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BOOK REVIEWS

John Bowman, *Window and Mirror: RTÉ Television: 1961–2001*

Cork: The Collins Press, 2011. 256pp, £22.99 ISBN 978-18488-9135-7

Chris Morash

When Teilifís Éireann first flickered on the air fifty years ago, on New Year's Eve 1961, an ageing Eamon de Valera made what, at the time, must have seemed like a grumpily sombre contribution to the champagne and jollity, but which, in retrospect, now appears as curiously prescient. The 'immense power' of radio and television, De Valera told that first audience for Irish television, made him 'somewhat afraid'; for, 'like atomic energy', television could 'be used for incalculable good, but it can also do irreparable harm.' Only a 'persistent policy', he urged, could transform the new medium into a tool with which to 'build up the character of a whole people'; if not, he warned, it would lead, 'through demoralisation, to decadence and dissolution.'

Looking back over the first fifty years of Irish television, it could be argued that where de Valera saw a black and white set of alternatives, what actually happened was that both possible futures he foresaw became realities; but not in ways that he could have imagined. Reading through John Bowman's latest book, *Mirror and Window: RTÉ Television 1961–2011*, what emerges is something that could be defined as 'a persistent policy' shaping Irish broadcasting over the past half century. The legislative basis for that policy was in place well before the first camera was switched on, in the form of Section 18 of the 1960 Broadcasting Act, which gave the broadcaster a responsibility to ensure that 'when it broadcasts any information, news or feature which relates to matters of public controversy or is the subject of current public debate, the information, news or feature is presented objectively and impartially' This provision has been repeated in all subsequent Broadcasting Acts, including the most recent Act in 2009. The Codes associated with the most recent reiteration of this legislation (Section 39 of the 2009 Act) are currently undergoing a process of review by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, and their terms form the basis of the first investigation to be undertaken by the Compliance Committee of the BAI, under Section 53 of the Act.

When the words 'objectively' and 'impartially' were first used in the legislation in 1960, they may have seemed innocuous enough; in retrospect, however, there is a strong case to be made that Section 18 of the 1960 Broadcasting Act has been one of the most important pieces of legislation in the history of the State. It almost certainly has as much claim as T.K. Whitaker's 'Economic Development' policy document, published two years earlier, as one of the founding documents of modern Ireland. Section 18 meant that for the first time in the history of the State, dissent was not simply tolerated: it was mandated. From 1923 onwards, almost all Irish media legislation had been aimed at controlling and limiting public debate. This was true not

only in obvious cases, such as the Censorship of Films Act (1923), and the Censorship of Publications Act (1929); there is equally a very good case to be made that the establishment of Radio Éireann in 1926 was as much concerned with diverting listeners from the BBC (sometimes even to the extent of broadcasting on the same wavelengths), as it was about opening up options for Irish listeners. Section 18 of the 1960 Broadcasting Act effectively reversed that entire history. From that point onwards, if a cabinet minister or a bishop said X, it was not only possible to broadcast the view of someone who said Y; it could be seen as a legislative requirement to do so.

In a remarkably short period of time, bringing together opposing viewpoints, and stimulating debate – as opposed to simply reporting – became normalised as journalistic practice in Teilifis Éireann, and to this day these values remain as the foundation of the relevant broadcasting codes relating to news and current affairs in Ireland. Of course, as with any ‘persistent policy’, there have been lapses, inadequacies and falls from grace; but they are visible only because there is a norm against which to compare them. And, to this extent, Irish television has been instrumental in carrying out a process of ‘demoralisation’: not in the sense that de Valera meant, as in a loss of morale, but in the sense of a de-centring of moral authority. From 1961 onwards, moral authority in Ireland could no longer be singular; it had to be dialogic. And, to this extent, RTÉ has been one of the institutions that has done much to shape ‘the character of the whole people’ – again, one suspects, not in terms that de Valera would have desired or accepted. In retrospect, the comparison with splitting an atom may not have been all that far-fetched.

Bowman’s *Window and Mirror* makes it clear that the creation of a dialogic public sphere did not simply happen because of a piece of legislation. As he traces the battles that the new station had to fight – with government ministers such as Charles Haughey (as Minister for Agriculture), Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, and Irish-language lobbyists – it becomes possible to argue that life would have been much easier for the first generation of broadcasters in Teilifis Éireann if they had interpreted the idea of ‘objective’ reporting in a way that accorded more closely with the *status quo*. They did not, and in the process helped to change the shape of Irish public debate.

One of the pleasures of *Mirror and Window* is the way in which it brings together the story of those formative years of Irish television. Indeed, this is the strongest part of the book. It is worth remembering here that while he is best known to the wider public in Ireland as a broadcaster, Bowman is also a respected historian, whose *De Valera and the Ulster Question* (Oxford University Press, 1990), won the Ewart-Biggs Prize. When writing about the 1960s, Bowman can write as a historian, and as a historian he is both generous in acknowledging the work of his predecessors and skilled at building on their work. Given that the 1960s is the period of Irish broadcasting that has received the most concentrated attention from historians (as opposed to more sociologically-inclined media analysts), when writing about that period Bowman is able to build on solid footings such as Robert Savage’s two thorough volumes, *Irish Television: Social and Political Origins*, (1996), and *A Loss of Innocence* (2010). Tested against the author’s own personal experience, shot through with his unparalleled knowledge of the RTÉ archives (both written and broadcast), and drawing upon his own interviews over many years with some of the key figures in the organisation’s

history, Bowman weaves this rich mix into some very fine historical writing indeed. With regard to the archives, he draws out not only a wealth of primary sources (some used here for the first time), he also reproduces memos, telegrams, and letters, along with photographs, production stills, and other materials, enriching the text in ways that will reach out to a non-specialist readership. Indeed, as a book, *Mirror and Window* is a beautifully produced artefact. Likewise, Bowman very productively mines the rich vault of his own interview material going back over decades, and some of that material (in particular, a retrospective interview with the late Jack White) adds a dimension that is distinctive in Irish media history.

By the same token, without that historical bedrock against which to ground his account, some of the later chapters are less satisfying. Bowman states at the outset of *Window and Mirror* that he will be eschewing a more conventional chronological narrative for a series of thematic excursions, brought together in loose historical units. Writing about the comparatively simpler mediascape of the 1960s, and using the existing historical scholarship as a jazz soloist would use a rhythm section, in the early chapters he always returns safely to the main melody. The same is true at some points later in the book – for instance, when he is writing about RTÉ’s response to the conflict in Northern Ireland. However, as he moves closer to the present, the media world becomes more complex, the existing body of historical writing like Savage’s becomes thinner, and the excursions from a central narrative often threaten to become anecdotal rather than illustrative; the discussion straying from the history seminar-room into the RTÉ canteen.

By the time we reach the last few chapters, it becomes evident that a very different kind of analysis is required to write about a world in which multinational media conglomerates play a part in the everyday lives of Irish viewers, and new technologies are forcing us to rethink basic questions. How does one write a history of a national broadcaster at a time when we can no longer take for granted a definition of broadcasting (never mind public service broadcasting)? We do not really get this analysis in *Window and Mirror*. Instead, Bowman concludes that ‘Whatever the next fifty years brings, RTÉ television’s best years may yet prove to have been its earliest faltering steps when it established that broadcast journalism would be its purpose.’ In this regard, *Window and Mirror* is extremely valuable in tracing the historical roots of the journalistic ethos of our national broadcaster; at the same time, it still leaves the reader wondering what historical processes will keep that ethos alive in a world that is increasingly remote from that distant New Year’s Eve.

REVIEWER

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