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Review: Mary Kenny, *The Way We Were: Catholic Ireland Since 1922*

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Book Reviews

Mary Kenny, *The Way We Were: Catholic Ireland Since 1922* (Dublin: Columba Books, 2022), 450 pages

Anyone of my generation (early 60s) will be aware of Mary Kenny's work as a journalist and author. From the firebrand feminist who is possibly best remembered for being one of the members of the Women's Liberation Movement who took the train to Belfast and brought back condoms to Dublin in May 1971,¹ over time she became a far less radical figure, as evidenced by her work as a columnist with *The Irish Catholic* over many years. In 1997, she published *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*,² which is a type of memoir/social history of her long-term relationship with Catholicism and is regarded as an indispensable reference work. So, the publication of Kenny's latest book, *The Way We Were: Catholic Ireland Since 1922* (Columba Books), will attract the attention of those of us with an interest in Irish Catholic identity. But it might also leave many a little dissatisfied at the lack of any real evolution from the earlier study. As with anything that Kenny writes, the reader will find much to ponder in many of the observations of someone who knows her subject intimately, but others, given the title of the study, might justifiably have expected an academic assessment of a century of Irish Catholicism, and they will be disappointed – I think a topic of this scale would require a Diarmaid Ferriter to do it justice, and even he might struggle with such a large canvas.

In her introduction, Kenny lays out her stall by stating that the book seeks 'to try and tell, or examine, the stories of Irish life over the past hundred years, in the context of the values, and with an emphasis on the role played by the most dominant factor in Irish life, Catholicism.' (p. 11) She then goes on to differentiate between the Church as institution, and what she refers to as that deeper sense 'where being Irish and being Catholic was for so long regarded as synonymous, and formed what we would call an identity' (p. 11). That melding of Irish and Catholic probably began to dissipate during the 1960s, when enhanced prosperity and broader access to education meant that many Irish people began to question the tenets of their faith, which in the past they had blindly accepted. Indeed, we have now reached the point where Ireland, in the view of sociologist Gladys Ganiel (who is strangely not

referenced in Kenny's book), can be viewed as a post-Catholic society. This does not mean in any way that Catholicism has disappeared, rather that it is now just one means among others of forming a relationship with God:

Post-Catholic Ireland, then, is paradoxical: the role of the Catholic Church has changed so dramatically that it is possible to identify a new era. But at the same time, Catholicism retains a different, yet still important, influence on people's personal lives and in the public sphere.³

The century covered by Kenny traces how in the early stages of the Irish Free State there was a conscious effort to mark a distinction between the newly emerging society and the former colonial power. One of the ways of doing that was to emphasise the fact that Ireland (certainly south of the border) was a Catholic country. While there had been tensions between the IRA and the Church hierarchy during the Civil War, the level of anticlerical feeling was remarkably low. This is explained by John H. Whyte in his magisterial study, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923–1970* (Dublin: 1971), by the unique ability of Irish people to compartmentalise their attitudes and loyalties. Hence, while they were sometimes denounced from the pulpit for their actions during the Civil War, former IRA activists did not see this as an obstacle to their remaining committed to the Catholic faith. What is remarkable about the Irish Free State is how enlightened it was in terms of inclusivity – the vote was extended to all women in 1923, and members of the old Anglo-Irish aristocracy were appointed to the Senate, along with Quakers. Indeed, one of the great successes of Ireland since 1922 is that it has managed to maintain a liberal democracy, one of the few new states established during the early twentieth century to achieve that. Kenny makes the very interesting point that Ireland in the early decades post-independence was increasingly Catholic as a response to market demand: the people saw Catholicism as a way of affirming their sense of identity, as much, if not more, than their leaders, political and religious. The staging of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932 was possibly the apogee of this merging of Catholicism and Irish identity, as the newly elected Taoiseach Eamon de Valera sought to send out a strong message both at home and on the international stage that Ireland was ready to take its place among the nations of the earth and was no longer just a mere adjunct to the British colonial empire. The isolationism of Ireland as a result of pursuing a policy of neutrality during World War II may have turned it more inward than was healthy, with a quite draconian system of

ensorship of publications and films resulting in the alienation of many of our creative artists, but it should be remembered that some of the most active agents in this area were lay people and not clerics – that said, it is probably true that during the 1940s the Catholic Church was anxious to combat what they saw as the advance of secularism and the danger of Communism, a fear which even extended to the perceived danger posed by jazz music.

The 1960s was undoubtedly a decade of upheaval and revolt. Interestingly, Kenny quotes the writer John Banville (the citation appeared in an essay collection on Ireland during the 1950s) who saw the Second Vatican Council as heralding the fall of the Catholic Church: ‘What none of us realised’, he said, ‘not even the cardinals themselves, was that the council marked not the first steps along the path to a new invigoration of the church, a new ‘Reformation’, but the beginning of what was proving to be its virtual dissolution’ (p.134). Interestingly, this is an argument that is often put forward by some of the more reactionary elements within the Church, who posit that Vatican II opened the floodgates and allowed the forces of secularism and relativism to take control. It is well known that both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were among those who sought to claw back many of the concessions introduced by the Council. Undoubtedly, the replacement of the Latin Mass with the use of the vernacular, the concept of the Church being the People of God, the loosening of the strictures around what constituted sinful behaviour and the advice given to the faithful to use what was known as an ‘informed individual conscience’, all these led to confusion among older Catholics in particular, who had become accustomed to the same liturgy and theology throughout their lifetime. While Pope Paul VI’s volte face on *Humanae Vitae*, which went against the majority view of the Council to allow married couples to employ artificial contraception to plan their families, was a small win for the conservatives, there can be no doubt that the main thrust of Vatican II was progressive. Notwithstanding this, John Charles McQuaid came back from Rome and assured Irish Catholics that: ‘No change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives’, a pronouncement that showed a determination on his part at least to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. And if one were to consider the banning of books during the 1960s as a barometer of the moral climate of the time, one could be excused for thinking that very little had, in fact, changed: Edna O’Brien, John Broderick, Lee Dunne, John McGahern, Brian Moore and a host of other novelists and writers had their works placed on the Index, as were other works which contained information

on contraception, abortion or simply sexuality. Attitudes did not change overnight in Ireland because of a Council's documents: they would require time to take root and flower.

The discussion of the fallout from *Humanae Vitae* is one of the stronger points of the book, undoubtedly because the author was very active in fighting for women's rights during the 1970s. She points out the inherent weakness of the Vatican's position on artificial contraception as being that celibate men were putting forward a doctrine that would have serious implications for women's health. Over time, people would see how incongruous that was. For someone so involved in the Women's Liberation Movement, however, there is not a huge amount of discussion by Kenny on the ban on women priests, or their reduction to the role of second-class citizens within the Church. This is most likely due to the fact that in later years, Kenny became somewhat distanced from some of the more extreme elements of feminism.

The death of two iconic figures associated with very traditional Catholic views, John Charles McQuaid and Eamon de Valera, in 1973 and 1975 respectively, meant a changing of the guard. From that point onwards, certain key aspects of the hegemony of Catholic power began to be questioned in the public forum. The 1980s is a decade marked by a number of high-profile cases involving women, beginning in 1982 when Eileen Flynn was removed from her teaching position at the Holy Faith Convent secondary school in New Ross after becoming pregnant with the child of a man who was separated from his wife, but whose children from that marriage were raised by Flynn and their father. Flynn lost her unfair dismissal case at the employment tribunal but received significant support from the media and from other women who argued that her personal life should not adversely impact her career in this way. In 2005, she resumed teaching at a Christian Brothers primary school and after her premature death in 2008 she was given a full Catholic funeral in New Ross, which is an indication of how far Irish attitudes had evolved in the intervening decades. Two hugely traumatic episodes occurred in 1984, the first being the Kerry Babies scandal, where Joanne Hayes, a single mother living in Kerry, was wrongly accused of murdering her baby (the Gardaí, the judiciary and the medical profession all contrived to try and make a charge that was clearly flawed stick). Then there was the tragedy of fourteen-year-old Anne Lovett who died after giving birth in a grotto to the Virgin Mary in Granard, County Longford. Such was the outpouring of grief from other Irish women at the circumstances of Lovett's death that Gay Byrne devoted

a few episodes of his popular radio show to allow women who had a similar experience of being pregnant outside of marriage to tell their stories. They did so in their droves.

The 1980s was also the decade of the referendums on divorce and abortion, both of which went the way recommended by the Church, but one could see that already ‘the times they were a changin’’. The ‘X’ case in 1992, in which a pregnant suicidal teenage girl, the victim of a statutory rape, sought permission to travel to England for an abortion, highlighted some of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of Ireland’s abortion legislation. In the end, the girl miscarried shortly after the courts had decreed that she was entitled to an abortion because of the likelihood of suicide. Once more, this episode made people, especially women, question prevailing attitudes towards their sex and the control of their bodies. Later that year, one of Ireland’s best-known and charismatic clerics, Bishop Eamon Casey, was discovered to have fathered a son with an American woman, Annie Murphy, a fact he kept secret as he continued in his episcopal role. The Casey affair would prove to be a very minor scandal indeed compared to what was coming down the line, with Fr Brendan Smyth being the first and most infamous of a large number of clerical abuse scandals involving children. The Pandora’s Box was open and what emerged would shake Catholic Ireland to its core. Various reports would reveal the extent of abuse by priests, male and female religious, in parishes and in institutions that were jointly run by Church and state, such as the Magdalene Laundries, the Industrial Schools, the Mother and Baby Homes. Kenny does not really dwell too much on all the details associated with these areas, which in fairness have formed the basis of several reports and books, but she does take issue with John Banville’s statement in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2021 that ‘everyone knew’ about the abuses that occurred in Irish society fifty or more years ago. She wonders why, if that was the case, John did not mention it at the time – he was after all a journalist at the *Irish Press* in the 1970s and had access to an ideal medium through which to share his knowledge. Whatever about who knew what and when, there can be no denying the pioneering work of journalists like Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan in exposing the horrors of the Industrial Schools or the experience of the many survivors who went public about the abuse they received in institutions like these, or simply at the hands of priests and religious in parishes and/or schools.

One could ask the extent to which the various scandals brought about

the current disillusionment with the Catholic Church in Ireland, or whether the ever-increasing wave of secularism was diluting people's attachment to religious faith in any case. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979, rather than representing a high point in Irish Catholicism, with record numbers turning out at the various venues where he appeared, was really a last-ditch effort on behalf of the Vatican to stem the tide. In the run-up to the visit, vocations to the priesthood had been falling steadily and the faithful were showing signs of a more vigorous questioning of certain aspects of Church teaching, especially in the realm of sexual morality. Quoting Crawford Gribben's recent study,⁴ Kenny notes that weekly Mass attendance collapsed from ninety-one per cent in 1972 to three per cent by 2011, with an increasingly elderly cohort among the attendees. More worryingly, by 2016, one-third of the population of Dublin and Galway identified as non-Catholic. Kenny has a very interesting reaction to this: 'You can make the future as secular as you like, but you cannot change the past.' There is still a sense in which the Irish landscape, traditions, language and rituals are closely tied up with Catholicism, to such an extent that they are indissociable from one another. This is why writers like John McGahern and Seamus Heaney, although non-believers, opted for traditional Catholic funerals: they knew that this is what would have been expected from the local communities in Leitrim and Derry, where their artistic talents had been honed. But as generations of Irish people now begin to emerge who are largely ignorant of Catholic doctrine and teaching, that cultural Catholicism will most likely wane, if not disappear altogether.

The book concludes with twelve profiles of people who, in Kenny's estimation, played an important role in Catholic Ireland during her lifetime. It starts with broadcaster Gay Byrne and ends with the civil servant Ken Whitaker. While all are interesting in themselves, I think that the likes of Mary Lavin, Delia Murphy, Deirdre O'Connell, Danny La Rue and Gerry Fitt had far less influence over Irish Catholicism than the aforementioned Gay Byrne, or Frank Duff, Seán Mac Réamoinn and Alice Glenn. Also, the order in which they appear is neither chronological nor logical. But in spite of these reservations, I really enjoyed reading the profiles, which brought back many memories. Alice Glenn, the conservative Fine Gael TD, who strenuously opposed her leader Garret FitzGerald's 'liberal crusade', and the theologian cum bon vivant Seán Mac Réamoinn, were two figures whom I remember well. They exemplify the two very different sides of the religious

divide, one being completely against the advancing secularism, the other showing a keen intellectual appreciation of how the Church needed to be alert to the spirit of the times.

On balance, I warmly recommend this new study to the readers of *Studies*, while emphasising that it is not intended to be an academic study, more a personal reflection on the 100-year relationship between Catholicism and the emerging Irish state. The absence of an index is a great pity, as is the omission of certain key figures in Irish Catholic studies, most particularly Louise Fuller, whose *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Gill and Macmillan, 2002 and 2004) is an absolutely indispensable text. Overall, however, the book is attractively packaged by Columba, and Mary Kenny's fluid style ensures that the 400+ pages will be read quickly and with pleasure. It remains to be seen if her current book will ever match up to the influence of *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, but the two of them, in addition to all her journalistic articles on the topic, will ensure that future scholars of Irish Catholicism will not be able to avoid the invaluable contribution of Mary Kenny when assessing this key aspect of Irish life and culture.

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Notes

- 1 The idea was to highlight the unavailability of condoms to buy over the counter in the Republic of Ireland, whereas they were freely available in the North.
- 2 Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1997). It was republished in a second edition in 2003.
- 3 Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.
- 4 Crawford Gribben, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).