

# AMBIGUOUS REPUBLIC

IRELAND IN THE 1970s

DIARMAID FERRITER

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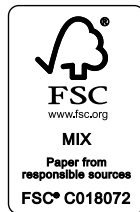
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# INTRODUCTION: OLD MOULDS BROKEN?

*'Promise ... fury and danger'*

In a contribution to the short-lived literary and political magazine *Atlantis*, published from University College Dublin between 1971 and 1973, archaeologist, historian and writer Liam de Paor addressed the theme of the contemporary ambiguity of the Irish Republic: 'The myths with which – whether we accepted them or not – we have lived for many decades have suddenly ceased to have the appearance of life ... It is not only in the North that old moulds are broken.'<sup>1</sup>

De Paor's reference to the breaking of moulds came directly from the opening line of a 1970 poem by John Montague, 'The Rough Field', one of a number of poems that sought to encapsulate the sense of bewilderment, but perhaps also opportunity, that the Troubles in Northern Ireland which erupted in 1969 might present. As his fellow poet Seamus Heaney was to remark of the early 1970s, 'there was promise in the air as well as fury and danger'.<sup>2</sup> But in Northern Ireland, any nervous sense of hopeful expectation quickly soured; as Heaney recalled: 'soon enough it all went rancid',<sup>3</sup> or as the second line of Montague's poem announced, 'In the dark streets, firing starts.'<sup>4</sup>

The consequences of the firing, of the rotteness, were monumental, particularly in terms of loss of life, and the 1970s on the island of Ireland was to be marked by death and destruction, reprisal and counter reprisal. Nor was there any sense of an end in sight by the close of the decade, by which time 1,900 people had been killed. If anything, there was even more

of a sense of entrenchment. In many respects, the Troubles in Northern Ireland defined the island of Ireland in the 1970s, not just internally, but in terms of how Ireland was viewed by the rest of the world, a case of 'old arguments' but 'new deaths'.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the decade the conflict continued to prompt poems, some reflective, some angry, immediate and blunt, with little attempt to disguise outrage. At a reading in the Clonard Monastery in the Ardoyne area of Belfast in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday in Derry on 30 January 1972, when thirteen unarmed civilians were shot dead by British paratroopers, Thomas Kinsella read 'steadily and carefully' from his poem 'Butcher's Dozen':

*And when I came where thirteen died  
It shrivelled up my heart. I sighed  
And looked about that brutal place  
Of rage and terror and disgrace.*<sup>6</sup>

Rage and terror abounded at various stages throughout the 1970s, ensuring that, as suggested by Mary Holland, one of the most gifted journalistic chroniclers of the Troubles, 'The 1970s were a period of simple – deadly – certainties in both parts of the island.'<sup>7</sup> That was certainly true in terms of loss of life; as a result of the Troubles, there were 496 deaths in 1972, 252 in 1973, 303 in 1974 and 308 in 1976. Given such carnage, the view that a united Ireland was attainable and even desirable to solve the Troubles and the partition of Ireland, separating the six Northern counties from the rest of the island, that had been a reality since 1920, had significant currency, not just among Republicans in the North but privately, in British government circles.

Many Republicans also believed that a Fianna Fáil government under the leadership of Taoiseach (the Republic's prime minister) Jack Lynch from 1969 to 1973 would and should intervene to protect them against Loyalist attack by those committed to the UK and determined to resist the onslaught of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and that the attitude of many politicians south of the border was equivocal. Both the British and Irish governments, however, underestimated the determination of Unionists, dedicated to keeping Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, to resist a unitary state or a power-sharing solution accompanied by a Council of Ireland. Such an initiative – the doomed Sunningdale Agreement of

1973 – was part sponsored by the coalition government of Fine Gael, the second largest of the Republic’s political parties, and the smaller Labour Party that wrested power from Lynch in 1973 and governed until 1977. While there were valiant efforts made by individuals and organisations to halt the violence, its continuance and the absence of a political solution to the crisis were accompanied by propaganda, miscarriages of justice, ill treatment of suspects and too little care and support given to victims by both British and Irish governments.

As de Paor’s article in *Atlantis* suggested, questions about old ways of doing things were also being asked in the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland, the main focus of this book. The sense of ambiguity that ‘had characterised Irish political aspirations for a long time’ was undergoing a reassessment, if not outright revision, in a state whose constitution contained a territorial claim over the six counties of Northern Ireland. Perceived myths, wisdoms and traditions rested on shakier foundations. How history should be viewed, commemorated, communicated, or, in some cases, skewed was another consequence of this. As Mary Holland noted, ‘The British kept telling the Irish to forget about history, as though that were possible in a situation when hundreds were dying violently on all sides.’ But what was also apparent was ‘the extraordinary ignorance’ which each community had of the other’s experience, culture and identity.<sup>8</sup>

Such ignorance also facilitated a sense of ambiguity, and an uncertainty about Nationalist ambition that in the 1970s was not confined to Ireland. Although the decade witnessed much violence internationally, it remains a difficult one to define. As observed by Gerard DeGroot in his influential *The Seventies Unplugged* (2010), ‘unlike the Sixties and the Eighties, for which themes abound, the Seventies seems a decade in-between, a black hole of meaning.’<sup>9</sup> His survey of the decade records ‘profound achievement’ and cultural brilliance, but observes that such progress was ultimately overshadowed by the surrender to violence.

Other historians, including Tony Judt, have reflected on the extent to which violence in the 1970s led to much talk about the ‘ungovernable’ condition of Western societies, compounded by ‘stagflation’ – wage and price inflation combined with economic slowdown. But protest, while vocal, and workers’ strikes, while frequent, were also contained by the achievement and endurance of the post-Second World War welfare states.<sup>10</sup> Like DeGroot, Judt in his assessment struggles to define the 1970s as a decade;



in the life of the mind, he maintains, it was 'the most dispiriting decade of the twentieth century', as collective ambitions gave way to personal needs. There was sourness, but also a scorn for tradition and pomposity and a determination to shock.<sup>11</sup>

This book seeks to explore these internationally recognised ambiguities, not just in relation to the physical, political and psychological impact of the Northern Ireland Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, but also the widespread social, cultural, economic and political upheavals experienced within the Republic. It offers a detailed framework of inquiry into a decade that witnessed much turmoil, fear and continuity. It was a transitional decade, where new boundaries were set, new ambitions articulated and occasionally realised and a time when it was necessary to reappraise Ireland's role as a European country, particularly after European Economic Community (EEC) membership in 1973, endorsed in a referendum by 83 per cent of the electorate. In tandem with this, the Republic was no longer a country where the rural population dominated; in 1971, census figures revealed that, for the first time, the majority (52 per cent) of people lived in urban areas. Economic challenges and industrial disputes abounded, partly as a result of domestic mismanagement and over-reliance on borrowed money, but also as a result of international crises, notably in the Middle East, which led to rocketing fuel prices and inflation.

While the two main Irish political parties that had dominated since the 1920s continued to prevail, Fianna Fáil's run of power that had begun in 1957 was broken in 1973 by Fine Gael and Labour before Fianna Fáil returned in triumph in 1977. The generation that had brought independence to southern Ireland in the early 1920s had left the political stage, but their shadows and imprints remained. Irish socialists who had believed, or hoped, at the end of the 1960s that they could break the dominance of the political establishment were disappointed. The office of Irish president achieved a visibility and controversial profile that had previously eluded it, while civil servants continued to play an indispensable but often hidden role in the formulation of policy, a role now more clearly traceable due to the release of archival material.

In terms of Irish versions of international currents, the Republic in the 1970s witnessed an increasingly visible and demanding Irish feminist movement that has notable achievements to its name, including equality and contraception legislation, a Council for the Status of Women and the removal of the public service bar on the employment of married women.

There was also an evident determination to subject inequality to greater scrutiny; it was a decade during which there was more awareness of poverty and poor housing – conservative estimates suggested one-quarter of the population could be classified as poor – and an increased public discourse about social, economic and cultural opportunities offered and denied, facilitated or avoided. It was also a decade that inspired much cynicism about continuity; although there was a net inflow of population recorded in the census of 1979, emigration was still a reality for those from marginalised districts; and those in underdeveloped communities, or traditionally neglected parts of the country, sometimes felt little had changed when it came to political and social priorities, but they also had emerging champions. Individualism and sexuality were still quite rigorously repressed and access to university education was still the preserve of an elite. Educating children and students was deemed to be a priority, and the numbers at schools increased, but the distribution of power within the education system was much contested.

Debate in relation to all these areas expanded and was frequently presented as a response to a crisis of authority. Some of the institutions that had enjoyed unchallenged supremacy in previous decades, including the Catholic Church, in a state where 94 per cent of the population were Catholic and only 4 per cent Protestant, were subjected to more criticism. While the Catholic religion appeared on the surface to be robust in terms of outward convention and obedience, fault lines were beginning to appear that would create questions about its capacity to survive the decade with an assurance of continued deference to and respect for its teachings and personnel.

Those intent on pressing for significant change displayed much courage and there was a maturation of sorts as well as increased tolerance. Journalists, broadcasters and economists sought to ask more searching questions, demanded more engaged and honest answers and created new outlets. Radio and television faced new challenges, and while public service broadcasting had much to recommend it, the monopoly of the state broadcaster, Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), came in for some stinging criticism. Culturally, artists broke new ground in giving poetic, theatrical and visual representation to Ireland's old and new, and Irish musicians were vibrant and productive.

As well as economically lean years, there were periods during the decade of significantly increased spending and consumption. Food that

had rarely if ever reached the Irish palate began to appear; holiday destinations that had previously seemed beyond Irish aspirations became more accessible and a noisy youth culture, expressed through music, writing, oratory, dancing and experimenting with new substances and new modes of sexual behaviour, made itself felt. The beginning of modern Irish consumerism was facilitated by increased exposure to the outside world and there was reason to celebrate the achievements of athletes and other sporting greats who made their presence felt on the world stage.

Not all of these stirrings came without protest. They prompted warnings that Ireland was losing its soul and its national, defining characteristics. A transitional decade also made for a bad-tempered decade, and not due solely to the despair created by paramilitary violence, which prompted censorship and rough justice. Improvements in the economy and indulgent consumerism were apparent and real but frequently faltering and too dependent on borrowed money; the oil crises bit hard and the cost of living became intolerable for some. Many of the attempts to bring a modern infrastructure to the country made agonisingly slow progress. Roads and transport assumed a new significance, but the increase in traffic created dilemmas and vastly increased the risk of road death. The first experience of a significant increase in house prices created tension and concern about sustainability. Discarding an older Ireland amounted in some cases to a reckless disregard for heritage in the rush to expand, adapt and modernise.

Strikes proliferated and raised serious questions about productivity, management and the role of trade unions. Foreign investors saw many opportunities in Ireland, but were also conscious and blunt about its deficiencies as a modern industrial economy. The balance to be struck between spending and taxes raised questions about equality among the workforce. Public sector workers complained of unfair budgets and a failure to distribute the burden of taxation fairly. While EEC membership provided significant opportunities for agriculturists in terms of new and bigger markets, the quest to get farmers to pay more – or indeed, any – income taxes met with stubbornness, and the notion of a European identity was curiously ill defined. The 1970s also saw some semblance of an engagement with the theme of the environment; issues around pollution and natural resources were sometimes tentatively probed and, given the shortage of oil during the decade, it was inevitable that questions of alternative fuel and energy supplies would be raised, though goals that were set in that regard were far short of ambitious.

Given the threat from subversives and new outlets for protesting, there were new challenges for law enforcers and it proved to be a difficult decade for the Gardaí (the Irish police force). How and indeed whether the policing and legal systems were working, and the extent to which the administration of justice was fair and transparent created new questions about civil liberties and human rights. In terms of individual welfare and health, there were attempts to tackle shortcomings, administrative and physical, and a new awareness of dangers to mental health. The role of the state in catering for the vulnerable was raised in different ways, often without demonstrable or impressive results.

In other European countries, including West Germany, there was a sense that ‘the bubbling reform atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s rapidly lost its fizz’,<sup>12</sup> flattened by international recession and mass unemployment, with, as in France, the main impulse being one of damage limitation and consolidation rather than grandeur, and complications in reconciling a desire for individual freedom with social justice.<sup>13</sup> In the United States in the 1970s, the decade has also been regarded by historians as representing the end of an era when a ‘new sense of limits struck home’ and abuse of trust was manifest in the political establishment. Identifying the crisis of confidence, as President Jimmy Carter sought to do, did not necessarily translate into consensus, as Conservatism reached a new power with the rise of the ‘New Right’ that denounced a society built on secularism.<sup>14</sup>

These issues, or local versions of them, were raised in the Irish Republic in the 1970s: in parliament, within the civil service, in newspapers, at public meetings, by protest groups, on radio and television and in private writings. The challenges of increased modernisation, secularisation, Europeanisation and consumerism have to be placed in the context of a republic that, after Ireland’s precocious politicisation in the early twentieth century and the civil war of 1922–3, had ultimately created a conservative, authoritarian governing culture, that seemed to prize the stability and endurance of the institutions of state and created a very wide definition of dissent. The Troubles and the fear that they would spill over the border further entrenched those traits, but it was clear that not all the dissent and challenges to authority could be contained.

The questions of governance and the distribution of power are of central relevance to any assessment of the decade and go to the heart of what changed, how and why, but also what remained the same. The 1960s

was justly regarded as a decade of progress in the Republic; the failed economic policies of previous decades had been reversed as protection gave way to free trade and created new employment and improved living standards. The emigration that had characterised the 1950s, when half a million people left the country, had been vastly reduced; there was investment in education, the arrival of television, exposure to outside influences and a relaxation of the censorship mentality.

But history, of course, does not fall neatly into decades; the Republic was still a state and society in transition in the 1970s and the way in which power – economic, social, political and cultural – was being exercised prompted much criticism. After a half-century of self-rule, there was much focus on what was not working and what might, could or should change for the better. The questions were searching and pointed – why was the political culture still so dominated by clientelism and localism? Could there be parliamentary reform and a truly representative Senate? Were state institutions viewed as the property of the politicians and how much reform of the civil service was necessary? Why were Irish natural resources not cherished and better used for the common good? Would Europe be the solution to doubts about Irish competence and potential or would it create even more problems? What was the answer to Ireland's economic woes: a self-sufficient narrowly focused approach to commerce or subjecting the economy to market forces with all the attendant risks? Was the public sector too big and too expensive or one of the country's greatest strengths? Was the Irish social and cultural identity truly distinctive or just a second-rate version of what was manifesting itself elsewhere? Were the children and women of the Republic cherished? Did Ireland share in the sense of an end to a 'golden age' thought to have terminated in Britain, for example, in 1973, giving way to 'an age of relative confusion',<sup>15</sup> or had Ireland even made it to a 'golden age' in the first place? Did both countries discover that modernisation required political resources which British prime ministers Ted Heath, Harold Wilson and their counterparts in Ireland were 'ill-equipped to mobilize?'<sup>16</sup>

There were valiant attempts to address some of these questions, but many of them were responded to ambiguously or simply ignored, or put on the long finger. A number of them, particularly those relating to leadership, political culture, economic management, status in Europe, natural resources, public service reform, and the status of children, are still relevant and very obviously unanswered forty years later in a Republic much

more peaceful and stable since the end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but bankrupt and shorn of much of its sovereignty due to a disastrous government decision to guarantee the entire Irish banking system in 2008 and the subsequent International Monetary Fund and European Union bailout of the economy.

Historians are now in a position to research and assess many aspects of the 1970s from primary sources as a result of the release of state documents, under the 1986 National Archives Act, which allows for the release of such papers after thirty years has lapsed, and the growing number of private collections being released relating to those active across many fronts during the decade. This book seeks to exploit them to the full to provide a window for understanding the decade, its governance, controversies and personalities.

In particular, this book draws heavily on the files of the Department of the Taoiseach in the National Archives, through which came an abundance of policy papers, discussions and assessments from all government departments and their civil servants. These files underline the strong centralised nature of government in Ireland and also the crucial role played by a generation of civil servants who feature prominently in the narrative, including T. K. Whitaker, governor of the Central Bank, Frank Murray, Richard Stokes, Dermot Nally, Bertie O'Dowd and Walter Kirwan in the Department of the Taoiseach, Charles Murray in the Department of Finance, Seán O'Connor in the Department of Education, and Seán Donlon, Noel Dorr and Paul Keating in the Department of Foreign Affairs. These formulated their opinions and thoughts at great length and were indispensable to the running of their respective departments. As observed by former Irish civil servant Martin Mansergh in 2011, 'Anonymous civil servants can achieve a degree of immortality on file ... with the passage of time and the release of archives, particular civil servants stand out, as much as ministers.'<sup>17</sup> The Department of the Taoiseach also became a repository for a multitude of correspondence from the public, reflecting the extent to which it was a forum for expressions of anxiety, and approval or disapproval of the way in which various contemporary controversies were dealt with.

Some of the personal papers of two Taoisigh, Jack Lynch and Liam Cosgrave, also housed in the National Archives, reveal much about their styles of leadership and their relationships with departmental staff as they grappled with some of the difficulties of the 1970s, most obviously the

stability of the state and the various threats to it. Some of their younger colleagues proved to be impatient to develop new ways of doing business, nationally and internationally. The papers of Ireland's foremost constitutional expert, UCD law professor and Fine Gael TD (member of parliament) John Kelly, and the first batch of the archival papers of Garret FitzGerald, Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1973–7 and future Taoiseach, are instructive and revealing in this regard and give a strong sense of some of the internal difficulties within Fine Gael. Correspondence across all these collections sheds light on the activities of some of the dominant Labour Party personalities and intellects of the decade, including historian and diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien and historian and broadcaster David Thornley, both first elected as TDs in 1969.

Likewise, the papers of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party, in the archives of University College Dublin, detail the strategies and attention to organisation that made it one of the most successful political parties in the world but also the tensions that arose in relation to its structures and large membership and the convulsions within the party after disagreements over how to relate to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The issue of senior members' involvement with the importation of arms led to the sacking of two of its most ambitious cabinet members, Charles Haughey, another future Taoiseach, and Donegal's Neil Blaney in 1970 and the subsequent 'Arms Trial'. The young general secretary of the party, Séamus Brennan, who took on that job in 1973, played a key role in attempting to manage the internal party fallout as the decade progressed. The papers of another key office holder, president of Ireland from 1974–6, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, who resigned after being insulted by Fine Gael's Minister for Defence Patrick Donegan, have also been used to detail another memorable controversy of the decade, while the neglected papers of the Irish Council of the European Movement (ICEM) also held in the UCD archives, have been drawn on to look at how one of the key challenges of the 1970s – to inform and enlighten people about the implications of EEC membership – was faced.

Valuable insights have also been obtained through the lens of contemporary newspapers, magazines and the personal memoirs and documents generated by those who lived through this decade. A host of sociological, religious, political, literary, educational and administrative journals have also been used in the introductory sections to each part to set the scene for each theme and underline the degree to which the 1970s



was a decade of debate about governance, identity and social change. Also of particular value, because of their intensive coverage of politics, culture and economics, are two current affairs magazines. *Hibernia*, a conservative organ which had existed since 1937, was acquired in 1968 by journalist John Mulcahy, who revamped and transformed it into a high-quality crusading publication with in-depth coverage of politics and business, while investigative current affairs magazine *Magill* was launched in 1977 by Vincent Browne, Mary Holland and Noel Pearson. In the same year *Hot Press*, a music magazine, was established by Niall Stokes and its value lies in the extent to which it highlighted the burgeoning youth culture of the era as well as new musical departures and a determination to embrace international influences.

This book does not offer a chronology of the decade or give another history of the Troubles, about which a voluminous library already exists.<sup>18</sup> Instead, it brings to light new sources of information on the emergence and persistence of the political, social and cultural issues that go to the heart of the nature of the Irish Republic, and in particular its governance, in one of its most challenging and defining decades. It reflects on its contemporary concerns, its successes and failures, and elaborates on 'trends and tendencies, the evolution of ideas, the striving to new values'.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, it underlines the extent to which, in the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s, while some old moulds were broken, ambiguities still abounded.