyfriend admitted to having been more passionate than was normal, Macnamara wrote:

When a girl agrees to sleep with a boy she is breaking a convention built up as a result of the experience of generations. Other girls did

3. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 2.

as you have done, and suffered the anxieties, fears and sense of guilt that led to the building of rules to safeguard others ... Most of the boys and girls going on holidays in twosomes are doing so because they are following the bad example of convention breakers (p. 64)

'Convention breakers' were frequently evoked as posing a threat to the weak and impressionable and were certainly not the type good Christians should seek to emulate. Telling young people that they should learn from the experience of others will not normally elicit the desired result, as the forbidden fruit always tastes sweeter and it is important to find one's own way in life. Towards the end of the 1960s, sales of the contraceptive pill had increased significantly in Ireland, in spite of the Church's interdictions. Ryan quotes a survey of final-year medical students in University College Dublin in 1967 which revealed that 88% of students wished the Church to change its position on contraception (p. 66).

In general, however, a fair degree of restraint was exercised by young couples. One of Ryan's interviewees, David Moloney, explained how he and his future wife went to Manchester and shared a room. They both decided that they would wait until they were married before having sex. Self-monitoring of this nature was commonplace, depending often on the religious scrupulosity of the couple and the degree to which the constant warnings of priests and parents impacted on their consciousness.

WHO WAS WRITING TO ANGELA MACNAMARA?

There is an important point I think should be made at this juncture: the letters published in the *Sunday Press* cannot be taken as representative of society as a whole.

Those writing to Angela Macnamara were most often women who were experiencing difficulties with their husbands or children and who needed advice on how to cope. It would be rare for anyone to write to an agony aunt to share his or her joy about a weekend away that went well, or a husband who was sensitive to his wife's needs, or a child who did well in exams. (It has also been claimed, rightly or wrongly, that some of the letters published were actually composed or 'doctored' in-house with a view to capturing the issues raised by a number of dif-

ferent correspondents). The agony aunt's role is to be a sympathetic presence, a person to whom you can divulge your problems and who can advise you on how to best deal with the hand you have been dealt. Paul Ryan points to the general thrust of the letters received:

The letters to Angela Macnamara revealed a generation of women falling in love, dating and marrying in the 1960s and 1970s that expected more than their mothers did – wanting affectionate husbands and a more reciprocal sexual relationship, where sex was an expression of love, rather than a right or duty within marriage (p. 81).

In many instances, these hopes remained largely unfulfilled. The honeymoon often proved a disappointment, the first attempts at sex clumsy and the guilt pronounced, even though couples now had the seal of marriage. One woman explained her reaction to sex thus: 'I'd like to have a better physical side to my marriage but it's just hopeless. I was always taught that sex was dirty and sinful, and I have never been able to adjust.' (p. 87) Men also wrote to the column, sometimes expressing disappointment that their wives could not rid themselves of the idea of sex being something that had to be endured but not enjoyed. In her reply to the wife quoted above, Macnamara did state that she 'may well be another victim of the defective education in our culture so that her upbringing has left her with a negative attitude to marriage and sex'. (p. 87)

CATHOLIC STANCES

Paul Ryan notes that she stopped short of acknowledging the central role played by the Catholic Church in perpetuating such a culture. Such a comment indicates the sociologist's view that Macnamara's Catholicism coloured the advice she gave, as she was constantly aware of the Church's stance on issues, especially those of a sexual nature.

And yet it is acknowledged that she was not well-perceived by many members of the hierarchy who felt that she was meddling in things that really fell within the Church's domain. It must have been extremely difficult for anyone, especially a committed Catholic, to offer advice at a time when attitudes were changing rapidly. Ryan notes:

The sexualisation of love and marriage in an era of sex manuals

and multiple orgasms, of equal rights for women in the boardroom and the bedroom, of self-disclosure and self-autonomy, created a tightrope which couples struggled to walk (p. 108).

When one thinks back to the 1960s and 70s, as this study forces us to do, it seems amazing that masturbation was considered sinful and as something which, if not controlled, could lead to homosexuality. As young people began to break free from constraints of family characterised by things like the daily recitation of the Rosary and to enjoy more autonomy, they often came into conflict with their parents whose values they did not share in many cases. Corporal punishment at home and in schools was commonplace, but did little to quell the rising tide of dissent. Women started to enjoy more freedom, as Ireland's economy suddenly began to see the benefits of T. K. Whittaker's economic plan, foreign travel exposed more and more people to different cultures and experiences, and there was a general opening up of Ireland to outside influences.

UNDERSTANDING HOMOSEXUALITY

When it came to understanding homosexuality, however, attitudes were still far from enlightened. Those with the gay gene in 1960s and 70s Ireland were largely misunderstood and marginalized. Angela Macnamara demonstrated a sensitivity to those who wrote to her about discovering that they or their children were showing signs of being attracted to members of the same sex. She often stated that it could be just a phase the person was going through and advised that they visit a priest or a counsellor. Below is an extract to an answer she gave in 1978 to a distressed mother whose 21 year-old son had just revealed to his parents that he was homosexual:

In telling you that he has homosexual tendencies your son has been honest and has shared something that is very important in his life. For too long we have condemned out of hand the person whose sexual tendencies are not the norm... However, the fact remains that there are many people who are this way and who lead lives of great integrity and love. (p. 192)

Ryan argues that in the course of the 18 years of its existence,

Angela Macnamara's column 'had become a force for sexual change in Ireland'. (p. 193) Certainly, her understanding of those of a homosexual inclination demonstrated that she was prepared in certain circumstances to deviate from the Church's exact teaching on moral matters. Ryan puts this down to 'the exposure of debates within her family, the column, and wider media discussion of new social movements in Ireland' (p. 194). As a wife and mother, Macnamara was well placed to appreciate the need for more discussion and education on issues surrounding sexuality.

The 1980s, coming immediately after the end of her newspaper column, did not exactly herald the dawn of a new era in Ireland. 1984 witnessed the death of a young teenager, Ann Lovett, in the church grounds of Granard, Co. Longford, after giving birth to a baby under a statue of the Blessed Virgin. The baby died also. The family and school friends of the girl expressed total ignorance of her pregnancy, in spite of the fact that she had gone full term. The same year also was notable for the establishment of a tribunal to investigate the false arrest and bullying of a single mother, Joanne Hayes, who was wrongly accused of the murder of a baby that wasn't hers.

INFLUENCE

Attitudes are slow to change and that is certainly the case with Ireland's rather skewed relationship with sex. Paul Ryan sees Angela Macnamara as someone who, behind the public façade of unswerving loyalty to the teaching of the Catholic Church, must have had serious doubts about the continued prohibition on contraception and the desire to control the sexual lives of its flock. He regards her role as having been highly significant:

Her contribution to how sexuality was spoken about, and the religious framework within which it should be understood, has contributed to her status as one of the most influential lay Catholics of her generation. (p. 205)

It is hard to dispute this claim, which renders Ryan's book a must read for anyone who would like to gain an insight into the moral and religious climate during which Angela Macnamara operated, that is

so different to the one we have now. Whether or not Ryan's study will enjoy a similar legacy remains to be seen, but I think it is fair to say that he is following in the footsteps of an illustrious sociologist of religion, Tom Inglis, who has offered to date the best analysis of Catholicism's unique impact on Irish society with his *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*. It would be most timely if a similarly ambitious undertaking was tackled by Paul Ryan in the years ahead. I believe he is capable of producing something equally valuable.



THE
PRIORY
INSTITUTE

Distance Education in Theology **Certificate, Diploma, and Degree Programmes**

The Priory Institute offers a certificate, diploma, and degree in theology. The full programme consists of twenty modules offered over five years, and while it is designed on the basis of studying two modules concurrently, participants may choose to take one module at a time.

Theology from Home - plus!

While the main work of each module is done from home and at each person's own pace, there is a network of student support to offset the 'loneliness of the long-distance learner'. Thus every student is linked with one of the twelve centres around Ireland, and each centre is stocked with basic reading resources, as well as having a local co-ordinator who liaises with the students. There are two study days in a number of the centres during the fifteen-week module, and an academic tutor who is available via e-mail on a weekly basis to help students with their study.

The Priory Institute
Tallaght Village, Dublin 24, Ireland
Phone: +353 (0)1 404-8124
Email: enquiries@prioryinstitute.com