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# Ireland in the Eye of the Tiger

*A new book provides a timely critique of the main characteristics of the Celtic Tiger, and illustrates how it is time for us to sit back and assess where we are heading, writes Eamon Maher*

I have been waiting for a long time for a reasoned discussion of the phenomenon that has come to be known as the "Celtic Tiger." My interest wasn't really in the spectacular economic growth that the country achieved in the latter half of the 1990s, but rather with the impact that increased prosperity had on the way we look on the world and see our place in it

as Irish men and women.

Much has been made of the surge of confidence that gave rise to a flowering culture manifested by the huge popularity of Riverdance, Seamus Heaney's Nobel Prize for Literature, Roddy Doyle's success in the Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha! Ha! Ha!*, the emergence of playwrights like Conor McPherson (still in his early

30s), and the enduring popularity of William Trevor, John McGahern, Brian Friel, and many more. There was a feel-good factor about Ireland, and, suddenly, it became fashionable and sexy to declare one's Irishness. Peace (although a tense, shaky one) prevailed in Northern Ireland, unemployment became almost non-existent, Exchequer returns continued to

rise exponentially, and everything was going beautifully. Or was it?

The authors of *Reinventing Ireland* (Pluto Press, 2002), Michael Cronin, Luke Gibbons and Peadar Kirby, set about assessing the various ingredients that went into the "Celtic Tiger" mix, and how they impacted on Irish culture and society. They have done an excellent job in assembling other experts (sociologists, economists, people with an in-depth knowledge of literature and media studies), and in putting across a coherent message about the transformation of Ireland in the past few decades.

*Reinventing Ireland* engage critically with the "new culture" which has emerged, and which is accepted in an uncritical manner by virtually all of its defenders. It is seen by the latter as "marking a break with the past and the coming-of-age of an enlightened, tolerant and liberal Ireland. Furthermore, while this "new culture" is closely linked by its proponents with Ireland's economic success of the 1990s, (...) the links between economy and culture have been little explored apart from a generalised correlation between economic success and a climate of national self-confidence and creativity." (p.2)

### Shrinking space

This sets the scene well for what is to follow, which is a series of considered articles on how the cultural debate has become subservient in many cases to commercial interests. There is "a shrinking space for articulating oppositional arguments." (p.8) Very seldom is it pointed out that there is a growing gap between rich and poor, and that we spend less on anti-poverty measures than any other member of the European community. We have a higher per capita prison population than most other developed countries, and the cells are occupied to a very large extent by the poor and the disadvantaged, many of whom have come to feel disenfranchised and disillusioned. It is significant that there have been far more checks on bogus social welfare claims in Ireland than on fraudulent tax returns, in spite of the fact that tax evasion costs the state far more than social welfare abuse.

There has been a tendency (and this agenda has been driven by politicians and business people alike) to "turn a blind eye towards the more negative social consequences of the economic boom" (p.10). This is due in part to the pervading notion that "modern" Ireland, having shed the baggage of a turbulent history dominated by religion, land and bloody nationalism, has now reached the El Dorado of prosperity and liber-

alism. The reality is somewhat different, as can be seen by the furore caused by the serialisation of Roddy Doyle's *Family* in 1994, in which alcoholism, sexual abuse, social and moral decay, and racism come to the fore. The high point of the series is when the downtrodden and abused wife of the main protagonist, Charlo, takes her fate in her hands and expels her husband from the house after she notices that he is starting to contemplate abusing their adolescent daughter. The harsh realism employed by Doyle in this series was at variance with the prevailing image of the "new Ireland."

More recent examples provided by the authors are the negative reaction elicited by secondary teachers during their industrial action, and the serious anger that followed the "No" vote to the Nice Treaty. We read: "In both instances, such was the coercive force of consensual thinking that any expression of sympathy for the dissenting position was immediately vilified as an intolerable threat to "our" hard-won prosperity." (p.17) I seem to recall a certain EU Commissioner being attacked on all sides after he issued a warning to the Irish Government with regard to spending. The Famine, emigration, the "hard times" we had endured, were flung at him on live radio shows by people who didn't want to hear about financial rectitude!

### Religion and the Celtic Tiger

Because of obvious space constraints, I could not possibly do justice to all the articles in this book, which is why I have decided to confine myself to the Introduction and to a chapter that I think will be of genuine interest to readers of *Reality*. It is the article by Lionel Pilkington entitled, "Religion and the Celtic Tiger: The Cultural Legacies of Anti-Catholicism in Ireland." The author lectures in English in NUI Galway, and is a member of the Church of Ireland. This allows him to throw light on some false traditional notions of Irish Catholicism

**"Instead of the view that Ireland's economic, cultural and political progress depends on an accelerated movement away from a benighted Catholic past ...**

**Drumcree suggests that it is the unyielding nature of mainstream (Church of Ireland) Irish Protestantism and its informal links to the anti-Catholic practices of the Orange Order that exists as one of the principal obstacles to political change and accommodation."**

The title is an obvious reference to Professor Declan Kiberd's defining study, *Inventing Ireland* (1995), whose principal argument is that modern Ireland was invented in the cultural revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Reinventing Ireland* begins by quoting from the strategy document of the National Economic and Social Council that declared in 1999: "Ireland reinvented itself during the 1990s." When analysing this process, the contributors to

that tend to dominate a lot of cultural debate about Ireland.

There is, according to Pilkington, "a long history of liberal critical argument which holds that Ireland's full development as a modern nation-state has been and continues to be impeded by the country's dominant religion." (p.124) The idea of Catholicism as being an obstacle to economic success was a theory that held sway (and probably does still predominate) among many Protestants in Northern Ireland. Catholicism in its Irish version was associated with indolence, conservative values in relation to morality in general and to sexuality in particular, and a lack of sophistication in cultural and social terms. The emergence of the Irish Republic as a successful commercial paradigm in the 1990s was attributed by some people to the dwindling influence of the Catholic Church and to the advance of liberal values.

The notion of Catholics as being entrenched in a sectarian past was rendered somewhat redundant by comparison with the recent actions of the Orange Order in Drumcree. We read: "Instead of the view that Ireland's economic, cultural and political progress depends on an accelerated movement away from a benighted Catholic past, Drumcree suggests that it is the unyielding nature of mainstream (Church of Ireland) Irish Protestantism and its informal links to the anti-Catholic practices of the Orange Order that exists as one of the principal obstacles to political change and accommodation." (p.127) Drumcree is the antithesis of the modern liberal image that has been fostered south of the border where the speed of the steps of Riverdance is a sort of metaphor for the rapid pace of life under the Eye of the Tiger.

#### **Brave assessment**

Pilkington is brave and sure in his assessments. He is also well-placed to show how the literary portrayals of Catholicism and Protestantism accentuate the authoritarian and atavistic nature of the former

while showing the latter as misunderstood and victimised by bloody-minded nationalist history: "If Irish Catholicism seems to require rigorous interrogation and sceptical analysis, it is assumed that Irish Protestantism requires merely sympathy, nostalgia, accommodation and respect." (p.129) Pilkington analyses the positive role played by the Catholic Action movement in Ireland in fostering social action and vocationalism in the middle decades of the last century. Similarly, according to him, the efforts of Catholic groups such as CORI have done much to highlight issues such as poverty and Third World debt, and have often been highly critical of government policy.

Catholics are not, as the cliché would have us believe, against modernisation at all costs. The fact that the Catholic Church is opposed to divorce, contraception and abortion means that it is often associated with traditional and outmoded values that stop the march towards commercialisation.

Pilkington makes much use of an article by Fiacra Gibbons in *The Guardian* (July 2001), who bemoaned the resurgence of "fundamentalism" in Ireland. To illustrate this fundamentalism, he cited the masses of people who turned out to see the relics of Saint Therèse of Lisieux, and the huge success of *The Glenstal Book of Prayer*. He then asked: "Could it be that the Celtic Tiger is showing the first signs of mange?" In other words, could the heightened evidence of religious devotion mean that the economic prosperity was going down the sink with the same alacrity as the dot.com companies? It never occurred to the journalist to view these spiritual phenomena as evidence that prosperity was not supplying the type of spiritual succour that many people crave in Ireland. Also, in the headlong rush away from Catholicism, the religion that has been the cornerstone of Irish society for centuries, he failed to appreciate the fact that no alterna-

tive was available in the fight against social injustice and immorality.

In the Conclusion to *Reinventing Ireland*, we come across the following lines which have more than a little resonance with my own feelings:

'When surprise is expressed about the coldness, the lack of warmth, the aggressive selfishness

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of Celtic Tiger culture in Ireland, what is surprising is the surprise. The consequences, both personal and social, of the new capitalism as currently practised in Ireland mean that the situation could hardly be otherwise.' (p.207)

***When surprise is expressed about the coldness, the lack of warmth, the aggressive selfishness of Celtic Tiger culture in Ireland, what is surprising is the surprise.***

This book of essays provides a timely critique of the main characteristics of the Celtic Tiger, and it illustrates how it is time for us to sit back and assess where we are heading. Too often, our material greed is blinding us to what is happening to the fabric of society, to the diminishing quality of life, to the destruction of our environment. *Reinventing Ireland* is a powerful account of how culture and society need to reclaim the ground they have lost in their attempts to service the needs of the market. I urge you to read it. ■