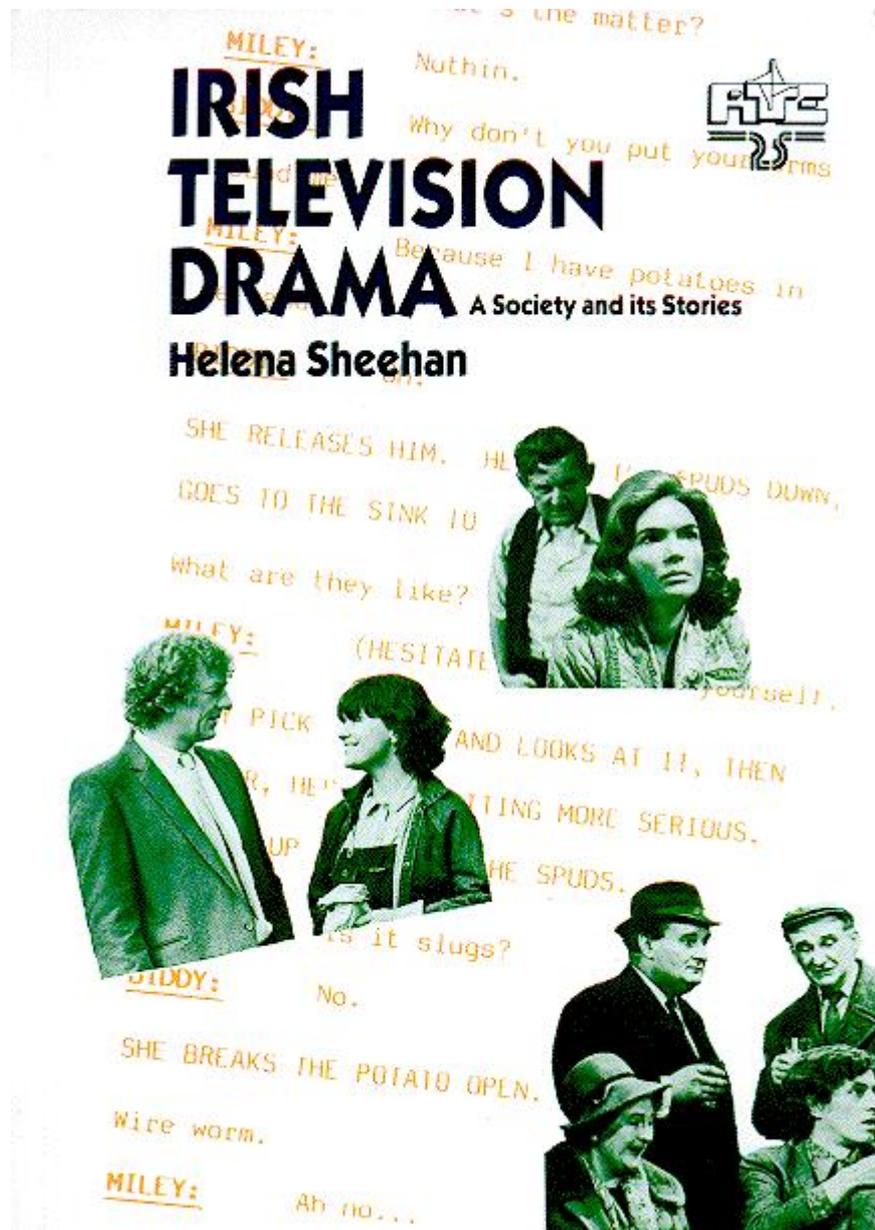


# Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories

Helena Sheehan



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**Professor Helena Sheehan**

website: <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehanh/sheehan.htm>

e-mail: [helena.sheehan@dcu.ie](mailto:helena.sheehan@dcu.ie)

# **Table of Contents**

**Introduction**

## **Part 1: Concepts / Contexts / Criteria**

**Chapter 1: Story, Myth, Dream and Drama**

**Chapter 2: Television as a Medium of Drama**

**Chapter 3: Judgments of Television Drama**

## **Part 2: The Evolution of Irish Television Drama**

**Chapter 4: The 60s: The Coming of Television**

**Chapter 5: The 70s: Progress, Pressures and Protests**

**Chapter 6: The 80s: The Satellite Era**

**Appendix: RTE Television Drama Productions 1962-1987**

**Titles index**

## Introduction

This is essentially a story about storytelling. It is, first of all, an account of why people tell stories. It is an exploration of what has been at stake in the whole, long and complex history of storytelling, stretching from the voices of the ancient bards to the signals of space age satellites. It is, in the second instance, a story about why particular people have told particular stories at a particular time in the history of a particular society. The Irish people have always been renowned as storytellers. This is the story of Irish storytelling in the television era.

Although storytelling would seem to be a universal activity, fundamental to the human condition, it has by no means been a static one. It has not been the same for all times. It is an activity that has undergone enormous transformations. Perhaps the most striking change is the extent to which tales told face to face in direct human contact have given way to tales electronically transmitted from increasingly remote sources. Dinner table conversation, school lessons, pub craic, bedtime rituals and fireside chats still survive. So do newspapers, books, theatre, radio and cinema. Nevertheless, television has become the predominant medium of contemporary storytelling.

This makes it ever more imperative to subject its stories and its modes of storytelling to critical scrutiny; to ask what sort of stories are being told and what sort of criteria are appropriate in assessing them; to see if there are any patterns discernible in this vast output; to find out if there are any explanations for its shapes and changes of shape. To get to the heart of the matter it is necessary to raise such preliminary issues as:

- the role of storytelling in human experience
- the role of drama as a mode of storytelling
- the role of television as a medium of drama

and to do so in a way that is up front about fundamental assumptions, terms of reference, methods of research and alternative approaches.

It is then in order to analyse particular stories in terms of their deep structures and to place these within the context of the total flow of television and the larger tapestry of social experience. This means an analysis of Irish television drama in terms of the underlying meaning of the stories being told and the emerging patterns of meaning, within the larger patterns of indigenous and imported television and within the development of Irish social history. Finally, there are the problems and prospects for the future. Much is at stake, both for Ireland and for the world, in the emergent scenarios of global flows in the satellite era.

The aim of this book is to pursue these larger and deeper questions about television drama, and to do so in a systematic manner and on a comprehensive scale, as an antidote both to the passive and unreflective nature of much television viewing and to the shallow and fragmented character of most television criticism. It is a somewhat daunting task to seek to synthesise such a vast and variable flow of programming across decades and across continents, to try to find a coherent pattern in the seemingly random chaos that others let be as a babel of incommensurable discourses, to look for deeper meaning in what others insist is simple entertainment or pure escapism, with no other rhyme or reason. Nevertheless there is reason to believe that television drama is shaped and being shaped by contemporary consciousness, in ways that are crying out to be understood. Paralysis in the face of the difficulties of doing so would be acquiescence in the laziness, cowardice and confusion that prevail.

It is my belief that there is a deeper logic to most things than is at first apparent and that it is important to take on panoramic projects. I have tried to give due attention to detail, without losing sight of the wood for the trees, concentrating on achieving as much of an overall perspective and sense of historical sweep as possible. My orientation in sorting out such a huge mass of data has been to adopt a holistic and historicist approach, which has aimed:

- to look at television drama in terms of the stories a society tells about itself and others to itself and others
- to draw as comprehensive and as vivid a picture as possible of Irish television drama in the various stages of its development, decade by decade
- to trace the networks of assumptions underlying these stories through the recurring images, plots, settings, themes, genres and modes of characterisation and through the patterns of change emerging in these over the years
- to articulate the implicit world view, or clash of world views, underlying the productions of each period
- to analyse the shifts which have occurred from the earliest days of Irish television to the present in relation to the socio-historical context in which they have occurred

- to reflect on the relationship between such shifts in the shape of television drama and the larger pattern of social change.

My argument is that a detailed and disciplined study of both texts and contexts reveals certain recurring modes of representation. These patterns are rooted in a larger process, a process forging its way through the work of writers, producers, directors and executives, most often below the threshold of consciousness. Time and time again, I was told by those who made policy, who wrote and edited scripts, who produced or directed the drama I was investigating, that there was no pattern in it. Most believed that what was produced or not produced was a matter of fortuitous circumstance, personal whim or some sort of individual non-contextual creative process. I was told all sorts of details about practical contingencies, personal tastes, differential talents and many other things, which were important for understanding the intricate processes on the ground and the particular reasons for particular productions being as they were. However, it would have been easy to get lost in these details and not see the wood for the trees. The fact that there were more particular processes and reasons involved does not invalidate the thesis that there were larger processes and reasons working their way through them. The fact that the writers, producers, directors and executives are not always aware of the forces shaping their consciousness and their situation makes those forces no less real.

Although this is a work of social history, making very large and strong theoretical claims, I have tried to devise methods of research which would ensure that my general analysis was properly grounded in particular knowledge of programmes and the concrete conditions of their production and reception. This meant, first of all, watching a lot of television. Several years of taking copious notes from intensive off-air viewing were supplemented both by drawing on memories of years of past viewing and by making the most of access to television archives. I had total access to RTÉ archives and was limited only by how much material had been lost when videotapes were wiped in the earlier period.

I must acknowledge here my enormous debt to Radio Telefís Éireann, as my relationship to RTÉ was crucial in making many aspects of my research possible. RTÉ not only gave financial support to my work, but gave me the run of the institution over a period of several years. I became a familiar face in the drama department, in studio, on location, in the library, in editing suites, in viewing facilities, in numerous offices and in the restaurant. I received considerable co-operation wherever my probing took me, without restrictions of access and without pressure to inhibit my critical assessments of what I might encounter. Indeed, most people I dealt with were remarkably critical and self-critical and expected the same from me. The whole experience gave me an understanding of the inside workings of a broadcasting organisation and the production side of television drama that I would not have otherwise. I observed the making of whatever drama was in production during the period of my research: *Glenroe*, *Inside*, *Leave It to Mrs. O'Brien*, *Spring Cleaning*. I conducted a number of formal interviews with executives, producers, directors, authors, actors, which have been cited where relevant in the text. Perhaps I learned most, however, in the less formal situations, from the offhand remarks, anecdotes and reactions that arose spontaneously in the course of work in progress, comings and goings and lunch breaks. I have respected whatever was said to me in confidence, although such knowledge shaped what I wrote, implicitly if not explicitly. This experience of things at the source has immeasurably enhanced my understanding of how television comes to be as it is and I can never watch television in the same way again.

I have also pursued more orthodox methods of research. My reading encompassed the entire range of academic work in television studies and related fields, as well as scripts, production manuals, previews, reviews, memoirs, reports, memos, files and miscellaneous archival material. Over the years I attended numerous conferences, seminars and lectures where relevant to add to my sense of the existing terms of discussion and debate. The 1<sup>st</sup> International Television Studies Conference in London in 1984, the 7<sup>th</sup> Celtic Film and Television Festival in Newcastle in 1986 and the RTÉ/IFI summer schools from 1983 to 1986 were important, as were various events organised by the Media Association of Ireland and the Society of Irish Playwrights.

My transition from university philosophy departments to a national television station was mediated by my early years of lecturing in communications in the National Institute of Higher Education, which has since become Dublin City University, which brought a reorientation of my research into the area of media studies, without leaving behind my interest in philosophy, specifically in epistemology, political theory and sociology of knowledge

Whereas my original outline for this book included one chapter on Irish television drama within a more comprehensive book on trends in television drama worldwide, this material mushroomed to become an entire book in itself. I would not have done so, had I not believed it merited such extensive attention. I have, however, taken great care to see it within the perspective of global developments in international television. Irish television drama has, from the very beginning, not only developed under the influence of its own native drama traditions, but also in an environment of intensive exposure to British and American television. It has neither been produced nor perceived in isolation from what was being produced elsewhere. It presents interesting points of comparison and contrast with both

British and American television, as well as with the television of other small nations. Amidst its various influences and under many pressures, it has achieved an impressive record of indigenous television drama production.

I have put particular emphasis on American television drama, not only because of the Irish audience's long and large exposure to it, but because of its pioneering role in the creation of the genres and conventions of television drama production and because of its long-standing and ever-increasing domination of the world's airwaves. I have also taken considerable note of British television, again not only because of the amount of time the Irish audience has spent in viewing it, but because it has developed under such a different ethos from that of the US and has pioneered a tradition so strikingly different in its themes, settings, storylines, characterisations and range of viewpoints. Ireland is probably the best place in the world for seeing the best of international television, at least in multi-channel land. Certainly better than America, where the US audience sees very little from elsewhere, even in cities with upward of 70 channels. Better than Britain, as we see all of their channels, terrestrial and satellite, with both indigenous and additional imported material, which is increasingly coming from a wider and wider range of international sources.

To acknowledge by name everyone who helped me, especially at RTÉ, would be a long list. There have been so many producers, directors, floor managers, stage managers, production assistants, vision mixers, cameramen, sound and lighting technicians, film and video editors, secretaries, librarians, executives, authors and actors, who not only put up with my presence, but went out of their way to assist me. I did occasionally come up against vague stirrings of anti-intellectual undercurrents, though only rarely did they erupt into the open and even more rarely were they aimed particularly at me. Most, however, were at least curious and courteous and some were most interested, encouraging and generous. I am particularly indebted to Muiris MacConghail and Bob Collins for facilitating my modus operandi within RTÉ and for their intellectual commitment to the project. I am also grateful to those who consented to interviews: Muiris MacConghail, Bob Collins, Ted Nealon, Niall McCarthy, Tony Barry, Louis Lentin, Michael Garvey, Donall Farmer, Jim Fitzgerald, Noel O Briain, Chloe Gibson, Brian MacLochlainn, John Lynch, Gerard Stembridge, Paul Cusack, Eugene Murray, Eoghan Harris, Wesley Burrowes, Michael Judge, Carolyn Swift, James Plunkett, Martin Duffy, Kevin Grattan, Mannix Flynn, Tony Fahy, John Baragwanath, Kieran Hickey, Kevin McHugh, Fintan O'Toole and Niall Tóibín. Other discussions, not set up as interviews, with these as well as others, such as Mick Lally and Liam O'Leary were illuminating. Kevin McHugh gave an insightful critical response to my work in progress. Others who assisted me were Catherine Hughes, Rita Foran, Eilish Pearce, Barbara Durack and Richard Pine. Finally, I must acknowledge the forbearance and assistance of Sam Nolan whose everyday life was so affected by my comings and goings, my viewing priorities and all the practical exigencies of my work.

In the end, however, it has been up to me to put the pieces of the puzzle together and to make something of value out of all that has come my way in what was in the end inevitably a solitary task. As to whether I have succeeded, it is for the reader to judge.

Dr. Helena Sheehan  
Dublin 1987

# **Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories**

## **Part 1: Concepts, Contexts, Criteria**

## Chapter 1: Story, Myth, Dream and Drama

What is it about stories and the acting out of stories in drama that holds such fascination for us? Through the ages, an endless stream of narrative and enactment of narrative has filled some basic need in us and stimulated a seemingly insatiable desire for more of the same. We seem to have a limitless capacity for exchanging experiences, for filling our lives with representations of other people's lives, for coming to terms with the problems and possibilities of life through a vicarious involvement in other lives, for incorporating the experience of others into our own and vice versa.

But what exactly are stories? What sorts of representations do they embody? What sorts of involvements do they elicit? A story or a narrative is an account of events. But it is not just any sort of account of any events. It is a selection and ordering of events into a meaningful pattern. It is consequential sequence of events. Its typical structure begins with a setting of the scene and introduction of characters in an initial situation, a state of relative equilibrium. It then proceeds to a disruption of this equilibrium, with the emergence of some sort of catalyst for the eruption of tension, conflict, misunderstanding, contradiction, mystery or loss. There follows an exploration of the causes, implications or consequences. Then come various attempts at resolution, which build toward a climax, a high point of tension, bringing revelation or catharsis. It ends with a resolution in a new state of relative equilibrium. A story may be factual or fictional, comic or tragic, deep or superficial, mythical or mundane, verbal or visual, ancient or modern. If it is fully developed narrative, it is a highly structured and meaningful ordering of experience. It is a far more fundamental activity than we often realise. It is bound up in an intricate and complex relationship with our other activities and with our overall patterns of experiencing and coming to terms with the world.

To a considerable extent, we interpret the world, ourselves and other people through stories. We are continually perceiving, describing and detailing with new people and new situations through remembered images from past stories. We are constantly exposed to new stories, varying types of stories, conflicting stories. Much cognitive and emotive activity is actually a sorting out and weighing of stories. The more integrated, the more intellectually sophisticated and emotionally mature we are, the more actively we are ordering and re-ordering the details of such knowledge and experience as comes our way into a coherent narrative of the story of the world, the story of mankind, the story of our own time and place and the story of our own lives within the context of these other stories. The further this is pushed, the more the thrust is towards weaving all stories into one ultimate story. So much of our discourse is actually storytelling. How often, when asked for an explanation of an action or event, do we respond by placing it in a consequential sequence of prior events? So many theories are actually stories. Conflicting theories, like theism versus atheism, idealism versus materialism, creationism versus evolutionism, voluntarism versus determinism, are in essence conflicting stories of how the same phenomena came to be.

Every story both presupposes and projects particular images of what human life is all about, a certain picture of the social order in which it plays itself out, and a certain implicit world-view. The most compelling and resonant of these images haunt us, weigh upon us, penetrate our patterns of thought and emotion, not so much directly and overtly, but indirectly and subliminally. The further we probe this process, the more obvious it becomes that narratives shape and are shaped by something larger than ourselves. There is every reason to believe that stories and images play a crucial, if often subliminal, role in the shaping and re-shaping of personality; in the forming and re-forming of a picture of the social order in which personality is realised; in the constructing and reconstructing of a world view through which all ideas and experiences are constantly filtered and re-filtered. Conversely, personality, social order and world-view shape the telling and re-telling of stories and structure the resonance of images.

Historically, the most compelling and resonant images and the stories in which they are embodied have gathered to themselves the force of myth. Myth is, it must be said, a term used in a very messy way in everyday discourse and used in very contradictory ways in academic discourse. It is often associated with primitive ritual and pre-scientific thought, with something essential to ancient Babylonians, Greeks or Celts or with remote Zulus or Navaho, but certainly not to ourselves and our cosmopolitan contemporaries. Alternatively, it is identified with general falsity and misconception, as when a notion is dismissed with the assertion 'That's a myth'. But myth is not necessarily either primitive or false. It can be primitive or modern. It can be true or false, though not in the same sense as a simple declarative sentence of mundane fact can be true or false.

What is myth then?<sup>1</sup> Myths are stories, but not just any stories. They are stories of special symbolic significance. Myths are prototypical stories, concretising the really fundamental themes of human existence; involving archetypal characters and situations; expressing the really basic curiosities, hopes, fears, desires, conflicts, choices and patterns of resolution. Myths are paradigmatic stories, ie, stories that are told and retold as shedding light on other stories, as linking past and present, as bringing the unknown into relation with known. Myths are resonating narratives, embodying the distilled essence of human experience; giving symbolic answers to the most basic human questions, questions of origin and destiny; offering stylised solutions to the most basic human decisions; staking out the choices to be made at life's cross-roads. Myths are normative narratives, setting out a society's history,

legitimizing its institutions, codes and values and envisioning its future development. Myths are synthesising stories, capturing the zeitgeist of a time and place, bringing to a focus what forces are at work, highlighting its problems, and crystallising its values.

Myths are not fortuitous fictions, nor free floating fantasies. They are deeply rooted reflections of a society's geographical conditions, technical means of production, social division of labour, political structures of power, state of scientific knowledge, etc. Whatever the ways of the gods and goddesses in the heavens, they have always been strikingly akin to the ways of men and women on the earth. They are not factual records of their times, but imaginative constructions of aspects of the collective consciousness that are as revealing in their way as any factual records. Myths are not static. They evolve in rhythms linked to the rhythms of a larger historical evolution. They twist and turn with the transformation set in motion with inventions, migrations, power struggles, invasions, victories and defeats. They are revised with revolutions. They reveal, not some mystified humanity transcending history, but a rooted humanity thoroughly and deeply shaped by the movement of history. Such universality as there is in the human condition emerges in and through the historical process and not in spite of or apart from it.

Mythical themes are those of creation and destiny, birth and death, fertility and sterility, initiation and estrangement, hubris and nemesis, good and evil, danger and flight, war and peace, privation and reward, covenant and betrayal, ignorance and enlightenment, quest and fulfillment, exile and promised land, golden age and apocalypse. Mythical lives are full of prophecy, incarnation, epiphany, mission, migration, metamorphosis, martyrdom and resurrection. Mythical imagery is grounded in the basic realities of light and darkness, sunrise and sunset, fire and storm, phallus and womb, birth and death. These fundamental experiences persist, and yet are greatly transformed, from one age to the next. Myths tend to capture both the continuity and the change. Indeed, they seem to emerge at the interface.

Mythical characters are 'larger than life' in that they symbolise something larger than themselves. Their individual lives play a metaphorical role in relation to other lives. Their particular stories have a world-historical quality to them. Because they so strikingly embody something so basic in the collective psyche, their very names reverberate with deeper meaning. How rich are the connotations of: Odysseus, Prometheus, Oedipus, Narcissus, Sisyphus, Dionysius, Zarathustra, Cuchulainn, Adam and Eve, Moses, Job, David and Goliath, Jesus, Socrates, Buddha, Abelard and Héloïse, Romeo and Juliet, Joan of Arc, Robin Hood, Don Quixote, Faust, Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe, Cathleen ní Houlihan. More modern characters lack the same richness of reference, but approximate it in capturing something in the collective psyche that reaches beyond their individual character: the Lone Ranger, Rambo, JR Ewing, Fr. Ted. Not only fictional characters carry this sort of symbolic reference, but certain real historical figures loom so large that their names carry a sort of mythic force: Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Darwin, Einstein, Marx, Lenin, Parnell, Connolly, Larkin, Che Guevara, Mandela. Not only individuals, but groups, the druids or the fenians, can take on mythic meaning,

Places too, both fictional and factual, have mythic connotations: the garden of Eden, the rivers of Babylon, the road to Damascus, Sodom and Gomorrah, Camelot, the Alamo, the GPO. The locations associated with long-running popular serials can gather a kind of symbolic reference approximating the force of myth: Coronation Street, Cicely, Craggy Island. Certain objects and vessels also carry mythic connotations: Pandora's box, Ariadne's thread, the Trojan horse, the tower of Babel, the ark of the covenant, the cross, the hammer and sickle, the plough and the stars. Finally, there are mythic scenarios of lost civilisations and future states: Atlantis, Apocalypse, Utopia, El Dorado, Tír na nÓg, Nirvana, the 1000-year reich, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the third wave.

There are many threads connecting myth past and present, but there have been many threads broken along the way as well. We must admit that the fabric is tattered, if not almost threadbare, in places. There can be little doubt that science has taken over much of the ground that was once occupied by myth. Myth no longer has the sort of explanatory function it once had. We no longer conceive of natural forces in terms of willful deities when we have become accustomed to the terms of the meteorological report. Despite the whole range of crude to sophisticated theological attempts to reconcile religion and science, there is no way we can relate to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden in the same way as our pre-darwinian ancestors. However, we still can relate to biblical stories, as to those of classical Greece and Rome, as giving symbolic expression to centuries of collective memory. In doing so, something is lost and something is gained. Once we see Mary in the same way as we see Aphrodite, we have separated ourselves from our kin flying to Lourdes or Knock, but we have grown. We have advanced in wisdom, if not in grace.

It is a question of how to deal with our myths once we become conscious to them as myths. It is a question of how to acknowledge our traditional roots without violating our contemporary experience. It is a matter of achieving a vision 'wherein the innocence of the morning will not any longer be strange to our maturity'.<sup>2</sup> Some would say that myth has no place at all in our world of modern science. Some engage in a spurious demythologising of contemporary religion. Others try to hold onto the old myths in as near the old ways as they can manage and try to conjure away the contradiction. Scholars, such as Joseph Campbell, have charted the path to such a vision in developing the science of

mythology, conceived as a natural history of gods and heroes, which regards none as sacrosanct or beyond the domain of science. Using the analogy of the development of biology as a science, he staked out the rules for a rational relationship to the heritage of myth:

Moreover, just as our science of biology came to maturity only when it dared to reckon man among the beasts, so will that of mythology only when God is reckoned among the gods.<sup>3</sup>

To mature is to recognise both that it is impossible to hold onto the old myths in the old ways and that it is impossible to banish the old myths in the name of new ways. Religion, whether traditionalist or modernist, forms the strongest bastion of resistance at both ends. Contemporary theologians, such as Bultmann and Moltmann, have attempted to hold on to religion by purging it of myth. This strategy of demythologisation, however, is based on a radical misconception of the nature of both religion and myth. Addressing himself to this position, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has argued:

Modern man can neither get rid of myth nor take it at its face value. Myth will always be with us, but we must approach it critically ... we come to recognise a fundamental convergence between the claims of myth and reason ... every mythos harbours a logos which requires to be elaborated.<sup>4</sup>

The point, therefore, is not to demythologise, but to remythologise. The point is not to strip religion of mythology, but to strip mythology of religion. The point is to re-interpret and re-appropriate myth in a way that is true to our rationality and modernity.

Myth should never be such as to override our science, but neither should our science displace our myth. Both science and myth making are very basic activities and the contradictions need to be worked through and resolved. With all that science can explain, with all we know about bacteria and black holes, about swarming neutrinos and orbiting satellites, we still need stories which connect us with our historical roots, stories which express the temper of our times, stories which project our prospects for the future. Without any supernaturalist overtones or regressive implications, it is still possible to re-appropriate the mythical imagery of the ages. In a way that makes metaphorical sense, if literal nonsense, atheists speak of the death of God and scientists name planets after Roman deities.

There are still some things about the world, about life at its testing and turning points, that are best expressed in images and stories, especially those with the sort of mythic symbolism which focuses our cultural experience, crystallises our values and extends our horizons. There is still something about certain patterns of behaviour that make certain adjectives like promethean, dionysian, protean, narcissistic, socratic, erotic or oedipal, the most compelling points of reference we can summon in describing them. We find meaning in them in a way that is very modern, in a way that is continuous with, but different from, the meaning they had for ancient Greece. The older images linger on and gather newer references in later ages, bringing the old and new together, sparking off each other and giving each a charge it would not have on its own. Such classical points of contact as touched in Joyce's *Ulysses*, Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* have a memorably powerful sweep to them.

The interaction is on many levels and to diverse purposes. Within popular culture, there are numerous examples, as when the Starship Enterprise encountered Apollo, who lamented for what later ages had lost amidst what they considered to be progress. Within academic discourse, there has been the appeal of Oedipus for such thinkers as Freud and Lacan and the appeal of Prometheus for such thinkers as Marx and Engels. For various mass movements, old images have continued to be a potent force. Nationalist movements, in the pattern of Irish republicanism's connection with the Celtic revival, have testified to the fact that a nation's sense of itself emerges, not only in its political response to the present, but in its mythical appropriation of its past. Left wing forces have drawn upon imagery garnered from centuries of slave revolts, peasant uprisings and proletarian strikes. Reference to events such as the Paris commune, the Easter rising, the October revolution, the battle of Jarama, Paris 68 and Woodstock have a mythic force. Right wing forces too have linked a mythic past to present movements and future glories in fascist appeals to Teutonic myth or the glories of ancient Rome and in the survivalist version of the black death, as they wait in their bunkers for destruction and regeneration to come full circle. Nearer to home, there is the loyalist refraction of present anxieties and conflicts through the glories of King Billy and the battle of the Boyne, as orange youth join their orange elders in building bonfires and following marching bands.

Old myths live on in new ways and new myths grow out of new times. But there is a great distance between myth past and present. When we look at the societies that gave birth to the most compelling myths, we must realise that these images had a rooted meaning and a unifying power that no images, old or new, can have for our society. There can be no contemporary everyman. There can be no contemporary drama of ethical dilemma and decision that can call upon the same clarity, the same binding assent, as the medieval morality play could in its own world. In more simple, stable and self-contained societies, there is a clarity and cohesion in their modes of representation and codes of behaviour in which myth looms so much larger and is so much more actively and commonly affirmed. In our more

complex, more mobile and more open societies, there is no such clarity and cohesion. There are so many conflicting accounts of origin and destiny, so many diverse modes of representation, so many antithetical codes of behaviour, that no one of them can have such binding force.

Such images as have any sort of mythic force do not loom so large and do not command such active and common assent. Often it is residual imagery, drawing a lingering power from systems of representation grounded in other times and places. This is the case with Ireland's continuing adherence to traditional Catholicism and new right's revival of the mythos of early capitalism and fundamentalist christianity. When it is emergent imagery, drawing its force from the growing edge of contemporary consciousness, it is likely to be bleaker and more individualistic: the alienated man, alone in the urban crowd, waiting for Godot, looking back in anger, rebel without a cause, wandering dazed the day after the holocaust, or powerless in a world of virtual reality and omnipotent computers. For a brief interval, the emergent imagery was more hopeful and more communal: rebel with a cause, marching on the Pentagon, burning draft cards, gathered around the campfires of the resistance, exploring consciousness three, demanding power to the people, organising the revolution, building Woodstock nation. Another storyline seemed to be opening up.

However, by the 1980s, seemingly smothering all other stories and sources of stories, came the unprecedented popularity and near universality of the cults of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. There was constant reference to its characters and images in everyday discourse and in other forms of popular culture the world over. There was the accompaniment of production and transmission with all sorts of ritual and lore, orchestrated journalistic gossip, guest appearances of stars on talk shows, in which actors meshed with their characters and discussed plots with their hosts with the most remarkable suspension of disbelief. There were bookmakers taking bets on who shot JR, *Dynasty* dolls selling for \$10,000 each, contests to win a trip to Dallas and a walk-on part and a presentation of one square inch of Southfork to Gay Byrne by the Dallas Rose in the 1985 *Rose of Tralee* pageant. Even if no single series has achieved the same iconic status as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the decade since, the dominant narratives of globalised popular culture are still coming from the same source.

Much of it is commercial marketing and media hype, but it raises the question of the difference between myth and pseudo-myth, of the line between myth making and myth faking. It might seem a sham to put *Dallas*, *Baywatch* and *Friends* in the same category as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bible*, the *Táin* or *Canterbury Tales*. It might seem incongruous to speak of JR Ewing alongside Achilles or Cuchulainn or to compare Ally Mc Beal to Aphrodite or Persephone.

By the standards of the great classical myths, their characters are so shallow and so glib, their imagery so stereotyped and debased, their plots so superficial and contrived. They produce neither illumination nor catharsis. They carry no parabolic conviction. They do not embody the values of a whole society. Nevertheless, they fulfill at least some of the functions of the myths of the ages. Television has brought forth a population of archetypal figures, which elicit a certain kind of personal involvement and constitute communal points of reference. They express in their own way something about the temper of their times. It is true that they are commercially packaged products for mass consumption, but their commercial success is dependent on capturing something in the mass psyche which responds to them.

In addressing this question, Martin Esslin has argued that Lucy, Kojak, Archie Bunker and the Fonz might cut pale figures set side by side with those of Odysseus, Achilles, Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere, but their genesis as the outcrop of the collective unconscious has not been so different. The pantheon of archetypal characters in the ever recurring situations of television serials, he has contended, accurately reflects the collective psyche, the collective fears and aspirations, neuroses and nightmares of the American population, as distinct from the factual reality of the state of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

The collective psyche, of course, is no monolith. The factual reality of the state of the nation, in the case of the US in the 1980s for example, evoked diverse, if overlapping, responses from different sectors of the population. It was a time of divergent, even antithetical, myths. Even in terms of what was within the range of what Hollywood was able to detect, package and disseminate, *Rambo*, *Dallas* and *Hill Street Blues* each indicated something different about the collective fears and aspirations, neuroses and nightmares. Each was a part of the collective dream life of the culture that created it.

The picture becomes even more complicated, as these images enter the dream life of other cultures and interact with their own indigenous images. The Irish audience for example, watches *ER*, as well as *East Enders* and *Fair City*. Their ensemble of characters springs from very different roots and sets off very different resonances, but they coalesce in the Irish mind to form some sort of composite picture of a person living in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ironically, the Irish character created for television who has resonated most widely in the international arena is Fr Ted Crilly. After all the angst associated with Catholicism, farce has been the face of catharsis.

Hollywood has continued to prevail over all other sources of cultural production. The whole world is still watching what comes from the US and references to *The Sopranos* and *The Simpsons* are universal points of reference and even illumination. Many found the cartoon world of Springfield to be a more insightful exploration of the terrain of contemporary experience than more intendedly realistic portrayals. Bart Simpson stepped forth as one incarnation of a contemporary everyman.

Television at its best has been conscious of its role in creating contemporary myth and its continuity with past myth. Perhaps the most elaborate orchestration of this has been *Northern Exposure*. With immense intricacy and irony, characters interpreted the contemporary through primitive, classical, medieval and modern myths. Joel dreamt of Sisyphus bequeathing him the rock to be endlessly rolled up the hill. Chris thanked Maurice for being Apollo to his Dionysius. Marilyn Whirlwind told old Inuit tales to explain the dynamics of life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ed, the apprentice shaman, found in Hollywood films the most natural source of explanatory stories. The whole cast of characters were constantly dreaming the present in relation to past stories.

Myths are collective dreams. Myths are the products and producers of the larger recurring dreams, which seem to give meaning to the facts of everyday life. Myths build up from old dreams and in turn are the building blocks of new dreams. Myths are generated by collective fantasy and in turn generate further fantasy, both individual and collective. Myths both feed off popular imagination and feed back into it. Over a period of years, we build up a store of images, drawn from a host of sources. We find ourselves rambling through time, rummaging about in them, reviewing them, revising them, re-arranging them, reflecting upon them, re-incorporating them. Some of these are more memorable than others, popping up again and again, haunting us even when we are off guard. Those that touch something in us and spark off it tend to recur more and more and become most thoroughly incorporated into our consciousness. Those that touch something in many individuals and keep sparking off it and become terms of reference are on the road to becoming myths. *Northern Exposure* dramatised all levels of this process brilliantly.

There are various levels of dreaming. When asleep, the images flow in free association with a minimal amount of restraint from logical or empirical considerations. When awake, the images still often flow in a kind of free association, but usually in a way that is more consciously controlled, more logically coherent and more empirically grounded. For most, it is left at that, with images emerging and dissolving, fusing and fragmenting, being absorbed both above and below the threshold of consciousness, contributing to their picture of themselves, other people and their world. For most, the images exist in a juxtaposition that retains a modicum of logic and a sense of reality, but a juxtaposition that brings the imagery to no higher order. For some, however, the images float wildly, cut off from logical and empirical constraints until the individual gets lost in a realm of fantasy and loses the grip on reality that is necessary to bring fantasy and reality into a healthy relationship or into a creative achievement. For others, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the imaginative process is most active, most self-conscious and most disciplined by rationality and reality, bringing the flow of images to a higher order, gathering them into a creative synthesis and raising dreams to the level of art. The creative person does not burst forth with a great project, painting, novel, play or film *ex nihilo*, but brings to a sharper focus what is hovering around in fuzzy and unfocused juxtaposition in others. All true art strives towards myth, in the sense of expressing the *zeitgeist* of its creative moment.

Dreaming, whether it issues in madness and myopia or in art and myth or simply in everyday fantasy, tends to dramatisation. The play of images moves in the direction of an imaginary enactment of scenarios. Dreaming or imagining is often the dramatisation of consciousness itself, with internal conflicts being played out in various ways and experimentally resolved. A person's fantasy life is often the internal drama of multiple impulses, being cast as programmatic identities, which confront each other in various ways in alternative scripts. In this sense, anyone with a lively imagination, ie, anyone who engages in an active experimentation with images, is an incipient playwright. When this internal process is externalised, we have the birth of plays and playwrights. When this loose and individual process is tightened up and socialised, we have come to the level of what is in the strict sense drama.

What then is drama? Drama is the enactment of a narrative. It is a highly structured ordering of experience. It is, in fact, a highly structured experience in itself. It is both about heightened experience and a heightened experience in itself. It involves a ritual entering into a story, both by those who present it and by those to whom it is presented. Drama is a highly schematised and condensed focusing of human experience in its moments of greatest intensity, in its moments of crucial choice and catharsis. It is a highly stylised and ritualised presentation of the human situation at the crux of things, at the crossroads, at the turning points. Drama is based on a causal arrangement of facts and events and an extremely rhythmic organisation of time. It calls for a particularly intense concentration of attention and organisation of psychic energy. Once seated in a theatre, cinema or in front of a television set, with the expectation of the elements of drama, we do not want to be presented with events at the level and pace of everyday life or at random. When the action is too slow, too loose, too flat, too rambling, we tend to become bored, anxious or resentful.

As to where to draw the line between what is and what is not dramatic, it is not so simple. The line certainly does not coincide with the line between fact and fiction or the line between plays and real life. There is the genre of

the drama-documentary. There are numerous studies showing how news, features, sports, adverts and virtually all of television's genres are also organised along dramatic lines. There are situations in real life that are more dramatic than those of many plays. There are people we encounter who are more dramatic than characters we see on stage or screen. We are all the time acting out the stories of our own lives, sometimes very dramatically, when we come to points of heightened experience and concentrated focus.

There is drama wherever and whenever there is the convergence of the elements of narrative, enactment, heightening and condensation. Across all its forms and genres, whether fact or fiction, single plays or series, comedy or tragedy, historical or contemporary, there is drama in the crucial situations of life which arouse curiosity, stir conflict and bring about catharsis. Drama revolves around situations of moral choice, crime, enigma, enlightenment, rivalry, vengeance, ambition, power struggle, natural disaster, deception, madness, loss, alienation, reconciliation, revolt, conflicting ideologies, historical transitions, identity crises, clash of old and new ways, rural-urban contrasts, male-female relations, reproduction, family tensions, social problems, political upheavals.

Drama has undergone numerous transformations:

- shifting its centre of gravity from the communal chorus to the lone individual.
- swinging between realism and romanticism, naturalism and expressionism, socialist realism and avant garde formalism;
- evolving through festival, theatre, radio, cinema and television.

But perhaps it is the medium of television that has wrought the greatest transformation in drama or, more significantly, in the role of drama in the rhythms of everyday life.

#### NOTES to Chapter 1:

1. There is a rich and complex scholarly literature on the nature of myth, building up over decades and drawing upon the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, archeology, philology and literary criticism. Classics in the field include: B. Malinowski *Myth in Primitive Psychology* London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Trubner, 1926; Mircea Eliade *The Myth of the Eternal Return* New York: Pantheon, 1954 and *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* New York: Harper, 1961; Joseph Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* New York: Meridian, 1956 and *The Masks of God* New York: Viking, 1964; Claude Lévi-Strauss 'The Structure of Myth' *Journal of American Folklore* 68: 1955; Erich Fromm *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairytales and Myths* New York: Rinehart, 1951; Roland Barthes *Mythologies* London: Paladin, 1973.
2. James Stephens *The Crock of Gold* London: Macmillan, 1912.
3. Joseph Campbell 'The Historical Development of Mythology' *Myth and Mythmaking* Henry Murray (ed) Boston: Beacon, 1968, p.21.
4. Paul Ricoeur 'Myth as the bearer of possible worlds' in Richard Kearney *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers* Manchester University Press, 1984, pp 36-44.
5. Martin Esslin *The Age of Television* San Francisco: Freeman, 1982, pp, 43-45.

## Chapter 2: Television as a Medium of Drama

Television has brought a whole new scale and intensity to the experience of drama that is without precedent in the history of human culture. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, there has never before been a time when a majority of any population had such regular and constant access to drama. Today more drama is watched in a week or weekend than would have been watched in a year or even in a lifetime in any previous historical period. This quantitative change in the level of drama as an intrinsic part of everyday life would seem to constitute a fundamental qualitative change, the implications of which we have scarcely begun to consider.<sup>1</sup> Once we do begin to consider, it becomes obvious that the implications of the shift from the occasional experience of drama to the habitual saturation of daily life with drama amounts to far more than an extension of access and viewing time. It begins to become clear that Williams was right in perceiving it as meaning that drama is now built into the rhythms of our everyday life in quite new ways.<sup>2</sup>

There is no way the relation of television to drama can be adequately conveyed in a cumulative account of television plays, series and serials as discrete units. To analyse particular programmes in isolation is to miss much about the experience of viewing such programmes. It is essential to analyse the experience of viewing such programmes within the experience of the total flow of television and to analyse this within the total flow of social experience. It is vital to grasp the rhythms of television drama within the rhythms of our everyday lives. It is also necessary to probe television as a medium and to understand how the forms and conventions of the medium, and not just the manifest content of programmes, have given a characteristic shape to the dramaturgy of our times.

It is significant that this voluminous and intensive exposure to images of a wider world and to vicarious involvement in representations of other people's lives comes at a time of increasing alienation from a wider world and deprivation of real involvement in other people's lives. Ironically, it is at a time when people have never been so interdependent that they have come to feel so isolated. The wider world has become ever more obtrusive and ominous at the same time as it has come to seem ever more obscure and out of reach. In this sort of world, in which we have become ever more physically crammed together, while intellectually and emotionally ever more far apart, television comes into the breach and speaks to us across the abyss. It does so without putting us on the spot to speak back. It keeps us from having to face into the abyss. It is a world in which the rhythms of everyday life have become increasingly cut adrift from either the rhythms of the natural world or the rhythms of social interaction.

Time is experienced as abrupt, crowded, fast moving sequences, dominated by a speeding and miscellaneous flow of images, with no apparent principle of organisation. The velocity, density, diversity and discontinuity of this vast flood of stimuli generates a vertigo that can be profoundly disorientating for those without a unifying centre to provide a more profound mode of orientation. For many, time is organised by nothing so much as by the television schedule, which both embodies the disorientating fragmentation and provides its own sort of comforting orientation and superficial level of organisation.

Already in its relatively short history, volumes have been spoken and written on the nature of television and its impact on our lives.<sup>3</sup> Contradictory claims abound. Opinions range from 'television is wonderful entertainment' to 'television is destroying the world'. Assessments of its influence run the gamut from 'it is the most powerful instrument ever to be invented' to 'it doesn't matter'. It is asserted that television is an incitement to violence, but then again it is also asserted that television is a means of sublimating violent tendencies. It is said that television opens us to a wider world, but it is also said that it cuts us off from it. For virtually every statement, there is a corresponding counter-statement.

What then can we say about television?

- Is it a stimulant or a soporific?
- Is it powerful or ephemeral?
- Is it communication or commerce?
- Is it window on the world or construction of reality ?
- Is it 'telling it like it is' or permeated by ideology ?
- Is it an art form or a idiot box ?
- Does it uplift or debase?
- Does it clarify or confuse?
- Does it enrich or erode ?
- Does it enlarge or diminish ?
- Does it unify or fragment ?
- Does it bring diversity or homogenisation ?
- Does it enhance enlightenment or encourage escapism ?

Does it convey information or breed ignorance ?  
Does it facilitate sanity or drive the masses into madness ?

The paradoxical power of television is such that it is and does virtually all that is said of it. Its complexity is such that both claims and counter-claims capture something of the multi-faceted truth of it. The best and worst opinions of it generally have their justification.

There can be no doubt that television has brought forth far reaching and fundamental changes, not only in how we spend our time, but in how we perceive our world, how we codify our experiences, how we relate to others and how we respond to other media. It not only occupies more of the waking hours of more of the world's population than any other medium in history, but it has probably reconstructed irrevocably our whole world sensory apparatus. It surely has altered the nature of our sensory balance in that it represents a return, although on a new level, to a culture that is more oral and visual than literary. It represents a mode of consciousness that is more oriented to sounds and images than to words and ideas.

It has brought the rise of modes of perceptions and expressions that are more dynamic, more prosaic, more concrete, more vivid, but also more ephemeral, more diffuse, more fragmentary. It has brought the decline of modes of perception and expression that are more contemplative, more analytical, more synthetic, more deeply rooted, more enduring. It seems there is a downward spiral in the standard of literacy and that people, especially the young, are becoming less clear, less disciplined, less logical, less integrated.

Not everyone is affected in the same way by television. Generally the experience of television is most positive where the experience of life is richest and is actively called into play, as a base for the creative assimilation and assessment of television. It is most negative where experience is most impoverished, where viewing is most addictive, most passive and least critical. For those without work, without meaningful personal relationships, without the habit of reading, without exposure to other forms of culture, without direct experience of situations which are and are not depicted on television, television can take over from all other interactions with the external world and even from certain internal processes.

This has both positive and negative effects. Television viewing can be healthy and even therapeutic. It can add new dimensions, even to the fullest of lives. For those deprived of such fullness, it can compensate to some degree for life's privations. It can give much pleasure, especially in times of illness, stress or depression, when life might otherwise be unrelieved pain. It can ease loneliness, especially for those who are trapped in chronic isolation. It can widen the horizons of knowledge and experience, even for the educated and sophisticated and even more for the uneducated and sheltered. It can enrich perception and stimulate imagination, though this is truest for those who are most adept at filtering the flow of what comes their way.

Television viewing can also be unhealthy and even neurotic. It can waste time and energy that could be more creatively and constructively channelled. It can dissipate mind and will. It can paralyse efforts to understand and to cope with life's privations. It can provide a pseudo-satisfaction of real needs in a way that re-inforces, rather than resists, the patterns of acquiescence in an alienated society. It can lead to addiction and withdrawal that exacerbates loneliness and overrides deeper experiences of both pleasure and pain. It can break habits of visiting, attending meetings, classes and social functions. It can kill conversation in homes, pubs and common rooms. It can create an illusory sense of intimacy and identification with fictional characters that can lead to the loss of real intimacy, as well as to a weakening of personal identity and sense of reality. It can cut a person off from other knowledge and experiences. It can condition masses of people to insensitivity. It can promote ignorance of anything that is not experienced second-hand through television, becoming like those in Plato's cave, who had never been outside and knew the outside world only through the flickering shadows on the cave wall.

It can distort perception and retard both reason and imagination, numbing the mind with mass-produced, plastic pictures of life, pre-packaged with formulaic plots, cliched explanations and superficial solutions. It can condition the mind to constant cutting, discontinuity and disruption, pushing the span of attention and power of concentration to near the vanishing point and making the flow of consciousness and sense of personal identity as jagged and as fractured as the flow of television. It can flood the mind and overload its circuits, with its sheer voluminous plentitude, swamping it with stimuli and overwhelming its ability to sort out and to synthesise. It can debilitate emotional sensitivity and debase cultural taste, crowding it out in the constant presence of kitsch, eroding the capacity to shift to other levels and gradually wearing down any sense of higher standards or deeper values. It can contribute to the infantilisation of the adult psyche, through its seductive silliness and its simplistic stereotypes. It can confuse the psychological development of children, through exposure to a multitude of adult problems, outreaching their capacity to comprehend. It can breed cynicism and disillusion, with the weight of the unending stream of palpable falsity, in commercial advertisements, in presidential addresses, in party political broadcasts and in life-in-the-fast-lane drama series.

On a sociological level, there is a need to consider the cumulative effect of the viewing experiences of the mass of individuals that make up a society and the character of the collective psyche as it is shaped by television. Television can do much to raise the cultural level of a society, by exposing people to the culture of times and places beyond their own direct experience. However, the domination of the airwaves by least-common-denominator American drama series is a formidable obstacle to what could be achieved in this regard.

Television does create a common discourse, perhaps the most universal point of cultural reference the world has ever known, but the homogenising and levelling effect of the standardised fare overrides both healthy diversity and a higher unity. It can erode both folk culture and high culture. It can be an instrument in establishing the ideological hegemony of those in power, so forcefully as to constitute the virtual colonisation of the collective consciousness. It can be highly efficient in the dissipation of potential dissent.

However, television is not a seamless web. It can at times be an instrument to challenge the dominant ideology, to highlight social injustice and even to suggest alternatives. The degree to which it can effectively do so is an exceedingly complicated matter to assess, as such interventions are subject to complex mechanisms of co-optation and to the overarching effect of the overall flow.

Much the same, of course, has been said of other media, past and present. What then is distinctive about television as a medium?

It has, after all, incorporated so much from other media that its distinctiveness might at first seem to be the way it functions simultaneously as newspaper, magazine, comic book, pulp fiction, classical literature, radio, theatre, cinema, music hall, rock concert, opera, ballet, light chatter, agony aunt, baby-sitter, night light, companion, election platform, sports stadium, game board, classroom, travelogue, porn palace and advertising billboard, all rolled into one. Television has at all stages in its development drawn heavily from other media, both in direct appropriation of material and methods and in indirect adaptation of genres, themes and techniques. It has, however, evolved considerably in its way of doing so over the years.

In its earliest days, perhaps the predominant influence was radio. This was natural enough in view of the fact that television was pioneered by broadcasting organisations already in the business of radio transmission. Not surprisingly, television was at first conceived as basically radio with pictures. Many existing radio programmes were transferred to television. *Hear it Now* became *See it Now*. Comedy sketches like *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Amos 'n Andy* added a visual dimension to their verbal routines. In the case of *Amos 'n Andy*, however, the white actors playing the black men on radio had to be replaced by black ones, now that the audience could see who spoke the dialogue. These were the forerunners of television situation comedy, soon to go speeding off on its own way. Adventure series like *The Lone Ranger* and *Dragnet* and domestic serials like *The Aldrich Family*, *The Goldbergs* and *The Guiding Light* also made the transition to television. The serial and series forms, particularly that of the soap opera, which were to become so central to television drama production, had their roots in the radio era. Of course, radio too had drawn on previous media: from music hall, from newspapers, from magazine serials, from comic strips.

Television, in its turn, not only took from these forms as adapted by radio, but often took material directly from vaudeville, from literature, from comic books. In fact, just to take the American comics of the era, it is hard to think of any - *Superman*, *Batman*, *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Donald Duck*, *Little Lulu*, *Dennis the Menace*. - that did not make their way on to American television.

For its drama, television has always drawn extensively on written fiction, from the pulp novel to classical literature. The US has led the way in adaptation of paperback bestsellers, like *The Winds of War*, *The Thorn Birds*, *Celebrity*, *Lace*, *Mistral's Daughter*, *Hollywood Wives*. Britain has pioneered and perfected the adaptation of literary classics, like *War and Peace*, *Roads to Freedom*, *I Claudius*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *The Citadel*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Jewel in the Crown*. America has from time to time engaged in adaptation of literary classics like *The Scarlet Letter* and *East of Eden*, as Britain has done productions of popular paperbacks like *Just William* and *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*. Most other countries have drawn on literary adaptations for television drama, with historical epics like Ireland's *Strumpet City*, Germany's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Italy's *Fontamara* and Australia's *1915*, being particularly striking sources of mini-series.

In the field of drama, theatre has naturally been an important source and influence for television, although this was far more the case in its earlier years than in later ones. In its beginnings, television drama drew heavily on theatrical productions, theatrical traditions, theatrical methods and theatrical talents. The US networks looked to Broadway. The BBC looked to the West End. RTÉ looked to the Abbey and Gate. It was not only for plays to adapt, but for the expertise of writers, directors, actors, designers, etc. In time, the same writers and eventually new writers began to write material specifically for television, as they, along with directors, actors, designers and crew began to

realise the new and specific possibilities of television as a medium for drama. However, the links with theatre have never been broken, whether in terms of movement of personnel back and forth or in terms of mutual influence. Interestingly, cross fertilisation has become apparent in the opposite direction as well, with theatre showing the influence as well as vice versa. The same could be said of other media as well, as even literature has not only come to make increasing reference to television and its imagery, but as literary style has increasingly taken on qualities derived from televisual and cinematic styles in its narrative structure.

To come to the relationship between television and cinema is a story in itself. First of all, there is the fact that television has from the beginning been used heavily as an exhibition box for films made originally for cinema. Then, with drama made for television, there has been the direct appropriation of genres, themes, characters and storylines from cinema onto television. Early television series like *I Remember Mama*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Genre Autry*, *Roy Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* had a previous existence in the world of cinema. So too had later ones like *The Odd Couple*, *MASH*, *The Four Seasons*, *Alice*, *Hotel* and *The Paper Chase*. Some of these had yet another previous existence as well, eg. *The Odd Couple* as a stage play and *Hotel* and *The Paper Chase* as novels.

Occasionally, the traffic has gone in the opposite direction as well. *Marty* and *Twelve Angry Men* were television plays turned into cinema films. Serials like *Emmerdale Farm* and *East Enders* have generated a series of paperback books. Then there has been the indirect appropriation. Within genres such as the western and crime thriller, which were rooted in Hollywood film traditions (and in previous pulp fiction), the newer television cowboys like *Maverick* and *Matt Dillon* still bore a remarkable resemblance to the older movie ones, just as later television cops like *Kojak* and *Columbo* still drew on the ambience of 1940s film noir gumshoe detectives.

Finally, in terms of form, even the most original made-for-television drama has veered toward a more and more sophisticated adaptation of film grammar in developing televisual styles. The use of film in shooting television drama and the technological development of videotape to an electronic approximation of the sensitivity and flexibility of celluloid have accentuated the tendency of the grammar of television drama to evolve in a direction away from the theatrical and toward the cinematic.

Early television drama tended to be studio-based and transmitted live. Production methods were very close to those of theatre, with the studio space calling for confined settings very like those of the stage and with live performance necessitating playing right through from first scene to the last and limiting the number of changes of scene, set, wardrobe and make-up. Performances began to tone down voice and gesture and to play to camera and sitting room, rather as if on stage. There were numerous slots in the schedule for single self-contained plays, which tended to be tightly structured, highly verbal encounters, in long stretches of real time. These plays were usually compact, rather than panoramic, both in time and space. Confrontations were more likely to be psychological than physical. Even with the introduction of videotape and the move away from live performance, making possible production in advance of transmission and repeat transmissions, drama still tended to be played right through as in theatre. It was still considered to be more a writer's medium like theatre than a director's medium like film. Production methods still involved long scenes, single takes and little editing, even when mishaps occurred or lines were fluffed.

However, as editing facilities improved, production methods began to shift towards those of film: shooting out of sequence, in shorter scenes and in multiple takes. Shifting perspectives with multiple camera techniques, new vision mixing effects, colour, chromakey and use of film inserts greatly increased the possibilities of studio drama. The development of outside broadcast facilities further enhanced the possibilities of television drama in freeing videotape from the restrictions of studio production and bringing it into the realm of location shooting. The continual development of higher quality and lighter weight video cameras and of more sophisticated editing facilities has brought videotape more and more into what was previously the domain of film.

This has meant being able to mount productions on a much larger scale than on stage, using huge panoramic landscapes and plotting developments on wagon trains, ocean liners and airplanes, in military battles and natural disasters. At the same time, it has meant being able to move in and show nuances of facial expression and gesture in close-up shots and to establish mobility of perspective with fluid camera movements, unlike in theatre, where all must be expressed in dialogue or overt action and where all is seen from a fixed point of view, more or less the equivalent of a medium shot. It has also meant an extraordinary ability to manipulate images and time frames in new and imaginative ways.

Whether using film or videotape, television drama has developed a new breadth, opening into a dramatic space, where the whole world is its oyster, as far as possible locations are concerned. It has also developed a new rhythm, transforming dramatic time, with all the mutations of pace and sequence made possible with the whole range of cuts, fades, mixes, flashbacks, flash-forwards, slow motion, fast motion, montage, actuality inserts, stills coming to life and vice versa, voice-over commentaries and other such effects, which compress, extend and juxtapose time

frames. This new scope and tempo in television production has re-shaped contemporary dramaturgy, bringing to drama a new vividness in visual imagery, a new range in kind and number of settings, a new flexibility in time span and sequence, a new complexity of plot structure, a new reflexivity of reference.

On a deeper level, this new scope and tempo, this new sense of space and time, amounts to a new kind of consciousness, involving new ways of perceiving, new ways of organising perceptions, new ways of coming to terms with what we perceive. This expansion, however, has also involved a constriction, though it is not a necessary one. At least it is not logically necessary. Whether it is sociologically necessary is another matter. The overwhelming tendency in film and television production, and in film and video production as well, has been to become increasingly sophisticated in technical terms and increasingly unsophisticated in intellectual terms. The tendency has been to rely on atmospheric locations, fluid camera movements, fast cutting, haute couture, action adventure stunts, cheap thrills and star glamour, at the expense of dialogue, characterisation, plot structure, social context or any sense of deeper meaning or purpose. The most expensive productions are given the shoddiest of scripts. The most advanced technology is put in the service of storylines and images written, produced and performed by those who have never risen to a cultural level above that of the comic strip / beer commercial mentality.

It is not that emphasis on visual effects need be at the expense of verbal expression. It is not that visual imagery need be so superficial, purposeless, flaccid, pretentious or discordant as to crowd out depth, purpose, structure, sincerity or coherence. It is, however, endemic to a society whose technological capacity has developed out of proportion to its wisdom. Some claim that communication of any depth is impossible through the medium of television. But it is not the medium of television, but the character of the social order which has shaped its development, that has put such enormous obstacles in the way of alternative paths of development.

No analysis of television, any more than any other medium, can be complete or right without an analysis of the political economy of its production, distribution and reception. All media are shaped by the general character of the social order and by the particular character of each medium's relationship to specific states and market forces. The European tradition of public service broadcasting has produced a very different sort of television from the American system of commercial domination based on the free play of market forces. The gap may be closing, against public service broadcasting, but something remains.

However, with so much overlap between television and other media, what is there to account for its distinctiveness as a medium? Or, in more fashionable jargon, what is its specificity as a signifying practice? What makes it different from other media? What are the specific implications for contemporary story-telling and drama?

Unlike literature, it involves enactment of the story. Unlike radio, this enactment involves visualisation as well as verbalisation. Unlike theatre, this visual and verbal enactment is not expressed in live performance, but is electronically transmitted as part of a more or less continuous flow, for a primarily domestic context of reception. Its contact with its audience is both more intimate and more distanced. Unlike cinema, the image is lower definition and on a smaller screen and not usually encompassed by surrounding darkness. It is generally viewed in a more privatised setting, subject to interruptions of ads, phones, doorbells, conversations, zapping and division of attention between multiple tasks.

Television does not demand as much of the imagination as literature and radio. It does not involve the same sense of occasion, the public setting, the darkness, the concentration of attention, the focus on a single story and the expectation of tight narrative structure and firm resolution, as do theatre and cinema. It does involve a pattern of viewing that is more casual, transient, distracted, scaled-down and open-ended. It is also more immediate, more familiar, more continuous, more accessible and more addictive.

Much of the distinctiveness of television once came from such features as live broadcasting and direct address, both now greatly reduced, especially in respect to drama. Much of the buzz also used to come from everyone seeing the same programmes at the same time discussing them the next day. Now with the multiplication of channels and proliferation of domestic video recorders, this too is greatly reduced. However, it must be remembered, there are villages in remote parts of the world where an entire community still gathers to watch their single television set on a single channel. It is also a world away from a split-level home in the US with two or three occupants and four or five television sets and choice of seventy or more channels.

Television has its distinctiveness, in being an electronic medium, incorporating both sound and vision, characterised by continuous flow and domestic context. The basic unit of television drama is less the play, which is sustained by plot, than the series or serial, which are sustained more by continuing characters and settings. Even television single plays and television movies are experienced and assimilated within the total flow, though their images rarely play on the individual imagination and become terms of social reference in the same way as do those of continuing series and serials.

In finding its way as a medium, television has evolved its own forms of narrative, which tend to be more extensive than intensive; more rambling and open-ended than self-contained; more recursive than hermetic; more collaborative and eclectic than sustained by a single, totalising vision; more reliant on stars, stunts, symbols and sites of exotic life styles than on having a meaningful story to tell.

All this is highly relative, however. Television, whether in its plays, series or serials, has had many a meaningful story to tell and has done so to marvellous effect in its own unique way. Everyone has their own favourites, as well as their pet hates. To sort out what we value, why we value what we do and how we justify what we value in the sphere of television drama brings us to questions of aesthetics, ideology and the next chapter.

Suffice it to say here that the matter is far more complicated than anticipated by the British newspaper editor who pronounced: 'Television? The word is half Greek and half Latin. No good will come of it'.<sup>4</sup> Far more accurate was an American FCC commissioner's description of television as:

'the literature of the illiterate,  
the culture of the low-brow,  
the wealth of the poor,  
the privilege of the underprivileged  
and the executive club of the excluded masses'.<sup>5</sup>

It has been all this and much more. All the more important to subject it to critical scrutiny and to evolve proper criteria for doing so.

#### NOTES to Chapter 2:

1. Raymond Williams *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* Glasgow, Fontana, 1973, p.59.
2. Raymond Williams *Drama in a Dramatised Society* Cambridge University Press, 1975.
3. Some studies of patterns of television viewing and its influence: James Shanahan, Michael Morgan and George Gerbner *Television and Its Viewers* Cambridge University Press, 1999; Jeffrey Scheuer *The Sound Bite Society*, New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999; Nicholas Abercrombie *Television and Society* London, Polity Press, 1996; Jerry Mander *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* Sussex, Harvester, 1980; Neil Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death* London, Heinemann, 1986; Newton Minnow and Craig Lamay *Abandoned in the Wasteland* New York, Hill & Wang, 1996; Marie Winn, *The Plug-in Drug: Television, Children and the Family*, Middlesex, Penguin, 1985.
4. CP Scott of the *Manchester Guardian*, quoted in Francis Wheen *Television* London, Century, 1985, p.8.
5. Lee Lovinger in 1966, quoted in Martin Mayer *About Television* New York, Harper & Row, 1972, p.382. The FCC is the Federal Communication Commission in the USA. In contrast, the Reagan-appointed commissioner Mark Fowler referred to television as just 'a toaster with pictures', quoted in Scheuer, op.cit., p.43.

### Chapter 3: Judgements of Television Drama

Are there coherent criteria for judging television drama? Some viewers simply let it wash over them, making only the most minimal judgements, mainly in terms of deciding what to watch. Others make constant judgements on what they watch. They say they liked a programme or they didn't like it. They consider some programmes good and others bad. If pressed, they might indicate certain storylines, characters, settings or sequences, which turn them on or switch them off. If pressed further, they might find it difficult to specify exactly why they put a value on some aspects and not on others. They would be hard put to articulate what criteria they bring to bear in making such judgements as they do, let alone what criteria should be brought to bear in making such judgements.

Most programme makers are vague enough about their values, about how they judge what is good and what is bad in making their programmes. They tend to be resentful of judgements on their work that do not conform to their own. They dismiss critics as failed programme makers and consider criticism as intrusion on their own domain. They believe that what they have created is what it is and it is not for anybody else to say what it is and what is not. Not that some critics do not give them cause for resentment. They are often arbitrary and indulgent in their likes and dislikes. They often fail to give any credible justification for their judgements. When it comes down to it, they can be vague as anybody else about specifying what criteria they apply, let alone what criteria they could justify applying.

There is, of course, a widespread view that there are no coherent criteria, or at least none that could be considered normative. It is this view that probably holds sway at the man-in-the-street level (or should it be person-at-the-box-level?). It is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, rooted in a social reality much broader than television and methods of appraising it. It is the fragmentary character of contemporary life. It is failure of vision and failure of nerve in the face of it.

Even in the academic world, there is a methodological anarchism that prevails across a whole range of disciplines, along the entire spectrum from the 'softest' of popular arts to the 'hardest' of natural sciences. From poetry, painting and pop videos to economics, biology and physics, it is anything goes.<sup>1</sup> A person likes what s/he likes. A person believes what s/he believes. No one else has any right to say that they are right or wrong. The astrologer speaks with as much authority as the astronomer. The survivalist and the socialist can each make their case on an equal footing. The dramatist can produce either the classic well-made play or a chaotic happening. The critic in turn can come at it either from a naively commonsensical point of view or with all the exotically counter-commonsensical paraphernalia of post-structuralist semiotics. Who is to say which is right or wrong? Each person's intellectual, moral and aesthetic preferences are treated as autonomous and sovereign and unanswerable to anything beyond themselves. Any attempt to pass judgement on anyone else's aesthetic tastes is considered particularly out of order. There is such an exaggerated emphasis on instability of meaning as to set the viewer/reader adrift from any sort of physical, social or textual determination.<sup>2</sup>

There is a populist strain in media studies, much of it an over-reaction to the elitism of high culture and traditional literary criticism and to the negativism of the Frankfurt School analysis of popular culture. It treats the pleasure the mass audience takes in *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Melrose Place* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to be, by definition, justified and therefore not subject to negative judgements.<sup>3</sup> It is sometimes accompanied by the most abstruse discourses on the nature of pleasure, which are so esoteric and disembodied as to raise the question of whether their authors have experienced an actual instant of the real thing. Whatever the intentions, it plays right into the hands of the one-hundred-million-Americans-can't-be-wrong school of television criticism.

While some are paralysed in intellectual indecision about critical norms, others plough on regardless. The only criteria many television executives and advertisers regard as relevant are the ratings. In their world, television programmes are commodities designed to sell other commodities. Judgements on television drama are based on their ability to draw the most desirable demographics, ie, to attract the most affluent sections of the audience targeted by the advertisers to maximise their profits. In devising a method for testing pilots prior to transmission, Hollywood's solution was to put 400 Californians into a preview theatre on Sunset Boulevard who would make their judgements by moving the dials on their black boxes between five positions: very good, good, fair, dull and very dull. They were first shown a *Mr. Magoo* cartoon, which is used as a control to determine whether they are a typically responding audience, so that what the typically responding California audience liked, with *Mr. Magoo* as the norm, was largely what the rest of the world got to see.

The fact that many of these shows have achieved high ratings the world over does not necessarily imply critical approval. Nor would mass critical approval necessarily establish their intellectual, social, moral or aesthetic value. The whole world is drinking Coca-Cola as well, but this hardly guarantees its nutritional value. The free play of market forces is not the same thing as majority rule, nor is majority rule co-incident with value. Even in RTÉ,

which was never as crass, those involved in production often dismissed their critics with the TAMs and considered no further argument necessary.

A more promising place to look might be in the explosion of interest in media studies in recent decades, giving rise to a burgeoning, if very diverse, literature. The different approaches to television studies employ very different methodologies. While some skim the surface and eschew questions of value, others penetrate beneath the surface and take on questions of value in the most direct way.

There are, first of all, empirical studies of the type predominant in the US. Content analysis studies texts in terms of manifest characteristics, which are easily specified and quantified.<sup>4</sup> It tabulates acts of sex and violence in popular series. It gives statistics on characters in various dramatic genres, classified according to age, sex, socio-economic status and behaviour patterns. It has a certain limited value in establishing certain superficial patterns. Ultimately, however, it is piecemeal research that tends to beg more questions than it answers. It sometimes uses crude categories like pro-social versus anti-social characters. It glides over the surface of what television is all about, while it fails to probe either the underlying assumptions of world view or the overarching structures of power. It does not penetrate more subtle patterns of behaviour. It does not examine sociological contexts or philosophical frames of reference. It is mechanistic, atomistic and ad hoc. It never adds up to any grand theory, but plods along pluralistically, failing to see the wood for the trees.

At the other extreme are the varieties of structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics, more European in origin, which gravitate to grand theory and disdain empirical research.<sup>5</sup> It analyses texts in terms of their formal qualities. It sees its task as the deconstruction of conventional codes of discourse. It conceives of both auteurs and audience as decentred subjects across a range of autonomous practices. It stresses the specificity of each mode of discourse: the literary, the cinematic, the televisual, etc. It is hostile to realist modes of representation, to narrative form, to rational coherence, to socio-historical analysis. It relates the text only to itself and rules out questions of the relation of the text to anything outside itself, although the truth is that it is generally so locked into introverted discourse on its own masturbatory methodology that it rarely gets round to specific texts.

When it does, the texts it favours are the cinematic and video equivalents of their own obscurantist tracts. It favours static or chaotic camerawork, disjunction of sound and image, non-sync sound, monitors and microphones in shot, picture not filling the frame, disruption of narrative unity, alienation of identification, arbitrary editing, and generally whatever is incoherent, in the belief that it alienates viewers and challenges them to construct their own meaning. It alienated viewers, true enough, but they may feel they can construct their own meaning quite well without all the gratuitous fragmentation and clutter that auteurs who announce the death of the author add to an already fragmented and cluttered experience of the world or without whatever disjointed words of pseudo-wisdom Godard might mumble with his back to the camera. Ironically, the myopic fixation on form leads to amorphousness. Paradoxically formalism becomes formlessness.

Both extremes of textual studies, both content analysis and semiotics, are pluralist, atomistic and ad hoc. Neither culminates in a coherent theory. Much of the problem is a failure to put texts in context. Other studies do put texts in context. Contextual studies also span a considerable range.

Effects research, at one extreme, is the behaviorist equivalent of content analysis. It attempts to measure quantifiable changes in individual behaviour patterns resulting from particular viewing experiences. It continues to investigate (inconclusively) the question of whether personal acts of violence are influenced by the violence of action-adventure series, films, news, etc. It tends to concentrate on overt changes of choice in voting and purchasing patterns, stemming from party political broadcasts or commercial advertisements. Like content analysis, it has a certain limited value in tracing certain connections along the surface. The basic problem, however, is that it defines its context too narrowly. So too does the uses and gratifications approach which brings in other factors and stresses the discriminating powers of individual viewers. Such studies fail to capture either deeper psychological processes or larger historical shifts.<sup>6</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum are historicist studies. These engage in research into production or consumption within a wider sphere. Studies in political economy of the media focus on the relationship between the prevailing structures of political and economic power in a society and the cultural products of that society. An economist approach construes the connection quite narrowly and focuses on the level of the direct influence of the ownership and control of media in determining the character of its products.<sup>7</sup> It stresses the role of television programmes in delivering audiences to advertisers and in conveying the ideology of the ruling class to subordinate groups. Other studies deal with the economic basis of cultural production as a far more complex and more subtle process.<sup>8</sup> The culturalist approach, on the other hand, relates cultural products to other cultural products, but eschews an emphasis on the economics of their production.<sup>9</sup>

A more holistic approach stresses the complexity of mediations, the scope for individual creativity, dissident ideologies and subversive readings, the subtle and subconscious processes through which programmes are constructed and interpreted. It sees the ideological dimension of television drama in systemic rather than conspiratorial terms, ie, in terms of the complex contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, rather than in terms of the conspiracies of conscious and clear-minded capitalists.

The approach taken here is holistic and historicist. It stresses the totality of interconnections within the socio-historical nexus shaping cultural expression. It analyses particular texts and engages in empirical research. It pushes further and relates texts both to other texts and to larger socio-historical contexts. It deals with television drama, not as a simple and fortuitous succession of particular plays, series and serials, but as a complex pattern of cultural development, intelligible only in relation to the larger pattern of contemporary social history. It probes both underlying assumptions and overarching structures of power. It examines philosophical frames of reference and relates these to social, political and economic conditions shaping the concrete contexts of television production and consumption.

There are many judgements made both on particular productions and on persistent patterns of representation across a range of productions. The criteria brought to bear in making such judgements basically fall into two inter-related categories: aesthetic and ideological.

With respect to aesthetic criteria, the relevant question is: What is it that makes some television drama great or good and other television drama mediocre or bad?

Obviously, production standards constitute one set of considerations. The quality of casting, performance, camera angles, soundtrack, lighting, locations, editing, wardrobe and make-up all play their part in making the difference between good and bad in the nature of television drama. However, there has been a tendency in international television to rely on star casting, fluid camera movements, fast cutting, exotic locations, trendy soundtracks, stunts, special effects and haute couture to carry television drama production. The weight of emphasis within the television industry often tends to be on the technical, formal and financial aspects of television drama. Discussions on the current state of play then centre on film versus videotape, studio versus location, the single play versus the series or serial, in-house versus commissioned production, home production versus international co-production.

Often confusion reigns on the surface and the deeper questions remain unasked and unanswered. The most lavish productions are given to the shoddiest of scripts. Few would deny the primacy of the script in theory, but in practice the emphasis is sometimes more on stunts, stars and special effects than on having a significant story to tell and an appropriate method of telling it.

The significance of the story is the most fundamental consideration to be brought to bear in judging television drama. All other considerations, of visual style, pace, performance, should be subordinated to evaluation of the script in terms of its basic human meaning. All questions regarding the method of telling the story should be subordinated to the prior question of whether it is a story worth telling.

What is it then that makes a story worth telling? What is it that makes some stories more significant than others? What is it that makes some television drama more meaningful and memorable than the rest? The most significant stories are those which express the epochal in the immediate, by portraying the characteristic conflicts and choices of an epoch as embodied in the immediate circumstances of concrete lives. The most meaningful and memorable drama has a metaphoric thrust that reaches beyond itself and presents a whole way of life in microcosm. It provokes communal recognition and revelation. It does what all great art does. It synthesises common experience. It cleanses perception. It illuminates what is dark. It orders what is chaotic. It unifies what is fragmented. It clarifies what is preying confusingly in others' lives. It brings to a focus what is there, but unfocused, for others. It appropriates the past, interprets the present and envisages the future. It combines epic scale with intimate impact. It creates individual images of social totality. It captures the flow of historical process.

Television drama should be judged, not only by the degree to which it explores the specific potentialities of television as a signifying practice, but also by norms by which all drama, indeed all art form, should be judged. It should be judged according to its scope, its depth, its integrity, its authenticity, its clarity, its relevance, its immediacy, its rhythm, its resolution. It should be judged by the degree to which it is probing, challenging, insightful and cathartic. It should be judged as to whether it raises substantial issues, whether it presents full-blooded and believable characters in credible situations challenged to make consequential choices.

The process of artistic creation, which issues in drama of this calibre, is rooted in the whole of the artist's experience of life. It is the writer's input which is most fundamental in creating drama, despite auteur theory and

despite the essential importance of directors, actors, designers and the rest. Drama is decisively shaped by the richness of the writer's life experience and by the degree to which s/he has creatively assimilated the most advanced knowledge, the most basic emotions, the most fundamental socio-historical processes. It is deeply dependent on the degree to which s/he can feel the pulse of the times about which s/he is writing and on the degree of intellectual, emotional and moral clarity s/he can bring to bear upon it.

The question of world view is crucial. The Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs has perhaps put this most sharply: 'Without a Weltanschauung, it is impossible to narrate properly or to achieve a composition which would reflect the differentiated and epically complete variety of life.'<sup>10</sup> His argument was that, without a philosophy, without the dynamic co-ordination of life in the writer's mind, there was no drama of any real magnitude. The greater the playwright, the more and closer were the ties binding him to the life of his times. It was necessary for the writer to have a world historical mentality in order to create world historical characters, ie, characters who could bear and reveal the fullness of their world. Dramatic necessity depended on the depth of the inner accord between such characters and the concrete collisions of the socio-historical forces of their times. For the world historical personality, who need not be a powerful ruler or great explorer or whatever, individual vision and passion coincided with social substance. Sharper individuation did not weaken, but strengthened, the social character of dramatic collisions. Conversely, the more acute the understanding of the social character of such collisions, the less likely to do violence to individual psychology or dramatic form.

Not that all writers might agree with this, but there is nothing more important than achieving a world view, grounded in personal experience and integrating the socio-historical experience of the times. Some writers have agreed, however, even if it meant passing difficult judgement upon themselves. The relentlessly honest French writer Flaubert wrote:

I lack a well-founded and all-embracing concept of life. The world's religions ...on the one hand, progress, brotherhood and democracy on the other, do not any longer answer the requirements of the present .... I see no possibility, today, either of finding a new principle or of paying any attention to the old principles. And so I am in search of that idea upon which everything else depends, and cannot find it.<sup>11</sup>

Decades later, the British writer who published his earlier fiction under the name Christopher St. John Sprigg and his cultural criticism under the name Christopher Caudwell, wrote to literary friends giving his reflections upon finding himself at a crucial turning point:

Seriously, I think my weakness has been the lack of an integrated Weltanschauung ....As long as there was a disintegration, I had necessarily an unsafe and provisional attitude to reality, a somewhat .... superficial attitude, which showed in my writing as ....'lack of baking'. The remedy is nothing so simple as a working over and polishing up of prose, but to come to terms with myself and my environment ....Naturally, it is a long process (the getting of wisdom) and I don't fancy I am anywhere near the end.<sup>12</sup>

Although most scripts today are being written by minds full of Hollywood razzle-dazzle or cluttered by French deconstructionist chic, nothing of substantial value will ever come of what is not rooted in the pursuit of wisdom. The problem is that there is a long-standing and deeply ingrained prejudice in television against writers with a well worked out philosophy of life, burning with something definite to say and wanting to say it through drama. The tired, trite adage passed on from one generation to the next is: 'If you want to send a message, call the Western Union'.

It has created an atmosphere of ludicrous defensiveness about having a message to communicate. It is identified with political overkill, with clumsy propaganda, with cardboard characters, grovelling in workerist grottness and speaking pidgin agit-prop. However, superficial drama is produced by superficial people. Some may have a facile message to communicate, a shallow sense of psychology and an inept handling of dramatic form. Others, who may have no message to communicate, do not by virtue of that, have a better grip on individual psychology and great dramatic flair. They are generally the most superficial of all and lack the vision and the drive to create fully individuated characters with real psychological insight of dramatic import.

The characters they do create tend to be individuated through superficial attributes or eccentric quirks, rather than thorough deep penetration of their inner life. They are such shallow clichés as to be nearly interchangeable parts. What was there to distinguish the heroes of *Airwolf*, *Street Hawk* and *Knight Rider* except the vehicles which they use to come to the rescue? What was the difference between *Charlie's Angels* or *Baywatch* babes except hair colour? How much was there to know about the inner life of JR Ewing or TJ Hooker?

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The scripts written around such characters are loose, flabby and vacuous. The plots are full of arbitrary comings and goings, full of fortuitous happenings, full of opportunist contrivances. There is no sense of sufficient reason for anything to happen. There is no sense of adequate motivation for any relationships formed or course of action pursued. The dialogue is either innocuous or overblown. It never conveys a single interesting idea or a single genuine emotion. Confrontations tend to be physical rather than psychological. False problems are raised and resolved through macho flair and technical hardware, rather than real problems raised through a meaningful sequence of events and resolved through a psycho-social coming to terms. In the absence of the strong dramatic drive that can only come in the process of a real psycho-social coming to terms with real problems, there is only the recurrent cycle of standardised characters and plots, combining and re-combining, jazzed up with hooks, buttons and blows, with fast cutting, with cornball carry-on, with expensive couture, with elaborate shoot-outs, car chases and burning buildings, with ludicrous supernatural forces, with soulless sex hyped as sizzling and salacious.

Nothing can cover the fact that it is false. It may be melodramatic technically stylish falsity, but it is falsity. It is banality, bloated with inflated sentiment and hyped with pseudo-monumentalising devices. Its energy is the energy of faked orgasms. No amount of posturing can hide the emptiness. It may be chic, blow-dried, designer-labelled emptiness, but it is emptiness all the same. There is an intellectual, emotional and moral numbness at the core of it all that no number of clichés, copulations, car chases or designer clothes can disguise. Of course, television being the omnivorous medium it is, with so many hours and channels to fill, not everything it produces can be great drama. In any age and in any medium, there is much dross along with the gold. All the same, it is not necessary for so much television drama to be so bad.

Television has in its time produced much good, and sometimes great, drama and has the potential to push much further. Television has produced characters which haunt the mind and embody metaphoric meaning. It has told stories which capture the thrust of socio-historical collision on the ground. Productions such as *Talking to a Stranger*, *The Sinners*, *The Stars Look Down*, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, *Roads To Freedom*, *Drums Along Balmoral Drive*, *Threads* and the *Billy* trilogy have given a complex and honest picture of a whole way of life. Whatever their limitations, there have been excellent productions probing the horizons of human experience and illuminating a particular cultural milieu.

Through the 1980s the Hollywood television dominating the international market went to the other extreme with *Dallas*, *Glitter*, *Miami Vice*. Its own producers openly referred to much of it as 'trash'. Satirical productions from the film *Network* to the serial *Beggars and Choosers* satirise the whole process of their production from within. Even its more serious productions have been so deeply flawed. Its historical series, like *Ellis Island*, *The Captains and the Kings*, *North and South* and *The Winds of War*, tend to be pseudo-epics, which put a sophisticated cinematic gloss on the crudest clichés of the most unsophisticated and conventional historiography, spiced up with highly sentimentalised love interest and star billings. Some of the better efforts, like *The Awakening Land*, *The Emigrants*, *Roots* and even *Rich Man Poor Man*, have opened out a bit, but have never exposed the full weight of the social order being constructed and re-constructed. Some dealing with difficult material, like *Concealed Enemies* on McCarthyism, have so swamped the narrative with such a multiplicity of small particularistic details, as to smother analytical reflection on the roots of McCarthyism as a historical phenomenon. *The West Wing* is undoubtedly sophisticated, but so smug and myopic. It is so full of imperial hubris. When Hollywood moves away from glitter to 'do' social issues, it gravitates towards television movies about athletes overcoming afflictions, communities rallying in the face of natural disasters, stars popping pills, families coping with alcoholism, desertion, divorce, disease, drugs, child abuse, teenage pregnancy or whatever. Most are maudlin morality tales, with bland up-beat endings and with Hallmark greeting card messages, although some have been a cut above the rest.

Although the flow is still overwhelmingly from US to the rest, there has been some flow in other directions and watching television in Ireland has brought the experience of fine drama from many international sources. In relation to the standards set world wide, Ireland has produced drama that can stand with the best, for national and international audiences. Despite the high exposure to imported material, a high proportion of what must linger in the mind as the most memorable drama seen on television can be found among its indigenous productions. Stories exploring the human psyche and encompassing the rhythms of socio-historical experience, such as the *Victims* trilogy, *King of the Castle*, *The White House*, *Ballroom of Romance*, *Assault on a Citadel* and *Strumpet City* have been the sort to evoke communal recognition and revelation and to leave deep traces in the collective memory.

Not every drama need embody total vision to be good. Not every playwright need have attained a self-conscious, all-encompassing, coherent world view to create drama of any value. But the drive must be towards totality and coherence and not away from it. The pressure to write must come from a push to cleanse perception and not to intensify its murkiness, to order the fragments of experience and not to add to the clutter, to illuminate the world and not to contribute to its darkness.

Unfortunately, the tendency is often to murkiness, clutter, disorder and darkness. It is not simply a problem with writers, but with the world in the grip of the postmodernist neo-liberal mentality. It is a mark of decadence in the social order when drama becomes decadent and storytelling no longer strives towards totality. A decadent, disintegrating society tells decadent, disintegrating stories. A society that has lost its vision cannot deal with encompassing themes. A society that has lost its way lacks the clarity and the energy of strong dramatic drive. It is only possible for a writer to deal with encompassing themes and to achieve the clarity and energy of strong dramatic drive by seeing through and taking on the decadence, by unmasking its pretensions, by challenging its norms and by opening sources of growth to offset the decay. Dramas made in the *Dallas* and *Melrose Place* mode lack authenticity, conviction, depth, proportion, integrity, insight, resolution and purposefulness. They are dishonest, superficial, trivial, contrived, arbitrary, opportunist and capricious. They produce neither illumination nor catharsis. They have a miscellanising, mind-crowding, fragmenting, dissipating effect. They are decadent. They tell something about the temper of the times, but in a way that distracts attention from the true reality of the epoch, in a way that subverts the capacity to come to terms with it. They delete the difficult dimensions of reality. In the words of South African poet Jeremy Cronin: 'Santa Barbara, the Bold and the Beautiful, Restless Years – the milk of amnesia.'<sup>13</sup>

They are seductively addictive, even to those who know better. Their cinematic stylishness captures and holds visual interest. Once a certain amount of attention is invested in continuing characters and storylines, no matter how absurd, it is difficult not to get hooked by curiosity about what will happen next. Some enter more fully than others into the fantasies they construct, fantasies of macho aggression, fantasies of exploitative power and unearned wealth, fantasies of saccharine sentimentality and slushy sexuality, fantasies which are aesthetically and psychologically immature, but by no means ideologically innocent.

Lukacs took the view that the main business of the critic was to elucidate the relation between artistic creation and ideology. Where the writer stood in relation to the socio-historical collisions of his time and how far he had worked out a world view capable of encompassing the realities the world presented to him: these were the fundamental factors shaping what sort of story he told and how he told it. To apply this to the contemporary critic looking at television, there is much to elucidate on the relation between drama and ideology.

Is television drama ideological? It is a question likely to provoke, not only a variety of answers, but also a variety of reactions to even posing the question. Many a viewer, producer, actor or author might express puzzlement, indifference or contempt at the very nature of the question. If pressed, they might perhaps admit that television drama may have its ideological moments. They might cite bits of phatic dialogue and straightforward declarations of position, such as:

Fr. O' Connor in *Strumpet City*: 'We condemn Marx.'

Dubliner in *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*: 'Babies don't get bit by rats in Foxrock.'

John Willie O'Neill in *Heritage*: 'Catholics kneel under plaster saints. We sit with Christ under guns and swords.'

Certain characters might be seen as carrying ideological connotations: the IRA kidnapers in *The Price* and the UDA heavies in the *Billy* plays. Entire plays like *A Very British Coup* or *Bad Day at Blackrock* or entire series like *Strumpet City* or *The West Wing* might be seen as concerned with ideological positioning. All the same, even given the number of lines, characters, plays and series that could obviously be construed as ideological, all of it together might be argued to be marginal within the overall flow of television drama.

Frank and Kate in *The Price* might be admitted to carry ideological connotations, but surely not Miley and Biddy in *Glenroe*. Some scenes in *Making the Cut* might have ideological nuances, but surely there is nothing all that ideological about *Friends* or *Fair City*. Surely, the argument might go, most of it is pure entertainment, harmless escapism, or simple fantasy. On the contrary. No entertainment is ever pure. No escapism is ever harmless. No fantasy is ever simple. In actuality, all television drama is ideological, implicitly if not explicitly. It may not be constructed or consumed with conscious ideological categories in mind, but it inevitably stakes out a pattern of representations shaped by the traditions and tensions of the social order in which it emerges. Every story embodies certain assumptions about the nature of the social order, which are de facto ideological.

What then is ideology? Ideology, in common parlance, is often taken to be synonymous with propaganda, bias, distortion or false consciousness. To say all television drama was ideological in this sense would be to fail to do justice to its narrative complexity and to its capacity for truthfulness.

Ideology, in the uncommon parlance of Parisian cafes and culturalist texts, is taken to be a form of misrecognition, illusion and reaction. In the convoluted discourse of Althusserian or Lacanian theorists, any form of

narrativisation, verisimilitude or identification is ideological in this negative sense<sup>14</sup>. To say all television drama is ideological in this sense would be to consider any form of story-telling, any realistic portrayal, any evocation of identification with character, to be inherently regressive, misguided and illusory. This would be to fail to do justice to the very capacity of narrative for truthfulness and for progressive meaning.

Ideology, as used here, is not synonymous with propaganda, false consciousness or reaction. It is not a pejorative or negative concept. Ideology refers to a set of interconnected views and values systematically generated by specific socio-historical conditions. The concept of ideology is meant to shed light on the way a person's view of the world is shaped by the vantage point from which s/he perceives it. It is meant to focus on the fact that the images, ideas, norms and codes, which people take for granted, are rooted in the time, space and social conditions within which they emerge. They are not eternal, universal or unconditional verities. It is not meant to indicate that they are necessarily false, regressive or unscientific. An ideology may be true or false, progressive or regressive, scientific or unscientific.

To focus on ideology in this way is to assert that the emergence of ideas, political movements and cultural trends is not arbitrary or fortuitous. It is not such that anything could have been thought, that anything could have happened, that anything could have been created, at any time. It is a matter of deeper logic embedded in the unfolding of intellectual and cultural history than anything that can be explained by great thinkers, great artists or historical accidents.

Ideologies are grounded in a society's mode of production. Contending ideologies, in exceedingly intricate and complex ways, are rooted in the specific division of labour generated by particular modes of production. The more highly developed the mode of production, the more complex the social order, the more specialised the division of labour, the more abstract the modes of mediation, the more formidable and variable the process of representation of the totality within which human endeavour takes place. The contending ideologies that emerge from this constitute a struggle for the terms in which this totality is to be defined and dealt with.

In the broadest terms, in an advanced capitalist society, there are many variations of bourgeois ideology contending with each other, along with residual elements of feudal ideology and emergent developments of socialist ideology. Each highlights certain key images, emphasises certain issues and prescribes certain norms at the expense of others. In relation to the social division of labour, one ideology will give expression to the whole network of views and values rooted in blood and land (peasant or aristocratic), another to those rooted in entrepreneurial skill and individual acquisitiveness (bourgeois), yet another to those rooted in labour and collective effort (socialist). The most abstract of theoretical arguments, when it comes down to it, often have their basis in the clash of peasant, aristocratic, bourgeois or socialist values.

It is not, of course, a matter of any simple one-to-one correspondence between ideas and class interests. The connections are not always direct, immediate or conscious. Ideologies often function all the more effectively by indirection, in a subtle and extended pattern of incorporation, and below the threshold of consciousness. An ideology provides the matrix of thought through which the world is perceived and conceived. Although it structures the very patterns of perception and conceptualisation, it is itself usually neither perceived nor conceptualised. It often operates more in terms of implicit assumptions than explicit statements, shaping all that is seen, moulding it within its framework, but remaining itself unseen.

Those who are most adamant in their renunciation of ideology in all its forms and who proclaim themselves to be non-ideological are often those most under the spell of ideology. Notions of journalistic objectivity, of political neutrality, of artistic creativity and art for art's sake, are profoundly and deeply ideological. All such illusions of autonomy have their source in the ever escalating separation and specialisation of mental and manual labour, which gives rise to theories and art forms which are ever more remote from any concrete experiential base. All spheres of thought and activity fly increasingly apart, seeming to be autonomous worlds unto themselves, generating ever more one-sided and partial versions of the whole and making any coherent view of the whole more and more difficult to attain or even imagine. The most 'independent' of observers is often the one who is most dependent on the dominant ideology, who has internalised its norms and procedures so unconsciously and so completely as to be unaware of its existence and incapable of conceiving of any alternative. In the process, a taken-for-granted universality and unconditional truthfulness is ascribed to views and values that are actually perceptions of the world from a particular class standpoint.

To add further to the complexity, such perceptions come to be accepted even by those whose actual position in the scheme of things is sharply at variance with those who inhabit such a class position and have the power to project their definitions and their codes of behaviour as if applicable to everyone at all times and everywhere. The poor take on the world view of the rich. It is not only the queen or the pope, whose power and position stem from the institutional and ideological remnants of a pre-capitalist social order, who uphold concepts of inherited wealth and

privilege and divine authority. The working class of the world cry for Diana Spencer, who never did one day's serious, and rate her among the great figures of the century. Labour MPs end their days as life peers. In Ireland, for example, the rhythms of its history have been such as to leave the debris of ideologies of other eras either in unreflective co-existence or in uneasy conflict, even within the same person. *Lovers of the Lake* was a striking evocation of the intermingling of druidic, medieval and modern myths and mores. It is not only executives of multinational corporations, who live well on the fruits of the capitalist system, who believe in its rags-to-riches, equal-opportunity-for-all myths, but those raising children on the dole, whose lives will forever be all-rags-and-no-riches, believe it as well. The images of those who have made it, even if fictionally, may loom larger than the more factual and much more common everyday reality of those who have not.

Television drama plays an enormous role in the development and dissemination of ideologies and it does so on many levels. It is not just when its characters are making speeches declaring their fundamental values. It is not just when its plots are obviously demonstrating the virtues or vices of the capitalist system. It is not only through its particular programmes, but even more through its total flow, through its kaleidoscope of images, which merge with images drawn from a host of other sources, to form a sort of composite picture of the world in our minds over a period of time.

To probe the ideological dimensions of television drama in this sense, it is necessary to focus, not only on particular dramatic productions, but on the overall patterns of development of television drama, to trace the networks of assumptions embodied in the recurring images, plots, settings, themes, genres and modes of characterisation. It is also necessary to analyse the shifts which have occurred over a period of time in relation to the larger shifts within the socio-historical contexts in which they have occurred.

Looked at in this way, all television drama is pervasively ideological. As Todd Gitlin has put it in *Inside Prime Time*: 'Television can no more speak without ideology than we can speak without prose. We swim in its world even if we don't believe in it.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, so penetrating is the medium that 'we don't even have to be tuned in to be wired up'.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps more powerfully and pervasively than any other medium, television provides the collective images, stereo-types and myths of popular culture through which we as a society represent ourselves to ourselves and to others. There is a complex and intricate relationship between the production and reception of television drama and the larger pattern of experiencing and coming to terms with the world. Its stories both express and effect the push and pressure of a wider world.

Examining television drama in terms of the stories a society tells about itself to itself and to others and about others to itself is likely to bring to light a great deal about the experiences, moods, concerns, hopes, fears and values of given social forces in a given culture at a given time. It may indicate much about the texture of the times, though it does not do so in a simple and straightforward way. Every drama, even if unintentionally, reveals something of the dynamics of the interacting nexus of forces in the society which has produced it.

It often conceals a fair bit about it as well. Every story, at least implicitly, embodies elements of a world view, in the sense that it symbolically conveys certain premises about what sort of world it is, about how the social order is structured, about what the rules of the game of life are. In doing so, it either acquiesces in the status quo or it queries it, challenges it, dissents from it or poses alternatives to it. It either exposes or eclipses the underlying structures of power. It either normalises or subverts the idealisation of its hegemony, the taken-for-granted assumptions which legitimate it and make its ideology seem to be only common sense. It either induces or inhibits the exploration of alternatives to it.

There has been a tendency to back away from ideological analysis in media studies, exemplified by Jesus Martin-Barbero's book *Communication, Culture And Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*. He characterises it as a conception of the media process which leaves room for nothing but the stratagems of domination, a process defined as a few powerful message senders controlling passive receivers without any indication of seduction or resistance. It is perhaps necessary to assert that neither the producers nor the audiences of mass media are homogeneous, that there are internal conflicts and contradictions in the production of programmes, that there are complex strategies of assimilation and resistance in their reception. On one level, it may be a matter of emphasis: how much weight to put on hegemonic texts and how much on alternative or subversive or even oppositional readings of these texts. On another level, it is something more: the unravelling of more powerful explanatory concepts, such as the media imperialism thesis in its more sophisticated versions, into pluralistic dissipation of mediations masking relations of power.<sup>17</sup>

The ideological complexion emerging from the total flow of television is by no means homogenous. The ideological profile of its drama varies according to time, place, genre, programme, production source, author, etc. There are significant differences, for example, from the 1950s to the 2000s; from America to Britain to Ireland; according to whether it is crime, sit com or soap opera; whether it is from Spelling, BBC or RTÉ. It embraces numerous contradictory impulses, even subversive ones. It is not a closed system. As Gitlin has put it, 'it leaks'.<sup>18</sup> It

changes. The dominant ideology needs to be continually re-negotiated vis-à-vis alternative and oppositional trends. It has an enormous capacity to absorb, tame and trivialise even the most subversive currents, although it cannot prevent such challenges to ideological consensus from making any inroads. It operates in a way that often gives the edge to distortion, superficiality, opportunism, crassness and cowardice, but it also gives a certain scope to a sincere search for truth and a deeper striving to come to terms with the exigencies of socio-historical experience.

Nevertheless, amidst all this, there is an underlying pattern, a highly complex one to be sure, in which certain views and values predominate over others, in which certain types of characters, settings, themes, problems, solutions and lifestyles are dramatised at the expense of others.

To come to grips with this, it is vital to ask such questions as:

In terms of any given programme:

- Is it a significant story?
- Does it have metaphoric thrust?
- Does it shed light on common experience?
- Does it cleanse perception or add to the clutter?
- Does it capture the rhythms of historical process?
- Does it provoke recognition, revelation or catharsis?
- Has it credibility, integrity, proportion, clarity, immediacy, insight, purpose, depth, relevance, resonance, resolution?
- What is the overt point of the story?
- What are the unspoken assumptions which set the framework for the story? What is the underlying world view?
- What are the underlying presuppositions about class, sex, morality, religion, business, the range of legitimate life - styles, the structure of power, the distribution of wealth?
- How are these presuppositions encoded in the narrative conventions, camera movements, editing, casting, dialogue and visual imagery?
- What issues are raised? Why?
- What is said about the issues raised? Why?
- What is not said? Why not?
- What issues are not raised? Why not?
- What are the key concepts which set the limits within which issues are raised?
- What are the alternative key concepts?

In terms of the overall flow of programming:

- What stories are being told? By whom? Why?
- What alternative ways could these stories be told?
- What stories are not being told? Why not?

More specifically:

- How to characterise and explain the standardised plots and patterns of resolution, the stereotypical modes of characterisation and the stylised settings of US serial drama?
- How to characterise and explain the similarities and differences between these and those of British productions and of Irish productions?
- How have any or all of these changed over the years? Why?
- What is the relationship between the patterns of development of these changes and the larger patterns of social change?

To make a stab at answering these questions, it is necessary to struggle to synthesise a vast and variable flow of programming.

Suffice it to say here that, between the early days of television and today, there has been much water under the bridge. New tensions and new times have brought to light much that was seething beneath the surface and then burst into open flames, only to be dampened down again. Much is still smouldering, and whatever the attempts to smother it under a shrill and shallow pretence that all is well, things will never be the same again.

Society has changed enormously in those years and so has television. The trajectory from Friday to Furillo, from Lucy Ricardo to Ally McBeal, from Rita Nolan to Nicola Prendergast, is most definitely one with interesting

aesthetic implications and with deep and determinate ideological dimensions. It is a process deserving systematic articulation and demanding serious assessment, grounded in clear and coherent criteria of judgement.

### NOTES to Chapter 3:

1. Paul Feyerabend explicitly argued that 'anything goes' even in the natural sciences in *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1978.
2. See, for example, John Corner *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*, Clarendon Press, 1999.
3. There have been quite a few studies of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, studying it in relation to different international audiences and taking different critical stances, for example: Ien Ang *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* London, Methuen, 1985; Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990; Jostein Gripsrud *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*, London, Routledge, 1995; Alessandro Silj *East of Dallas: The European Challenge to American Television*, London, BFI, 1988; Barbara O'Connor *Soap and Sensibility: Audience Response to Dallas and Glenroe*, Dublin, RTÉ, 1990. Gripsrud takes a strong critical position against more populist approaches.
4. Some examples of content analysis of television programmes: JR Cantor, 'Humour on Television: A Content Analysis', *Journal of Broadcasting*, 20, 1976; Mildred Downing, 'Heroine of the Daytime Serial', *Journal of Communication*, 24, 1974; Sydney Head, 'Content Analysis of Television Drama Programs', *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, 9, 1954; Jean McNeil, 'Feminism, Femininity and the Television Series', *Journal of Broadcasting*, 19, 1975; Nancy Tedesco, 'Patterns in Prime Time', *Journal of Communication*, 24, 1974.
5. Examples of structuralist and semiotic studies: Roland Barthes *Elements of Semiology*, London: Cape, 1967; Rosalind Coward and John Ellis *Language and Materialism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1978; John Ellis (ed.), *Screen Reader: Cinema/Ideology/Politics*, London: SEFT, 1977; Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London, Methuen, 1977.
6. Examples of effects research: JD Halloran (ed) *The Effects of Television* London, Panther, 1970; JG Blumler and E Katz 'The Uses and Gratifications Approach to Communications Research' *SAGE Annual Review of Communication*, 3, 1975.
7. Frequently cited as an example of an economist approach to media studies is: Dallas Smythe 'Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1, 3, 1977.
8. More complex studies of the political economy of television include: Graham Murdock and Peter Golding 'Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations', John Westergaard 'Power, Class and Media', Philip Elliot 'Media Organisation and Occupations', all in *Mass Communication and Society*, J Curran, M Gurevitch and J Woollacott (eds) London: Arnold, 1977; Nicholas Garnham, 'Contribution to a political economy of mass communication', *Media, Culture and Society*, 1;2 1979; Kevin Robbins and Frank Webster 'Mass Communication and Information Technology', *Socialist Register*, 1979.
9. Studies in the culturalist mode representing different emphases include: Stuart Hall 'Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect' in *Mass Communication and Society*, op.cit.; M Barrett, P Corrigan, A Kuhn and J Wolff, *Ideology and Cultural Production*, London: Croom Helm, 1979.
10. Georg Lukacs *Marxism and Human Liberation* New York 1973, p.126.
11. Flaubert cited by Lukacs, *ibid*, p.125.
12. Christopher St. John Sprigg to Paul and Elizabeth Beard. 21 November, 1935. Caudwell archives in Humanities Research Center, University of Austin, Texas. Permission to quote from unpublished correspondence from Rosemary Sprigg, executor, and from Paul and Elizabeth Beard.
13. Jeremy Cronin 'Even the Dead' in *Inside and Out* Cape Town, David Philip, 1999, p.134.
14. For an elaboration of this approach, see such texts as: Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy* London, New Left Books, 1971; Jacques Lacan *Ecrits: A Selection*, London, Tavistock, 1977; Julia Kristeva 'The Semiotic Activity', *Screen*, 14, 1/2, 1973; Colin MacCabe 'Realism and the Cinema', *Screen*, 15, 2, 1974; Laura Mulvey 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 3, 1975. For a critique of this approach, see: EP Thompson *The Poverty of Theory* London, Merlin, 1978; S Clarke, T Lovell, K Robbins and V Seidler *One Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture* London, Allison & Busby, 1980.
15. Todd Gitlin *Inside Prime Time*, New York, Pantheon, 1983, p.333.
16. *ibid*.
17. Jesus Martin-Barbero *Communication, Culture And Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* London, SAGE, 1993. See also review by Helena Sheehan in *Irish Communications Review* 1995.
18. Gitlin, 'Prime Time Ideology' in *Television: The Critical View* Horace Newcomb (ed.), New York, Oxford University Press, 1982.

# **Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories**

## **Part 2: The Evolution Of Irish Television Drama**

## Chapter 4: The Sixties: The Coming Of Television

### Ireland in the 1960s

Ireland in the 1960s was a society on the move. An old order was dying, though not without kicking and screaming and elaborate death throes. The protracted passing of the clear and cozy world into which post-independence Ireland had settled would not give way without virulent protest and sustained struggle to hold its own. The emergence of the not-so-clear and not-so-cozy forces that threatened to displace it were met with very formidable resistance. It was a complex shift in the balance of power that, even now, is far from finished. The values of traditionalist Ireland were basically rural, religious and nationalist. Its mentality was more feudal than bourgeois, in the sense of the emphasis being more on ties of blood and land than ties of capital or labour, more on agriculture than industry, more on the community than the individual, more on hierarchical authority than democratic rights, more on decreed doctrine than open inquiry, more on inherited ritual than personal fulfillment. Its legacy of frugal self-sufficiency was isolationist with respect to the rest of the world, all that is except what came within the orbit of the Church of Rome. Catholicism was its primary, and nearly exclusive, tie to a larger world. Otherwise its protectionism erected insulating walls to keep holy Ireland to itself alone; tariff barriers in the realm of economics and censorship laws in the realm of culture.

The walls were far from impenetrable, however. Capitalist market forces, emigrant ships, European radio waves, British trade unions and television transmissions, Hollywood films, imported paperbacks and smuggled condoms had long been making inroads. Warnings against these alien influences were constant and there was always a backdrop of fear of city lights and foreign ways and the more complex and challenging problems and possibilities they opened to view. Not that everything that filtered through from the outside world threatened its traditions. Much of what it picked up on re-enforced its conservatism, particularly the whole cold war mentality prevailing in the western world.

It was hostile territory for those who had ventured into the open spaces in open view and had the temerity to come back and talk about it. It branded its most honest and creative thinkers as common pornographers. For such a small country, it outdistanced many a larger one in banned books and theatrical riots. There were honours for those writers who chose the path facing into an imagined past, into an idyllic romanticisation of folk traditions. It was another story, though, for those who looked to the real past, who exposed its dark areas or who set out to explore new ways. Marginalised or rejected, they often felt driven from dissent and defiance to despair or self-destruction. It was not only the iconoclasts, but even those who stood with anything less than reverential awe before the icons, who came under pressure from the powers-that-be. Priests, politicians and patriarchs wanted to keep the rules of the game simple:

‘Keep the faith.’  
‘Up the Republic.’  
‘A woman's place is in the home.’  
‘The family that prays together stays together.’

Artists, intellectuals and left wing activists who insisted on asking ‘Why?’ were a disruptive and most unwelcome presence. It was not only the official censorship, but also what John A. Murphy has called the layers of unofficial, self-righteous, ‘busybody censorship’.<sup>1</sup> Then there were all the complex forms of self-censorship, overt and subtle, conscious and unconscious, direct and indirect. While there was no direct censorship of theatre, as there was with literature and cinema, the prevailing atmosphere of censoriousness took its toll there nonetheless. The court case surrounding the Pike's production of Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*, the public outcry against the Abbey's production of Sean O' Casey's *The Bishop's Bonfire* and the withdrawal of O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* from the Dublin Theatre Festival were cases in point. Even so, there were those willing to swim against the tide and to set forth and defend a more humanistic, a more secular, more cosmopolitan perspective on what Ireland was and what Ireland ought to be.

If the most progressive forces of the day failed to prevail, it must be said that neither did the most reactionary forces get everything their own way. Against severe pressure from such groups as Maria Duce on the right, the 1937 constitution had its liberal aspects. Ireland was at least formally a secular state with no established church. It was a republic, which recognised no aristocratic titles. It was a democracy in which many individual liberties were guaranteed.

But it was hardly the cutting edge of social, cultural and political advance on the world stage as the 1950s moved towards the 1960s. When things began to change in 1957, when de Valera was succeeded by Lemass, it was to bring itself into line with the direction in which the rest of the world was moving, ie, the growing internationalisation of capital and its corresponding culture. Ireland was basically a capitalist society, despite its low level of capital accumulation and its high level of feudal residue. Lemass's policies for economic expansion involved accelerated capitalist development and industrialisation through foreign investment, thus opening Ireland to the international marketplace. After several decades of resistance, Irish national capital did a volte face and decided to ally itself with international finance capital. Multinational investment brought a rise in productivity, a rise in employment, a rise in consumption. There was not only a rising standard of living, but a general air of buoyancy, an energy in the 1960s that stood in marked contrast to the inertia of the 1950s. There was an atmosphere of rising expectations. It was a time, in the words of the song of the era, of 'high hopes'.

The advancing industrialisation naturally brought a formidable demographic shift from rural to urban modes of economic and social organisation. This in turn, again quite naturally, brought a gradual erosion of the social base of rural, Catholic and Gaelic definitions of Irish identity. Concomitant with the new openness of the Irish economy to the international laws of supply and demand was the openness of Irish culture to the bourgeois mentality and its characteristic forms of cultural expression. Ireland was suddenly full of rock'n'roll, the space race, smart clothes and situation ethics. The country particularly basked in the reflected glory of the election of John F Kennedy in the US and felt on top of the world on the occasion of his 1963 visit to Ireland. Ireland was very much apart of the whole upbeat, on-the-move mood prevailing in the wider world in this burst of modernist thrust.

The more liberal, cosmopolitan atmosphere in Ireland was greatly enhanced by what was happening in the Catholic Church on a world scale. Catholicism itself was adapting to modernising moods and mores. As Protestantism had emerged as the theological concomitant of capitalist economics and bourgeois culture, Vatican II Catholicism represented a hybrid form, a belated, complex and controversial Protestantisation of Catholicism. The whole atmosphere of *aggiornamento* had cultural consequences that were much more far reaching than any of the particular reforms promulgated by the council. The main impact was in its relativisation effect. So much of what had been considered absolute was discovered to be relative. So much of what had been thought immutable was suddenly made mutable. So much of what had been static for centuries was suddenly all changing. Many resisted and resented the loss of this rock of stability in their lives. Many welcomed the new spirit of openness and relevance. Some who began re-thinking and re-evaluating old dogmas according to the new guidelines pushed onward and took the process much further than even the most liberal theologians intended, exceeding Catholic guidelines and outgrowing the church altogether.

In academic centres, Thomism was giving way to existentialism. Catholic social teaching as embodied in the papal encyclicals was losing ground to empirical social sciences. The orthodox reverential and nationalist approach to Irish history was coming under the challenge of a sweeping historiographical revisionism, which undermined many cozy and heretofore unchallenged assumptions.

Not surprisingly this convergence of forces put considerable pressure upon traditional definitions of Irish identity and brought about a marked disintegration of consensus in what had been a remarkably homogeneous society. The years ahead were to be full of tensions between old and new ways. They were to be characterised, not only by conflict, but efforts to reconcile old and new, particularly to find ways to fit new developments into the framework of old ideologies. But there were also new ideologies. The Irish, like many another people, took their stand in relation to them and began the parting of the ways. But not without a great deal of jostling and arguing over division of common property before taking leave.

## **The Coming of Television**

Into this hectic and somewhat heated atmosphere came television. Television had already arrived on the east coast, which received British television, a fact which coloured the expectations and reservations attending the introduction of Irish television. Preceding the introduction of Telefís Éireann were several years of public debate on what the coming of television would mean for Irish society. It was a debate which had a particular edge to it because of the perception of the country as being at a crossroads in its development. From the public record of statements of the hopes and fears expressed from various quarters, it would seem that the fears predominated, at least among official spokesmen. From church pulpits, from Oireachtas debates, from GAA meetings, from Knights of Columbanus seminars, came worries and warnings about the effects of television, which was basically seen as an agent of erroneous ideas and alien values. These sorts of apprehensions were enhanced by the radical character of the British television drama at the time. Denunciations of the 'kitchen sink drama' on TV as sordid and immoral were central to the tone of the debate.<sup>2</sup>

The enabling legislation, the Broadcasting Act of 1960, was cast in a liberal mould, changing the structure of existing radio broadcasting as well as laying the ground for the introduction of television broadcasting. Breaking with the existing civil service organisation of broadcasting, which put it under the direct control of the minister for posts and telegraphs, on the one hand, and refusing to give commercial interests the franchise, which would put it at the mercy of the free market, on the other, it established an independent broadcasting authority. Just how autonomous the RTÉ Authority, appointed by government, was to be was not clear. Tried and tested at points of crisis and subjected to amending legislation and judicial decisions over the years, it remains unclear to this day.

The opening night of Telefís Éireann on new year's eve 1961 was surrounded by great festivity and excitement. Beginning with the national anthem, the night's programming included music, poetry, news, benediction and ceremonial speeches. The speeches sounded contrasting chords. Éamon de Valera, now the president and the personification of the older post-independent Ireland, struck a cautionary note. Television, he said, was like atomic energy: it could be used either for good or bad. It could either impart knowledge and build the character of a whole people or it could lead 'through demoralisation to decadence and dissolution'. Cardinal D'Alton also spoke in an apprehensive tone. He warned parents against letting children become television addicts. He exhorted programme makers to ensure that programmes reflected high ideals and not the 'caricatures of Irish life' that were expressed by writers in recent years. However, he expressed confidence in Éamonn Andrews, the first chairman of the new RTÉ Authority, whom he described as being 'on the side of the angels.' There was no such holding back, however, in the speech of the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, who was the voice of the new policies. Addressing the Irish people as citizens of the world as well as of Ireland, television fitted very well into his plans for the country. Full of optimism about what television would bring, he stressed that there were standards, aims and values that transcended national frontiers and were universal in application.

The financing of the new television service was something like a cross between the methods of BBC and ITV. Revenue came both from licence fees and from advertising. Despite recurring clashes between the public service dimension and the commercial element, the ethos of public service broadcasting has predominated. In a situation where it has never had a monopoly of its audience, it has always been anxious about its ratings and its ability to attract advertising revenue to pay its way. It has, all the same, never been a slave to the TAMs and has been conscientious in trying to provide a proper spectrum of programming for its audience.

Just what constituted a proper spectrum, however, was a matter for debate both for its audience and for its own personnel. The composition of staff and mix of programmes were such as to provide grounds for a constant tug of war between traditionalist and modernist values and for considerable divergence of judgement as to how wide the spectrum should span to the right or to the left of what was a very unstable centre.

There were those who believed that television could give new support to old ideas and values and they were in at the ground floor in the formative years of Telefís Éireann. Programme schedules were full of liturgical ceremonies, prayers, indulgent coverage of ecclesiastical events and clerical statements and a great deal of pious commentary. Much of RTÉ's style of address to its audience has been in this sort of reverential, triumphalist and introverted tone, which assumed that all were of the one true faith in the one true church. Those of other faiths have rarely felt themselves acknowledged, except as an afterthought and in a token and piecemeal way. Atheists and agnostics have hardly ever felt their existence acknowledged at all. News, features and current affairs coverage routinely rested on unexamined assumptions of the rectitude of the prevailing structures of power in the world and of the validity of existing social, political and economic institutions. Controversy generally centred on differences of emphasis within the particular blend of pre-capitalist and capitalist norms that Ireland was working out for itself. Those further to the right or left, especially to the left, most often felt their point of view was either left unexpressed or marginalised in the infrequent and precarious forms of expression opened to them.

There were others, however, also in at the ground floor, who would have had it otherwise. Working in RTÉ, some in relatively influential positions, were a significant number of people of progressive and even radical views. Although their work never expressed the full force of their convictions, they nevertheless put up a formidable fight to secularise and to liberalise programme output. Their struggles were not without success. But in their edging forward, they had to contend with the counterweight of forces striving to push them backward every step of the way. Key figures involved bear witness to the pressures they had to deal with at the time, especially of the heavy lean of church influence in RTÉ. Jim Fitzgerald, a producer in the early years whose photograph and address was once printed in the *Catholic Standard* with the caption 'This man is dangerous' spoke of the presence of clerics at policy meetings and the role of a clerical unit in RTÉ. He claimed to have had his presence at meetings questioned because of his 'left wing bias'. He felt it vital to try to drill a hole in a lot of silences and to speak of things not spoken about before, but felt he was hampered in having his work continually scrutinised for political bias.

Not that it was always so out in the open as this. The normal way to prevent things being done, he contended, was to slice the budget.<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Swift, writer and script editor, spoke of the strong control of the Knights of Columbanus in RTÉ. They were, she claimed, behind the prosecution of *The Rose Tattoo* case at the Pike Theatre. They had, in her view, failed with theatre and were determined to have their way with television.<sup>4</sup> James Plunkett too had his problems. An author and producer, formerly a trade union official, he had earlier lost his job in Radio Éireann on account of a trip to Moscow. According to him, the shock waves were coming all the time, though the liberalising forces did manage to move ahead. The clergy, in his view, tended to overplay their hand. Television, as he saw it, tended to liberalise as society liberalised.<sup>5</sup>

Television did much more than reflect the liberalisation of Irish society. It also did a great deal to contribute actively to its liberalisation. Whatever the tug of war between traditionalist and modernist values in personnel and in programme content, television in itself was inevitably an instrument of modernisation. It was in the very nature of the medium to be an agent of liberalisation, which was perhaps why a country like South Africa only introduced television reluctantly and late in the day. Itself the product of industrial and technological progress, its very presence brought even the most remote rural dwelling into a whole web of implication in the forms of perception and rhythms of response embodied in the culture which brought it forth. On one level, the overt opening of Ireland to other cultures providing constant points of comparison and contrast to its own culture, was bound to have a powerfully relativising effect. On another level, a sort of subliminal seduction into the whole pace and texture of its dense and discontinuous flood of stimuli, has most likely had even more far-reaching consequences, though much more difficult to assess or even express.

Previous media had, of course, played their role in the modernising process. Like television everywhere, Irish television drew on previous media and developed in a complex and ever changing relationship to other media. Growing out of an organisation already in the business of radio broadcasting, there was a natural tendency at first to regard television as simply radio with pictures. The complexities would become apparent in due course. Not surprisingly, personnel were recruited from the worlds of the press, radio, cabaret and theatre, as well as from foreign television services. Quite naturally, various television formats showed the influence of traditions formed in these previous media. News and current affairs, for example, tended to look to the conventions and procedures pioneered by the popular press and mediated through radio.

Drama tended to draw primarily from theatre in its first years, although strands of influence from literature, radio and cinema, both domestic and foreign, were also in evidence. Constant exposure of both programme makers and audience to a great deal of British and American television has always been an important source of influence as well. The earliest efforts in the field of television drama in most countries have been marked by a predominance of adaptations, with original written-for-television material taking some time to come into its own. In a country like Ireland, with such strong and internationally honoured literary and theatrical traditions, it was even more bound to be so. RTÉ's first heads of drama, Hilton Edwards, Jim Fitzgerald and Chloe Gibson, were drawn from the world of Irish theatre, as were most of the producers, directors, writers, actors, and designers, bringing with them the styles, structures and skills that had been evolved by the theatrical profession.

The prevailing production methods in television at this time also tended to favour a style of drama very close to that of theatre. The main form of dramatic production was the studio-based single play. The confinement to studio space generally meant the use of sets very like those of the stage. Even though videotape had by this time eliminated the need for live performance and made possible production in advance of transmission, drama was still played right through from the first scene to the last in proper sequence as in theatre. The plays were done in long single takes with a minimal number of changes of scene, set, wardrobe and make-up. For technical reasons, there was little editing, even when mishaps occurred or lines were fluffed. Acting styles only gradually began to move away from the projection of voice and grandness of gesture customary in the theatre to the more quiet and subtle type of performance appropriate to the more close-up, intimate and domestic medium of television.

Most important of all in assessing the influence of Irish theatre in the development of Irish television drama was the appropriation of themes, genres and modes of representation characteristic of indigenous theatrical traditions. In fact, the majority of television plays were direct adaptations of stage plays in these first years. As to the state of Irish theatre at this time, it had been for several decades in the doldrums, except perhaps for such sporadic challenges to the mainstream as came in the shape of theatres like the Pike and the Globe. The Abbey had settled into a rut of what Frank O'Connor called 'museum theatre'. Its succession of cottage kitchens presented a picture of a cozy and complacent society, disturbed only by individual transgressions and cute eccentricities.

Stemming from the traditions of the Irish literary revival, particularly from Yeats's brand of aristocratic hostility to bourgeois values, it represented an urban idealisation of rural life. It was a theatre based in heroic legend, pitted against the modernist idea of progress. It focused on the warm organicist peasant community as a haven from the cold individualist industrialised world. It spoke in a highly stylised mythical language, grounded in an aesthetic

that consciously chose romanticism over realism. Although the Gate brought the best of international theatre to Ireland and Irish writers such as Seán O'Casey, Denis Johnston, Walter Macken and Brendan Behan wrote in a decidedly different vein, the national folk drama of a poeticised peasantry was the dominant tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship of Ireland with America, particularly the influx of US tourists and the making of Hollywood films about Ireland, did much to maintain and even enhance antiquarian images of Ireland as a land of lush landscapes, laughing leprechauns and lovable lads and lassies. America, never really believing in itself quite as much as it pretended, seemed to need a nostalgic fix in a connection to a picturesque pastoral past, to legitimise itself in an imaginary link to roots in paradise lost. Ireland, in a schizoid sort of way, both laughed at the yanks and proceeded to prostitute itself to fulfil their fantasies of Ireland as a kind of Celtic Disneyland. To bring its own way a share in the wealth that industrialisation had brought, they were happy to play to the galleries and be the swaggering boyos and comely colleens in an anti-industrial scenario full of sunbursts, shamrocks and shillelahs.

There were variations on the theme, but these were only aspects of the same cycle of delusion and self-delusion. As Micheál Ó hAodha put it, the stage Irishman was a swaggering, good natured buffoon who dearly loved a lord, who was always ready to raise a laugh or strike a blow, but was as gentle and innocent as a turtle dove. Then there was the equally fallacious idea of the noble peasant, who had the blood of kings in his veins. He regretted, as did others, that the Irish theatre did not bring forth playwrights to mirror the deeper thoughts and emotions of their people, instead of all the falsely sentimental images of cozy cottages and mother machrees and purty colleens and crubeens and clay pipes and all of the other trappings of stage Irishry.<sup>7</sup>

It had its critics, of course. Seán O'Faoláin was particularly scathing about it, characterising much of the myth making as really myth faking. It was a source of sorrow to him that the Irish persisted in a lack of intellectual sophistication and tended neither to write realistically nor to ponder deeply. He saw the two as connected, linking the lack of realism to the strain of anti-intellectualism in Irish culture.<sup>8</sup> Irish culture never provided much of an arena for intellectual debate. In its whole range of artistic expression, it has always been more descriptive than analytical. Irish drama was a drama of ideas. It was drama that took great delight in descriptive dialogue, but not in philosophical meaning. In its great flow of witty words and ironic insights, it displayed capacity to be remarkably clever, if not notably deep.

Not all of it has been in the Yeatsian tradition of poetic romanticism. It had its other modes, both naturalistic and expressionist. All of these were to find their way onto television, with the balance shifting as the years went on. Its early adaptations spanned the whole range of existing theatrical styles, taking in Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, as well as Joyce and Beckett, as well as O'Casey and Behan. Its original material would eventually widen the range still further. Its forms encompassed melodrama, tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, thriller, farce, allegory, soap opera and drama-documentary.

It did take time to find its own original material, however, and to discern the distinctiveness of the medium and what was appropriate to it in the way of dramatic style. An early issue of the *RTV Guide*<sup>9</sup> went to a number of Irish playwrights and posed the question: How will Irish drama be affected by the coming of Telefís Éireann? Some believed that it would not be affected at all:

- John B. Keane answered flatly that it would not be affected, though he then warned of the dangers of writers becoming slaves of its techniques. He saw creativity as rebelling against its constraints.
- John O'Donovan was even more certain that it would involve no radical change. Television, he stated firmly, was a method of presentation, nothing more and nothing less. It presented no challenge in dramatic technique. The television play needed arresting dialogue, observant characterisation and interesting situations, just as stage and film did. The important thing, he insisted, was what you presented, not how you presented it. No amount of lighting effects, camera gimmickry, and hopping from one lens to another would turn a bad play into a good one.
- Maura Laverty agreed: Television wouldn't affect playwriting in the slightest.

Others felt it would affect playwriting and they did not welcome the prospect:

- Austin Clarke said there was nothing he liked about television. It was such a visual art that it would make it difficult to appreciate the imaginative power of words. He did concede that television could open the field for a more popular kind of drama, but stipulated that producers would have to find a method to give due value to language.
- Frank Carney would have none of it. He said he wouldn't dream of allowing his work to be presented with advertisements popping into the middle of a play.

Others were more open to the new possibilities for Irish drama in the medium of television:

- David Hayes and Brendan Behan thought television would have a stimulating effect on drama.
- John McCann considered television to be a most exciting and enticing medium.
- Donagh McDonagh thought that the brilliant production of Synge in the first week of Telefís Éireann augured well.
- Gerard Healy was all for television. It was a more flexible medium. It would help drama get away from the kitchen sink and explore whole new settings. It would show aspects of Irish life that had been neglected by Irish theatre.

In the same issue was an article entitled 'The Problems and Possibilities of Television Drama'. It was by Hilton Edwards, the grand old man of Irish theatre who was RTÉ's first head of drama who kept television drama firmly within theatrical traditions. Ironically, the article was on the need to break away from theatrical traditions and to realise the distinctiveness of television as a medium for drama. It indicated quite a clear view, on one level at least, of what the situation required in this respect, however much he may have failed to implement his own recommendations in practice. Edwards looked back to his early days in the theatre as a time when he was sure of his ground and not beset by aesthetic doubts. This situation was undermined by the advent of cinema with its obvious pictorial superiority to stage. This necessitated discovering what qualities were truly theatrical. The coming of television in its turn threatened both stage and cinema. There was confusion among the three domains, especially since the invention of videotape. The solution, Edwards argued, was to isolate the essential germ of each medium. Each would remain irreplaceable in its own domain, if true to itself and if not lured into playing games away from home. In isolating the essential germ of television and finding what made it other than stage or cinema, Edwards noted various characteristics. There was its capacity to penetrate the family hearth. There was its ability to highlight details through the use of the close-up. It was possible on television to reveal the inner life of a play. The camera and the microphone, the eyes and ears of the audience, not only came to meet the action, but almost entered into it, sharing moments of greatest intimacy. All the same, this still made television sound like an audio-visual aid and transmission system for the existing theatre.

Edwards then set out his new department's strategy. Initially, it would be necessary to rely on existing works of indigenous and international theatre, until writers familiarised themselves with the new medium. In doing so, it was best to search for those plays which the alchemy of television could transmute to a new quality and give renewed life. RTÉ produced quite a number of classic and contemporary works of international theatre, such as *Antigone*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Fire Raisers*, *The Government Inspector*, *An Apple a Day*, *Dr. Korczak and the Children*, *Skipper Next to God*, *The Physicists*, *Do You Know the Milky Way?* and *Martine*. It also did its own productions of quite a number of classic and contemporary works of Irish theatre, such as *The Well of the Saints*, *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet*, *Candida*, *O'Flaherty VC*, *The Man of Destiny*, *The Moon Shines on Kilenamoe*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Church Street*, *The Far-Off Hills*, *The Whiteheaded Boy*, *Michaelmas Eve*, *The Scythe and the Sunset*, *The King of Friday's Men*, *The Year of the Hiker*, *The Field*, *The Plough and the Stars*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *The Hostage* and *The Loves of Cass McGuire*. But ultimately, Edwards stated, the task was to find original television writers and to produce plays unique to television, plays which owed nothing to stage or cinema.<sup>10</sup>

Television did nothing, however, to change his fundamental aesthetic, which was declaredly romantic and escapist.<sup>11</sup> He had no time for the social realist, documentary style of drama that was having its day on British television. He was determined to resist the idea of drama as reportage, to which he thought television tended. It was, as he saw it, a medium which made it difficult 'to see the dramatic wood for the journalistic trees.'<sup>12</sup> The problems of contemporary society should be left to news and current affairs to clear the field for drama to deal with areas where the dust had long since settled.

In this matter, he got his way. Whatever else about the RTÉ drama of this era, it was not designed to give a picture, challenging or otherwise, of Irish society in the Lemass years. Nevertheless, even in its way of drawing back from it, it often gave more of a picture of it than it intended. Most of it was set in the past, at least at first. As time went on, an increasing proportion of the drama was set in the present. Not that drama set in the past needed always be irrelevant to the present. It could be either an avenue of escape from the problems of the present or an agency for shedding a long clear light on them. Ironically, productions shedding the most light on the present were sometimes those most firmly rooted in the actuality and complexity of the past, as opposed to those moving in a kind of dreamy indeterminacy about time that passed for timelessness.

### **Morality Plays**

Many of the plays had the tone of the universal morality tale and carried a sense of an essentialist human nature that was what it was, regardless of the particular existential realities of time and place. Plays such as *The Well of the Saints* and *The Devil a Saint Would Be*, whether in a tragic or comic vein, assumed a static sort of conflict

between good and evil, a universal set of virtues and vices, somewhat oblivious of the transforming reality of historical process in shaping such conflicts and in defining good and evil and virtue and vice. Plays such as *Everyman* assumed that there was an essentialist and universalist everyman, that good deeds were good deeds, that beauty was beauty, that life was life and death was death, whether in the peasant fields of the medieval world or in the night clubs and bourgeois penthouses of modern times. They were tales more in the tradition of biblical parables than tracts for the times. Far from promoting any sort of historical understanding or social consciousness they fostered attitudes that turned away from it. There was a sort of quaintness about them that was oddly out of tune with the times that were in it. But they represented a strong strain in Ireland's past that it was desperately trying to hold on to as it was being pulled into the future. The moral of the story was generally of the order of:

- better to be blind than to see the ugliness of this world (*The Well of the Saints*);
- better to be civil to a demon than to risk insulting a saint (*The Devil a Saint Would Be*).

Hardly the most appropriate sentiments for marching bravely into a brave new world.

The lives of the saints actually loomed quite large in this scheme of things. There was a series of five plays under the title of *The Little Father* on the life of Francis of Assisi. There was a tableau *Oliver of Ireland* on the life of Ireland's beatified and to-be-sainted Oliver Plunkett. There was *Enquiry at Lisieux* on the route by which Therese Martin became Saint Therese of Lisieux. This sort of production was presented in a pious, reverential tone that seemed to take not the slightest notice of the remotest possibility of any sort of doubt or dissent in the whole of the country. The *RTV Guide* actually presented *Everyman* 'as a final Lenten offering'.<sup>13</sup> It presented *Enquiry at Lisieux* in terms of an endearing (or cloying, depending on your point of view) reference to the 'Little Flower' as 'one of the saints nearest to the hearts of the Irish people.'<sup>14</sup> It was a mode of address more appropriate to the pulpit than to a public broadcasting service. It assumed a degree of consensus that was never really there and was steadily being eroded yet further. It even implicated in the very production people who did not believe in it. It was not as honest and as innocent as it seemed.

Religious texts and sub texts pervaded many of the plays. Priests and nuns were a persistent presence among their characters. Virtually all other characters were within their faithful flock. Whatever their temptations and their transgressions, which were often the stuff of the drama, they still believed. Indeed, they lived their days and did their deeds in an atmosphere in which it was seemingly unthinkable not to believe. As Hugh Leonard described the situation:

The Irish writer is alone in the world in the sense that in every other country the existence of God is doubted and a serious play becomes a... search for a purpose and a meaning. The Irish writer is different in that he accepts God and so do his characters. That is his starting and his finishing point and it is inclined to put him out of step with the rest of the world's writers. At the beginning of every Irish play there is the presumption that God exists. In nearly every other European country among the literati ...there is a belief that God is dead and that we must carve our own meaning out of life.<sup>15</sup>

The priest often came into play as the mediator of social tensions. In *A Matter of Conscience*, the parish priest brought reconciliation and the true Christmas spirit to the conflict between unctuous citizens and a family of tinkers. Persuading those involved to tip the scales of justice on the side of charity, the priest was typically the resourceful and inspired solver of the community's problems. Occasionally, the priest was revealed as having problems of his own. In *A Ship in the Night*, a sort of Canterbury Tales scenario involving the interactions of five passengers on a boat crossing the Irish Sea, all were thrown together and set up to come face to face with their problems. Of all their stories, it focused most intently on an alcoholic's downfall and a priest's crisis in his vocation. Even more occasionally, the priest stood against the community which was itself resourceful and inspired in taking into its own hands the resolution of its own problems. Liam O'Flaherty, who had himself studied for the priesthood, had the people reject their parish priest and form a committee to fight landlordism in an eight part serial entitled *Land*.

Nuns also made their presence felt in the plays of the period. A typically benign view of their way of life and their role in the world came through in *A Letter from the General* in which the good sisters were not only holy virgins and benevolent missionaries of western culture in the eastern world, but brave bulwarks against the communist threat. When their mission in the far east was threatened with closure upon the communists coming to power, they sought to hold their ground, despite the new government's declared aim of eradicating all traces of the dominance of western culture. One of the old nuns, who had taught the local communist leader when he was at school, believed that a plea from her might succeed in stemming the tide. They then proceeded to await a letter from the general. When it came, it became apparent that their plea had failed and his sympathies had changed.

A more critical view of convent life came through in *Cradle Song*. It traced the reactions of various nuns to a baby left in a Spanish convent, their decision to keep her, her growing up and in time making her decision to leave. The effect of the foundling on each nun was used as a device for revealing layer after layer of the characters of each of them. It seemed to have not gone down very well with RTÉ's convent audience. One nun wrote to protest. She called it a travesty of convent life. She objected to its picture of nuns as immature, hypersensitive, jansenistically narrow in their relations with men, catty and superstitious among themselves, and feeding their repressions on untheological devotions to the blessed sacrament.<sup>16</sup> Whatever this Sister of the Holy Child Jesus may have claimed, others might find such a characterisation an extremely accurate description of convent life from inside its walls.<sup>17</sup>

There were other plays as well which touched on the hypocrisy of the holy and the mixed motives underlying much religious observance. *Some Women on the Island* put the spotlight on a number of women on a pilgrimage to Lough Derg. They were shown as preoccupied with gossiping about their fellow pilgrims and grumbling about their physical discomforts to the exclusion of any awareness of their own need for penitence. Another nicely ironic cameo of the role of religion in Irish life was *Grace*, an adaptation of one of Joyce's *Dubliners* stories. Following upon a session combining drinking, camaraderie and a rambling theological discussion, a group of Dublin businessmen made their way into a retreat for businessmen at the Jesuit church in Gardiner Street. In a burst of a kind of holiness that was indistinguishable from alcoholic euphoria, they renounced the devil, not forgetting his works and pomps, and bellowed out the stirring strains of *Faith of Our Fathers*.

Occasionally, an eye was cast on the presence of minority religions in the country, reflecting the new ecumenical spirit abroad in the land by the late sixties. *The Last Eleven*, a play written by the assistant controller of television at RTÉ, Jack White, was specifically about the challenge of ecumenism. Showing how the last remnants of a Protestant community in rural Ireland were being affected by the changing times, it concentrated on the conflict within a Protestant cleric of the old school in dealing with a Catholic curate of the new age.

Morality was normally, either implicitly or explicitly, tied to religion. What was defined as moral or immoral was generally done in accordance with the dogmas of Catholic moral theology. What passed for ethical discussion was corrosively conditioned by the Catholic canon law mentality. Many plays showed Irish life as perhaps more full of sin than sanctity, but sin was a matter of the individual straying from the prescribed path, which never called the prescribed path into question. Morality or immorality was a matter of individuals deciding to adhere to or depart from the socially accepted moral norms, which corresponded to divine commands, the do's and don'ts of which were simply taken as given. The drama generally spotlighted the circumstances and consequences of the decision for the individuals directly affected, but threw little or no light on the social evolution of the moral norms setting the terms of the decision. There was rarely the slightest hint of challenging the legitimacy of the prevailing moral codes or the legitimacy of the social order which produced them and policed their observance.

Occasionally, matters of public morality were raised. Those which did so most explicitly, however, were adaptations of works by foreign authors and were often met with hostility from the domestic audience, or at least that section of it for which they came closest to the bone. Jim Fitzgerald's productions of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* and Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* concerned the responsibility of the individual to confront social pressures and to examine the validity of their claims upon him. In these plays, it was not simply a matter of individual conscience versus social convention, but a matter of the social responsibility of the individual to stand against prevailing social mores. Giving *Public Enemy* an Irish setting certainly carried a strong implication that its dilemma was as relevant to Irish society in the sixties as to the time and place of its origin and that the will of the people could come down just as harshly here against anyone who stood with integrity against their less-than-noble vested interests.

An indigenous treatment of a similar scenario was John B. Keane's *The Field*, which also showed an entire community implicated in suppression of truth and conspiracy in crime, but elicited a certain sympathy for it in standing its ground against forces outside it. Its strong imagery showed a world where 20th century jet planes flew over 19th century feuding, land hunger and dying folk ways. It showed a society in transition in microcosm, focusing on the fate of one field and whether it would or would not be incorporated into Ireland's relentlessly advancing industrialisation. Despite this clear exposure of the greed, frustration, violence, and even murder, smouldering just under the surface of rural life, it portrayed the people of such communities as ground down and locked together by centuries of poor land and backbreaking toil and therefore not to be judged too harshly for anything they might do to prevent what little they had being taken from them. However, while all matter of crimes, including murder, could be justified within such communities, sexual transgression surely could not. Speculating that it might have been an avenging husband who murdered the man who came to buy the field: 'Can you blame the poor man, Father? In all fairness can you blame him for murderin' a home-wrecker?'

How many had qualms of conscience in the face of such representations would be hard to tell. How many Irish communities, one might wonder, which knew and would not say where the bodies were buried, flinched at whatever recognitions such drama might have brought to the surface. How many secrets lay buried in rural Ireland,

how many strangers ended in unmarked graves, how many girls gave birth alone by cold dark grottoes, how many families disposed of unwanted babies in the deep of the night, no one will ever really know. Much about the dark face of the hidden Ireland and the forces keeping it hidden remained outside the domain of television drama.

Despite the public face beaming to the world indications of warm, friendly communities, there were other glimpses of how harshly communities could deal with particularly vulnerable individuals. Showing what cruelty and neglect could be visited upon people in need of compassion and attention, there were plays such as *The Bomb* and *The Loves of Cass McGuire* dealing with the situations of old women essentially alone in the world, *An Triail* dealing with the reception given to a young unmarried mother in distress; and *Them* dealing with the treatment meted out to a simple, amenable retarded child. Showing what harm could result from envy and greed and the corruption of truth, were plays such as *The Old Ladies* and *Patter O'Rourke*. Showing what devastation could be wrought by struggles for domination and bullying human relationships, were plays such as *A Walk on the Water*, *Shadows in the Sun* and *An Bullaí*.

But ultimately transgressions were transgressions of individuals. Theft was put down to the individual thief, although *A Matter of Conscience* did indicate that what the tinkers might do illegally was nothing compared to what a businessman might do legally. Lying was done by the individual tongue, although *The Liar* did infer that doing one thing and saying another was by no means a rare Irish characteristic. Murder was an individual act and the question was to find out 'who done it', although *The Glass Murder* could make it a very engrossing story. But there was rarely any probing of the social order and how it had shaped the individuals who did such things. Often the surrounding society was redeemed in a revelation of what was regarded as the essential goodness of human nature. This was usually embodied in some good, but ordinary, individual who, through some kindness, brought the offending individual face to face with his offence. The sinner became a penitent and all would be well with the world once again. Even the cynics would soften in the heart warming glow radiating from such good acts and come to a higher opinion of their fellow men and learn to move more easily in the social world. *The Bomb*, *The Paddy Pedlar* and *No Trumpets Sounding* were among the many examples that could be given of such tales of reformation and redemption.

### **Images of Sexuality**

Not all stories would end so well, however. Given the Irish tendency to an obsessive identification of immorality with sexuality and to a disedifying levity about other moral matters, it was not surprising that *An Triail* could have no such happy-ever-after resolution. Discovering that she was pregnant, a young country girl took leave of the repressively religious atmosphere of her family home and came to the city seeking work. Here she encountered various types of people with various types of reaction to her condition, including that of the father of her child, who drunkenly declared his desire to have nothing to do with her. Giving birth to a baby girl and feeling rejected all around, she ended up taking her own life and that of her child. One of the few plays written by a female author, this was one story that did not shrink from showing the darker recesses of Irish society, at least those into which women were forced owing to the repressive regimentation weighing upon female sexuality, stemming from the Jansenistic strain in Irish Catholicism. Some of the most biting plays were done in Irish, where it was perhaps possible to do things that could not be done in English.

Once in a while, there was a throwback to a pagan sensuality, which would be expressed in such productions as Merriman's *Midnight Court* and Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*, pouring scorn upon clerical celibacy and loveless marriage and glorying in the honest and illicit expression of human sexuality. But, for the most part, sexuality was given a fairly muted treatment on RTÉ. It tended to be more of an implicit off-screen presence than a matter for explicit enactment. Whatever erotic passions came into play confined their physical expression to fully-clothed, above-the-waist embraces, at least on screen. There were no torrid love scenes of naked bodies rolling in the rural hay or doing their best in the back of a Morris Minor along the Dollymount Strand. Domestic sets were more likely to be kitchens or sitting rooms than bedrooms. Certainly, an exploration of the deeper side of human sexuality was not very high on the agenda.

There were many stories surrounding the mating rituals of Irish society. Many of these were lighthearted battle-of-the-sexes stuff. Whatever their comic overtones, productions like *Me and My Friend*, *Happy as Larry*, *Pigs in the Parlour* and *I Have Heard the Mavis Singing* showed how far apart men and women really were and how little understanding there was across the gap of the sexual division of labour. Many of these, from a male point of view, saw the problem in 'the wiles of women and their fickleness in love' (*Happy as Larry*). The female of the species was a mysterious law unto itself, beyond the power of male reason. The following bit of incidental dialogue was typical:

'April is a tricky month alright. You never know where you are with it.'  
'Like a woman.'  
'You're quite right. It's a strange month.' (*The Field*)

There were a number of plays painting an interesting picture of certain aspects of male / female relationships. For example, there were the anti-marriage attitudes of the Irish bachelor set in his ways in *The Chair*. There were the pressures upon courtship and marriage brought to bear from emigration in *The Lambs*; from rural-urban tensions in *An Bullaí*, *Mr. Power's Purchase* and *All the Eels in the Ranny are Dead*; and most of all, from rural property relations in *The Girl From Mayo*, *Michaelmas Eve* and numerous other productions. The tie of sexuality to property, particularly the relationship of matchmaking to land hunger, was very striking indeed.

Always a staple of dramatic conflict, there were many tales of the eternal triangle, spanning centuries and countries in the range of settings. Not that it played itself out in the same way for all times. There was the ancient *Deirdre* fleeing from marriage to the high king of Ireland to her lover Naoise. There were the feudal conflicts between aristocracy and peasantry in *Martine* and *The King of Friday's Men*, which set the terms of relationships between peasant girls and lords of the manor. There were the big house intrigues of *The Real Charlotte*. There were the rural small holding sorrows of loveless marriage in *In the Shadow of the Glen* and the dilemmas of the young woman of the house torn between father and son in *Autumn Fire* and *Two's Company*. There were the freedoms and restrictions of the middle classes in *Candida*. There were the grand forces involved in pre-independence politics and the fall of Parnell over Kitty O'Shea in *Mourn the Ivy Leaf*. There were the mundane manipulations of sixties singles in a Dublin bedsit in *Me and My Friend* and the sad results of modern marriage on the rebound in urban working class life in *Babby Joe*.

The representation of women in all of this was extremely traditional. These plays were full of earth mothers sacrificing themselves to their husbands' appetites, spoiling their sons, shamed at their errant daughters, sorrowing over their emigrating offspring, sturdy and nurturing amidst domestic stress and setting a sound moral example to one and all. The salt of the earth were these women, according to the stereotype. Queens within their own sphere of home and hearth, so the story went, they knew well enough not to reach beyond it. The wider world was left to men. Its issues, ideas and ideologies were beyond their ken and of no possible interest in any case. It was best to let men get on with it all, politics or economics or whatever it was. Indeed they were busy with their own domestic details, not to mention gossiping about those of their neighbours.

It was assumed that a woman should not work outside the home. If she did, it was only something to be endured until rescued by a man whose duty it would be to keep her in the best style he could manage. It was thought to be a woman's right to live by a man's labour. Alternatively, she might work because she was left unclaimed on the shelf or because she wished to improve the family income. But rarely did she work because she had something vital she had to do in the wider world. In this scheme of things, women who were not securely on the path from being comely and complacent colleens to being settled and spreading matrons were often either scheming bitches or neurotic victims. Brought up not to make their own way in the world, but to latch on to men who were, women were bred to a parasitic mentality. Those who had not managed to find a host were almost bound either to be predatory or to feel pointless.

Television drama could hardly be blamed for representing women in this way, if this was how in fact the vast majority of women tended to be, a line of defence for which a reasonable case could be made. But it could perhaps be blamed for not representing it more sharply, for not digging into its roots in the sexual division of labour, as a historically contingent and not an eternally necessary condition. It could be faulted for not highlighting the exceptions more carefully, for not exposing the alternatives more credibly. Even in Ireland by the 1960s, there were a growing number of women reaching towards a more liberated way of life. Even then females could be found who were not reducible to their relationships to men, whether human or divine, women who were other, or more, than girlfriends, wives, mothers or nuns. When occasionally a woman who broke the mould came along, she stood out a mile. The woman writer returning to the place of her roots in *Oileán Tearmainn* was an alien species, even to her own kin. Part of the problem, according to Carolyn Swift, was that there were few women writers and that there was not enough scope for those there were. Men tended to be disturbed, in her opinion, by women's perceptions and by their more accurate characterisations.<sup>18</sup>

The representation of men was, naturally enough, correspondingly traditional. Men were also shown dealing with domestic difficulties and having their own problems as harrassed or harrassing husbands, as tyrannical or tractable fathers, as bothersome and benevolent brothers, as spoiled or sturdy sons. But they were never reduced to those roles. They were always more. They had consequential things to do in the world. They were heroes, statesmen, politicians, guards, soldiers, revolutionaries, union organisers, orators or adventurers. They were doctors, lawyers, scientists or engineers. They were saviours, scholars, poets or priests. They were farmers, merchants, clerks or accountants. Of course, they were also tyrants, bullies, buffoons, thieves, deserters, drunks and village idiots. These were to be fought, redeemed, reformed or tolerated. What could not be tolerated was failure to fight. A man had to establish his virility in a certain amount of daring-do. Whether it be a battle of brains or brawn, he had to come forward and fight his corner or he was no man. If the blustering boyo had to cross swords over the *cailín deas*, all the better. Masculinity was regarded as in its glory in the fighting, as femininity was in the being fought for. The male

protagonist in *An Bullaí* was prototypically described as having 'a mind full of fact and fancy of the fighting prowess of ancestors.' In coming to grief, he was perceived as 'an island of self-destruction'<sup>19</sup>, showing a growing male insight into this version of masculinity.

## **New Directions**

There was an advancing front in opening up many matters to a wider view as the decade moved forward. Irish society was experiencing a stepped up tempo of social change and feeling the need to come to grips with it in one way or another. When Hilton Edwards was replaced by Jim Fitzgerald and then Chloe Gibson as head of drama at RTÉ, there was a more explicit commitment to drama that would reflect social change and stimulate a coming to grips with it. There was all the time an increasing proportion of original written-for-television material. There was cultivation of new writers, such as Michael Judge, Eugene McCabe, Brian Friel, Wesley Burrowes and James Douglas. There was an increasing emphasis on serials and series to supplement the single play format. There was more drama with a contemporary setting. There was a real commitment to dealing with the more challenging problem areas. There was a determination to have more drama based in urban life. But it was not easy. Such drama could not be produced by simple fiat.

## **Images of Rural Life**

Most of it was based in the preoccupations of rural life. As Hugh Leonard diagnosed the situation, Ireland's playwrights were too incestuous and imitative with respect to their predecessors. While writers in other countries were making urgent personal statements about new ideas and values, Irish writers were 'still dribbling on about the aunt's farm and the marriage broker.'<sup>20</sup> Robert Ballagh singled out the idealisation of the west of Ireland as perhaps the greatest inhibiting influence on twentieth century Irish art.<sup>21</sup> Even among urban elements, there was a long-standing tendency to equate rural Ireland with what is authentically Irish, which has blocked any proper analysis of either rural or urban Ireland.

Reflecting on the historical origins of this idealisation of the west of Ireland, one source was the legacy of colonialism. Michael D Higgins targetted a kind of internalised colonisation, based on a misplaced antiquarianism, a romanticised reconstruction of the past, which glossed over its economic and social realities, and spelled the death of real participatory culture, which spoke of the harshness of poverty and deprivation. These cameos without context presented landscapes, to which were added peasants, without histories or present structural locations. It represented a tyranny of images in which the colonised took upon themselves the coloniser's version of themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Penetrating further, other aspects of the process came to light. Both the Protestant Anglo-Irish ascendancy and the Catholic nationalist bourgeoisie promoted the agrarian ideal, as an enclave of traditional values in a world of rampant industrialisation, but they espoused decidedly different versions of it. Explaining the middle class outrage at Synge's plays in these terms, Luke Gibbons outlined the struggle over a controlling vision of Irish life in terms of the clash between the puritan ethos of the Catholic bourgeoisie and the aristocratic ethos of the Protestant ascendancy. The one was a production ethic of duty before pleasure, while the other was a consumption ethic of leisure and sensual indulgence. The literary revival represented a reversion to an image of pre-famine Ireland, when the hegemony of the ascendancy was still secure, as a refuge from the values on which the consolidation of the rural bourgeoisie was based. The ideal of the playboy of the western world, as the collective fantasy of the rural community, with its respect for violence, its smouldering sexuality and its disregard for due process, struck at the very foundations of both the family unit. and the nation building process itself. It was a protest against the encasing of sexuality in a grid of economic calculations and against the centralisation of law, ideology and the state apparatus, thus undermining the modernisation process.<sup>23</sup>

Various plays written or adapted for television dealt with law and order in various modes and in various contexts, an analysis of which would disclose something of the layers of ideological complexity co-existing or clashing in Irish society. Over the whole range of productions touching upon the administration of justice, there were varying attitudes of loyalty or hostility to the centralised forces of law and order. What predominated, however, was the hostility, which spanned the range from rural communities, which were a law unto themselves, to urban individualists, who would grab whatever they could regardless of any rules. Against this, there were the voices of church and state dominated by the interests of the national bourgeoisie wishing to establish the rules of existing law. There was also the voice of Irish labour, demanding a more just form of law consonant with the interests of the working classes. Bringing several of these voices into confrontation with each other could be powerful and revealing drama. In *The Field*, there were several occasions of full frontal conflict. Even before the catalytic crime, a prophetic exchange set up the forces that could not be reconciled:

*Sergeant:* 'I'm wasting my time! There's nothing in your heads but pigs and cows and pitiful patches of land... a man might be beaten to death here for all you'd give a damn.'

*Bull McCabe:* ' And a sergeant might get his face split open at night and all the guards in Ireland wouldn't find out who did it ...not if they searched till kingdom come!'

There were no complex arguments contesting the legitimacy of the state or the doctrines of the church, but a simple appeal to more mundane realities and primitive folk ways to which their law was alien.

*Bull:* 'There's a law for them that's priests and doctors and lawmen. But there's no law for us. The man with the law behind him is the law and it don't change and it never will.'

When told by the priest that God would ask him questions about the murder one day, he replied:

*Bull:* 'And I'll ask God questions! There's a lot of questions I'd like to ask God. Why do God put so much misfortune in the world? Why did God make me one way and you another?'

There were numerous strands of ideological explanation that could be brought to bear upon an analysis of the prevailing modes of representations of both rural and urban life. Irish drama encompassed layer upon layer of ideological deposits, reaching back centuries and indicating traces of many overlapping social orders. It bore witness to residues of pre-celtic and celtic pagan folk ways, of Catholic medieval hierarchical systems and mediating rituals, of Protestant dualism, bourgeois individualism and capitalist industrialism, of reformist and revolutionary republicanism, and even hints of a socialist critique of it all. It was just a matter of singling out characters or plays or playwrights which separately embodied each of these elements in a clearly articulated and self-contained sort of way. It was more often a matter of various elements all mixed together, congruously or incongruously, within a play or even within the minds of particular characters and their authors, and rarely brought to a point of clean, clear articulation. All sorts of historical complexities complicated the combinations and brought various peculiarities and anachronisms, which played themselves out both within the wider world and in the dramatic representation of it. Such reversals of normal historical patterns of development as the association of Catholicism with republicanism and the association of Protestantism with monarchism and aristocratic privilege made it a very dense site to excavate. The balance between the various elements shifted significantly over the years, but all of these elements, in various proportions and combinations and hybrid forms, remained persistently present, however (inevitably) unstable in their transformations and multiple manifestations. All sorts of hazards lie along the road to trip up any facile generalisations. It could be said, for example, that rural drama was often a vehicle for expression of traditional values and urban drama was a more likely instrument for breaking new ground. But it was not always the case. In the development of Irish television, rural drama could be quite pointedly progressive and urban drama could at times be less so.

While much of the rural drama was of the cute kitchen comedy variety, some of it was quite serious and sharp-edged. All the machinations involved in the ownership, acquisition, inheritance and expansion of property did have its ironic twists and its funny side, to be sure, and were often dealt with according to some formula like: 'Take one will, two cousins, one comic housekeeper, one exasperated lawyer, add a pinch of love interest, a slight trace of message and shake well.' The result, for some of its audience, was sheer hilarity. 'Good clean fun for all the family' expressed the tone of a number of letters written to the *RTV Guide* about RTE's production of *All the King's Horses*. Others, however, felt it was a 'diabolical production', marking Jim Fitzgerald's 'fall from grace' as a redoubtable critic of kitchen comedies and showing that 'TV is the great corruptor'.<sup>24</sup>

Other productions, however, focused on the tragic side of it all. Giving expression to the bitterness and devastation brought by land hunger and by the class tensions of the countryside were the searing stories of *Land, The Field* and *The Girl from Mayo*.<sup>25</sup> Showing the pressures and misunderstandings of family life, most memorably as viewed in relation to bleak old age, were *The Year of the Hiker* and *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, which stirred a storm of protest following the RTE production and also highlighted the wrenching and uprooting brought about by emigration, as did *Going Into Exile, The Lambs* and *A Ship in the Night*.<sup>26</sup>

A number of plays revealed dimensions of the rural-urban interface in Irish society and the tensions it brought to the surface within individuals, within families and within communities. Focusing on those who left the country for the city and on their efforts to resolve the problems arising from their ties to their rural roots were *All the Eels in the Ranny are Dead, Mr. Power's Purchase, An Triail* and *Oileán Tearmainn*. Also looking at it from the point of view those left behind, *Oileán Tearmainn* and *An Bullaí* gave forceful expression to the seething anger and resentment of country people towards their urbanised countrymen. They declared their hatred for brylcreemed towny slickers, who might steal the apple of their eye in a country ballroom of romance. They sought to take their revenge upon the woman

writer, a thinly disguised Edna O'Brien figure, who did not give a very flattering picture of the place to which she returned to pose for photos for a gimmicky article in a glossy magazine and to find locations for the filming of her novels. Two rural bachelors, portrayed by her as sexless, conspired to rape and murder her, with the collusion of the parish priest and garda sergeant. It was very strong stuff and, again interestingly, in Irish. When asked if it was possible to go further in dealing with difficult matters in Irish than in English, Brian Mac Lochlainn, who directed both *An Bullaí* and *Oileán Tearmainn*, said on reflection that perhaps it was.<sup>27</sup>

Traditional rites of passages played a very large role in the drama of rural life: birth, coming of age, marriage, old age and death, especially death. An extraordinary number of plays were built around the rituals of burial and all the peasant cunning and fortuitous complication attendant upon it: eg in *The Paddy Pedlar*, *The Weaver's Grave*, *The Purchase* and *Myko*. In other plays, a death and a funeral were the catalytic agency for further events, eg in *A Walk on the Water*. Another recurring source for dramatic development has been the fork in the road, coming to a point in life where it was necessary to choose between diverging paths and coping with all the pressures from different directions, eg in *Come Back*, *The Whiteheaded Boy* and *The Far-Off Hills*.

### **Private Life and the Public Arena**

When career choice has led in the direction of service in such institutions as the gardaí or the army, there has been scope for drama involving the interface between domestic life and public activity and how the experience of the one may affect the modus operandi of the other. The duties and codes of behaviour of soldiers as affecting and affected by their family situations provided the basis of *O'Flaherty VC*, *Yesterday is Over* and *Saighdtrí*. The way of life and pursuits of the gardaí provided high dramatic conflict in a mountainy adventure with poitín makers in *All the Sweet Buttermilk* and in a sinister thriller in which the guard turned out to be the mysterious killer obsessed with the fickleness of women in *The Fiend at My Elbow*.

While most of the drama was domestic in setting, there were other productions which saw the dramatic possibilities of public affairs. A recurring theme was the clash between old and new ways and the rising tide of mistrust. Whereas *The Chair* dealt with it inside the home, other plays opened it out into the larger community. In *The Hollow Field*, a government inspector came up against local superstitions and prejudice fighting to preserve a fairy fort. In *The Moon in the Yellow River*, a German engineer was brought into conflict with locals, who eventually blew up the power station as a symbol of alien technological progress. Taking a somewhat cynical view of the incongruity of Ireland's efforts to combine industrial development with basically rural values, Denis Johnston threw into light relief the solemn arguments about machines versus men and the standard clichés regarding German efficiency and Irish fecklessness. Casting a satirical eye on both international industrialism and parochial pastoralism, he was attempting to shed light on the changes overtaking Irish society and to challenge the prevailing terms of reference for dealing with them. Other drama set in the public arena ranged from the intricacies of local politics in *Down at Flannery's* and *The Deputation* to the larger canvas of Irish history, particularly in the high points in its protracted struggle for national independence, in *The Long Winter*, *The Fenians*, and *Insurrection*.

### **Reconstructions of Irish History**

All of the wide range of productions putting forward dramatised interpretations of Irish political history came at a time of growing historiographical debate. Different productions reflected it in different ways, with some coming down on the side of the traditionalist interpretation of the making and meaning of the Irish nation and with others veering in the direction of the revisionist re-interpretation of it. However, not even the most reverential productions supporting a nationalist stance could be written off as a whitewash. Nor did the most critical productions go anywhere near the more extreme anti-nationalist or two-nationist positions that were being expressed in the wider arena of debate. RTÉ veered towards the centre of the spectrum, though allowing some room for manoeuvre this way or that way in relation to it.

There were, first of all, what were considered to be the worthy productions. These were generally made from written-for-television scripts and often commissioned to mark the occasion of an anniversary of one of the turning points in Irish history. Marking the centenary of the 1867 rising, there were two drama-documentary productions: *The Fenians* and *The Republican Brotherhood*. *The Fenians* combined a poetic and prose narration by Pádraic Fallon and focused on the figure of O'Donovan Rossa as a way of overcoming the difficulties in dealing with a movement such as fenianism, so spread out in time and place and so diverse in its personalities and activities. *The Republican Brotherhood*, being a six part series, was able to give attention to a number of other figures such as James Stephens and John Devoy and to a more elaborate historical assessment of the movement. According to this production, there were certain mysteries surrounding it all, but the significance of the fenians was that they sought to subvert the social system of their time. John O'Donovan, who adapted the script from the work of UCD historian Donal McCartney,

considered them to be 'the communists of their day'. The bottom line was that their cause may have been a failure on one level, but it was not a fiasco. On another level, it was perhaps more successful than they knew.

*The Long Winter*, also written by John O'Donovan with James Plunkett, who directed it, was a six part series of drama-documentaries covering a large canvas of centuries of struggle for Irish nationhood, culminating in the 1916 Easter rising. The most memorable of these, *When Do You Die, Friend ?*, was based on the diary of William Farrell, a Carlow saddler involved in the 1798 rising. It traced his development from his schooldays and apprenticeship, through his oath of allegiance to the Brotherhood of the United Irishmen, to his subsequent arrest, imprisonment, interrogation and execution. It underlined his great love of learning, which brought him to draw on traditions from the Greek *Iliad* to the writings of the French and American revolutionaries of his day. It showed how his 'abiding hatred of tyrants and tyrannies' and his commitment to the rights of man made him face into the terrors he saw around him: martial law, floggings, burnings, spying and informing, torture and hangings. Great care was taken in the production, from the detail of studio sets and effective use of location shooting to the highly literary script and very serious performances. There was a haunting sincerity and high moral tone to it that made the viewer want to hold his head high at having inherited such traditions.

A somewhat different style and tone characterised the other major and even more elaborate production of 1966, marking the 50th anniversary of the Easter rising. One of the best remembered and well received productions in the whole history of RTÉ, *Insurrection* commanded an unprecedented marshalling of resources, involving an army of actors and extras (which actually included the army), and months of studio recording and location filming. It was highly innovative in format, both in its style of production and in its schedule of transmission. The script by Hugh Leonard mixed drama and documentary codes, framing a dramatised account of the events of Easter week 1916 within a *You Are There* style of actuality reportage. Interspersed with the narration were long stretches of dramatic reconstruction, which set out the struggle as a constant mixture of tragedy and farce.

It focused not just on the heroic leaders, but on the ordinary volunteers, in a very humanistic sort of way. It was played highly naturalistically, presented as if in real time and broadcast on eight successive evenings through Easter week. It was very much the communal talking point for days to come and won the critical acclaim of virtually all shades of opinion. Though set in the past, it struck chords echoing the need to define Irish identity for its own time and it did so in a way in which the harmonious notes could, for the time being, override the disharmonious ones. It did give due weight to at least one set of political issues that had called for political struggle, but it was a struggle that united *us* against *them*, rather than dividing the *us*. There was still considerable consensus about 1916 at this time.

Other productions in the style of more traditional plays sought to find a harmonious sphere, rising above the disharmonies within the island itself, employing other strategies. In *The Long Sorrow* by vocational teacher Thomas Coffey, two men, one from the RUC and the other from an IRA raiding party, lay dying of their wounds and exposure in the snow. Although conditioned to animosity, they became dependent on each other for survival. The dilemma as posed by the play was to choose between loyalty to their political convictions and their responsibilities to each other as fellow human beings. The moral of the story was that they discovered too late that their bond to each other as human beings was stronger than the bonds of their political allegiances. It was meant as a story showing that a focus on human relationships could transcend political conflict.

A similar spirit pervaded *Dawn Chorus* by Labour TD Seán Dunne, a civil war story in which two former comrades found themselves on opposing sides, the one at first the prisoner of the other and then vice versa. The matter of whether the second should be executed was then solved by a ceasefire. The play, refraining from taking sides, saw an exposition of the rights and wrongs of political struggle as secondary to an exploration of how tragic events had worked their poison in the hearts and minds of those caught up in them. There was a vague implication in such productions that a universal humanism could cut through all political conflicts, which unwittingly begged all sorts of questions regarding the concrete conditions giving rise to such conflicts in the first place and actual strategies for achieving solutions to them.

These were liberal plays which echoed the liberal mood of the times on a world scale. Many productions, even those of Hollywood, flowed with the tide of the liberal vision of north and south, rich and poor, black and white, all discovering their transcendent humanity and throwing off all ideologies, pulling together and moving on into the future. It was a tide soon to turn, as voices from the left joined those from the right in faulting it for neither properly addressing the problems nor offering a solution. The 'end of ideology' position was shown to be as ideological as any other.

Bringing a gallows humour to bear, when there seemed to be no solution in sight, was Brendan Behan's way of handling the drama of IRA dreams and dilemmas. Set against the backdrop of the 1950s border campaign in the north and high emigration and low living standards in the south, *An Giall (The Hostage)* brought the hostilities of the larger world into the shoddy, claustrophobic space of a Dublin brothel. Under the layers of bawdy laughter and music

hall carry-on, there were other levels: such immediate matters as the fate of the British soldier held hostage in Dublin and that of their comrade awaiting death in Belfast; such political issues as republicanism, loyalism and the border; such moral ironies as sexual prudery in a house of prostitution and prostitutes condemning communists; such moral dilemmas as taking 'a life for a life' and justifying man's inhumanity to man.

The wider world of political struggle, coming into tight confrontations and funnelling into close-up and highly charged studies of character, was a recurring motif. It was in its time one which has sometimes stirred up, rather than smothered, the disharmonies not far below the surface in Irish society. Frank O'Connor's story *Guests of the Nation*, which RTÉ also adapted, had caused uproar in Dáil Éireann, when certain TDs objected to its inclusion in a secondary school English textbook. In this story, the killing of hostages, who right up to the last referred to their IRA captors as 'chum', was revealed to be an act of poignant and tragic finality, which could not easily be covered by talk of duty. Rather than justifying the deed in grand talk about following orders and the necessities of war, the main narrative voice was one left feeling: 'very small and very lost and lonely, like a child astray in the snow.' Indeed, there was a sense of all involved being powerless before forces they did not really understand.

Interestingly, some of the sharpest-edged treatments of Irish history which RTÉ produced at this time were actually in its adaptations of works written earlier and for other media. Liam O'Flaherty's *Land*, for example, had an unusual bitterness and forcefulness, along with a rare quality of philosophical reflectiveness, in dealing with land-based oppression and struggles against landlordism. Frank O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation* brought the perspective of class conflict into the midst of republican politics, with one of his characters declaring himself a communist and explaining to the others: 'The capitalist pays the priest to tell you about the next world so as you won't notice what the bastards are up to in this.' Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, along with Denis Johnston's *The Scythe and the Sunset*, represented a somewhat sardonic treatment of sacred moments in the nation's history and a decidedly anti-heroic view of its mythologically heroic struggles. In O'Casey's plays, set amidst Dublin tenement life of 1916 to 1920, the men on the fringes of nationalist politics often turned out to be wastrels, cowards, braggards, spoofers, informers, failures or hangers-on, while the women were generally apolitical humanitarians.

On one reading, these plays could be taken to indicate that politics was a force intruding upon and subverting truly humanitarian sentiments. Yet any attempt to find an apolitical grounding for humanitarian values was doomed to failure. On another reading, they could be taken to show how fragile human relationships could be in any case, but most particularly in the case of a particular type of politics, which revelled in a rhetoric of vengeful violence and mystical blood-letting and was willing to live with the random suffering resulting from it. Johnston's play *The Scythe and the Sunset*, like O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, was set in Dublin during the Easter rising and took a highly cynical view of the nation's sentimentalised version of its own history. In an orchestration of various individual voices, he gave expression to multiple angles of vision from which to look upon this turning point in the nation's history. Gathering into one room characters giving voice to the range and interplay of forces of the emergent nation and its ancient enemy, he showed both the innocence and idealism of the rebellion as well as its incompetence and its elements of farce. Johnston was for years concerned with spotlighting and analysing myths in the making, particularly those by which the new Irish state sought to legitimise and consolidate itself. Such drama showed there to be not some simple factual history, but varying versions of history, corresponding to various purposes and points of view.

Of course, even earlier, James Joyce had pioneered the use of an incisive irony to cut through the self-delusions of Irish politics and the shallow sentimentalities that passed for a hold on its history. This was also taken up and brought to a wider audience by television. *Ivy Day in the Committee Room*, another of Joyce's *Dubliners* stories which RTÉ produced under the umbrella title of *Dublin 1*, centred on the meaning of the life and death of Parnell for the political animal of the next decade and gave a look at the cultural process by which a historical figure gathered to itself the force of myth. Already historical memory was being overlaid with the gloss of emerging mythology. Celebrating him in recitation and song, the chief was looming larger than life as his followers were sinking to the maudlin. They called him the 'uncrowned king of Ireland', seemingly oblivious of the incongruity and tackiness of dressing their nationalist leader in monarchist imagery. In the words of an amateur versifier among their number:

'He lies slain by the coward hounds  
He raised to glory from the mire,  
And Erin's hopes and Erin's dreams  
Perish upon her monarch's pyre.'

The story showed how Parnell was becoming, not just a leader who brought to articulation and political action what forces were welling up from below, but a messiah with a singular mission and divinely endowed powers. It was expressed employing a whole gamut of linguistic styles, which Joyce put into his characters via RTÉ actors, ranging from such high flown and flowery poetry to their more mundane pub prose:

'He was the only man that could keep that bag of cats in order.'

Parnell's times were becoming *the* times, as if nothing could be achieved in the come-too-late world of their own new century:

‘Musha, God be with them times. There was some life in it then.’

But the sceptical voice had its say as well:

‘ In Ireland, any dead politician is, by definition, a patriot.’

Speaking of how those who persecuted him joined in the chorus promoting him to near sainthood:

‘We all respect him now that he's dead and gone, even the conservatives.’

In all events, Parnell was dead and there were the political needs of the living to be getting on with and, of course, characters to say so:

‘What this country needs is capital. Look at all the factories down by the quays there, idle. Look at all the money there is in the country, if we only worked the old industries, the mills, the shipbuilding yards and factories.’

To those who could look forward and not only backward, a new force .was looming on the horizon, that of the labour movement with Its potential, not only as an industrial force, but a political one as well. As their discussion moved into the question of the political representation of the working classes, the case was firmly put:

‘Hasn't the working man as good a right to be in the corporation as anyone else - ay, and a better right than those shoneens that are always hat in hand before any fellow with a handle to his name?’

And it was not only the right of representation that was at stake, but perhaps, it was thought, a more progressive and honourable form of representation would come of replacing publicans with bricklayers as public representatives. Pursuing the argument:

‘But it's labour produces everything. The working man is not working for fat jobs for his sons and nephews and cousins. The working man is not going to drag the honour of Dublin in the mud to please a German monarch. ‘

The next decade, of course, gave rise to the ‘neither king nor kaiser’ Citizen Army and the identification of the cause of labour with that of the nation in 1916. The ensuing years also saw the growing strength and self-consciousness of the labour movement, climaxing in the lockout of 1913. In Connolly and Larkin, the working class had found political representatives who changed the very nature of political representation. Such towering figures, they too, in their turn, gathered to themselves the aura of myth. RTE's drama-documentary *The Testimony of James Connolly*, written and directed by Eoghan Harris, set out to unravel the threads of myth woven around the figure of Connolly. Targeting the various factions which he saw as attempting to rob Connolly's ideological grave, Harris took issue both with those who presented him as a full-fledged dialectical materialist and with those who treated his socialism as an aberration best forgotten. Particularly antagonistic to the latter, he wished to correct the view of Connolly as cast in the same mould as a modern day trade union representative on a board of directors. The bottom line, as far as this production was concerned, was that Connolly was most definitely a socialist as well as a nationalist. He was, even to the last, preoccupied with and committed to the political philosophy of socialism. This type of production, built around the grand events of Irish political history, provided one of the main avenues of dramatic expression in an urban setting.

### **Images of Urban Life**

There were also other avenues. There were a number of plays, both adapted and original works, dealing with city life from a number of different angles and bringing it out of the past. Most were new plays set in Dublin and dealt with contemporary urban life. A number of these dealt with the trials and tribulations of domestic life in the city. Marital problems were a recurring source of dramatic tension, both in the effects in the home and in the ramifications in an immediate circle of acquaintances. Plays such as *How Long is Kissing Time?*, *Babby Joe* and *No Trumpets Sounding* explored its causes and consequences in their various ways.

Very few dealt with the world of work. It was a gap of which the drama department was very conscious. There were appeals for scripts, which did not always yield the hoped for results. There were also scripts turned down

at a higher level, according to Jim Fitzgerald in recounting the obstacles he met in achieving his aims when head of drama.

In the meantime, productions such as *Dublin 1* did something to fill the gap. More sharply than many a later effort in a more urbanised Ireland, Joyce's *Dubliners* stories gave crisp cameos of Dublin life, each leaving its reader with something worth pondering. RTE's production softened the impact somewhat unfortunately in dramatizing them in a light hearted music hall style that belied the more weighty intentions and the more insightful humour of Joyce's stories and Hugh Leonard's scripts adapting them. *Counterparts* was an exceptionally striking story in exploring aspects of the bullied and bullying male ego. In tracing the process by which a man's oppression as a worker was related to his oppressiveness as a father, it gave a most interesting picture of the interface between the workplace and the home in the city and the pub culture of male camaraderie mediating between the two.

But adaptations of works of decades past were no substitute for new works dealing with new aspects of urban life. Chloe Gibson, in her turn, was also conscious of the lack of plays with an industrial background, which was becoming increasingly incongruous as increasing numbers were moving into industry. As head of drama, she commissioned script editor Norman Smythe to write a script with a storyline set in a factory. The resulting production *A Case of Teamwork* concerned a young engineer taking up a position as assistant manager of a paint factory. His eagerness to learn the ropes and do the job well quickly brought him into conflict with the attitudes of the works manager who had been there for twenty-five years.

*Danger, Men Working*, by John D Stewart was another effort to fill the gap and to find dramatic material in the working lives of those who were building the homes and hospitals and factories and schools in which everybody else lived and died and worked and studied. Dealing with difficult labour relations on a building site, it explored the conflicts between management and workers as well as among the workers themselves. A ruthless manager, using British Army tactics, was driving the men as if they were machines and producing the opposite of the desired effect. It was all rather neatly resolved in having an accident bring the manager to his senses. If it was meant to imply that management with a human face could resolve class conflict, then it was not so close to the cutting edge as one might have hoped. It was, however, progressive in showing the difficult lives of building workers as worthy of dramatic treatment and respectful consideration.

Although the country was in the throes of relatively rapid industrialisation and more and more lives were coming within the orbit of the division of labour and distribution of resources appropriate to the capitalist mode of production, there was still a vague notion that Ireland was a classless society. This was primarily because it did not have its own aristocracy and secondarily because it did not have a very highly developed native capitalism. Nevertheless, capital and labour, whether the capital was native or foreign, were the overarching forces in organising the basic realities of Irish life. Yet neither capital nor labour was given dramatic attention in any way commensurate with its role in Irish society. Very few plays gave even a glimpse of how the everyday business of the country was done, let alone insight into the basic structure of the system that so pervasively shaped everyone's everyday life.

Eugene McCabe's *Breakdown* was unusual in being set in the world of commerce. In it, a Dublin business tycoon in financial trouble prevailed upon an ex-schoolmate, who had become an accountant, to cook his books, so that he could get financial backing and a government grant for his business. In the background were various complications regarding their wives and involving the death of a mutual friend. The accountant's dilemma was, not only whether to help him or to refuse, but whether his refusal would be out of integrity or vindictiveness. It was basically a morality play about both choices and motives. It was not only about doing right or wrong, but about doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. It was also a play about power and reversal of power, a scenario in which the cat had become clawless and the mouse had become mighty, a scenario in which the powerless have always taken a vicarious delight. It was a delight that could be healthy enough, though it could also be a distraction from the structures of power to exaggerate the possibilities of the small man getting his revenge on those at the top.

Another study in small scale power relations took place in a setting far removed from the corridors of commercial power, a Dublin doss house. In *Shadows in the Sun*, a tough guy, just off a ship, robbed a drunk and bedded down in a hostel, where he proceeded to bully its odd assortment of infirm and down-on-their-luck characters. Eventually, they got even with him for taking over the place and lured him into the hands of the police. For the author, Dr. Maurice Davin-Power, a Dublin district medical officer, who knew such places from his professional experience, the moral of the story was: 'The right of man to opt out of the herd is inalienable.'<sup>28</sup>

This production was an early expression of at least three trends that would mark much of RTE's subsequent representation of urban life:

- (1) a tendency to put a disproportionate emphasis on lumpen elements and the squalid indiscipline of down and outs at the expense of the more normal urban dwellers and the demands of work discipline;

- (2) a tendency to see the city as the site of loneliness and alienation;
- (3) a tendency to define both its problems and its solutions in highly individualist terms.

It was fair enough to picture contemporary cities as full of strays and wasters. It was fair enough to give voice to the lonely man in the urban crowd. For *A Ship in the Night*, all were 'like satellites orbiting in a dirty great empty space.'<sup>29</sup> But it was not fair enough to leave it at that and to fail to explore adequately either the socio-historical grounding of individual alienation or the higher forms of social organisation of urban life. There was little in the televised picture of city life to suggest it might have offered a higher stage in evolutionary development, rather than a fall from a rural Eden.

## Series and Serials

Although single plays were the main form of television drama production in the sixties, series and serials became increasingly important, not only in terms of volume of output, but also in terms of creating a vehicle for giving dramatic expression to the growing edges of contemporary Irish life, both rural and urban.

There were a number of limited series, mostly historical, dealing with figures ranging from the humble *The Little Father* to the social climbing *The Real Charlotte*, but mainly recreating the events of political struggle in the sober *The Long Winter*, the experimental *Insurrection* and the angry *Land*.

Others were contemporary and belonged to the same genres as were becoming current in television elsewhere. They were most probably deliberate attempts to create Irish versions of the sort of series and serials that were being imported in great quantities from abroad and popular with the Irish audience. There were two situation comedy series, both written by Fergus Linehan and each running for a single season. *Me and My Friend* was about two mad girls in a Dublin bed sit, waiting to be swept off their feet to married luxury, and *Killyraggart 17* was about a London couple inheriting a decrepit hotel in Ireland and their efforts to start a new life. There were also two serials in the thriller genre, both in Irish, *Ó Duill* and *A hAon is a hAon sin a hAon*. Both brought Ireland into the world of international intrigue with Irish detectives facing great danger and saving the world from unscrupulous misuse of modern science. There was also a series of courtroom dramas in *Justice at Large*, written by lawyer Rex Mackey.

But most important in taking hold of the public imagination were the longer running serials of the genre called soap opera, although those involved in making them invariably pleaded for a more dignified label. Wesley Burrowes, for example, expressed his preference for the term chronicle drama, which was certainly more accurate and appropriate, however unlikely it was to come into common use.

RTÉ's first efforts in this direction were short-lived. Its first serial, *Siopa an Bhreathnaigh*, began on RTÉ's first week on the air and was written by Niall Tóibín. In its first season, it was set in a Dublin shop and introduced a bilingual situation, with the shop being run by Irish speakers who spoke English to their customers. In its second season, the shop had migrated to the west of Ireland on the very edge of the Atlantic. It raised problems of coexistence with an English partner and with Germans involved in intrigues over a copper mine.

Next came several experiments, initiated by the new controller of programmes, Gunnar Ruggheimer, to establish a rural serial on videotape. Both seem to have failed in falling awkwardly between the stools of fact and fiction. *Down at Flannery's* was set in the fictional village of Ballybeckett and storylines involved romances, returned yanks, concerts, feiseanna, disputes over land and local politics. It ran into problems with professional performers playing amateurs in pub sessions striking what seemed to be a false note. *Shinrone* involved bringing outside broadcast equipment to the real village of Shinrone, Co Offaly, with the intention of producing an unscripted drama, recording the ordinary lives of its inhabitants. The double lesson to be taken from this seemingly unsuccessful experiment, according to Eoghan Harris, was that the results were predictably fascinating to the inhabitants of Shinrone, but boring to everyone else, but that there *was* an enduring public interest in ordinary lives.<sup>30</sup>

## *Tolka Row*

However, with *Tolka Row* the long running serial took off. Running from 1964 to 1968, it was a domestic serial in an urban setting. It was meant to be RTÉ's answer to *Coronation Street*. Originated from Maura Laverty's 1951 play, it was set in a new corporation housing estate on the north side of Dublin, where the Nolan family had moved from their Liberties tenement life. The narrative centred on the domestic life of the Nolan family and extended outwards to encompass their neighbours, friends and workmates. The Nolan's were the stable, responsible, urban

working class family. They were counterpointed in various ways by various other characters, such as Gabby Doyle, still close to his rural roots, and Chas and Queenie Butler, leading an unstable and irresponsible lumpen life of indolence, punctuated by gambling and petty crime. Within this network of social relationships, all sorts of problems arose to build up dramatic tension and advance toward at least relative resolution: those surrounding birth and death, courtship, marriage, housing, financial viability, pregnancy, child rearing, generational rebellion, neighbourhood gossip, interfering in-laws, illness, career choice, retirement, care of the elderly, sexual jealousy, cultural expression, all fundamental human situations generating many variations on the theme.

The importance of *Tolka Row* was that it touched on so many basic human experiences in terms of the concrete conditions of everyday working class life. It showed how so many basic human desires found specific forms of fulfilment or specific obstacles to fulfilment within the particular parameters of a particular class at a particular time and place. It dealt with all the typical problems of finding meaningful work and financial viability in 1960s working class Dublin. Working life constantly ran up against problems of alienated labour, insecure or ill-paid employment and unemployment. Sometimes solutions to problems of unemployment were sought in small businesses. Even if the capital could be raised, these were as likely as not to come up against either bankruptcy or multinational takeover. Other times the solution was seen to be emigration.

It raised all of the problems with a commendable descriptive accuracy, even if it failed to push further and to probe the structural roots of the problems or the possibility of finding structural solutions to them. Any analysis of the social order, which made their problems what they were, was beyond the ken of any of the characters and presumably beyond the boundaries of the terms of reference the scriptwriters set out for themselves.

The attitude of Maura Laverty and the other writers seemed to be that it should have no overtly reforming social message, but that it should give an honest picture of the social conditions surrounding working class life on the new estates. They felt they had a duty not to shirk the problems, but the problems were more grist for the anecdotal mill than conditions demanding an analysis of their causes and strategies for social change. Indeed they seemed to believe that people could get through life by meeting such problems with courage, sympathy and down-to earth humour and left it at that. The causes were left almost deliberately opaque.

This was re-inforced in a crucial exchange in the concluding episode, as the two central characters, Mr. and Mrs. Nolan, were coming to terms with their own reluctant decision to emigrate and as the audience was witnessing the disintegration of the community with which they had built up such a firm identification over five years. As if to highlight their inability to put their own personal experience into a larger social context, their nearly last words to the world were on the subject of emigration:

*Jack:* 'It's the Irish curse ...I was reading somewhere that over one million people have left Ireland since 1940. Not many of them came back.'

*Rita:* 'Have you ever asked yourself, Jack '

*Jack:* 'Yes, Rita, often. But I don't have an answer. Maybe them politicians have, but I haven't.'

It was as if their lives were governed by mysterious forces that they could never comprehend. It was as if it was beyond the comprehension of the working class to understand their condition. It was true to life to present, as typical, working class characters, even central characters, who did not comprehend. But it was not true to life to present no working class character who did comprehend over the whole course of such an extended serial based in working class life. Dublin working class life at that time did have enough of a tradition of trade union militancy and left-wing political activism that it would have been unlikely for the Nolans and the whole range of their friends, workmates and relations to live out their days without ever encountering anyone with larger ideas about how the system worked and what should be done about it. With all that came within its orbit in the whole course of its run, it never produced a voice giving it a critical edge. It broke no new ground in illuminating the socio-historical forces underlying the phenomena with which it dealt. It was content to record the surface phenomena without probing further into their deep structure.

Nor did it break any new ground in the realm of personal relationships, particularly with respect to the sexual division of labour. The representation of male and female roles was perhaps even more traditional than in some of the rural drama. There were many scenes centring on the daily lives of full-time housewives, normally addressed as Mrs. Nolan and Mrs. Feeney, in a way that never queried the role of housewife as a socially honoured and honourable role. When, later in the serial, Rita Nolan took on part-time work, it was to improve her home. Even this caused problems, as Jack Nolan took it as a reflection on his ability as a provider. Even in courtship, there were rigid rules about the male taking the initiative and the female passively waiting for the male to call the shots and make the running. When Seán Nolan, the Jack-the-lad son of Jack and Rita, finally became serious about one of his many girlfriends, it did not work out because she attempted to force the pace and therefore lost him. Naturally, it was the female anxious to get married and the male wary of being cornered.

It wasn't that these weren't the codes and customs prevailing in this sort of working class community at this time. It was not wrong that sex roles were portrayed as being so traditional, but that the portrayal of traditional sex roles was so unquestioningly traditional. By 1968, there were certainly other notions in the air from which such characters and their scriptwriters might not have been so hermetically sealed off. There were even women around rejecting the custom of changing their names upon marriage, an area in which the theatrical profession had always taken a lead, allowing a professional dignity to its female members that was not common elsewhere. May Ollis and Carolyn Swift went by names of their own and not by their husband's names. Yet, and this was perhaps the most disappointing expression of the sexual politics of *Tolka Row*, in an article dealing with the tendency of audiences to relate to serial characters as real people, Carolyn Swift saw fit to explain that May Ollis was really Mrs. Pat Lehane and not Mrs. Jack Nolan or Mrs. Desmond Perry.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, *Tolka Row* did break new ground in giving extended dramatic treatment to the everyday joys and sorrows of working class life. It was the most sustained dramatic representation of urban life that RTÉ produced for decades. Its enduring significance was that it showed urban Ireland both to itself and to others. As Niall McCarthy, a later head of drama, put it, 'it introduced one half of Ireland to the other half.'<sup>32</sup> Certainly those living in working class communities, especially the new estates, identified with it fully and continued to wax lyrically about it long after its run. By this time, most had seen much drama on the screen, but it was cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, lords and ladies, doctors and lawyers, saints and spies and statesmen. For the first time, with *Tolka Row*, it was people like themselves on the screen whose lives were seen as having dramatic significance. It made them feel differently about themselves and their own lives and they warmed to it greatly.

When it was gone, they missed it, not perhaps because it was irreplaceable, but because nothing comparable did replace it for many years. When it was terminated, there were a string of post-mortems from producers, scriptwriters, critics, commentators and audience. Most paid tribute to its relevance and its popularity and regretted its passing. In marking its ending, most commented on the difficulties of sustaining a serial and felt it had, for whatever reasons, run out of steam. Some said it had degenerated into too much family squabbling. Others thought it had begun to mix naturalistic characterisation with music hall send-ups in a way that did not work. Others put it down to factors like cast turnover and static studio-bound sets. The assessment of *Tolka Row*, the subject of sporadic comment over the years, was subjected to more systematic analysis later with the advent of media studies.

Luke Gibbons argued that *Tolka Row* came to grief because it tended to present the family, not only as the main focus of dramatic interest, but also as the centre of power relations in the community, thus reducing complex political and economic questions to personal or family dilemmas. The basic structural weaknesses in *Tolka Row*, the existence of workplace only as a foil for family conflicts and the non-existence of a communal meeting place in its main sets, testified to the attenuated nature of the wider community in its basic conceptions and to the de-socialised character of its response to social problems. He also pointed out that it was a representation of urban life which displayed its residual rural structures in showing the continued existence of the extended family and its tendency to derogate wider social functions to itself, giving rise to a misplaced confidence in its own ability to withstand the harsh realities of social and economic change.<sup>33</sup>

The same tack was taken by Martin McLoone, who argued that there was a basic contradiction at the heart of the strategy of *Tolka Row*. Despite the fact that it was designed to provide for the first time positive sympathetic images of the working class and to re-insert the missing discourse of the city into Irish culture, it looked at city life from the perspective of the country ideal and it therefore only re-confirmed the simplistic notion of city life implicit in rural mythologies, ie, the notion of the city as the site of disharmony and communal breakdown, in contrast to the myth of rural harmony. For him, this was evidenced most clearly in the closing down of the subplots whereby Statia (née Nolan) and Gabby Doyle made the decision to leave Dublin and return to his family home in Donegal, thus implying that rural retreat was the answer to the problems of city life, even for the city bred Statia. His thesis was basically that it was the complexities of the specific historical conjuncture and the serial form itself which conspired to turn its progressive intent against itself.<sup>34</sup>

This thesis, however, was somewhat overstated and unduly formalistic. It was surely off the mark to characterise the particular historical conjuncture of Ireland in the 1960s as parallel to that of Britain in the 1850s and to claim that *Tolka Row* did not work in the Ireland of the 1960s for the same reasons as *Coronation Street* would not have worked in the Britain of the 1850s. Whatever its own level of indigenous industrial development, Ireland was living in a wider world long since industrialised and touched on many levels by the fruits of that industrialisation, especially through modern media, in a way that would make this anachronistic comparison quite inappropriate. It was, however, true that rural customs and values were carried into urban life, although it did not follow that *Tolka Row* did not work because of this. *Tolka Row* did work insofar as it reflected this and its audience identified with it and accepted it as accurate and appropriate.

Nevertheless, McLoone's placing of *Tolka Row* within the wider ideological project of Irish television was more to the point, although the term 'project' might imply a degree of conscious intent that would be inappropriate. His reading of the final episode, particularly the discussion of emigration and the reference to 'them politicians', was an indication of the challenge of the social democratic tradition to the Catholic nationalist interference in social or family matters, the implication being that, despite its origins in British Protestant liberalism, only the development of the welfare state could keep the community intact in a way that frugal self-sufficiency had not. Although it was a reading that might have over-reached the writer's intentions, it was one implication that could be taken from the text.

### ***The Riordans***

Another important factor in the assessment of *Tolka Row*, both during four years of its five-year run and in the years after, was comparison with *The Riordans*. *The Riordans*, one of the longest running and most successful serials in RTE's history, began in 1965 and ran until 1979. Both serials were enormously popular. *Tolka Row* maintained high TAM ratings throughout, while *The Riordans* topped the TAMs over its whole fifteen year run. Not only because of its longer run and higher ratings, but because of its bolder approach, *The Riordans* stirred all sorts of recognitions and emotions and became even more central to the popular culture of its time and more firmly embedded in folk memory since. *The Riordans* broke more new ground, both in its methods of production and in its range of concerns.

*The Riordans* was a rural serial set in the fictional village of Leestown in the real county of Kilkenny. The narrative centred on the life of the Riordan family and their farm and opened out onto the life of the whole community, particularly their communal meeting places. In its production, it broke entirely out of studio, but without using film. It used an outside broadcast unit to combine the immediacy of video technology with the authenticity of location shooting. So innovative was this in international terms that observers came from foreign television services to see videotaped drama made on a real farm, a real pub, a real church, a real village. With the more naturalistic setting went a more naturalistic style of acting that was a much more decisive break with both Hollywood and Abbey styles than *Tolka Row*. The casting of actors from outside the Abbey tradition also contributed to the break with its style.

In its storylines, it was far more issue-oriented. In the beginning, the weight of emphasis was on matters agricultural. It was forthrightly didactic in aim and firmly modernising in mission. When this task was taken over by *Telefís Feirme*, the emphasis shifted somewhat to matters psychological and sociological. Its role, as seen by its script editor and script writer Wesley Burrowes, was to be a chronicle of human relations in an Irish community. If, in doing so, an issue of wider social significance was suggested by a story, he preferred to plunge into the heart of the issue, rather than skirt around its edges.<sup>35</sup> And plunge he did, bringing upon himself and RTE years of continuous controversy.

Criticisms were often vehement and vituperative, quite unlike any levelled at *Tolka Row*, which rarely stepped on anyone's toes and, when it did, did so very lightly. Occasionally, there were complaints that *Tolka Row* dealt with topics not suitable for children or that dialogue in the Dublin idiom was belittling, to which Carolyn Swift could easily reply that they had a duty not to shirk reality and ask facetiously: 'Do we really wish Oliver Feeney to talk like a BBC announcer or Queenie Butler like a BEA hostess?'<sup>36</sup> But Wesley Burrowes would not get off so easily. *The Riordans* stepped on many toes. It did so, not out of any aggressive intent, but out of a simple desire to move gently and courteously forward along a road full of people threatened and determined to stand in the way.

Interestingly, it was the rural serial, rather than the urban serial, which came closest to the cutting edge of what was happening in Irish society. Both Gibbons and McLoone put this down to *Tolka Row* being a view of urban life from an essentially rural perspective and to *The Riordans* being the opposite, a view of rural life from an essentially urban perspective. In breaking with romantic images of rural life and establishing its validity in verisimilitude, its realistic representation of rural life did far more to undermine the tradition of the rural idyll by unravelling it from within.<sup>37</sup> For his part, Wesley Burrowes said that what he had intended to do was to show the real rural Ireland to the city, but that what he did manage to do was to give the rural people of Ireland a city person's view of their life. In reality, *The Riordans* did both. As it evolved, 'there developed a two way conduit of ideas, showing urban attitudes to the country and rural attitudes to the city.'<sup>38</sup>

To many, not least to himself, Burrowes must have seemed an unlikely person to be the major writer of a rural serial based in a Catholic community in the south of Ireland, given his own urban, northern Protestant background. He has always been disarmingly bemused by his initial innocence and ignorance of the life he was to chronicle in such detail, never hesitating to say that the 'hidden Ireland' was more hidden from him than from anyone else in the country. But it was not hidden for long. With remarkable thoroughness, he set out 'on a long liquid

excursion in search of Leestown.<sup>39</sup> He went to live in the real Kells to which the mythical Leestown came to bear a growing resemblance and really immersed himself in the life about which he was writing. No doubt much of the edge of *The Riordans* came from this intricate knowledge of this sort of life from inside it, constantly counterpointed by the experience of life from outside it. It was showing a way of life, both from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in.

Of course, television itself, opening a window not only on the rest of the country, but on the rest of the world, began a process of fusion between town and country that was to be irresistible. *The Riordans* was very much a part of this overall process. It fulfilled its most important function, in his opinion, in its challenge to traditional values. The co-operative movement and the winning of the right to own land had done little to promote egalitarian ideals. For Irish farmers, the priority was to own land, the more the better, and to cultivate their own gardens. The tendency of men of property to cling to traditional values and to resist change was constantly under challenge from men of no property and radical movements, mostly based in the city, demanding change.<sup>40</sup> *The Riordans* constantly highlighted the contrast between men of property and men of no property and showed how people's values were affected by their station in life. Although he never set out to write a treatise on class and class consciousness, Burrowes has always put a great deal of emphasis on class consciousness and tended to show how each person in each episode was acutely affected by it.<sup>41</sup>

Characters were well chosen and well drawn to mark the contrasts very vividly. There were those with a solid stake in rural property: the Riordans with their hundred acre farm and Johnny and Julia Mac with their pub and Miss Nesbitt, the horse Protestant lady of the big house. There were professionals such as Dr. Howard. There were educated wage earners like Jim Hyland, the agricultural instructor and Roddy Byrne, the schoolmaster. At the other end of the social spectrum were travellers like Éamonn, Eily and Francey Maher and the orphaned waif Maggie Nael. There were agricultural labourers like Batty Brennan and later Éamonn Maher. A key figure in mediating between all the various strata, though there were many types of ties, was the Catholic priest, Fr. Sheehy, whose role naturally loomed far larger than that of his Protestant counterpart, Canon Browne. Also important in mediating, though on quite a different level, was Minnie Heffernan, the priest's housekeeper and village gossip. There was also a steady stream of urban characters coming and going, not only from Dublin, but from the far corners of the earth. There was never a claustrophobic or introverted feel to it, with a rich variety of positions in the social order of its time and place closely observed and each strongly counterpointed against others.

Both forms of dress and forms of address sharply marked off characters in terms of their status in society according to class, age and sex. On the Riordan farm itself, Benjy and Batty were normally seen in work clothes, whereas Tom nearly invariably was wearing white shirt, tie, waistcoat and hat befitting the patriarch and politician and Michael was wearing the sports coat and tie of the young professional. Mary, of course, was usually in an apron. Habitual forms of address were strikingly asymmetrical. For an encounter between priest and matriarch, he was Fr. Sheehy to her, but she was Mary to him. In an encounter between the ascendancy lady who married the local doctor and the priest's housekeeper, the one was Mrs. Howard, but the other was Minnie. Even the young Michael Riordan was addressed as Mr. Riordan by the older Francey Maher, but it would be hard to recall Francey ever being addressed by anyone as Mr. Maher nor Batty as Mr. Brennan.

With relentless topicality, *The Riordans* dealt with a host of contemporary issues, ranging from the agricultural to the sociological, from the minutely practical to the grand philosophical. It could be methods of slurry disposal at one moment and a priest's crisis in his vocation in the next. It was enormously educational, in different ways for different people. No doubt a substantial proportion of what many city dwellers knew about agriculture and day-to-day rural life came through years of watching *The Riordans* and its successors. Much of it must have been a revelation, their education heretofore having been utterly lacking in anything having to do with methods of slurry disposal, use of fertilisers, techniques for improving milk yield, systems of keeping farm accounts, schemes for eradicating bovine TB, the role of co-operatives, conflicts over mining rights or rights of way or farm retirement schemes. Others, more informed about these matters, might have found the expression of new attitudes about marriage or the honest treatment of mental illness to be new food for thought. In all sections of the population, it raised matters which were considered in a new light when filtered through the strong identification which the serial engendered. No doubt it played its role, not only in reflecting, but in reshaping, social attitudes to travellers, unmarried mothers, hare coursing, mixed marriages and much more, especially when it moved into the seventies and sailed even closer to the wind than in the sixties.

The airing of social issues was all the more effective for not being done in an awkward, agit prop sort of way. Such matters as arose seemed to do so quite naturally and organically, out of the rhythms of the lives of familiar characters in a familiar setting. There was an honesty and a humour in the tone of it that made whatever came seem quite plausible. There was also a sense of proportion about it. There were big stories of murder mystery following a dead body being found in the woods; of violence over the appointment of a schoolmaster, raising ghosts of ancestral conflicts in the local area's part in the struggle for national independence; of decisions about emigration and

inheritance of land. There were also small, often funny, stories about poitín making and greyhound racing and amateur drama casting and 'mural' painting, not to mention participating in tidy town competitions. Regarding the 'murals', as an example of the characteristic humour of the serial, which combined light comic relief with a serious satirical edge, Éamonn had to paint clothes onto the naked nymphs of the mural done for the new pub lounge. It was a laugh, but a laugh that said more about the Irish mind and its cultural consequences than many a tedious commentary.

Although it all seemed to flow rather easily and to be a simple record of events as they happened, it was in fact a carefully constructed narrative created in a process Burrowes described as like walking a tightrope.<sup>42</sup> There was a constant, but obviously creative, tension between the aim of providing entertainment and that of raising themes for development by way of social comment. It was a dilemma posed as treating Leestown either as a backwater, touched only by an occasional ripple from the social pressures of the day, or as the open sea, buffeted by every wave of controversy and hotly debating all the burning issues of the era. Burrowes claimed to have fallen off both sides of the tightrope regularly, but it could equally be claimed that he performed a fine balancing act. There were also other tensions in establishing the rhythm and pace of the narrative, which he also described using the tightrope metaphor, involving striking a balance between simply recording the happenings of village life, which would be dull, or giving action-packed adventure of the kind the audience was seeing in *The Man From UNCLE*, which would be false. Here he provided a running narrative, which was true to life to the point of showing the trivia, without being tedious, and at the same time was interesting, without being artificially slickened up with contrived confrontations and cliffhangers at every turn.

The Irish audience was at the same time spending most of its viewing time watching television drama produced elsewhere, whether imported and transmitted by RTÉ or on the British channels, whether American sitcoms and action-adventure series or British historical epics and modern domestic serials. However, in *The Riordans*, there was an authenticity and relevance to their lives that made it special. For many viewers, it was the high point of the week's viewing. However, it was not only its indigenous character that made it special. While *The Riordans* was firmly within the developing television tradition of the domestic serial, it opened it out to explore new potentialities of the form. It dealt with all the minor and major joys and sorrows of family life within a small community, but without disengaging these from the larger socio-economic context conditioning them in the way the standard soap opera formula normally did. Even on an international scale, it stood out in this respect. Reflecting on the failure of British television serials to reach the same level of social comment as 19th century serial fiction did in its day, Raymond Williams wondered if anything of value might come of the television serial and then commented: 'The most encouraging example I know is Irish television's *The Riordans*'.<sup>43</sup>

### Verdicts on the Decade

Indeed, there was much that was encouraging in the television drama of RTÉ's first decade. Certainly its output was prodigious for a station of its newness, size and limited resources. By the mid-sixties, there was on average a new home-produced play every fortnight, plus several series and serials. To give more specific figures, as set out in the *RTÉ Guide* at the end of the decade:

Of the 136 plays produced in the first 10 years by RTÉ:

103 were by living writers, 81 of which were Irish.

33 were classified as classics, 2/3 of which were Irish.

Over half of these began life as stage plays.

There were also anthologies and serials. By the end of the decade, serialised drama represented more than half of RTÉ's drama output as measured in actual television running time.<sup>44</sup> In commenting on these statistics, Wesley Burrowes contended that they established that Ireland, in proportion to its viewing population, had easily the highest output of home produced drama in Europe.<sup>45</sup> The quantity of home produced drama was considered important in itself, no matter what the quality. Jim Fitzgerald especially insisted on this. He contended that, if output was kept to the maximum, it would find its own level. If the quantity was kept up, the quality too would rise. He believed that, to the degree that writers were encouraged and this policy was followed, the results would begin to show. Both quantity and quality did rise, he argued, though the problem came when this began to frighten those in authority.<sup>46</sup>

RTÉ tended to be highly self-conscious in assessing its own performance, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, not only in production levels, but also in audience response. Its audience research encompassed the quantitative TAM ratings from 1962 on and the qualitative assessment panels from 1965 on. Whereas imported drama often topped the TAMs, indigenous drama did very well indeed in attracting both the differential attention and the critical acclaim of its audience. Calls, letters, resolutions and submissions from all sorts of sources poured in and received various degrees of attention. The *RTÉ Guide* was constantly devoting its columns to readers' praises and protests on

programmes, as well as initiating features, such as a series by newspaper television critics, giving a critical appraisal of RTÉ's performance.

Television itself became increasingly reflexive over the years. Among its early television plays, a number spotlighted television itself. *Our Representative Will Call*, *Heart to Heart*<sup>47</sup> and *One for the Grave* were set in television stations. Televisions began to appear regularly among the props in television plays and serials. References to other programmes began to creep into scripts.

By 1968, there was RTÉ's first full-scale television programme about television programmes, *Right of Reply*. Each fortnight, producers selected several programmes that had come in for hard words and brought into studio both critics to make their case and programme makers to answer their arguments. There was also a studio audience which was encouraged to participate. Producer Seán Ó Mordha and controller Jack White stressed that it was not to be a sham battle with all the cards on the side of RTÉ. Drama came in for considerable attention in the ensuing series. Indeed, the session on the sitcom *Killyraggart 17* caused some to say it was almost as if RTÉ had deliberately stacked the cards against itself. Although hints of astounding revelations about the drama department were scattered through the discussion, Jim Fitzgerald's announcement that he was never satisfied with any programme he made seemed to have defused the fighting spirit of those who had come prepared for battle. There was also a vigorous debate over the merits of the imported sitcoms, with Niall Tóibín and Michael Judge leading the critique of the canned comedies and Liam O'Leary defending whatever made people laugh.

The overall pattern to the criticisms raised against RTÉ in the course of the run of *Right of Reply* (which was unfortunately only seven months) was that RTÉ was too Dublin-oriented, neglected rural viewers and paid too little attention to traditional Irish values. Reflecting on the value of the series on the occasion of its final programme, presenter John Bowman said that it highlighted the problem of finding out what it was to be Irish in a time of change. He quoted Raymond Williams, who had been in Dublin a few weeks earlier for a seminar organised by and for Irish broadcasters. In discussing the problems of running a television service in a small country, especially one with a much larger neighbour, the main problem was: 'to maintain a national identity, without at the same time becoming a backwater.'<sup>48</sup>

Running at the same time was another television programme about television programmes, this one specifically about television drama. The series, called *Looking at Drama*, probed definitions of drama and characteristics of television as a medium. The commentary was interspersed with excerpts from television drama productions, reflections from television writers such as Hugh Leonard and Tom Murphy and reactions from pub punters. After a clip from *Cathy Come Home*, for example, the tone of the pub comment was used to show the ability of drama to enlist viewers' sympathies, especially when welded to the power of documentary: 'When they took the childer away from her at the end, the old one was only in floods.' The series attempted to show the contribution made to television drama, not only by authors, but by producers, directors, designers, technicians, actors and audience. The series included a session on the value of drama for children and workshops on experimental drama. Most of the scripts were written by Carolyn Swift, with the aim of getting the television audience to reflect on such questions as:

- What is drama?
- Who are the people involved?
- What do they do?
- How do they do it?

Opening the subject out even further, there was one programme entitled *Drama and Society* with a script written by Raymond Williams, raising such questions as:

- Why do different kinds of societies pick out different kinds of problems and choose different ways of resolving them?
- What frame do they put them into and why?

The social origins and effects of drama were traced from the evolution of theatre to radio, cinema and television. The analysis of the historical process was illustrated with excerpts from *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Beginning to End*, *The Field*, *Tolka Row* and *The Riordans*.

Much of the reflection about television by the end of the decade was concerned with the growing domination of the airwaves by US imported programmes and with worries about a bland mid-atlantic conformism sweeping over indigenous cultures. Right from the beginning, a substantial proportion of RTÉ's schedules was filled with American series such as *Have Gun, Will Travel*, *The Virginian*, *Rin Tin Tin*, *Mr. Ed*, *Dragnet*, *87th Precinct*, *I Spy*, *Mission Impossible*, *Father Knows Best*, *I Remember Mama*, *Love That Bob*, *My Little Margie*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Bewitched* and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. Indeed, by 1969, 75% of its programme material was bought in from the US.<sup>49</sup>

Although the TAM ratings for the imported programmes were high, there was continuing criticism of RTÉ for showing such a high proportion of imported material and for such a high percentage of it coming from the US. There were constant demands for more home produced programming and queries about other possible sources for bought-in programming.

By 1966, television had come into 85% of all Irish homes. Gaeilgeoiri saw it as an agent of anglicisation destined to oversee the final demise of the Irish language. Others as well, even more sweepingly, accused RTÉ of playing a prime role in the anglo-americanisation of the Irish mind, of giving way before a cultural imperialism that heralded the death knell of indigenous cultures. The author and activist Peadar O'Donnell warned that the fireside of rural Ireland was being overrun by television and that tales of Micheál Ruadh and Big Willie Boyle were giving way to those of Kit Carson, Vint Bonner and Bat Masterson.<sup>50</sup>

There was much discussion of the quality of American series. There were articles like John O'Donovan's 'Confessions of a Lucy Lover' and others following from it, in which various men were inspired to ponder a traditionally troubling male dilemma. This was a preference for muddling females, so as to feel superior, on the one hand, and a need for a certain degree of competence from women, so as to have a comfortable home, on the other. The consensus seemed to be that the Lucy-type, like whiskey, was best taken in small doses.<sup>51</sup> However, the Irish being what they were, neither the whiskey nor the surrogate pleasures of the Lucy-type sitcom were likely to be taken in small doses. Addressing the problem of the large doses (and switching from a liquid to a solid metaphor), the actress and director Sheelagh Richards once compared a night's diet of the typically flaccid programmes for family viewing to the experience of eating a whole box of chocolates. One had enjoyed each one, but the end result was a sick, irritable, leaden discomfort.<sup>52</sup>

This sort of critique of RTÉ's schedule was one of the main planks in the whole case against RTÉ set out by Jack Dowling and Lelia Doolan in *Sit Down and Be Counted*. They argued that American television series, such as *I Dream of Jeannie* and the like, were made by a technological elite for a synthetically contrived and diluted mass audience. They were glossily packaged imitation life kits made to computer calculated specifications, dominated by beautifully edited and crisply cut audio-visual clichés. Most of it was meaningless and it displaced the meaningful on a terrifying scale of priorities. The most dangerous thing was the way in which the whole smooth acceptance of the status quo as fundamentally likeable deprived the viewer of any true experience of the problems, which were briefly faced and then swept under the carpet. All of the unmanageable incongruities were replaced by contrasts played for laughs and by solutions in which every wrinkle was ironed out and every end tied up.<sup>53</sup>

The whole row, which reached a certain climax in the resignations of RTÉ producers Dowling and Doolan and culminated in the publication of *Sit Down and Be Counted*, had been brewing for some time and involved a lot of other people as well. Aside from debate over the merits and amounts of imported programming, there were a number of other matters contributing to a dramatic build-up of controversy over RTÉ. The controversy came both from without and from within RTÉ.

From without, there were, first of all, a whole series of public debates surrounding *The Late, Late Show*, which had played a pioneering role in giving a public airing to issues heretofore either hushed up or spoken of only in private. The whole ludicrous episode in 1966 known to folk memory as 'The Bishop and the Nightie Affair'<sup>54</sup> was only one of many such incidents, but the outpouring of protest, initiated by a bishop's sermon over such a trivial and silly matter as a game in which a woman was asked the colour of her nightdress on her wedding night, served to bring to a focus much resentment that had been welling up. This incident, followed by outraged clerical and public reaction, and by RTÉ's apology, united to crystallise both conservative resentment against RTÉ's perceived liberalism and liberal resentment against RTÉ's perceived conservatism. Typically, however, it was conservative opinion which mobilised itself most strikingly. Several weeks later came another wave of denunciations and a chorus of motions from county councils condemning an angry young man who appeared on the show criticising some of the inequalities in Irish education, various practices of bishops and Christian Brothers, and the censorship of writer John McGahern. These and other such rows, said the authors of *Sit Down and Be Counted*, showed a typically Irish resistance to frank talk in public.

News and current affairs coverage was another hotbed of controversy. A number of incidents in which RTÉ came into conflict with politicians, more specifically with the Fianna Fáil government, set off a power struggle in which the degree of autonomy which could be exercised by RTÉ was put to the test. Despite strict adherence to journalistic norms of balance, Fianna Fáil ministers were not happy with coverage of governmental affairs. The Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, made a statement in the Dáil in 1966 rejecting, in no uncertain terms, the view that RTÉ should be independent of government supervision. The chairman of the RTÉ authority, CS Andrews, a strong Fianna Fáil man, agreed. Just how lacking in independence they were became all too clear, when trips of RTÉ teams to cover events in Vietnam and Biafra were cancelled from on high. There were also various conflicts involving business interests. The consumer affairs programme *Home Truths* perhaps provided the arena for most blatant conflict between

RTÉ's public service obligations and the pressures of its commercial advertisers. Its cancellation was a source of despondency to those who fought for the primacy of the former.

While most of the overt controversy was centered around *The Late, Late Show*, *Seven Days* and other programme areas, there could be little doubt that the prevailing atmosphere affected drama as well.<sup>55</sup> No area of programming was unaffected by the climate of internal upheaval enveloping the station. From within RTÉ, most of the controversy was focused on the growing tension between programme makers and management. There was staff hostility to organisational changes designed to bring about a firmer control of public affairs by the RTÉ Authority. There was trade union rejection of management guidelines on 'staff and politics', which staff saw as an attempt to control their outside political activities, overriding their good sense as adult citizens, to say nothing of their constitutional rights. There was one conflict after another. There were rumours and counter-rumours. There were small group discussions, large meetings and staff teach-ins in the canteen. There were ultimatums and resignations. There were newspaper articles and finally a full-scale book detailing it all, as the internal politics of RTÉ spilled over into the public arena.

*Sit Down and Be Counted* was a most exasperating document to read. It was obviously written in a hurry and in need of a strong editing hand which it never got. It veered, in a most indisciplined manner, from the smallest details of telephone calls to grandiose interpretations of the history of philosophy and the history of technology, encompassing a misinformed critique of marxism and details of a trip to the USSR along the way. It was also somewhat high flown and vainglorious. It nevertheless, despite its inflated self-consciousness, spoke a lot of good sense and told a lot of truth about television and Irish society that needed telling. It accused RTÉ of giving way before the Irish double standard, of not tolerating in public what was tolerated and even encouraged in private. It condemned RTÉ for reducing dialogue to monologue, for not only throwing a switch for the light, but praising the resulting darkness. It made it clear that it was not a matter of personalities but of structures and of the way these structures embodied the ambiguities and ambivalences that reflected the divisions within the national psyche.

Not surprisingly, the *Sit Down and Be Counted* critique had its critics, both on the right and on the left. The chairman of the RTÉ Authority, CS Andrews, when later writing his memoirs, took a dim view of the 'creative people' in RTÉ:

Many of them were convinced that they were living and working in a society which was rotten to the core; they believed that they had a mission to change it through use of television ... it was difficult to see how they expected so rotten a society to provide them with the expensive and complicated facilities of a television network and pay them while they rushed into the fray to establish the new Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup>

For his part, the director-general, TP Hardiman, echoed the position of his predecessor, Kevin McCourt, to the effect that RTÉ could not afford the luxury of an editorial policy. He denied that either advertisers or the sales department in RTÉ had any influence on programme content, but he stressed that RTÉ had to pay its way and needed advertising revenue. It was only advertising revenue, he said, which would make possible an expansion of home produced programming. He also linked the programme makers' protests to the wider mood of social protest and claimed that there was more involved than just circumstances within RTÉ.<sup>57</sup> Not that those involved would contest this. Indeed, *Sit Down and Be Counted* carried a rather grandiose introduction by Raymond Williams, which linked events in RTÉ with events in Prague and Paris in 1968.

However, not all approved of their assumption of the mantle of the left. Jim Fitzgerald felt that they had gone public on the wrong issues, creating a situation which meant the ruination of the real progressive movement that had been building within RTÉ. James Plunkett also withheld his support, believing that things were edging forward and that it was important not to be distracted with false issues or lesser evils.<sup>58</sup> The producers pushing the other way never questioned his integrity, but they felt he exercised his position of pre-eminent moral leadership in a way that calmed others' will to resist. Seán MacRéamoinn characterised a clash between Eoghan Harris and James Plunkett at a Workers' Union of Ireland meeting at RTÉ as being like listening to an argument between Daniel Cohn-Bendit and an old guard French communist during the Paris riots.<sup>59</sup>

Summing up the sixties in a book dedicated to assessing the significance of the decade for Ireland, Fergal Tobin put considerable emphasis on the role of RTÉ in it all.<sup>60</sup> Judging the end-of-the-decade turmoil in RTÉ as the culmination of a series of pressures and protests that had been building, he outlined the major forces involved. Traditionalists, through the sixties, were inclined to blame television for all the woes of the world. The Fianna Fáil government developed a paranoia vis-à-vis RTÉ, which they saw as a nest of socialists and other undesirables. This situation, along with constantly coming up against the conservatism of RTÉ's own management, created a siege mentality among programme makers. However, in his opinion, the 'creative people' had embarked on a battle that could not be won. The producers might have won all the debates and have influenced public opinion, but the organisation men held all the cards. By the end of the decade, by his verdict, television was put in the hands of the safe

men. But they were not the old safe men of Irish society, but the new ones. On the broader canvas, the prevailing ethos had ceased to be that of the strong farmer, with his inertia and his intensely localised view of the world, but that of the suburban bourgeois, who believed in nothing profound, but had energy and drive and links to a wider world.

This judgement and that of others, including the authors of *Sit Down and Be Counted*, while not unfounded, was far too harsh. Despite the resignations of the talented people who had left and the disillusionment of many of those who stayed, there were still creative and committed people struggling on, with their most original and progressive contributions still to come. It was far from true that the best was over for RTÉ, as the sixties came to a close, as perhaps only an examination of RTÉ as it proceeded through the seventies will show.

#### NOTES to Chapter 4:

1. John A. Murphy, 'Censorship and the Moral Community' in *Communications and Community in Ireland*, Thomas Davis Lecture Series, edited by Brian Farrell, Dublin/Cork, Mercier, 1984, p.62.
2. For a more detailed account of the debate, see: Fergal Tobin, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the 1960s*, Dublin, Gill & MacMillan, 1984; Martin McLoone and John MacMahon (eds.), *Television and Irish Society*, Dublin, RTÉ/IFI 1984.
3. Interviews with Jim Fitzgerald, October 22 and November 5, 1984.
4. Interview with Carolyn Swift, December 11, 1984.
5. Interview with James Plunkett, April 22, 1985.
6. cf. Micheál Ó hAodha, *Theatre in Ireland*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1974; Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Irish Theatre*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1983; D.E.S. Maxwell, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
7. Ó hAodha, *ibid.*
8. Seán O'Faoláin, *The Irish*, London, Penguin, 1969.
9. *RTV Guide*, January 26, 1962: the *RTV Guide* was the weekly magazine published by RTÉ until July 1966, when it became the *RTÉ Guide*.
10. *ibid.*
11. Hilton Edwards, 'Drama on Television', *Aquarius*, 1973.
12. *RTV Guide*, *op. cit.*
13. *RTV Guide*, April 15, 1962.
14. *RTV Guide*, March 31, 1963.
15. Hugh Leonard in *Flight From the Celtic Twilight* Des Hickey and Gus Smith (ed.), New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1973, p.198-199.
16. *RTÉ Guide*, February 8, 1968.
17. Drawing on personal experience of convent life as a nun during these years, it was a very apt description indeed.
18. Interview with Carolyn Swift, *op. cit.*
19. *RTÉ Guide*, November 11, 1967.
20. Hugh Leonard, *op. cit.*, p.201.
21. Robert Ballagh, cited in *Culture and Ideology in Ireland*, edited by Chris Curtin, Mary Kelly and Liam O'Dowd, Galway University Press, 1984, p.1.
22. Michael D.Higgins, 'The Tyranny of Images', *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 8, No.2, 1984.
23. Luke Gibbons, 'Synge, Country and Western: The Myth of the West in Irish and American Culture' in *Culture and Ideology in Ireland*, *op.cit.*
24. *RTV Guide*, October 4, 1964; *RTV Guide*, October 16, 1964.
25. According to Carolyn Swift (Interview Dec. 11, 1984), the script of *The Girl from Mayo*, which she adapted from the story of Brian Cleeve, was originally rejected by the script editor and was only produced by going over his head.
26. Many of these productions were adaptations rather than original works for television.
27. Interview with Brian MacLochlainn, February 25, 1986.
28. *RTÉ Guide*, April 6, 1967.
29. *RTÉ Guide*, October 14, 1965.
30. Interview with Eoghan Harris, July 17, 1984.
31. *RTÉ Guide*, November 10, 1967.
32. Interview with Niall McCarthy, July 17, 1984.
33. Luke Gibbons, 'From Kitchen Sink to Soap', in *Television and Irish Society*, *op. cit.*
34. Martin McLoone, 'The Urban Working Class on Television' in *Television and Irish Society*, *op. cit.*
35. Wesley Burrowes, 'Imitations of Life' *Irish Independent*, December 28, 1985.
36. Carolyn Swift, *RTÉ Guide*, November 10, 1967.
37. Gibbons and McLoone, *op. cit.*
38. Wesley Burrowes, *op. cit.*
39. Wesley Burrowes, *The Riordans*, Dublin, 1977.
40. Wesley Burrowes, *Irish Independent*, *op. cit.*
41. Interview with Wesley Burrowes, October 25, 1984.
42. Wesley Burrowes, *The Riordans*, *op. cit.*
43. Raymond Williams, *The Listener*, November, 1969. *The Riordans* was also singled out for favourable mention in his book *Technology and Cultural Form*, Glasgow, Fontana, 1973, p.61.

44. Wesley Burrowes, *RTÉ Guide*, December 31, 1971.
45. Ibid.
46. Interviews with Jim Fitzgerald, October 22, and November 5, 1984.
47. *Heart to Heart* by Terence Rattigan was a 1962 Eurovision commissioned play for simultaneous transmission on a number of national networks.
48. John Bowman, *RTÉ Guide*, May 9, 1969.
49. This figure was given by Jack Dowling and Lelia Doolan in *Sit Down and Be Counted*, Dublin: Wellington, 1969.
50. Peadar O'Donnell, *RTV Guide*, September 8, 1964.
51. *RTV Guide*, 1965.
52. Sheelah Richards, quoted by Dowling and Doolan, op. cit.
53. Dowling and Doolan, op. cit.
54. An account of this and other controversies involving *The Late, Late Show* can be found in Fergal Tobin's *The Best of Decades*, op. cit. and Maurice Earls' 'The Late, Late Show -Controversy and Context' in *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit.
55. Jim Fitzgerald claimed that scripts were overruled at a higher level, so that various drama projects never went into production. Interviews, op. cit.
56. C. S. Andrews, *Man of No Property*, Cork, Mercier, 1982, p.277-278.
57. Statement issued by T. P. Hardiman, cited by Fergal Tobin, op. cit., p.2.
58. Interviews with Jim Fitzgerald, and James Plunkett op. cit.
59. Cited by Dowling and Doolan, op.cit., p.193.
60. Fergal Tobin, op. cit.

## Chapter 5: The Seventies: Progress, Pressures and Protests

### Ireland in the 1970s

By the beginning of the 1970s, Ireland was well and truly caught up in the stepped-up tempo of social change. There was a rising tide of social protest, a tendency to take politics out onto the streets, a will to challenge what was called 'the establishment' and to experiment with new forms of cultural expression. For many, it was true, it was only a superficial trendiness, an unfocused grasping after innovation or a passive flowing with the tide. But for others, it was a deep questioning of old ideas and values, a highly focused pursuit of alternatives and an active commitment to social causes.

In the past decade in Ireland, the nature of 'the establishment' had changed. The new Ireland of Lemass, while still under attack from the right, was now coming under attack from the left. The Lemass era had brought to power an intellectually and culturally impoverished nouveau riche, who believed in prosperity but not much else, at least not very profoundly. They were energetic and full of cocktail party chatter, but they had no clear vision, no coherent values. However, in the new mood, which put a strong emphasis on public morality, the issue was no longer simply the maintenance of frugal self-sufficiency or the pursuit of expansive prosperity, but also the question of how that prosperity was produced and distributed. The management ethos of the Irish Management Institute was not designed to deal with matters of social justice. In an atmosphere giving a high profile to radical, and even socialist, ideas and movements abroad, the issue was no longer simply provincialism versus cosmopolitanism, but of conflicting brands of cosmopolitanism. The new forces, with new links to the wider world, took a dim view of Industrial Development Authority executives winning and dining potential American investors and preferred to be outside the American embassy protesting against the consequences of what America was actually investing in Vietnam.

In the north, there was the new wave of the traditional 'troubles', rooted in decades of residual resentment and sparked off by the new mood of mass movements on the march world wide. The civil rights movement in the north of Ireland was directly influenced by the civil rights movement in the south of the USA. They were moved by the same spirit. They used the same tactics. They sang the same songs. Indeed, *We Shall Overcome* was echoing the world over. The parallel went further. Just as the peaceful civil disobedience of the SCLC gave way to the more militant and violent black panthers, so did the initiative pass from NICRA to a new IRA armed campaign. The decade was full of civil strife, bombs and bullets, men on the run, internment, direct rule, republican splits, the proliferation of paramilitaries, the emergence of centre parties, two nationalists, peace people, political initiatives, loyalist lockouts, republican hunger strikes and on and on, in an escalating cycle of schism and violence. In the south, there was the spillover effect of events in the north. The various shades of republicanism had their organisational networks through the republic. Sinn Féin (Official), Sinn Féin (Provisional) and the Irish Republican Socialist Party contested elections and engaged in various forms of legal political activity, while the Official IRA, Provisional IRA and INLA had their active service units and engaged in various forms of illegal political activity.<sup>1</sup>

There were also housing action demonstrations, student sit-ins, contraceptive trains; campaigns against EEC entry, against the Offences Against the State Act, against inequitable taxation of the PAYE sector; campaigns for resources protection, equal pay, contraception and divorce. There were issues and causes galore, one issue for some, another for others, randomly combined for yet others or coherently integrated for still others in a strategy in pursuit of a full-blooded socialist alternative to the existing system. The Labour Party, for its part, had announced at the beginning of the decade that 'the seventies will be socialist' and then proceeded to play its part in ensuring that it would not be so. Within Fine Gael, the older blueshirt element came under challenge from a newer 'just society' grouping, representing a cautious but significant move of the older establishment towards some sort of accommodation with social democratic impulses. In 1973, Fianna Fáil, after sixteen years in power, fell, to be replaced by a Fine Gael-Labour Coalition, but was back in government again by 1977. For the left, it made little difference, addressing the same sort of protests, pickets, mass meetings and marches to one as to the other.

The women's liberation movement began to be a formidable presence in Irish life, not so much in its particular organisational forms and activities, but more in the whole atmosphere of questioning traditional sex roles that gave rise to it. Women who never attended a women's meeting began to perceive themselves in a new light and to work out their lives in terms of a new range of options. Enlightened men adjusted with equanimity, if not always with ease. Unenlightened men adjusted as well, if without equanimity and with remarkably less ease.

The ever more liberal atmosphere of Irish life brought a new climate for the arts and a new situation for the artist in relation to Irish society. Writers became ever more explicit and more critical in dealing with such matters as religion, sex, politics and class. Even within the theatrical establishment, there was a steady succession of challenging works by such authors as Brian Friel, Eugene McCabe, Tom Murphy, Tom Kilroy and others. Outside it, there was

much experimentation, with new theatres, new companies and new forms popping up everywhere. There was the like of Plunkett's *The Risen People* at the Project and Arden and D'Arcy's *Non-Stop Connolly Show* at Liberty Hall. There was street theatre all around Dublin city centre. There was also the memorable and exciting visit of the radical 7:84 company creating a highly innovative theatre elsewhere on the celtic fringe.

For some, the new climate provided the opportunity to use art as a means for a public coming to terms with matters of public importance. For others it brought a retreat from the public arena into their own private obsessions. A more ambivalent establishment did not make such a clear target for an artist to attack and to define himself over against in exile, in censored literature and in despairing self-destruction. A more liberal atmosphere could also be more indifferent. Without coherent orthodoxies to rebel against and without the clarity of vision to construct alternatives, there was a tendency towards forms of cultural expression that were more and more indulgent of individualist idiosyncrasy, indifferent to philosophical coherence and dissociated from social context. This was the case with a myriad of forms: ranging from the sincere, if shrunken, worlds of masturbatory novels and highly precious theatrical productions to the pompous pretentiousness of pseudo-avant-garde paintings to the nihilistic nastiness of the punk aesthetic in dress, movement and music. Certainly it was hard to specify any common criteria for what was considered art any more.

### **RTÉ in the 1970s**

The push and pull of the various forces struggling to find their place in Irish society played themselves out in relation to RTÉ as well. There were new pressures from political left and right, from furious feminists and happy-at-home housewives, from nationalists and two-nationists and from a host of other sources. There were also continuing pressures from Irish speakers, from Catholic traditionalists, from rural and urban dwellers. All were judging the televisual picture of reality against their own perceptions of it and finding RTÉ wanting in one respect or another.

The pressures from the politicians, particularly those in power, continued to build and reached crisis point with the dramatic government dismissal of the RTÉ Authority in 1972. In the course of following the understandable journalistic goal of exploring the political motivation of those in command of the armed campaign in the north, RTÉ came into conflict with the Fianna Fáil government, which summarily replaced the entire RTÉ authority with a new one. RTÉ's enthusiasm for the change in government the next year and the appointment of Conor Cruise O'Brien, critic of the previous government's policy on RTÉ, as minister for posts and telegraphs, was short-lived. The amending legislation which he introduced in 1976 did limit the arbitrary exercise of government power in this domain. But, by issuing a more specific directive, prohibiting interviews with members of proscribed organisations, he strengthened the force of section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act 1960 in its effect on everyday broadcasting practice in RTÉ. These events, along with being starved of adequate finance through lack of support from successive governments, left a legacy of suspicion and resentment between politicians and broadcasters.

When the question of a second channel arose, the minister proposed not creating RTÉ2, but re-broadcasting BBC1 instead. Following a survey showing this to be contrary to public wishes, the decision was made in favour of RTÉ2. However, due to financial problems, RTÉ2 only came on air in 1978. Because the issue was posed as between BBC1 and RTÉ2, as between foreign and indigenous culture, the issue of an independent Irish channel was not raised at this time. Stemming from the second channel debate, RTÉ staff, particularly through the RTÉ trade union group, mobilised to influence public opinion in favour of RTÉ and to extract from RTÉ various guarantees regarding broadcasting practices and working conditions.

There was also the emergence of an ad hoc group calling itself Citizens for Better Broadcasting and publishing a series of position papers entitled *Aspects of RTÉ Television Broadcasting*. Among those putting their names to this analysis were academics, clerics, trade unionists, and theatre directors such as: Augustine Martin, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, Tony Coughlan, Kader Asmal, Austin Flannery, James McDyer, Terence McCaughey, Michael Mullen and Tomas MacAnna. Their study of RTÉ schedules revealed an increasing percentage of imported material and, correspondingly, a decreasing percentage of home produced material, as well as an imbalance in the sources of imported material, parallel to the imbalance in global flows analysed by UNESCO and causing international concern. Their recommendations were that home produced programmes should occupy the dominant share of the schedule; that there should be more Irish language and regional programming; that imported programmes should be selected from the widest possible sources. Their proposals also included support for public service broadcasting from public funds in the same manner as support for education and health services and control by a body appointed by the Oireachtas to be representative of the whole community, including RTÉ staff, and to be dismissed only by an Oireachtas majority. Their publication also expressed regret at the decline of authentic debate on the central issues in the life of the nation.

## RTÉ Drama in the 1970s

The style of RTÉ drama in the seventies was shaped by many factors, from the central issues in the life of the nation to the exigencies of budget allocations and new developments in the technology of television production. Regarding the latter, the most obvious development, as far as the audience was concerned, was the introduction of colour in the mid-seventies. They might also have noticed a more sophisticated visual style, a more extensive use of locations and a faster pace of plot development, without being precisely aware of the extent to which any of this was due to such factors as increasing use of film and improvement in video editing facilities. The level of output remained reasonably high, relative to the limited resources of the country and size of its audience. Over the decade, there was on average a new home produced single play every month, plus many more serials, series and mini-series.

Although the balance shifted towards more original written-for-television material, there was still considerable adaptation of works written for other media. Adaptations of foreign classics included *Andorra*, *The Rehearsal*, *The Promise*, *The Father*, *The Diary of a Madman*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *The Strong Are Lonely*, and *Mother Courage and Her Children*. For the most part, the works of such authors as Frisch, Anouilh, Strindberg, Arbuzov, Gogol, Chekov, Lorca, Hochwaelder and Brecht were given fairly standard productions and retained their original settings. Once in a while, they were more freely adapted and put in an Irish setting, such as in *Fine Girl You Are*, Hugh Leonard's adaptation of Chekov's *The Darling*. Productions of Irish theatrical classics included Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and Joyce's *Exiles* were RTÉ/ Abbey co-productions. More contemporary works of Irish theatre given RTÉ productions included John Murphy's *The Country Boy*, Tom Murphy's *Famine* and *The White House*, Brian Friel's *Crystal and Fox*, Eugene McCabe's *King of the Castle*, Sam Thompson's *Over The Bridge* and John Boyd's *The Flats*. Literary works dramatised for television included: *The Branchy Tree*, Brian Friel's *Mr. Sing, My Heart's Delight*, Frank O'Connor's *The House That Johnny Built*, Eric Cross' *The Tailor and Ansty*, Kate O'Brien's *The Last of Summer* and Aidan Higgins' *Langrishe, Go Down*.

## Irish Television Drama Outside RTÉ

Of course, not all of the Irish television drama being watched by Irish audiences was provided by RTÉ. Perhaps the most memorable adaptations of Irish short stories were provided by Granada under the anthology title *The Sinners* and shown on RTÉ as well as ITV. These plays of 1973 were consciously intended to break British attitudes of condescension towards the Irish. The producer, Brian Armstrong, looked for particularly 'meaty' stories for this series of 12 one hour plays. He used Irish settings, Irish actors and Irish scriptwriter Hugh Leonard to dramatised works of Irish authors Seán O'Faoláin, Frank O'Connor, James Joyce, James Plunkett and Brian Friel. They were excellent and quite unforgettable productions, which impressed Irish audiences, as well as British ones, with what Irish talent could actually do. Granada also made an adaptation of Frank O'Connor's *An Only Child*. Other ITV companies also produced Irish drama from time to time, with productions such as HTV's co-production with CBS, an adaptation of Brian Moore's novel *Catholics*, set on an island off the west coast of Kerry. BBC produced a fair amount of Irish drama as well, again most of it in the way of literary adaptation, which included Joyce's *Stephen D* and *Two Gallants*, O'Connor's *First Confession* and Macken's *The Island of the Great Yellow Ox*.

It was not all adaptation though. There was also the comedy series *Me Mammy* written by Hugh Leonard and performed by Irish actors. There were also serious and controversial works dealing with the dilemmas of Northern Ireland politics, although there was a lot of water under the bridge between Sam Thompson's *Cemented With Love* in 1965 and *The Legion Hall Bombing* in 1978, both of which were postponed before finally being transmitted.

Other Irish television drama was made by Irish independent producers, often co-funded and transmitted by RTÉ. Films such as Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* and *Criminal Conversation*, Bob Quinn's *Poitéin*, Joe Comerford's *Traveller* and *Down the Corner*, Tom McArdle's *The Kinkisha* and Robert Wynne Simmons' *Double Piquet* fell into this category. There was also *The Hebrew Lesson* made by the Dublin Film Cooperative at Ardmore Studios.

Occasionally too, there was an American television movie made in Ireland employing some degree of Irish talent, such as the thriller *Cry of the Innocent*.

RTÉ not only promoted, transmitted or co-funded these types of production, but made its first forays into the field of co-productions. As well as the plays co-produced with the Abbey theatre, RTÉ entered into its first co-productions with BBC. The first was in 1975, a psychological thriller by Michael Judge, *Full Fathom Five*, changed somewhat from its RTÉ production ten years earlier. The second was in 1979, a Harold Pinter adaptation of the Aidan Higgins novel *Langrishe, Go Down*.

## New Initiatives in RTÉ Drama

However, most Irish television drama was in-house RTÉ production, though all of it was produced and received in a cultural environment characterised by exceptionally high exposure of both programme makers and audience to what was being done in television elsewhere. There were new genres, most often Irish versions of television genres being developed abroad. The popularity of imported medical series with Irish audiences gave rise to the indigenous *Partners in Practice*. The addiction of viewers to police series was given an injection from home sources in *The Burke Enigma*. The pull of the historical epic was meant to draw the audience fond of BBC costume drama to the saga of *Kilmore House* spanning 150 years of Irish life. The foreign sitcoms were given domestic analogues in *The Lads*, *The Lodgers*, *What The Butler Missed*, *I Try To Ignore It But I Love It*, *Hair Today*, *Gone Tomorrow* and *Up in the World*. For those who liked BBC productions of Beckett and Pinter, there was Wesley Burrowes' surreal play *The Becauseway*, 'a play about reality, using none of the conventions of realism'. It was set in an indeterminate time and place, but definitely a long way from 1970s Leestown. For those who admired the socially crusading drama-documentary of British television drama, like *Cathy Come Home* and *Spongers*, there was RTÉ's *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*.<sup>3</sup> This sort of drama was given greatest scope later in the decade when Louis Lentin, as head of drama, instituted the regular Thursday Playdate slot, in a conscious attempt to achieve in Irish television what Armchair Theatre did in bringing a new wave of social drama to British television.<sup>4</sup>

There were serious efforts to stimulate the writing of original drama dealing with contemporary Ireland for production by RTÉ. Donall Farmer, as head of drama, approached established Irish writers to write for RTÉ. In addition, RTÉ sponsored a television drama competition and sent out guidelines on how to write for television to try to find new writers. It gave RTÉ productions to both the winner and the runner-up in this project: Liam MacUistin's *The Glory and the Dream* in 1971 and Maureen Donegan's *Who Me?* in 1972.

Another attempt to stimulate contemporary drama was the highly experimental *Caravan* series. The formula, devised by producer Tony Barry, was to send a researcher into a town or industrial plant and to construct from interviews a broad picture of the social groupings, issues and problems of the place. Writers Michael Judge, Carolyn Swift and Eoghan Harris would then produce a series of open-ended sketches reflecting this picture. Following this, an outside broadcast unit would arrive in the place, actors would perform the sketches and then the production team would conduct an open-ended discussion of the pertinent issues sparked off by the sketches, combined with contributions by local singers, dancers and musicians.

Only two of the programmes had been transmitted when the series was taken the air due to various controversies and legal complications arising from it. Spotlighting the atrocious wages paid to outworkers in the knitwear and footwear industries in Kilkenny and satirising the manners and mores of the nouveau riche who had built empires on smuggling in Drogheda, brought strong representations and protests from the local chambers of commerce and the Legion of Mary. Querying the role of the medical officer in Waterford Glass, in terms of his ties to the owners and the alleged difficulties of workers in acquiring sick certificates brought a libel suit upon RTÉ. Although producers wanted to let the matter go to court, RTÉ's legal officer advised against it.<sup>5</sup> RTÉ settled out of court and took the series off the air.

This pattern was what most characterised the RTÉ drama of the seventies: RTÉ, through its programme makers, venturing as close as they found desirable or possible to giving a picture of the problems and possibilities at the cutting edges of contemporary Irish society and RTÉ, through its management, sometimes pushing full-steam ahead and other times applying the brakes, flattening out, apologising, giving way to pressure and taking programmes off the air in mid-run. The overall picture, looking back on it, was one of great vision and verve, punctuated by moments of reaction and failure of nerve.

### *The Riordans*

Wesley Burrowes analysed the situation, as it presented itself to him, in terms of 'a nervous tic in the face of RTÉ':

It will rarely happen that a specific person in authority will say 'This is unacceptable'. He will more likely say that, while he personally sees nothing wrong with it, his immediate superior is not so broad-minded and perhaps it might be better to change it. If you ever meet the superior, he will say the same about his superior, and so on up the ladder. My own view of the Tic (if I may use this as a collective term for nervous men) was that they tended to pre-judge the conscience of the viewers, instead of consulting their own.<sup>6</sup>

Burrowes has outlined a number of incidents from the mid-sixties through the seventies relating to the writing of *The Riordans*, in which the tic intervened on behalf of Seán Citizen. Not surprisingly, the touchy subjects were sex and politics. Again, not surprisingly, more the former than the latter. The one incident relating to politics involved Tom Riordan's standing for election as an Independent in a bye-election. Interventions involved revising scripts to water down his speeches, justified on the basis that it would not do that he should be seen as so obviously more honest and clever than party candidates. All of the other incidents related to sexual morality and transgressions thereof. There were two attempts to introduce a storyline in which Maggie Nael would become pregnant. Overruled both times, Burrowes sought alternative strategies. The first time the unmarried mother story was introduced via an outsider, an English Protestant one at that, to distance it and to make it less highly charged for an Irish Catholic audience. The second time, as Maggie had already begun to display 'symptoms which the most sheltered of viewers couldn't mistake', Burrowes had to go running to a doctor for an escape route to find an alternative cause of the same symptoms, which he felt was a cheat and cast a shadow over the programme for some time afterwards.

Even a bit of humour caused problems, as when Johnnie Mac, pleased as punch at Julia becoming pregnant, was asked if he suspected anyone in particular. Another instance came after Benjy and Maggie had married and Benjy's eyes (and a bit more than his eyes) began to wander. An attempt to explore the effects of an extra-marital affair on a marital relationship resulted in the scripts being gutted, which Burrowes regarded as a triumph for hypocrisy. Nevertheless, even the kiss behind the bush, which survived the slicing, brought the farcical condemnation of the programme as a sex orgy in the chambers of the Tuam town commissioners.

Indeed, what the powers-that-be at RTÉ let through was far more than what a significant strand of the Irish audience thought inappropriate. The nervousness of RTÉ management over what viewers and their elected representatives would take in the way of progressive programming did not come from nowhere. Many in RTÉ were aware of a double standard in their audience, in that completely different criteria of acceptability were applied to home produced programmes from what were applied to imported ones. As Burrowes characterised this in relation to *The Riordans*:

Irish viewers seem to accept fairly equably (even enthusiastically, in the case of *The Brothers* and *Rich Man, Poor Man*) any amount of sex and sadism, as long as it is foreign-made, while retaining the strictest of standards about what RTÉ produces.<sup>7</sup>

Again and again, any hint of sexual transgression on the part of any of the Riordans whether Benjy in a compromising position with a woman, before or after marriage, or Jude, a separated woman, having a relationship with a divorced man, was met with a chorus of indignation. In relation to a controversial bit of dialogue between Jude Hyland and Ed Phipps, Burrowes observed that, if Shirley MacLaine were to express the same sentiment to Jack Lemmon, there would be no problem, but viewers wouldn't have their own Benjy or Jude letting them down. More than once, RTÉ in general and Wesley Burrowes in particular were accused of subverting the morals of the nation. What really raised the roof was the issue of contraception, when their own much-loved Maggie went on the pill and the much-revered parish priest was implicated in the decision. The moral dilemmas of both Maggie Riordan and Fr. Sheehy, to whom she went for advice, were posed with the utmost care. Maggie had just experienced a difficult birth and had been warned against the medical consequences of another pregnancy. Fr. Sheehy, despite the rigidity of the church's teaching on the matter, sympathised and advised her it was a matter for her own individual conscience.

It was an accurate reflection of what was going on at that time when younger Catholic women were going on the pill in that spirit and younger Catholic priests were taking that sort of stance, or even going further, in opposition to papal proclamations. It was also an indicator of the progressing protestantisation of Catholicism, expressed in what came to be called 'à la carte Catholicism'. Nevertheless, individual viewers, provincial newspapers and county councils heaped censure upon RTÉ, Wesley Burrowes and everyone connected with propagating, or even acknowledging, such views.

Many of the audience were confused with all the changes that had taken place in Catholicism and in Irish society. They wanted the old clarity, not an analysis of the new confusion. Mary Riordan, more than the rest, spoke for them. She could not accept the breakdown of her daughter's marriage and a discussion of it with her son encapsulated the disorientation of all like her, who had accepted a total identification between morality and church edict. In a scene in which Mary was going on about 'this annulment nonsense', Michael told her that she would have to get used to it. She replied that she never would. Michael, pushing her to examine her premises, elicited the reason that she was against it was because it was against everything she always believed in, ie, everything the church had always taught her. Michael, pushing further, asked how she would feel if the church's decision were to grant the annulment:

*Mary*: 'I would feel let down.

*Michael*: 'You wouldn't agree with the decision?'

*Mary*: 'No, I certainly would not.'

*Michael:* 'But, don't you see, then your argument wouldn't be with Jude? It would be with the church.'

*Mary:* 'Ah You're only trying to confuse me with all this smart talk. It's not right, Michael, and it never will be.'

For many of the audience, Mary and Minnie should have been left to hold on to their old beliefs and to get on with all of the trivia of their female busy-ness, without being subjected to all of this 'smart talk' pressing against older traditions of Irish society at this time. However, if they had, *The Riordans* would have been just another soap opera, full of cups of tea and petty gossip, but devoid of the sociological significance that gave it its essential dramatic tension and made it such a pioneering achievement. Despite the interventions of 'the tic' on behalf of the audience and despite the howls of protest from the most conservative and complaining section of the audience when there was no such intervention, *The Riordans* managed to bring 'to the surface with almost relentless zeal every possible transgression of the traditional Irish family enshrined in the 1937 constitution.'<sup>8</sup> In doing so, as Luke Gibbons perceptively put it, it 'helped to dispel the idea that marriages were made in heaven, even if their material purpose was to facilitate the inheritance of various tracts of earth.'<sup>9</sup>

In the end, *The Riordans* got away with it, no doubt because the controversial issues, especially those relating to sexual morality, were raised with a deeply rooted authenticity within a long-established sympathy for popular and credible characters. It was also because of the skilful style of scriptwriting that represented a range of points of view that never veered very far to the left and kept balanced at centre or just left of centre. It gave much scope to the expression of views considerably to the right of centre, without ever giving way to the pressures to over-balance in that direction. By the end of the decade, it was possible to proceed with storylines that went much further than ones that had been over-ruled in early or mid-decade. Even Maggie, never mind Benjy, could have an affair by the late seventies.

### ***The Spike***

However, the series that notoriously did not get away with it was *The Spike*. Although *The Spike* was taken off the air in mid-run, amidst a storm of protest and blaze of publicity, following upon an infamous nude scene, the Issues involved were actually far more complicated and even now need careful unravelling for the record.

*The Spike* began what was to be its ten week run in January 1978. It was set in a post-primary co-educational public sector school in an unspecified urban working class area in its own time. It was, in actuality, quite specifically set in Dublin, both in the locations used in its production and in the clear associations it had in the minds of its audience. It was, even more specifically, shot in the Ringsend Technical Institute with classes actually in session and cast with pupils from Ringsend and Ballymun, giving it an authenticity that blurred the line between fact and fiction. It was, in fact, meant to be a rigorously realistic picture of a particular sector of the Irish education system, grounded in the authenticity of its scriptwriter's own experience as a teacher in that sector.

It was furthermore intended to shed light on certain features of the Irish education system in general and of Irish society as a whole, which accounted for the inequalities and incongruities manifest in that particular sector. It was strongly implied that its analysis of that system, although presented in a fictional format, could be verified by an objective factual study of that system in reality. Its credibility was clearly staked out as standing or falling in terms of this sort of verisimilitude. Although the official name of the fictional school in question was St. Aidan's, it was commonly called the Spike, because, it was said, it was once a workhouse, but also because, it was inferred, the dark shadow of that sort of world still hung over it. The Spike was pictured as a dumping ground for rejects who had been weeded out, according to the highly questionable criteria of a selection process in the Irish educational system that was tied to the class divisions of Irish society and to the role of the church in maintaining those divisions.

The author, Patrick Gilligan, pulled no punches in setting out his anti-establishment point of view. Despite his commitment to the VEC sector and his respect for the wisdom inspiring the 1931 Vocational Education Act, the reality on the ground, as he saw it, was that this sector was distinguished by a stigma. Although the vision of education as a community process dedicated to the total development of human potential sometimes managed to shine through the murk and sordidity of schools like the Spike, the darkness more often prevailed over the light. In explaining why, he wrote in the *RTE Guide*:

Irish society, with its genius for division along class lines, is in no doubt at all about the role of the public sector school. The Spike is a scrap heap. Scrap can be refined into nobler metal, but the process is tiresome and costly and there are always more insistent priorities than the undeserving poor.<sup>10</sup>

The script, through all ten episodes, was full of class-conscious dialogue, mostly showing the contempt of the tu'pence ha'penny for the tu'pence or the anger, coupled with absurd deference, of the tu'pence to the tu'pence ha'penny. The script was permeated with the seething resentment between the ex-woodwork-teacher-turned-acting-principal and his more academically qualified colleagues; between the night class ladies with furs and fake Foxrock accents and the scrubbers (or the sanitary technicians, as they preferred to be called); between religious orders running the publicly subsidised private schools and teachers committed to the public sector ones. It also gave expression to the pathetic aspirations to upward mobility of those at the bottom, such as the prostitute who wanted to overcome her illiteracy to make the transition from working in Joe's chip van to Erin's Isle, so as to mix with nice people and have a good class client.

Even worse, there were the aspiring ambitions of the wife of the public sector principal who insisted on sending their daughter to a private boarding school so that 'at least she won't marry into the flats'. Along the way, the series touched on many problems rooted in class inequality: poverty, prostitution, illiteracy, anti-social behaviour in social institutions, domestic violence, child labour, lack of study time for students with bread winning responsibilities, lack of career opportunities, political hypocrisy and power struggles for control of the education system. Running through it all was an unmistakable indictment of those in power in both church and state for the incongruities and injustices pervading the status quo. The lines of connection were brought to sharpest expression in the final, though never to be transmitted, episode when O'Mahony, the acting principal of the Spike, went to the parliamentary secretary in indignation at the furtive and evasive activities of the religious orders: engineering the re-organisation of post-primary education in the area so that the new Spike would be run by a new board of management controlled by its competitors.

The politician quite straightforwardly set forth the political expediencies of the situation. His party, he explained, mightn't have given the working class anything else, but they had given them aspirations, perhaps aspirations above their station. In consequence, he went on:

'They have middle class aspirations now, and middle class values, and middle class kids belong by right of tradition to the religious schools'.

But with the decline of vocations, the religious schools couldn't cope with them in the traditional way. Nevertheless, as he saw their strategy:

'But you can't imagine the religious letting what they see as part of their traditional enrolment drift into the godless, non-denominational Spike. What can they do? They haven't the brothers and they haven't the nuns. This approach is devious, but it ensures that the faith of our fathers will survive until vocations pick up again'.

As to his own complicity in a course of action in which he did not believe, he stated right out:

'No politician can afford to disregard the faith of our fathers and no government can afford to dismiss the aspirations of the would-be middle class. And stay in power'.

Although O'Mahony was furious in the face of the forces arrayed against his aims, he was not beyond turning this sort of political opportunism to his own advantage. Whatever his disapproval of the church's grip on family life, on educational institutions and on parliamentary politics, he appealed to it when it suited him. Taking to the parliamentary secretary the knowledge given to him in confidence that his main competitor for the job of permanent principal was divorced, he put it to him:

'Your party has publicly set its face against any weakening of the family unit. Not out of conviction, but because the pulpit controls the marginal votes. She will have the responsibility of shaping young minds'.

Thus the hypocrisy lying behind the rigidity of Irish domestic law was brought into the picture as well. So too were other targets set up for critical exposure or at least for ironic comment: the IMI management ethos, sexual prudery, assertiveness training, youthful IRA activism, artistic diletantism, republicanism and revisionism. Striding through all the various elements of this hectic and even chaotic scenario was the figure of Jer O'Mahony, bellowing at staff and students, as if a ganger on a building site, and uttering pronouncements of his own homespun philosophy relating to every matter at hand. Although hardly the most enlightened or coherent of men, his point of view predominated over all others, as rowdy pupils, jaded teachers, indifferent parents, cynical politicians, liberated women, parasitic wives and daughters, scurrilous special branch men, pretentious artists and a host of others came and went, projected alternative points of view and moved on. Although the action centred on the hustle and bustle of the tumbling down school, it opened out onto the streets of Dublin, houses, flats, offices, government buildings, courts and graveyards and covered a formidable amount of ground in its ten episodes.

Not that Irish viewers saw that much of it. The fifth episode was the last to be transmitted. This episode concerned the night classes held at the Spike, being a school with a heavy commitment to adult community education, in addition to its responsibilities to youth in the area of the post-primary curriculum. The episode was full of the author's characteristic humour, which he felt to be an important dimension of the series, so as not to present a picture of unrelieved gloom. The camera cut throughout from the corridors to the classrooms, highlighting three classes in particular: the Bernard T Mullins confidence course, the 'know your fur' class and the 'cleaning science' class. While its humour had its moments, such as Bernard T. Mullins reeking of whiskey to get himself the confidence to face a new confidence class or a candidate for the modelling position declaring she had the specified measurements only to be told she was confusing inches with centimetres, on the whole the humour was glib and clumsy and usually missed the mark. It would have been worth tackling Irish inhibitions regarding verbal and tactile communication and worth exploring negative attitudes to the human body implicit in the taboo against nakedness, even perhaps with a touch of well-aimed humour. But this script was most definitely not the way to do so and the humour was most emphatically not well-aimed.

In the course of one night's confidence class, those who began too shy to speak were, by the end of the session, wandering the corridors mauling total strangers out of the blue. When the principal walked in the middle of the 'shy class' they were invited to practice their touches on him, from the matey arm around the shoulder to the 'friendly crotch touch'. In the course of one night's art class, the art teacher began by making an aggressive case for the necessity of a nude model, waxing eloquently on serpentine lines of beauty and undulating curves. He then found a suitable model in a woman from the shy class who proceeded to undress and come on to him seductively. He proceeded to lose his composure completely and dismiss the class. He ended up declaring ludicrously that he would not expose what was suddenly his fiancée to the vulgar gaze of bankers, butchers and spinsters. It was too false to be funny, even for those who might have wanted to laugh and saw the comic potential in the material. It was too crude to elicit any real sympathy, even among those predisposed to be open-minded in broaching such subjects.

Regarding the notorious nude scene, it must be said that, however heavy-handed the script, the style of shooting brought to it by the director, Noel O'Briain, was extremely cautious and restrained. Once undressed, the woman's body was first seen from side and front angles from behind a screen. Then when posing for the art class, the body was first shot from behind only from the hips up in a medium close-up, followed by a view of the full body from the side, but only in long shot. When turning to the classical reclining pose, there was only a long shot of the full body and a medium shot from the hips up. Nevertheless, no matter how good or bad the script, no matter how delicate or brash the direction, all hell broke loose over the fact that there was a nude scene at all. This was the centre of focus in the furore that followed and it remains in popular memory as the rock on which *The Spike* foundered and the reason why it was taken off the air.

The truth was that there were pressures building up against the series the whole time it was in production and that there was a climate of hostility established against it before it ever went on the air. There were rumours and press reports of rumblings and reservations in the Department of Education before anyone even saw it. There were objections from the Christian Brothers, who had heard the name of the school was to be St. Aidan's, seemingly believing that running a school by the same name gave them proprietary rights over its use. Once it was on the air, Brother Vivian Cassells denounced the series as having nothing to offer and called on RTÉ to take it off the air after the fourth episode, and to 'consign the remaining six to the obscurity they deserve.' The television columns and letters pages of the national and provincial press were full of negative reviews and condemnations of the programme for vulgar and obscene language, for poor production standards, for gross distortion in its picture of the education system. There were features on schools taking pains to demonstrate how unlike the Spike they were. Even the more favourably disposed reviewers criticised it for being exaggerated and heavy-handed. Tom O'Dea, in *The Irish Press*, bent over backwards to find its redeeming features, but had to admit it showed 'signs of overloading'.<sup>12</sup> Ken Gray, in *The Irish Times*, called it 'gross exaggeration' and sympathised with actors struggling with intractable material. He also commented on a 'naive, adolescent approach to sex'.<sup>13</sup>

*The Spike* began to appear on the agendas of political bodies. Press reports of official condemnations added their weight to the mounting pressures. Waterford County Council called it a slur on teachers. Fermoy Urban Council called it vulgar and suggestive. RTÉ could be in no doubt that it was broadcasting over troubled waters. However, once the nude scene appeared, the troubled waters swelled to flood proportions. The founder of the League of Decency, JB Murray, suffered a heart attack, attributed to the stress caused by the sight of the naked female body on the television screen. His wife told the papers that the family had tried to stop him watching it, but he insisted on doing so. He got very worked up at the nude scene and was phoning the newspapers to complain when he came to grief over the 'filthy play'.<sup>14</sup> The incident received much publicity and took its place in the folklore of modern Ireland, as virtually all factions agreed on its symbolic significance in giving sharp and concrete expression to the characteristic tensions and ironies of Irish society in the television era.

In the days and weeks that followed, *The Spike* in general, and the nude scene in particular, were the talk of the town in virtually every town and townland in the country. Those who missed it felt they had missed a crucial event in the life of the nation. RTÉ's drama policy, the nation's morals and Madeleine Erskine's body were on centre stage in the most heated cultural controversy of decades. It was a major talking point in homes, schools, offices and pubs. It was a prominent item on the agenda of the most diverse meetings. It was a point of reference in court cases. Day by day, the lore surrounding it swelled, reaching ever more farcical heights of hilarity, at least for those who were not too angry or too bruised to see the funny side of it. Jim Fitzgerald claimed he had been assaulted by a fat elderly lady, who asked him if he had been in *The Spike*, and then thumped him when he said yes. RTÉ was flooded with phone calls, telegrams and letters of protest. There was a new wave of resolutions from public bodies, this time not only condemning the series, but demanding it be banned. There were newspaper editorials calling for its withdrawal. The Fine Gael spokesman on education, Eddie Collins, urged the director-general to put a stop to the programme as 'an indefensible and unjustifiable attack on the teaching profession and authorities.'<sup>15</sup> In the discussion leading up to Limerick County Council's unanimous condemnation, it was said that there was no school in Ireland even remotely resembling the *Spike* and it was asked what was the reason for concocting a school where everybody, teachers and students alike, seemed depraved. It was then claimed that problems had arisen in a Limerick city school, where there had previously been no problems, that were directly attributable to *The Spike*.<sup>16</sup>

When the announcement came that the series was to be withdrawn, it was front page news. Sub-editors found it impossible to resist a spate of articles headed '*The Spike* is spiked' and 'The spiking of *The Spike*'. Telegrams of congratulations and resolutions of support came pouring into RTÉ.

However, if the decision went a long way towards relieving the pressure brought to bear from outside, it in turn pressed hard upon the points of pressure from inside. The decision, not surprisingly, sparked off a bitter controversy within RTÉ. The director-general, Oliver Maloney, who took the decision, defended the decision on the basis that the series 'had failed to achieve its programming objectives.'<sup>17</sup> The RTÉ Authority backed the director-general and stated that the series was making RTÉ a 'target of ridicule.'<sup>18</sup>

The controller, however, took sharp issue with the director-general. Muiris Mac Conghail, who was controller at the time of its transmission though not at the time of its production, issued a confidential memorandum to programme makers, which was discussed at an unprecedented meeting of all production staff and union representatives within RTÉ and quoted in the public press. Mac Conghail stated unequivocally that the decision would be seen 'as a victory for and by those whose criticism of the series are provoked by prudish, or indeed, illiberal and censorious considerations'. To cease transmission in mid-run was 'to give substance and definition for a long time to a rather narrowly-based articulation of morality'. It would have, he asserted, 'serious implications for future drama policy'. He admitted that much of the criticism had been well-founded, but he felt that there was a 'slightly hysterical note prevailing in the public debate and that there was 'frankly, also a considerable class reaction to the series'. He believed that the series did not transgress public morality or acceptable public taste and should be continued.<sup>19</sup> Basically his view, as he expressed it publicly later, was that RTÉ made two mistakes in relation to *The Spike*: the first was putting it on and the second was taking it off. Although it was badly written and made under difficult conditions, it was withdrawn for the wrong reasons. RTÉ should have taken more time over it and then stood by it. Instead, it was done in a hurry and RTÉ lost its confidence and its courage.<sup>20</sup>

Noel O'Briain, the producer, also defended the programme strongly at the time. He denied that the nude scene was meant to titillate and argued that its purpose was to examine attitudes to nudity. He pointed to the double standard of the audience, who had not complained of nude scenes in foreign programmes transmitted by RTÉ. He asked: 'Why was it all right for an American or a black woman to appear naked on Irish television screens but not an Irish woman' ?<sup>21</sup> Looking back, he conceded that the series should have been done in a more subtle way, but believed it should have been allowed to continue and find its way. He was convinced at the time, and remained so, that it was taken off more for its controversial view of the education system than for any other reason.<sup>22</sup>

Patrick Gilligan, the author, also referred to the double standard of the audience and considered the opposition to *The Spike* to be a vote for imported programmes. He pointed to the programme's high TAM ratings and insisted that it had considerable support. As to charges of crudity, this was debatable.<sup>23</sup> Coming to his defence was fellow scriptwriter David Hayes, who referred to Gilligan as a 'victim of our two-tone morality, whiter than white on the surface and murky underneath'. This, he believed, was the reason for RTÉ giving in to the 'craw-thumpers'.<sup>24</sup> Jim Fitzgerald, talking to the press with a plaster on his forehead, denounced the decision as censorship and as a return to the days when Seán O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor were banned. He asked if RTÉ was going to be controlled by JB Murray and the League of Decency.<sup>25</sup>

Others, while inclined to sympathise with the aims of the series, found it difficult to sympathise with its execution. Michael Judge, himself both a teacher and a scriptwriter, felt it was ham-fisted and chaotic, that it was almost as if it had gone on a suicide course.<sup>26</sup> Still others were anxious not to let off the hook those who hid behind

its inadequacies in execution to avoid facing the facts that it was its intention to disclose. The Jesuit sociologist, Micheál MacGréil, suggested that there might have been more truth in the stricken series than most people had been prepared to admit.<sup>27</sup> *The Irish Times'* education correspondent, Christina Murphy, asked how different the public reaction would have been, if it had been the most sophisticated production RTÉ had ever put in the can. She conjectured:

The cries of horror would have been only marginally less vocal. I doubt if the League of Decency would have accepted a nude scene, however tastefully and relevantly presented. I equally doubt the ability of many teachers to accept an honest look at vocational schools written by Shakespeare and produced by Lew Grade.<sup>28</sup>

Although the presentation was gauche and this resulted in an air of incredibility, she nevertheless believed *The Spike* had a lot to say which was very true. Her own coverage of vocational schools confirmed the facts about students working in the evenings, about problems of classroom discipline, about rows over nude models in art classes, about teachers making passes at pupils and pupils making passes at teachers.<sup>29</sup> *Hot Press* asked why it was that extreme conservatism was always considered more respectable than liberalism.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the battle lines were drawn and many who jumped into the fray were ill-disposed to take pains over the finer points of the aesthetics or politics of the series. The Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, used the occasion of the Jacob's awards to express his support for the decision to take *The Spike* off the air, despite the fact that he had not seen it. Needless to say, his insistence that, 'speaking objectively', the director-general and the RTÉ Authority had been right, did not go down very well with the programme makers in attendance. The forces were lining up to rub salt in the open wounds. *The Irish Catholic* went out of its way to point out that, for once, RTÉ liberals could not blame the bishops. It was the plain people of Ireland who had called them to account for their artistic crudity and moral laxity.<sup>31</sup> While this claim was not completely without warrant, there was also evidence of a certain degree of orchestration of the public response by church institutions. For example, in the letters that came into RTÉ, there were a number from the same class at Presentation Convent, all using almost the same language, each claiming to be an individual child offended by the programme. JB Murray meanwhile thanked the plain people of Ireland for the enormous number of cards and messages of support that came pouring into St. Vincent's Hospital. He took exception to the remarks of Muiris MacConghail and Jim Fitzgerald, which he regarded as offensive, and was glad to see the tables turned on such liberals who had too often got their way.

Meanwhile, the trade unions took their stand. The producers' union, the Workers' Union of Ireland, supported the stand taken by the controller. The actors' union, Equity, did as well and expressed its members determination that the actors involved, particularly Madeleine Erskine, not be victimised. The teachers' unions, in this case, were on the other side. On and on it went. It even found its way onto the order paper of Dáil Éireann, when Dr. Noel Browne, TD asked if the cancellation of the series was to be taken as the precedent for a new form of censorship.

The audience research service at RTÉ issued several very detailed reports on *The Spike*, both before and after cancellation. The opinions of the panel were somewhat more complex and differentiated than those who took the initiative to write in or phone the station. The bottom line, however, in the post-cancellation survey, was that 66% believed that the series as a whole was poor. 56% approved of RTÉ's decision to stop transmission, while 39% disapproved. 49% said RTÉ should not transmit the remaining episodes. 26% advocated transmission and a further 21% recommended transmission linked to a studio discussion of the series. (RTÉ Audience Research Reports February 28, March 3 and April 26, 1978).

In retrospect, it can be said that *The Spike* was a brave, sincere and progressive attempt to use drama to raise public consciousness on public issues of considerable public importance. However, it was, it also must be said, an attempt that fairly clearly failed to achieve its objectives. This was both because of external pressures, which were unquestionably unfair and excessive, and because of internal deficiencies, which put its defence on weak ground when it came under such stridently strong attack. Without doubt, it ran to ground for many reasons. The question remains as to whether it would have been taken off if controversial matters had been raised with greater subtlety and sophistication, if the scriptwriting had been more adept, if production standards had been higher. On balance, there is still reason to believe that the pressure to do so would have been there, no matter how impressively it had been done, due to its explicit treatment of human sexuality, its unflattering picture of the education system and its oppositional stance in relation to the exercise of power by both church and state.

Perhaps the most controversial material was in the untransmitted episodes. Most certainly the transmission of these would have heated up the already heated controversy to boiling point. The next episode scheduled to go out concerned youthful IRA activity and the influence of an Irish teacher's fervent nationalism upon his idealistic students. After showing the atmosphere of mystification of nation, sex and death in the Irish class, matters came to a head with the news that a boy in the class had been blown to bits transporting explosives at the border. Although at first full of

heroic tribute to the lad's patriotism and supreme sacrifice, the first real pressure upon the teacher's convictions brought an abrupt volte face, turning from the most traditional and romantic republicanism to the most cynical and flippant revisionism. Again the author short-circuited any serious reflection on the serious issues involved by substituting an abrupt volte face for which no psychological grounding had been given. With the characterisation so lacking in credibility and the issues at stake getting such short shrift, it would have surely failed to achieve either dramatic effect or moral enlightenment.

Another episode which might not have gone down very well, with either liberal or conservative sections of the population, though for different reasons, was the one on prostitution. On the one hand, it elicited a certain sympathy for prostitutes by highlighting the plight of Rosaleen who had left school at eight and who had to overcome both illiteracy and fear of being fried by her pimp-cum-chip-van-proprietor. It also showed prostitutes as having a certain pride in earning their money, which made them seem superior to nagging and grasping wives. On the other hand, it enunciated only two points of view regarding prostitution. The first was that of the police superintendent, who believed that the world's oldest profession provided a socially necessary safety valve and that its elimination would leave a dangerous vacuum. The second was that of O'Mahony, who believed that it was a degraded life and wanted to set up night classes for prostitutes to offer them a way out, by teaching them deportment, nutrition, social skills and home making. Essentially, his idea was to reform them by making them marriageable. As O'Mahony analysed their situation, what it came down to was this: 'I can't imagine a girl wanting to spread herself under a jobber for a fiver, when she could marry him and have the lot.' Although it told a certain truth, however unintended, about the sordid side of the institution of marriage that might put it below the institution of prostitution, it was hardly a very progressive point of view. Between the police superintendent and the school principal, and perhaps the author wavering between the two, there seemed no point of entry to the sort of expansion of horizons for women which feminists of the day had in mind.

The author's engagement with the sort of issues raised by the women's liberation movement, as relevant to the scenario he had staked out, was quite primitive. Such confrontation as there was was most explicit in the final episode, in which the struggle for power within the school converged with a contemporary form of the age old battle of the sexes. Finding the most formidable competition for the top post in the form of a young female, who was not only highly attractive, but had higher academic qualifications, O'Mahony's reaction was a combination of an unreconstructed horniness and sexist deviousness. The script throughout the series in general, but in this episode in particular, was full of sexist humour, which would have been all right if there had been anything else in the script to counterpoint it or to highlight it with some sort of critical edge. However, there was no indication of anything in the author's own point of view rising above it. Running through the series was a particular male view of the female of the species, and not a very mature or sophisticated one at that, dominated by a somewhat adolescent, voyeuristic approach to female sexuality. It was a viewpoint of men superficially aware of the impact of the women's liberation movement, but not significantly affected by it.

In the end, there was little ground for anyone to stand on to defend it. Those who would have been willing to accept a critical perspective on the education system and explicit reference to human sexuality were undercut by the clumsiness of treatment of the issues, the superficiality of the characterisation and the immaturity of the underlying point of view.

The legacy left by *The Spike* is hard to assess. If the result was to emphasise that new ground should be broken with much greater care and that the critique of existing social systems and of prevailing sexual mores should be approached with greater maturity and sophistication, there would have been something to show for this unfortunate episode in Irish television history. If, however, no such explicit lesson was drawn from it, and the result was to reinforce a posture of nervousness and timidity and a reluctance to risk offending any sizeable section of the audience, it may have actually set back efforts to open up drama to the terrain of dealing with the controversial growing points of contemporary society.

## **Social and Political Satire**

Not all of the tension generated by this sort of timidity resulted in programmes being taken off the air. However, the failure to give full support to controversial programmes brought a certain disaffection among those who were willing to risk sailing close to the wind.

This was the case with some of the best political and social satire produced by RTE, particularly the two Niall Tóibín series *If the Cap Fits* (1973) and *Time Now, Mr. T* (1977). Every programme in these two series was a veritable tour de force on the part of Niall Tóibín, who did much of the scriptwriting and played an enormous number of roles.

In the course of the short sketches of *If the Cap Fits*, he appeared as ninety different characters, encompassing such roles as taoiseach, RTÉ newsreader, RTÉ arts presenter, IRA chief of staff, unionist ideologue, Dublin trade union leader, sports journalist, bishop, priest, nun and a host of others, leaving virtually no prototypical figure of contemporary Irish life with its comic potential untapped. The characters were not simply vague types, however, but cut to the bone in the way the taoiseach was so acutely Liam Cosgrave, the IRA chief of staff so obviously Cathal Goulding, the bishop so recognisably Éamonn Casey. Some were amalgams. The Dublin trade union leader was conceived as a combination of Mickey Mullen and Mattie Merrigan, though when Niall Tóibín had occasion to see either of them afterwards, he thought it very funny that Mickey Mullen took it to be Mattie Merrigan and Mattie Merrigan took it to be Mickey Mullen.<sup>32</sup>

In the longer sketches of *Time Now, Mr. T*, he gave in depth interviews uncovering the layers of personality in guises ranging from St. Patrick to Edna O'Brien. He came forward as well as the midlands auctioneer raging war alike on communists, street traders and taxmen, as the northern Protestant savant expounding on the nature of the southern state, as the cynical Corkman seeing Dublin imperialism in an RTÉ announcer's 'good evening', as another Dublin trade union leader with a difficult wife. The scripts were highly literate and the performances were extremely energetic, generating an effervescent humour that was both intelligent and earthy at the same time. Many of the laughs came from verbal ironies based on misconceived metaphors, malapropisms, mispronunciations, mistranslations, incongruous juxtapositions, double entendre and grandiloquent phraseology applied to banal realities. There was the taoiseach's speech about 'the fledgling filly that was our free state' and the need to root out 'mongrel foxes and other vermin' and to deal with 'this ring of shysters and shop stewards'. There was the RTÉ continuity announcer giving a posh but ignorant pronunciation to every other word. There was the commentary on the film *Last Tango in Dingle*, full of pseudo sophisticated jargon about the 'screen dialectic' and 'aesthetic-didactic conflict', full of small nation pride in a product unique in that 'almost two of the actors were Irish and another almost Irish, another almost an actor'. The Irish film with English subtitles translated 'led thoil' as 'right on' and 'A bhfuil tu fuar?' as 'Are you frigid?' Then the credits rolled on and on:

script by Dominic Behan  
adapted by Hugh Leonard  
based on an original idea by Ulick O'Connor  
based on a novel by Bryan MacMahon...

There was also the sketch of a programme *Eyeball to Eyeball* with Proinsias Mac Anghuish talking to Seán Mac Giolla Stiophan beginning every sentence in historical send-up:

'you were born in O'Connell Street in 1916...  
'you were chief of staff of six wings of the republican movement  
'your motherless child scheme  
'your two left wing tracts: 'Ireland further from God' and 'Ireland even further from God'...

Then there was the ponderous intellectual taking his stand against violence and refusing to give the Oliver Cromwell memorial lecture on the same platform as Cathal Goulding. There was the attempt to put crime in context in giving the biographical details of a pickpocket, 'stricken with poverty in his adultery'.

Although the humour was highly verbal, the nuances of facial and gestural performance, as well as the skills of makeup and wardrobe in establishing each persona, gave it a visual dimension that did much to intensify the pleasure in its ironies and to justify the use of television as a medium. Often the humour was in visual/verbal juxtaposition, such as in a sequence which consisted simply of a succession of stills of Fianna Fáil government ministers with only laughter on the sound track. Sometimes the visual aspect carried the humour, as when featuring artefacts embodying the tackiness of Irish visual culture and connecting the Irish film industry with diversification in the direction of a company making plastic porcupines for children's baths and Pope Paul lampshades.

No one could say that these series chose soft targets. They took on the institutions of church and state, legal and illegal organisations, indeed RTÉ itself. Those involved knew they were dealing with controversial material and were not surprised to meet with oppositional calls and letters from certain sections of the audience. However, both Niall Tóibín and Brian MacLochlainn, the producer of the series, were disappointed at the lack of support within RTÉ. When Niall Tóibín did a sketch as a female social worker discussing self-abuse, there were phone calls and letters protesting, to which RTÉ responded with apologies. Tóibín naturally felt let down and left to wonder whether the amount of stick was really worth it. He concluded that the country was obviously not ready for satire. There was, he believed, a huge amount of self-righteousness in the country that needed to be pulled up by laughing at it. The attempt to do so had brought him criticism such as he had never faced in his career. He was beset with accusations of trying to

pervert, corrupt and deprave the entire Irish nation. Brian Mac Lochlainn, for his part, felt let down when RTÉ would not approve another series.<sup>33</sup>

Another series of the same era, most definitely RTÉ's bravest and best period for social and political satire, was the long running and fondly remembered *Hall's Pictorial Weekly*. It had its origins in the *Newsbeat* programme, in which its editor Frank Hall scoured the highways and byways of Ireland in search of colourful characters and off-beat situations. According to Hall, it occurred to him one day that he would be much more the master of the situation, if he simply sat at home and wrote the sketches, instead of beating the bushes.<sup>34</sup> As it happened, Hall wrote a script about 'the finest minister for hardship which this country ever had', which Éamonn Morrissey masterfully played as Liam Cosgrave. The character caught on like wildfire. It continued and developed over the next years and became indelibly sketched on folk memory. Other characters emerged too as cartoon counterparts of various familiar figures of the times. The programme is best remembered for its anarchist lampooning both of specific politicians and of the political process itself. Its great contribution, as John Boland put it in *Hibernia*, was in its lampooning of the political, cultural and business leaders of 'our parish pump society in which private malice never matured into public satire'.<sup>35</sup> Although Tóibín and Hall were willing to challenge their audience to come to that sort of maturity and much of the audience were more than willing to get into it, others were not. Brigid Hogan O'Higgins complained about it in the Dáil. Other national politicians refrained from public comment on it. Provincial politicians, however, did not refrain and county councillors were forever giving out about the slagging of county councillors. All the same, problems arose over meetings of the Longford Urban District Council conflicting with the programme for councillors who didn't want to miss it.

*Hall's Pictorial Weekly* was at its strongest during the 1973-1977 term of the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government. So sharp and constant was its satirical send up of the government ministers of the time, that it is generally accepted that the programme played an important part in bringing the coalition into disrepute and perhaps even contributed to bringing it down. Once the coalition was out and Fianna Fáil was back in again, the programme was never quite the same. There were still funny sketches about Bord Fáilte and nuns joining trade unions and RTÉ reporters getting progressively more drunk at every press session they attended. It even had a go at highlighting the hilarity surrounding *The Spike* scenario. However, the edge seemed to have gone out of its political satire, which was always the programme's strong point. The columnists began to observe a slide, attributed to the programme being soft on Fianna Fáil. The character based on the taoiseach, Jack Lynch, was essentially a benign figure. Despite the fact that there were as many targets worthy of satirical treatment as ever, at least in the view of the commentators, the programme never quite managed to rise to it in their opinion.<sup>36</sup> This did not stop Fianna Fáil councillors from giving out about such satire as was directed towards them. However, their Fine Gael and Labour counterparts were quick to point out that they had only become unhappy with Frank Hall since the change of government. Their opponents found it quite amusing to observe their response, now that the boot was on the other foot.<sup>37</sup>

As it turned out, with one thing or another, including Éamonn Morrissey moving on and Frank Hall becoming the film censor, *Hall's Pictorial Weekly* came to the end of its long run by the end of the decade. In its time, it went very close to the bone and it was to RTÉ's credit to have sustained such a sharp production for so long. According to producer Peter McEvoy, those involved in making the programme often felt that RTÉ management was nervous enough about what they were doing, but they never intervened and the programme always proceeded with a free hand. The politicians may have been unhappy and may indeed have complained, but they would have placed themselves in a ridiculous situation, if it ever came to libel suits, in the act of identifying themselves with ludicrous fictional characters.<sup>38</sup>

### **Political Drama: North and South**

Satire was not the only mode of dramatic response to the character of political life in contemporary Ireland. It was, however, the only arena in which the politics of contemporary Ireland, at least of the Republic of Ireland, received up front, centre stage dramatic treatment. Otherwise anything that was so explicitly political was only present as a subtext or else it was either set in the past or set in the north.

There were strong subtextual currents giving a more sober look at the darker side of the political culture of the southern state. They were really only glimpses, but they were often pictures which struck a resonating chord and left a lingering impression. Reinforcing a growing cynicism about politicians, there were the images of the cynical and opportunist Paco Kelly TD, the parliamentary secretary in *The Spike* and the ambitious and amoral Willie Burke, the up-and-coming politician come night-club-owner, symbolising certain lines of connection between criminal and political activities in *The Burke Enigma*. In one of the rare televisual images of a left wing activist, there was the combat-jacketed maoist in *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*, whose politics of class struggle was undercut by its status as impotent pub talk. In a less pessimistic vein, there were the ongoing activities of Tom Riordan in his continuing role as a county councillor in *The Riordans*.

However, most of the drama of contemporary politics was preoccupied with Northern Ireland. Some of it was set in the south, dealing with the spillover effect of the current 'troubles' in the country as a whole. Sometimes it was incidental and soft-centred as in the 1974 episodes of *The Riordans*, when children from the violent north were brought down to the more peaceful south for the Christmas season of good will. However, in 1978, after *The Riordans* had moved from serial to series form, it took a harder look at the choices posed by the north to those adhering to republican traditions in the south. In an episode called *The Class of 64*, the centre of dramatic confrontation was in the dilemma of Benjy Riordan, when he found himself torn between his past principles and his present compromises. The conflict emerged in a particularly acute form, when Stevie, an old college friend, came seeking help as a wounded IRA man on the run, and when Maggie, despite the dangers of non-co-operation, persisted in her uncompromising hostility to the armed campaign. To Stevie, Benjy represented betrayal. As he put it to him: 'Nothing like a wife and child and a few hundred acres to change your principles'. For his part, Benjy had fond memories of college days and singing ballads like *Kevin Barry*. He still wanted to see a united Ireland, but had learned to be content with what he had. So had many others. With the onset of the troubles and with the years since, the tide had gone out and left those like Stevie high and dry. To Maggie, they could afford to be rebels in those days. There wasn't much at stake for them then, but now it was necessary to make a choice. It was necessary to decide whether to spill blood or not. Benjy felt that both Stevie and Maggie were too uncompromising. Maggie felt that Benjy still wanted to have it both ways. In the end, resolution came when Benjy disarmed Stevie, who seemed to be asleep, and signalled the gardaí who were waiting outside due to Maggie's earlier decision. The viewer was left to decide whether Stevie had really fallen asleep or only pretended. Although the ambivalence of the resolution was the real point of the episode, it presented at least one way of posing the choices in a plausible way, which drew on the credibility and identification built up in relation to long-established characters.

Of course, credibility and identification could also be established, although differently, in shorter series and single plays. In other forms as well, there was an attempt to mobilise these in relation to the human dimensions of the northern situation. *The Spike* had also attempted to portray the divergent paths taken by those in the south who had felt called upon to make choices in relation to the north and to face the consequences of their republican principles in their own lives. The episode concerning the idealistic student turned IRA volunteer, who was blown to bits at the border, and the idealistic teacher turned coward and cynic the first time his beliefs came under any pressure, failed to reach its audience at all. Even if it had been broadcast, it would almost surely have failed to establish credibility or identification, because of its serious deficiencies in characterisation.

A more substantial piece challenging southern attitudes to the northern strife was Alun Owen's play *Passing Through*. The plot concerned the catalytic effect of the presence of an outsider asking questions of the locals, amidst the niceties of Dublin's suburban lounge bar culture. Peter Field, a high flying international news correspondent, moving from one of the world's war zones to another, was passing through Dublin on his way to Belfast. He insistently probed beneath the surface pleasantries and asked people to state their point of view, when they wished only to skirt around the edges of a subject or to avoid it altogether and get on with a bit of light craic. Not that Field was above the craic. It was just that he got his kicks by turning over stones to see what would crawl out. He persistently pushed all and sundry to declare their political allegiances, in an atmosphere in which this had heretofore been studiously avoided. One by one, he stormed their defences:

*Peter:* 'How do you feel about a united Ireland?'

*Will:* 'You're joking. I don't talk politics in bars.'

*Peter:* 'No? Well you should. You're an Irish American and your people pump a lot of money into this country that winds up as guns. So I think I'm entitled to ask'.

Moving to the next:

*Peter:* 'Just how far is Belfast from where we are now?'

*Liam:* '100 odd miles.'

*Peter:* 'I'd have thought it more like a thousand, there's not much mention of it around here.'

*Liam:* 'Why would there be? Don't we get it in the papers, on the telly, on the wireless, sure there's no escaping it. We all know it's there. Jaysus, they wouldn't let you forget it, but I don't feel inclined to ruin my Sunday morning jar over a pack of mad dogs killing each other above. If I was to worry about anything, it'd be making sure it don't come down here.'

Then, after a brief skirmish with a businessman, for whom the bottom line was that bombs were bad for business, Field turned to his natural antagonist, a parlour provo:

*Peter:* 'So, right off, what's your answer to this mess in the north?'

*Dick:* 'I think like we all think when we're honest with ourselves. I wish you and your soldiers would get to buggery out of our country and leave it to us. We'll settle it. Are you answered?'

*Peter:* 'You've a point, but what about all the innocent that might get killed?'

*Dick:* (*Dismissively*) 'Oh, for Jaysus sake, will they amount to any more than the guilty that are going at the moment?'

After a bit of diversion and one of the group singing under his breath 'Glorio, glorio to the bold fenian men', the exchange flared up again:

*Dick:* 'I've never heard so much codology in me life. You're going there with a set of attitudes as rigid as railway lines without points.'

*Peter:* 'And so far as I'm concerned, you haven't got an original idea on the subject, just a set of inherited, insular, provincial prejudices that have no relationship to the contemporary world which you seem determined not to live in.'

*Jolyon:* 'Dick, you must make allowances for a situation that's defied solution for ten years.'

*Dick:* 'Ten years is it? Eight hundred and ten more like.'

*Peter:* 'You're talking ancient history, man.'

*Éamonn:* 'Can you not agree to disagree?'

*Dick:* 'That's you, Éamonn, anything for a quiet life and a merc in the garage. I give up.'

*Peter:* 'I wish a few more of your countrymen would.'

*Dick:* 'You've no need of worries there. Most of hem have, just pray it'll go away or at least sweep it under the carpet.'

Then an attempt to push his fellow countrymen into the scuffle:

*Peter:* 'This is a hell of a country, but seemingly you take it in your stride.'

*Jolyon:* 'I'm a bit lazy about social attitudes and refrain from shouting 'to hell with the pope' on the quays.'

As for his old friend, a Welsh author living in Ireland as a tax exile, who had been resolutely staying clear, his taunts constantly met with expressions of his non-committed stance:

*Dai:* 'I'm apolitical, always have been.'

To which his friend astutely replied:

*Peter:* 'One is, except politicians'.

Continuing to give his verdict on his friend and on the country:

*Peter:* 'You've managed to make your selfishness seem a virtue. This country's perfect for you. There's no edge or worry about the place. It's ostrich land, perfect for you, Dai, but not much use to me in what I'll be looking for.'

*Will:* 'Well, I'll give you this. You certainly managed to stroke the complacent cat's fur the wrong way.'

In an interesting twist to the tale at the end, raising questions about the activities of foreign intelligence services in Ireland, the British and American neighbours of the Welsh writer were agents, long aware of Field's continuing history of being a thorn in the side of their agencies. After his activities in Korea, Aden, Vietnam, etcetera, turning out stuff that was truthful and dangerous the decision had been taken that he be terminated. The north of Ireland was to be the end of the road.

Revealing as it was about certain types of foreigners resident in Ireland, the real point of the play was to use their presence to counterpoint the manners and mores of the natives. As seen by Louis Lentin, who, as head of drama, commissioned the work for RTÉ:

Alun Owen uses this situation to present a recognisable and telling picture, not of the foreigners, but of the local Irish and their wives, of the lip service that permeates so much of Irish society at all levels. Who fears to speak of '98 can be sung and sung loudly, but who bothers to really speak of anything? Of the North? Of 68-79? Anybody? Field may be a troublemaker, but at least he speaks to the point. Ireland of the welcomes is all very well... on the wall.<sup>39</sup>

It was a challenging play that hopefully left somebody somewhere with lingering thoughts about the questions it raised.

Of course, most of the drama dealing with the north was set in the north. There was, first of all, the 1970 revival of Sam Thompson's controversial 1960 play *Over the Bridge*, which the troubles had made more topical than ever. Taking advantage of the new production of the play on the stages of the Lyric (Belfast) and the Gaiety (Dublin), Chloe Gibson arranged for an RTÉ production in the same year. Drawing on his own experience as a worker and trade union activist in the Belfast shipyards, Sam Thompson turned to dramatised portrayal to highlight the strident sectarianism within the shipyards and the dilemma it posed for the trade union movement. In a confrontation between an anti-sectarian trade union leader and an Orange rabble rouser, with most of the rank and file foundering on the fences, the tension built to a shattering climax, when the trade union leader was beaten to death by the men he had so conscientiously served, creating a vivid symbol of the brutal tragedy of the situation.

Another play which had come from the Belfast stage was John Boyd's *The Flats*. Set in strife-torn Belfast in 1970, it adopted a semi-documentary style, recording in a matter-of-fact way the immediate realities of familial and tribal upheaval, in the escalating cycle of hostility prevailing at the time, in an attempt to convey the essential tragedy of the situation in a particular sort of way. Although from a Protestant background, the author focused the drama on a Catholic family, whose home was in the middle of the firing line. Within the Donellan household, the conflict centred on the militant involvement of father and son in the local citizens defence committee, against the wishes of mother and daughter. It captured the claustrophobia, the squalor and the sense of siege enveloping the world of Unity Flats. It communicated a sense of the communal disruption and dispossession as experienced on the ground.

Set in Glasgow flats was another stage play bearing on the northern conflict given a television production by RTÉ. On one level, *The Sash* by Hector McMillan was a Romeo and Juliet love story across the orange and green divide. A young woman, pregnant and nerve shattered, had come to stay with her aunt in Glasgow for a bit of peace and solace away from the strife of Belfast, only to be confronted with the 12th of July belligerence of the Glasgow variety of bigoted orangemen. Her aunt, Miss Shaughnessy, was a strident foe of Protestant triumphalism, symbolised primarily by her neighbour in the flat below. Bill McWilliam was big, bragging, boozy orangeman, who believed: 'If you give the taigs an inch, they'll be over us like that'. When his son declined to wear the sash his father wore he was furious. The play was not, however, simply the Protestant-boy meets-Catholic-girl and how hopeless it all is when caught in the vicious cycle of sectarian prejudice and violence. The play was essentially about the emergence of a spark of hope in those who could come to realise:

'Yet all the blood we both have drawn  
'Twas red, not orange or green.'

It was a play with a message and a clearly left of centre one at that:

'Tell them to hell with orange and green.  
Match your banner to the colour of your common blood.'

Not relying entirely on adaptation, however, RTÉ produced four original written-for-television plays set in the north, all by Eugene McCabe. The earliest, made in 1970, was *The Funeral*. It was basically the story of an ill-starred and isolated gentleman farmer, Cecil Maxwell, who reluctantly decided to attend the funeral of a Catholic neighbour, thereby bringing upon himself the blackest crisis of his bleak life. Underneath the hearty and smiling welcome, he sensed the daggers. He was, for the author, the vehicle for his elegy for the rural Anglo-Irish, who had failed to adapt.

The most distinguished achievement of RTÉ in this area was its award-winning production of McCabe's *Victims* trilogy of the mid-seventies. It was a new departure for RTÉ in the scale and style of its production and was filmed on location in colour. All three plays were set in the present in the same part of Northern Ireland, the rural farmlands of South Fermanagh, involving crucial episodes in the lives of a loosely inter-related set of characters. A minor character in one story would be a major character in the next and vice versa. There was a definite build-up in the nature of the tension in each story.

The first story, *Cancer*, centred on the lives of two elderly bachelor brothers living in a derelict small farm. The play opened with overhead shots of an idyllic countryside, almost as if a travelogue panorama, with a similarly engaging musical sound track. This idyll was quickly shattered, however, first by RTÉ news of northern troubles on the car radio, then by the army helicopter and then by the discovery that the two men in the car were travelling to visit one's brother in hospital dying of cancer. Cancer, through the play, functioned both literally as the physical disease killing one man's body and metaphorically as the psycho-social disease killing the soul of both a particular man and a whole community. Dinny McMahon, with all of his spitting, venomous bigotry, was portrayed as in fact sicker than his brother Joady with terminal cancer. In every possible situation, Dinny was growling and grumbling at the British Army, at the UDR, at his Protestant neighbours, at his Catholic neighbours, even at his dying brother. Even their Catholic neighbours saw the Protestant caricature of Catholics embodied in them. With nothing to do all day but draw

the dole and sit by the fire, they couldn't even manage to wash themselves or keep their house decent. Whatever their hostility to Protestants, it wasn't as if they were really even Catholics, with never a mass or any other religious practice. At the same time, whatever their anti-establishment rumblings and the implication that they were communists, a neighbour made it clear that she knew what real communists would do with the likes of them.

The second story, *Heritage*, traced the growing crisis, building out of more overtly political forces, in the lives of a Protestant family of working farmers and part-time soldiers in the UDR. The tension centred on the situation of Eric O'Neill, 21 year old farmer and UDR member, living under the same roof as his estranged parents. Torn asunder, being pushed and pulled from all sides by people with conflicting points of view and by forces he could neither comprehend nor control, he was without definite beliefs, without clear loyalties, without a firm centre from which he could sort it all out and hold his ground. Within his community, within his own family, within his own soul, the contending forces bore down upon him, bringing increasing confusion and terror. Within the community, he felt all around him the sinister presence of the anonymous killers, who had him on their death list, everywhere watching, waiting, scraping, clawing, gorging like rats. Yet he thought of the Catholic neighbours he knew, all good, hard working people. He saw as well the sinister side of the Protestant community of which he was a part. He listened to their talk of blind hatred and looked around the church full of loving tributes to violent death. Yet there were those he cared for, particularly Rachel, nurse and neighbour who cared for him as well. Within his family, he had given in to pressure from his mother and uncle to join the UDR, however alienated he felt from their hard, hating, humourless, sexless, black sectarianism. He felt a sympathy for the position of his father, who did not wish him to join the UDR and did his best to stand clear of sectarian divisions. His father had come in the previous story to visit Joady McMahan, his Catholic neighbour who was dying. His attitude was: 'If one neighbour in ten thousand wants to kill me or mine, I'll not hate them all for that one'.

Eric's uncle George had also come into the previous story, declaring his determination to fight to the last ditch and promising blood by the floods, lest any pope come to the townland of Invercloon. Within this second story, Dinny McMahan of the first story made an appearance, taking his stand with a gun against the hunting party from the big house, composed of characters to come into the foreground in the third story of the trilogy. In a church scene as well, there were other minor characters to become major characters in the next story. Amidst it all, there was much talk of bravado and of cowardice. What was or wasn't cowardice was a hotly contested matter, however. Eric was pressured to feel a coward if he did not join the UDR and, at the same time, a coward for giving in and joining.

Within himself was the worst conflict, a conflict that froze him in impotence, a conflict he felt unable to resolve, a conflict that brought him to the worst cowardice of all: the inability to choose, the inability to respond, the inability to act. He saw himself as afraid of his uncle, afraid of his mother, afraid to choose between his father and his mother, afraid of Catholics, afraid of Protestants, afraid to love, afraid to hate, afraid to live and afraid to die. He saw himself as standing for nothing, as risking his life for something he didn't believe in or even understand: 'I dunno why I'm in this uniform, who I'm fighting, or what the fight's about I'd as lief be dead.' In the end, he decided he was already dead. Pushed further, becoming like a cornered animal, when his uncle implicated him as accessory after the fact in a blood-for-blood murder when out together on patrol, he came down at least on the side of being more afraid of living than of dying. Tired of being afraid, he crashed through a British Army checkpoint and made other jumpy soldiers the instrument of his own death and final release from his dilemmas.

There were many dimensions to McCabe's way of telling this story of the twenty four hours leading to the death of this young man. Underneath the particularities of the events were estimable insights into psychological processes and into sociological forces. Especially interesting was his treatment of the way in which sectarian tensions were connected to stunted personal development in general and sexual paralysis in particular. In the case of Eric's parents, both gave him their versions of their relationship. According to his mother, she had kept her marriage vows, reared his sons and kept his house for a man who treated her with a cruel silence and used her 'unnatural' from the start.

According to his father, he had never heard her laugh, nor ever seen her body for the whole of their thirty years together. In his view, she hated bodies, both her own and his. She could live on black bread and water, the bible and hating Catholics. In the case of his uncle, his blind bigotry had made him sexless, living all his life in a womanless house, just as the two brothers on the other side of the divide in the previous story did. In the case of Eric himself, he loved Rachel and she loved him, yet he could hardly kiss her without embarrassment and awkwardness. When she reached out to him painfully and asked him why he had never really touched her, he could not respond, frightened even more of her mind than her body. When she begged him for comfort in her shattered grief when her father and brother were killed, he was hopelessly inadequate.

Also interesting was his glimpse behind the sectarian conflict on the ground to the larger structure of power keeping everything as it was. In a play for some sort of lucidity, Eric's father asked:

'What's he fighting for, woman? God and country? The queen? I'll tell you what he's fighting for! The big boys who splash more on weekends whoring than he'll make in a lifetime... there's goms who'll die to keep them at it. That's your cause, son... pound notes, millions of them, and the men who have them don't care a tinker's curse who kills who as long as they keep their grip, and if that's coward's talk, I'll stay one.'

But the lucidity was unable to break through the darkness of his son's ill-fated life. And so one more death in the north.<sup>40</sup>

The third story, *Siege*, dealt with even more overtly political forces in even more explicit confrontation. Opening at the Inver show with the union jack flying overhead and the strains of *Land of Hope and Glory* blaring from the loudspeakers, members of the Provisional IRA mingled in the crowd and stalked their prey. Amongst the locals, there was talk of George Hawthorne's being released, after being questioned in connection with a double murder, and of the rumours that his nephew Eric O'Neill's death at an army checkpoint had been suicide. George was nevertheless as blustering as ever in his bigotry. Meanwhile, in Monaghan, the IRA unit came together to be briefed in the McAleer home, full of the kitsch iconography of Catholic nationalism: the sacred heart, the madonna, Patrick Pearse, the two Johns: Kennedy and Roncalli, and Lourdes water. In a sickroom smelling of fish and lysol was the prototypical Catholic mother, thanking God every day for her three green fields and two strong sons.

The IRA unit selected by the army council for this special mission was a determined, but divided, group. There were Mrs. McAleer's two strong sons, Pascal and Pacelli, played as comic tweedledum and tweedledee figures in black berets, in a way that was out of key with the production as a whole. They were meant to be atavistic creatures, who killed as ritualistically as they prayed, who carried out the orders of the army council in the same way as they participated in the holy sacrifice of the mass. Their mother had decreed they had a score to settle for their father and for all the dead generations and so be it. They were, as the dominant mother figure typically wanted her sons to be, brave clean living and sexless boys. Their mother was proud to say of them: 'they've got nerve, don't smoke, don't drink, don't interfere with girls.' They were quite without complexity, without maturity, without irony, but they were also without guile, without egoism and without viciousness. Jack Gallagher, in contrast, was devious, macho and vicious. He was, in McCabe's description, a natural mechanism of terror and disorder. He did not, never would, want peace and harmony.<sup>41</sup> He was full of racial, political and personal hatred. When he spoke of it, with his twisting mouth and bloodshot eyes, the words came out jerking and sadistic and built into a low key fury. There was blood lust on him. He had to taste blood, to kill or be killed. There was the other sort of lust on him as well. The enemy was for killing and the opposite sex was for screwing in ditches and cars. He boasted of his prowess at both: how the girls whimpered, how the targets spun, stumbled and fell, date, street, townland, all reported in detail.

Martin Leonard, the commanding officer of the group, was quite different again. There was an authority in his presence that created an aura of determination, discipline and detachment, an air about him that did not easily reveal the doubts, the fears, the dilemmas. He had killed before, though unlike Gallagher, he had never seen the face of a victim, nor did he welcome the prospect. He took no joy in killing and often awoke in a sweat after hearing screaming and seeing images of what he had done. He was, in McCabe's words, a tired priest of violence who had ceased to believe in the creed. As seen by Kevin McHugh, who played the part, his will to believe had eroded, though he was still committed to carrying through a programme in which he no longer believed. He was efficient, but jaded.<sup>42</sup> He no longer had clear answers for the why and wherefore of it all, but he was proceeding and commanding nonetheless. Sexually, he was more of a mystery than the rest. All that was clear was that he exercised restraint, did not let it distract him from the tasks at hand and was able to deal with a woman without sexually baiting her, again unlike Gallagher.

The woman most at issue was Isabel Lynam, the fifth member of the group, another character of a certain complexity. A high profile ideologue of the movement (modelled on Maria Maguire who played this sort of role in the Provisional IRA in the early seventies), she was attracted to men of violence, while at the same time distrusting them and being distrusted by them. She was the only member of the group who had never killed before. She had freely chosen to stand with the men of vivid words and violent action in contrast to the hollow crafty manoeuvrings of politicians like her father, a TD. She had found it easy enough to propagate violence from a platform, but found it 'different now that it prowled to her side, the bloody midwife of regeneration, a ruthless animal with dripping mouth and glassy merciless eyes.'

The sharpest contrast among members of the group, at least the one that kept flaring up in open friction, was between Gallagher and Lynam. Resistant to his sexual baiting and repelled by his sadistic bloodthirstiness, she did not conceal her contempt. He responded by taunting her as 'Mise Eire Nua', calling her a 'gutless, middle class yacker', and turning sexual rejection backwards declaring 'I don't pick over garbage.' The contrast between Leonard and Lynam was of a far more subtle nature. They knew they shared each other's doubts about both ends and means, although he was far more reluctant to air them or to swerve from a decided course of action. The greatest point of tension was in their different relationship to the gun. As he took out a pistol and proceeded to give a terse, clinical

instruction in its use, his voice seemed far away, as she was overcome with the gleaming phallic awfulness of it. She reacted to his unfastening the catch of her bag and thrusting in the pistol as if to rape. The sexual tension between them was further nuanced by his knowledge of her army council affairs and her recent abortion and by his later refusal of her seductions. Isabel Lynam was not only strongly played off against the men involved, but also against the various women who came into the story. She was brought into sharp contrast with the republican mother figure in a scene in which she was brought up to Mrs. McAleer's bedroom, a chamber with both strong uteral and sepulchral connotations. The mother macree was fecund and fatalistic, completely circumscribed by the earthy fundamentals of the unending cycle of birth, hunger, blood and death. She could not comprehend this younger woman who was childless, who tampered with the natural order of things in taking up men's work of war, who believed neither in God nor in her Ireland. She could only ask: 'Are you a communist, child?' And she could only respond to the complexities of her beliefs and the character of her commitment in declaring: 'Too much learnin' is the ruination of the world. All a body needs is faith in God, his blessed mother, faith in your people and faith in your country.' Mrs. McAleer was, she perceived, a rural version of her own more urban, genteel mother, who devoted herself to poodles and Jesuits. Further contrasts and confrontations and further nuances of character came to light, as the operation which had brought them all together got underway and the scene expanded to take in the variety of persons and positions at the other end of the northern spectrum.

The plan was to go to the big house and to hold the gentlefolk and their guests hostage until three specified comrades were released from Long Kesh. Inver Hall was the home of Col. Armstrong, a retired British Army officer and member of the landed aristocracy, who had considered himself above the battle. His captors, however, considered his ambivalence as insidious as the bigotry of his compatriots and reminded themselves that the wealth, power and privilege of his like had been gained by force and fraud, even if sanctioned by the rule of law and pulpit. On his side, however, it seemed:

'all so unfair. We were never absentees. My grandfather cut rents to half and nil during the famine, mortgaged the estate to feed tenants, Catholic and Protestant, one of my cousins signed the treaty for the Irish side...'

Through him, McCabe returned to the imagery of cancer. After declaring his belief that nationalism was a disease, he continued: 'The cancer is in the room and may kill us shortly.' Among his guests was Alex Boyd-Crawford, a neighbour, somewhat less liberal: 'We never employed papists, family tradition. They all cheat, lie and thieve, careless, superstitious, stupid. When you hear this from the nursery onwards, right or wrong, it tends to stick.' Going one better, Canon Plumm insisted it was right, citing a study proving 'they've a lower IQ than negroes.' Another guest, an American academic, Professor Stuart Caldwell, who shared Col. Armstrong's interest in military history, felt obliged to remark that the study was controversial. Pursuing the argument, Canon Plumm, full of rotund gravitas, displayed the full force of his bigotry: 'To the Irish, no one else. What they've done down there in 60 years is not in doubt: ruined Dublin, painted pillar boxes green and produced more lunatics and alcoholics per square mile than other country in the world. This is a proven fact.' There were also two women present, the wife and daughter of Col. Armstrong. Harriet, the wife, was a cultured woman, who had turned to drink in her despair at her inability to cope with her situation. She had found marriage to be a cruel trap. She thought military history a subject indistinguishable from pornography. She loved poetry and she hated all that reeked of blood and empire. Her daughter, Millicent, pregnant with her first child, was educated, but lacked empathy. She was less vulnerable than her mother.

In a series of exchanges between the captured and their captors, there were various forays into exploring the ground that united and divided the assembled company. There was first the shock of recognition between Millicent and Isabel who realised they had been at Trinity College together. The dialogue between them quickly passed from awkward recognition to sharp accusation:

*Millicent:* 'Impassioned at debate, I remember. I listened then, I'll listen now.'

*Isabel:* 'This is not a college debate'.

School days over, each adjusted to what company the other was keeping. Millicent remarked on the faces of Isabel's IRA comrades and said she could imagine them doing anything, but not her.

*Isabel:* 'I find their faces less horrific than the painted ones round your walls.'

*Millicent:* 'You can maim, cripple, blind the innocent. For what?'

*Isabel:* 'You've never been colonised. You wouldn't understand.'

*Millicent:* 'I can try if you can explain.'

*Isabel:* 'I don't have to.'

*Millicent:* 'You can't. You've had your student pub crawls, your bedsit affairs, hitched about and got stoned. So now you're a graduate. Work's a bore. What next? Backroom politics with mindless killers. A taste of terror before you die. It's beyond contempt.'

*Isabel:* 'When you stop killing us, we'll stop killing you. It's as simple as that.'

*Millicent:* 'What have I - we - got to do with killing you?'

*Isabel:* 'Everything.'

Although there were moments of confused compassion, particularly between Isabel and Harriet, it was mostly mockery and hostility. Gallagher was compulsively taunting. Using Boyd-Crawford's hearing aid like a microphone, he asked loudly: 'Do you think there's any hope for peace in our time, sir?' Prior to pistol whipping the face of an oil painted brigadier on the wall, he lashed out at those present, their ancestors and their contemporaries:

'When we look for common rights the way you got your empire, all your lackeys in the press and Commons yap: hang them, hang them. Mother of parliaments? A fat knacker's wife who's flayed half the bloody world. Your mock monarchy and zoo-keeping dukes and public schools, all stiff upper prick and regiments of backstreet rats and bugging horatios. You have deported, degraded, starved and tortured us and still do and no apology and never will, but smirk and snigger at stupid Paddy, dirty Paddy.'

When Pascal played the tin whistle, it neutralised the creeping terror, at least for his comrades, as each note not only carried its own sound, but evoked centuries of racial memory. It had a different effect on the hostages, however, especially on Canon Plumm. In response to an assertion that the Irish language was the key, he let loose:

'To what? Chicken in the rough? Non-stop reels of jig-jig trash? The great, great show with endless whining lamentations manufactured by jackeens for plough boys and shop girls.'

Reflections on the role of women came into play as well. A news report on the kidnapping listed the men involved, but made no mention of the women. Harriet felt it acutely, not only for herself, but for her daughter who was, after all, a bachelor of arts. This then provoked further thoughts:

'Bachelor? Should it not be spinster of arts? Sounds miserable. Dog's nice; who likes bitch? Bulls are magnificent; cow's stupid. Boars fierce; sows eat their young. The language itself is perverse to the female. Men only. We're under sentence and the BBC don't know we exist.'

So it went, through a long night which most present feared would be their last. Come morning, one hostage shot and two released, the British Army arrived 'full of beans and bitters'. The crunch time had come and the hardest choice had to be made. The terms had been decreed: the three specified IRA men would be released from Long Kesh, but there would be a three-for-three exchange. It was decided that two bombing technicians and a suspect propagandist were the most expendable. And so the hostages were released, Gallagher and Leonard took off by helicopter with their three comrades from Long Kesh, the five deemed least expendable to the movement, as Pascal and Pacelli McAleer and Isabel Lynam went to their fates. Although the scripts in the trilogy were richly-textured and multi-layered texts, with nuances not always adequately captured by the production, the trilogy was nevertheless a most impressive contribution to creating a culture true to its time and a fine achievement both for the author and for RTÉ. Michael Garvey, the head of drama at the time, regarded it as a 'gothic achievement'.<sup>43</sup> Wesley Burrowes, who played a part in initiating the project and editing the work of his fellow writer, considered it one of the best things RTÉ ever did and felt it confirmed McCabe as the 'best writer we have'.<sup>44</sup> *Cancer* won the script award for the author at the International Film Festival in Prague and a Jacobs award for the director, Deirdre Friel.

### **British Television Drama and Northern Ireland**

It was to RTÉ's credit that, whatever its limited resources, it gave such emphasis to dramatic treatment of the northern conflict. British television, in contrast, did not, at least not in the 1970s, nor was it interested in buying in the McCabe trilogy. Considering the estimable resources of British television and the sheer amount of television drama, home produced and imported, dealing with so many other problems, both near and far, there would seem to be a certain dereliction of duty in this regard. It took until the 1980s for British television drama to come through in this respect.

Addressing himself to this situation in 1980, Richard Hoggart wrote in *The Listener* that only nineteen plays in twelve years had dealt with the 'troubles', whether about Northern Ireland itself or about the effects in Britain. Anything on the troubles, he pointed out, was regarded as very sensitive and involved reference upwards, discussion, delay, denial of repeats or relegation to late night slots. Most drama that made it through, in his opinion, used stock characters and stock attitudes, with the result that the audience was denied the help of drama in coming to terms with the complexity of the situation. There was not so much direct censorship as indirect censorship, arising from the fact that Northern Ireland was considered a switch off subject or a dangerous one.<sup>45</sup>

Northern Ireland did occasionally get a look in. For example, in the 1976 Thames series *Bill Brand* on the political and personal life of a left-wing Labour MP, there was an episode giving a fair degree of attention to the passage through parliament of a further prevention of terrorism bill. Although a government backbencher, he put forward an amendment to reduce the period in which a suspect could be detained without being charged from ten days to three, bringing him into conflict both with his own party and with the opposition who wanted to raise the period from ten days to fourteen. In a wide ranging attack on the erosion of democratic freedoms and on the capitalist system itself, Brand stressed that the politics of terror was a bankrupt politics, but challenged those heckling him and going on about 'men of blood' to consider *all* men of blood, including currency speculators who murdered by telephone. As to what to do about Ireland, Brand insisted:

'The problem of Ireland will not be solved by passing anti-democratic laws in Britain. The problem of Ireland will be solved by the Irish, when the British government, acting on behalf of the people, relinquishes the imperialist role it has exercised these last three centuries.'

This speech was made against the political background, both within the fiction and in real life, of a wave of IRA bombs in Britain. The speech brought forth threats from a neo-fascist group, an attack on his family home and demands from within his constituency that he resign. It was a brave effort by its author Trevor Griffiths to show the capacity of a television drama series to deal convincingly with ideological conflict in an up-front way.

Among the other British television companies in the ITV system, there was occasionally a play of relevance to Anglo-Irish politics, such as the STV production *Just Another Saturday*, a 1975 play by Peter McDougall, showing the sectarian rivalry in Glasgow as not unlike that of Belfast (as Hector McMillan had also shown in *The Sash*). Thames 1979 production of Stewart Parker's *I'm a Dreamer Montreal* gave a light-hearted treatment of the heavy scene that was Belfast at the time, which some reviewers felt conveyed the embattled essence of Belfast life better than many a heavy treatment of it. The play went at the subject obliquely, by honing in on the dream world constructed by a music librarian by day and show band singer by night to cocoon himself from the harsh reality of Belfast life. However, any such cocoon was shown to be exceedingly precarious in the face of such pervasive turmoil.

As to the BBC, its 1976 production, *Your Man from the Six Counties* concerned a 12-year-old Belfast boy, whose life had been so pervaded by turmoil that he had never known what life was like without the constant presence of bombs and bullets and sectarian hatred until he was sent to stay with an aunt and uncle in the 26 counties. The BBC was responsible for producing the drama relating to Northern Ireland which generated the greatest controversy. *The Legion Hall Bombing* was a 1978 Play for Today production. It was a drama-documentary reconstructing an actual trial in September 1976 in the Diplock courts under the Emergency Powers Act, in which the Belfast youths were accused of planting a bomb which went off at a British Legion whist drive. As it came out, the viewer was left to make up his or her own mind whether the accused was guilty or not. What did come through was that, in the conditions of Northern Ireland, witnesses and jurors were often too frightened to identify defendants or to find them guilty, but also that dispensing with jury and normal rules of evidence also set justice at risk. Problems, which put those involved in the production at odds with the BBC, caused transmission to be delayed for six months. When it did go out, it did so without the names of Caryl Churchill as author or Roland Joffe as director, who had taken their names off the credits, because of modifications which they did not approve. The play has often been cited as evidence of direct censorship in British television, as has Brian Phelan's *Article 5* in 1975, which made passing reference to the use of torture in Northern Ireland at a time when British interrogation techniques were under investigation by the European Commission for Human Rights. Although the play had been commissioned by the BBC, it was never screened.<sup>46</sup> There was also Kenneth Griffith's biography of Michael Collins, *Hang Out Your Brightest Colours*, which was banned by the IBA.

### **Drama of Rural Life**

Drama need not always deal with bombings, kidnappings, legislation, elections or overt expressions of political allegiances in order to be political. Much of RTE's drama of the 1970s focused on contemporary Ireland in a way that showed how individual lives were shaped by presumptions and pressures stemming from larger structures of power, making it political in a broader and deeper sense of the term. Much of it, even if only subconsciously, registered the psycho-social consciousness of the shifting nexus of power relations and the displacement of traditional customs and values. Some of it, quite consciously, presented a forceful critique of the authoritarianism of the old Ireland or of the pretensions and false promises of the new Ireland.

The drama of rural life became much tougher and probed further into the bleak side of country matters. Apart from *The Riordans* which continually explored the problems and possibilities of life as experienced in the context of rural Ireland, there were a number of single plays which highlighted particular aspects of country life. The Irish language plays *Saolaiodh Gamhain*, *An Carabhan*, *Teangabhail* and *An Taoille Tuile* presented vivid pictures of the poverty and arduousness of the way of life of those who had to engage in back breaking labour in harsh conditions to

eke out even a subsistence existence. Each of these in their different ways showed the effect of such conditions on vital relationships. In the case of *Teangabhail* and *An Taoille Tuile*, the effect was tragic in blighting young love in fragile relationships. In the case of *Saolaiodh Gamhain* and *An Carabhan*, the effect was to make the old, who had lived all their lives in such circumstances, unfit for any other.

Emigration was quite naturally a recurring theme. Some plays focused on the drama of the decision to emigrate or not to emigrate. *The Country Boy* explored the roots of emigration in the economic structure of rural Ireland and the exercise of patriarchal authority on the family farm. The problem was refracted through the experience of two brothers, both facing the same dilemma, each in their time considering emigration as the solution, but coming to different decisions as to what way to go. *The Emigrant* showed a family in a dwindling community still attempting to scratch out a living and resist emigration. In the end, a widow determined to hold her family together had to pay the price of severing it from its roots. Although the note in the *RTÉ Guide* attempted to back away from any considerations of the social context or solutions to the problem of emigration and presented the play as simply about human nature,<sup>47</sup> this was setting up an unreal and unworthy dichotomy.

Other plays looked at the effects of emigration and followed into foreign parts the lives of those who left rural Ireland. Taking a light hearted look at the acute form of Irishness characterising those who huddled around such expatriate centres as the Wild Harp of Erin All Ireland Social Recreational & Workingmen's Club Birmingham was Ron Hutchinson's *If You're Irish*.

Giving a more sober view of men emigrating to find work in Britain to support the family back home was Maeve Binchy's *Deeply Regretted By*, in which an emigrant's death brought to the surface the hidden complexities of the double life he had been leading for so many years. It gave an insight into the difficulties of both those who left and those who stayed, both facing the responsibilities of married life without any of its comforts.

Showing the severe isolation and remarkable human resources of a 'grass widow' left behind on the very edge of civilisation for months on end every year, while her husband went to work in Scotland, was *Mr. Sing, My Heart's Delight*. There was a peculiar sense of the mingling of joy and sadness in these sort of plays, particularly in *Mr. Sing, My Heart's Delight*, a play of great lyrical beauty, despite the bleak presence of acute poverty, both material and cultural, and extreme loneliness. There was a certain mythic, elemental quality to it, rising above the specificity of its setting, in its portrayal of the power of the human spirit in an isolated illiterate old woman, whose soaring imagination and irrepressible joie de vivre triumphed over all economic and cultural constrictions of sexual and social repression.

Whether as text or subtext, whether in its old or new forms, emigration was a persistent presence. The plays of this period threw up a number of memorable images of the deep psychic dislocations it forced on simple people, most of them ill fit to cope with its complexities. Sometimes it was those leaving like the landless labourer in *King of the Castle*. Other times it was those returning, like the older brother back on his holidays with his American wife in *The Country Boy*, or the young woman back to be married, after earning her dowry in America in *An Taoille Tuile*, or the failed actor, seeking to recapture what he had left behind in *Conversations on a Homecoming*. The lingering feeling was of uprooted branches blown in the wind, of elements never to be firmly grounded, of people who were neither here nor there. There were moments of acute awareness of the drift of rural decay and depopulation. There were revelations of the layers of madness and viciousness resulting from it. Going a long way towards illuminating the offensiveness of those on the defensive and explaining why Maguire in *King of the Castle* constantly behaved like a threatened animal was his perception that: 'There'll be nothin' here soon but Scobers, tinkers and tourists'.

### ***King of the Castle***

*King of the Castle* was far and away the outstanding play for cutting through the layers of pretence to the lacerating tensions and brutish realities of life on the land. For its author, Eugene McCabe, it represented 'a disquieting revelation of the second face of Cathleen Ní Houlihan'.<sup>48</sup> Originally a stage play, first presented at the Gaiety Theatre during the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival, it won the Irish Life award for new plays. One critic predicted at the time that it would never be shown on RTÉ.<sup>49</sup> In proving this prediction wrong in 1977, RTÉ went as far as it has ever gone in presenting in dramatic form an uncompromisingly honest and devastatingly unflattering picture of Irish society. In this production, RTÉ also pushed to the limits of what it would dare in its raw and explicit exposure of the darker side of human sexuality and all the predatory and vulnerable emotions surrounding it. It was a play the *Daily Telegraph* had characterised as having 'the obvious, naked, unambiguous impact of an animal in heat'.<sup>50</sup>

The critics and professionals generally heralded it in the superlatives, even if the audience found it difficult to accept. Louis Lentin, who directed the RTÉ production, considered it 'the best Irish play for a quarter of a century'.<sup>51</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon said that it gave a more honest and uncompromising view of Irish society than any other play of its period. Of all the works of the decade, it was the one which best expressed the viciousness and rapacity of the affluent, but spiritually impoverished, new middle class in the period of economic expansion which occurred under the

government of Seán Lemass.<sup>52</sup> However, its very truthfulness was its problem. As Hilton Edwards observed, there were more in Ireland who wished to disbelieve it than to accept it.<sup>53</sup>

*King of the Castle* was set on a large Leitrim farm at the beginning of the Lemass era, The big house, once inhabited by the local gentry, was now occupied by Scober McAdam, the new man of the era, the self-made, prosperous entrepreneur, and his young wife Tressa, who was in miles over her head in her attempt to play the role of the new lady of the manor. Typifying in their opposite ways the barrenness of the nouveau riche, each occupied the big house differently. She had a desire to do and decorate in the old ways of the gentry, but still had a peasant perception of people of 'quality' and knew she hadn't the 'breeding' to fill their shoes. He, however, had no regrets about their passing and being replaced by those who made their way by buying and selling. In a scene capturing their different attitudes to the big house, they said to each other:

*Tressa:* 'You don't ever fit it right'

*Scober:* 'If you can pay for it, you fit it.'

The play opened with the hired men working on the land during the annual threshing. Their speech was overflowing with both class antagonism and sexual innuendo. In the matter of the inequality of wealth, they seethed with the impotent resentment of the dispossessed. In the matter of sexual fertility, however, they conspired with peasant cunning to take their consolation and their revenge in their perception that here the tables were turned. The play was permeated with a sense of the legacy of centuries of famine, poverty, serfdom and cultural constriction. It was also suffused with the symbolism of harvest and of fertility.

The tie of sex to land and livestock and to buying and selling was strongly emphasised. It came piercing through, over and over, on level after level, in the multi-layered and richly-textured narrative of its superbly constructed text. The woman, played with a suitable brooding edginess by Fionnuala Flanagan, was constantly referred to by means of the imagery of farm animals, whether horses, pigs, dogs or cows. She needed to be 'the right breeding sort'. She was 'chewing her cud'. She was 'a bitch in heat'. When the metaphors were mixed, it could as often be down the evolutionary ladder as up. It could even drift into the realm of mechanical and technological artifact. 'Bonnet never lifted,' her husband was assured when he got her. When more human terms were used, it was more often generic or patronymic than individual. Her husband often addressed her as 'woman', just as she addressed him as 'man'. Alternatively, all around, including her husband, called her 'Mullarchy's daughter'. Even in direct address, her husband often called her 'daughter'. She was never addressed by her individual first name, although the men frequently were. Any intimation of individuality was dismissed with the assertion 'She's a woman, like any other'.

Not that the imagery the men drew upon to express their perception of themselves or each other rose very far or very often above the level of the farm animals. They spoke of themselves as stud to the mare, as dog to the bitch. Occasionally, there was a feeble effort to articulate something rising above this. In his effort to persuade a journeyman to impregnate his wife in order to provide him with an heir to stop the mockers, the conversation turned to the nature of sex:

*Scober:* 'What men and women do. An itch. A scratch. It's gone. It's nothing unless a growth comes from it.'

*Matt:* 'It's more than that. I'm not a dog.'

This was an assertion quickly discredited by the action. Despite the previous refusal to oblige on the part of both Matt and Tressa, the only two voices even trying to contest the barnyard mentality in relation to human sexuality, when sexual intercourse did happen between them, it was violent, atavistic and brutish, not unlike the manner of animals in heat. It followed a cruel and ugly encounter between them, in which she taunted him about not having the kind of licence they have for bulls, boars and stallions and he called her a bitch. She derided his masculinity and scoffed at him for being landless, for labouring on someone else's land and for having only himself to blame for having to emigrate. She lauded her husband's superior masculinity in his ownership of land, in his power to buy and sell. She gave her definition of the difference between a man and a messer. It was all this that brought them to blows and then to sex. The only distinctively human elements were the emotional cruelty and the market forces.

It was a far cry from cute anecdotes of laughing leprechauns and lovable lads and lassies. It was an even longer way from sublime stories of an isle of saints and scholars. It did not speak well for those who would be the first to defend the prescriptions and prohibitions of Catholic moral theology and for the elements who might be first to come down hard on anybody challenging it all as a matter of principle. All but Scober were practising Catholics.

Maguire, the most malicious mouth at the table, was the least likely to forget to bless himself before and after meals. It was even a long way from *The Riordans*. Whatever the grievances and gossip between neighbours, the rural community of Leestown was basically benign. People more often helped than hindered one another. Good loomed larger than bad, all things considered. It was the opposite in *King of the Castle*. The community was so permeated by

tension, greed, hostility and ill-will that the overriding feel was one of malevolence. Even the woman, who in the beginning had seemed most the victim of greed and hardness, came through by the end as the hard and greedy victimiser. Enquiring about the crop, the tons and tons of what had been harvested by the labours of others, she tensely proclaimed herself and her husband set for the winter and let the rest be damned: 'Let the criers cry outside the gates. We can shut our ears.' And yet in such an atmosphere, no one could be home and clear. The oppressors were oppressed as much by their own oppressiveness as that of others. All were both victimisers and victims in this intricate web of victimisation. Taking little consolation from all that had been gathered to the big house or from the gatherers being shut out of its gate, Tressa realised: 'Only it's a dark time...winter ... and lonely...the garden's like a graveyard.' Despite the fact that all the outward structures of the rural community and traditional religion were intact, the reality was that every individual was ultimately alone and living by codes that were more an odd blend of pagan primitivism and capitalist competitiveness than those of the official Catholic nationalist ideology.

It was not a picture of the rural community that the rural community was prepared to accept. Whatever controversy was generated by the play in the theatre audience was nothing compared to that sparked off in the television audience. During transmission, there were a number of calls to RTÉ, mainly from women, saying the play was 'filthy'. The television columns of the provincial papers were scathing. They vied with each other to find terms negative enough to express their revulsion. The papers insisted that they were being inundated with calls and letters, indicating that their readers were up in arms. The critic in the Cork *Evening Echo* heaped scorn on theatre people and what they regarded as great theatre. Whatever this elite thought of *King of the Castle*, he told his readers: 'you and I and thousands of others know full well that its theme is crude and vulgar and very much foreign to our way of life.'<sup>54</sup> The reaction in Leitrim was particularly vehement. People had allowed their children to stay up in their provincial pride at a play being set in their county, despite the fact that RTÉ had made it very clear that it was to be regarded as adult fare. The next meeting of the Leitrim County Council was overflowing with outrage. Councillor Joe Mooney declared the play to be 'a slander on the people of Leitrim.' It 'made dirt of the women of Leitrim'. He asked why Eugene McCabe 'hadn't the guts to locate this filth in his own county' (Monaghan). He warned that the play could lead to a 'new wave of permissiveness'. It was the sort of thing that might have gone down well with the 'so called intelligentsia in Dublin', but country people were 'shocked, annoyed and appalled'.<sup>55</sup> It was also discussed at the Castlebar Urban District Council. Councillor Richard Morris was to the fore in voicing his disgust at what he described as 'filth' and 'trash'. In his opinion, the majority of people working in RTÉ were 'depraved minds, dropouts from society or winos'. He thought the director-general should be asked for a public apology.<sup>56</sup> Such an apology was not forthcoming. The RTÉ Authority, according to Bob Collins, who was its secretary at the time, sent out many letters defending the production.<sup>57</sup>

### *The White House*

The reaction was similar in the case of Tom Murphy's *The White House*, another RTÉ production of controversial theatrical material in the same year, which also gave a very sharp-edged view of rural life. *The White House*, originally a 1972 Abbey Theatre production, consisted of two plays, both set in a pub in an East Galway town, involving the same set of characters, separated by the lapse of a decade. (A later version, re-written and produced by Druid in 1985, collapsed the two plays into one under the title *Conversations on a Homecoming*.)

Although Tom Murphy was inclined to consider himself as not consciously political or sociological,<sup>58</sup> his realisation that the writer must transcend what is merely autobiographical or purely local gave his plays an organic political and sociological significance. *The White House* was a work of striking social relevance in the way it registered the crises in personal and communal identity resulting from the political and sociological shifts in Irish society in the 1960s and 1970s. It gave forceful expression, as Fintan O'Toole perceptively put it, to the confusion and disorientation of 'an Ireland caught between one failed dream and another, between a gaelic rural idyll and a modern industrial paradise.'<sup>59</sup>

*Speeches of Farewell*, the first of the two plays, was set on November 22, 1963, the night of the assassination of John F Kennedy, in the pub called the White House. The pub was owned by JJ Kilkelly, a man totally caught up in the Kennedy mystique. JJ presented himself as a man of flair and initiative, a man of advanced ideas and rationalist rhetoric, very much in the Kennedy mould. He even contrived to make the most of his physical appearance, which bore a vague resemblance to that of JFK. Full of the high-flown rhetoric of the new frontier, JJ was the man who would blow away the cobwebs of bigotry and insularity of traditional small town Ireland and lead the way into the fresh air of the liberal, cosmopolitan era of Lemass, Kennedy and Roncalli. Drawn into the world of his brave new pub, swathed in pseudo-Kennedy charisma and a mythic Camelot aura, were his self-effacing supportive wife and a group of younger acolytes, who shared his battles and his dreams.

As the play unfolded, the chinks in the armour of the king and his bold knights could be glimpsed. Despite all the surface confidence and clarity, there were mounting revelations of just how vulnerable were their characters and

how confused their vision. Underneath the bold rhetoric of a new cultural world, there turned out to be only a collection of vague notions, shallow opinions and rag-tag prescriptions. Their great confrontation with clerical authority was over a nude painting. They believed that the country-and-western system itself was unyielding and uncompromising in its drive for total sentimentality. They thought that there should be no division between bar and lounge. Such was their analysis of the system and programme for an alternative. Indeed, so shaky were the foundations of this ramshackle edifice that the death of John F Kennedy, and JJ's total collapse in the face of it, were enough to bring the whole lot tumbling down for all concerned, with their very identity, individual and collective, exploded to bits.

In the second play, *Conversations on a Homecoming*, the full weight of the vulnerability of the characters and the tenuousness of their beliefs came into clearer view and sharper relief. Gathering for a reunion ten years later, on the occasion of the return of one of their group who had emigrated, the characters progressively disclosed the changes the ensuing years had wrought in them. The play consisted essentially of pub talk, beginning in sobriety, moving to inebriation and then back full circle to sobriety again. In the course of the cycle, the layers of pseudo-sophistication and self-deception were painfully peeled away to reveal each character in disillusioned nakedness. Their former guru, JJ, whose character was the centre of focus in the first play, was only a haunting off-stage presence in the second. While he was on the tear in a pub that in their heyday was referred to as the opposition, the focus shifted to those he left high and dry when he went under.

The dialectic forming the centre of dramatic tension was the confrontation between the two characters at the extreme ends of the spectrum between illusion and disillusionment. Michael, the returned emigrant, was a failed actor still clinging to a rose-coloured view of their glory days and an inflated estimation of JJ and the White House. Tom, a teacher who stayed in the town, was, in contrast, the most bitter and cynical of the lot. It was he who took it upon himself to be the agent of interpretation of the past and to be the instrument of dismantling others' fond illusions regarding it. As the night proceeded towards full revelation, it became apparent that the two were meant to be alter egos, two sides to a whole person, whose interaction might produce some sort of resolution to the dilemma of them all. At one point, another character remarked of them: 'The two of ye together might make one decent man'. The effort to move from confusion and self-delusion to clarity and sanity was short-circuited somewhat and stopped short of going the whole way, at least by the end of the play. For the time being, a frustrated search left only numbness in its wake. As one of the characters admitted, he was 'not able to feel anything anymore'. As to whether some sort of healing and a sadder but wiser wholeness might come in time, the possibility was left open, at least for those still somehow striving. Others were write-offs in one way or another. JJ would continue to descend into alcoholic disintegration. 'Mrs' would continue to put on the brave face on the downward spiral of self-effacing degeneration. Liam would take control of the White House, in the way of the new breed of the old gombeen, who were taking control of much else in the country.

Like other works of Tom Murphy, *The White House* dealt with confrontation between the brutal realities of modern life and the efforts of people to find solace in faiths and fantasies and to construct sanctuaries and places of refuge for themselves. In the first play, the White House, such as it was, was shown to be functioning as a sanctuary for a collection of characters in their glory days, as a place where they found moments of vulnerable union against the long loneliness of their individual lives. In the second play, they confronted each other and their own shattered dreams, standing in the ruins of their dilapidated refuge. In so doing, they stood for much more than just their individual characters in their individual place. Their predicament, and their words in articulating it, somehow spoke with the weight of the expectations and losses of so many others. The shabbiness of the White House, both in its rise and in its fall, was a suitable symbol of the sham of Ireland's preening itself in the reflected glory of the Kennedy mystique in its hour upon the world stage. Constructed in such a way that two evenings in the lives of a small set of characters in a single pub could create resonances of so many days and nights in the lives of so many other people in so many other places, it was bound to set off reflections on the social history of its times in anyone serious enough to think upon its meaning. The force of the contrast between the one scenario and the other was lost to a considerable degree in the later Druid version, arguably to its detriment, giving ample cause for a preference for the RTÉ version. In any version, however, it was substantial and searching drama. Even the minor images of the play, like the cutting down of trees to make Easter egg boxes, were the sort to stay in the mind and to stir reflections on proportions and priorities and the way things were ordered in the world from one era to the next.

Not that large sections of the television audience were inclined to such reflections. Head of drama, Michael Garvey, saw it as a production that would have its audience fighting against it, but felt it was RTÉ's contribution to their growth.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, perhaps, those who might have been engaged in such growth preferred to do it in relative silence. Those who were not, however, were anything but silent. There was uproar in a number of local government bodies. It was the occasion for a resolution condemning 'the recent permissive trend in RTÉ programmes,' which received the unanimous support of Middleton Urban Council and for a resolution protesting against the 'scandalous filth of RTÉ programmes' passed unanimously by Youghal Urban Council.<sup>61</sup> At Cork County Council, there was criticism of *The White House* as 'obscene' and 'absolutely disgraceful' and there was a unanimous

motion deploring the 'low standard' of RTÉ programmes.<sup>62</sup> At North Tipperary County Council, there was also a unanimous resolution condemning it.<sup>63</sup> At Castlebar Urban District Council, it was considered 'scurrilous and filthy' and Councillor Frank Durcan called upon the RTÉ Authority to remove those involved in putting it on air.<sup>64</sup> For their part, the West Donegal Fine Gael executive protested against it as blasphemy and a gross insult to Christian principles.<sup>65</sup> Agreement on this point seemed to form the basis of ecumenical harmony in Cashel. Soon after a notice criticising the moral standards of RTÉ was read out at all Catholic masses at St. John the Baptist Church,<sup>66</sup> the Protestant dean of Cashel declared it was 'time to cry halt to the grossly offensive programmes on RTÉ'.<sup>67</sup> In the provincial press, television columnists, editorial writers and letter writers gave out about the 'profanity', 'vulgarity', 'depravity', 'obscurity', 'irreverence' and 'blasphemy' they attributed to *The White House*. A line that gave the characters a laugh over a book entitled *The Life Story of the Little Flower* being catalogued under horticulture in the local library even had viewers taking offence on the basis of their devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux. One irate letter writer to the *Irish Independent* was disgusted at what he called 'disrespect to the Little Flower' and suggested it was 'time such sick people got out of RTÉ'.<sup>68</sup> Other correspondents called on RTÉ to 'clean up its dirty mess'.<sup>69</sup>

Coming to the defence of his work, Tom Murphy responded to Limerick city councillor Thady Coughlan, who had called it 'unadulterated filth'<sup>70</sup>, with the suggestion that the filth might be in the mind of the beholder, rather than in what it beheld. Tomás MacAnna considered Coughlan's remarks as 'absolutely silly' and prompted more by electioneering than any other motive.<sup>71</sup> Reviewing the production in *The Irish Times*, Ken Gray was of the opinion that the Irish public found it embarrassing to hear on television the sort of talk that went on in their pubs. Whatever the problem, he insisted, the solution was not to pillory the playwright. The play might have been depressing, but it was strong and powerful and uncomfortably accurate in its observations. It was also full of compassion. As far as he was concerned, it was a credit to the resolution, courage and integrity of the drama department of RTÉ that it was done well enough to provoke such cries of shame and disgust.<sup>72</sup> Tom O'Dea in the *Irish Press* felt the dialogue was a bit too polished and left some questions hanging in the air, but there was enough hard truth in it that he 'could hear the sound of approaching vigilantes, diverted temporarily from their pursuit of Niall Tóibín (during the run of *Time Now, Mr. T*) to go after Tom Murphy'.<sup>73</sup>

In an interesting reversal of the point periodically put by people within RTÉ regarding its audience's double standard, in accepting imported programmes what they refused to accept in home produced ones, an editorial in the *Cork Examiner* accused RTÉ of having a double standard that worked in the opposite way. It cited, as evidence for this, RTÉ's taking off the air in mid-run the US serial *Executive Suite* for less than what it allowed to go through in *The White House* and other home produced dramas of the era.<sup>74</sup>

## Law and Order, Class Conflict and Rural Life

Not all the rural drama with any sort of critical edge got the audience's back up to the same extent as *King of the Castle* and *The White House* with their raw revelations and shattering emotional catharsis. Other plays shed their own sort of light on the problems, but with a lighter touch and a less threatening challenge to their audience.

Niall Sheridan's *A Dog's Life* dealt with the comic side of life in a remote garda station, but also gave cause to consider something of the serious side of the struggle for survival of men who were trapped, both by habitual attitudes and socio-economic facts. Showing life on the other side of the law was Bob Quinn's film *Poitín*, with its acute observations, not only of poitín makers, but of community life in Connemara, where traditional ways were being threatened, not only by the forces of law and order, but by poverty, unemployment and emigration. It got a showing not only on RTÉ, but abroad, where it played its small part in breaking the force of stage-Irish stereotypes of west of Ireland life.

Drama which put a strong emphasis on class antagonism in the rural community did much to undermine these stereotypes from within. Apart from *King of the Castle*, which took a hard and clear approach to it, and *The Riordans*, which went for a softer and more ambiguous treatment of it, there were a number of other productions taking it on, each in their own way. Jennifer Johnston's *The Gates* focused on the barriers of prejudice and poverty between those born of the landed gentry and those born of their hired labour on a country estate. A young girl, whose father had been banished for marrying outside his class, came into the family estate which her uncle had let run to seed. In enlisting the help of her uncle's odd job man, in her efforts to bring the place back to its former glory according to plans her father had been unable to carry out, she misjudged the barriers of class standing in the way.

Liam O'Flaherty's *Teangabhail* also dealt with the matter of relationships formed in the shadow of rural class structure. When a young landless labourer and the daughter of the man for whom he was working fell in love, their home was caught in the stranglehold of class distinction, with cruel consequences coming as if by some kind of historical inevitability. A similar storyline, though away from the agricultural division of labour on the land and into the industrial division of labour in the country town, was developed in James Douglas' *Too Short a Summer*. In the

summer before he was to enter university, a young lad went to work at the local brickworks, where his father was also employed. Upon becoming involved with his employer's daughter, all sorts of problems emerged. Reaction to their impending marriage and the change in his career plans served to expose the unyielding class structure of the town, both in terms of the bitterness from below and the snobbery from above, explored particularly in terms of Carmel's mother, who was living on her status as queen of small town society, and Conor's father, whose son was the focus of his own frustrated ambitions.

In a yet sadder story of the suffocating effects of life in a small town, Eugene McCabe's *Roma* showed how the solace taken even in a highly repressed relationship was crushed in the cruelty thriving in the constricted lives of those at the margins of the social structure. Looking at the society from the point of view of those for whom it had no respectable place, a bleak picture emerged. Benny, the odd job man in a chipper, living in a loft with a drunken beggar, sustained only by his religious faith and secret love for his employer's daughter, delivered a hard verdict on local life, even before the little he had was taken from him: 'This town is rotten, like the bad end of a city. Sometimes it seems God's deaf or blind or gone asleep. Sometimes it seems there's no cure'. Even those for whom he worked were near enough to the bottom of the heap. An Italian family running a fish and chip shop, they had moved from one part of Ireland to another, trying to find a place for themselves in Irish society. The wife was still clinging to pathetic hopes of social mobility, at least through her daughter. Inciting Maria to study hard, Mrs. Digacimo explained why: 'With education, maybe you marry a doctor. For you, cara mia... a good life... you no want this?' For her husband, however, there were no more illusions. The life they had was the only sort of life they would ever have. No matter where they went, it would be the same. Their lot, as he sadly saw it, was to realise that:

'we belong nowhere, Gina, we belong with louts and drunks and half-wits and... there is nothing else, but now and tonight and tomorrow and the next day 'till we die...'

Perhaps the most marginalised elements in the social structure were the travelling population. Various plays dealt with the class tensions between the travelling community and the settled community, whether in a serious vein in *Voices in the Wilderness* or in a comic romp in *God's Gentry*. *The Riordans* gave extraordinary attention to such tensions during the whole course of its run. As a serial, there were both regular and transient characters who were travellers past and present, whose lives shed light on various aspects of the situation from various angles. As a series, an episode called *The Outsider* gave it tighter treatment and took it on from an unusual and ironic angle. Although *The Riordans* exposed all sorts of attitudes to travellers in the community, the scripts were invariably written in liberal sympathy for their plight. It was never in rose coloured hues. However, this particular episode specialised in the shades of grey. In it, a roguish traveller and his family came to squat in the home of Éamonn Maher, a settled traveller and a long established and respected character.

This, naturally enough, caused considerable disorientation in a whole range of characters. There were all sorts of interesting reversals. As one character expressed it: 'I've been at evictions before, but never before where everyone was on the landlord's side'. Playing on the reversals he set in motion, the traveller told the story of the good shepherd in reverse to the priest. He accused him of: 'guarding the church to be sure the black sheep doesn't get in and contaminate the other ninety-nine.' Posing the issue in a black and white way that belied his canny sense of the greyness of it all: 'There are two classes - those that get moved on and those that do the moving. You're one or the other'. Using every device to play upon residual guilt in the community, he brought all the mythical imagery he could muster to bear on the confrontation, from the bible - 'I'm not going through any agony in the garden for you' - to Hollywood and the wild west: 'There's a stage at noon... Don't worry, I'll be on it'. Even after it had finished as serial and series, a once-off special called *On the Feast of Stephen* featured the Riordans facing Christmas season, with a case of two traveller kids and a missing turkey.

Although *The Riordans* dealt with the ambiguities, the thrust was towards clarifying the situation and sorting out the issues. The opposite was the case with *Traveller*, an independent film directed by Joe Comerford, written by Neil Jordan and shown on RTÉ. There were some revealing moments in the film, showing aspects of Irish society through the alienated eyes of two young travellers. It punctured some of the glossy balloons of both religious observance and republican ritual. The emptiness of the relationship between Catholicism and the everyday lives of its adherents came across with particular vividness in the church presiding over the arranged marriage of Michael and Angela, in a farcical wedding ceremony in which both questions and responses were uttered in the most perfunctory way, underlining the huge discrepancy between the words and the reality.

In their smuggling sojourns north of the border, there were incidents indicating something of the weight of dead heroes upon living non-heroes and the shallowness of the routine singing of rebel songs. However, long sections of the film were opaque, unfocused and incoherent. Indeed, the film itself, in its overall impact, was opaque, unfocused and incoherent. This endeared it to the avant-garde critics, who stretched flimsy material to its limits to find hidden meaning in its fabric or acquiesced in its incoherence by praising it for not subordinating image to plot and for not prioritising narrative over circumstance.<sup>75</sup> There might have been those who found some inherent value in minimal

dialogue, inaudible speech, a non-synchronous sound track, disconnected images, dark to black lighting, long static sequences and diffuse to disappearing narrative, but others did not. It also provoked an alienation of boredom, impatience or even hostility that did nothing to enhance understanding. *Traveller* might have been a film about characters who had little to say, who were inarticulate in relation to themselves, to each other and to their world, but this did not demand or excuse a film that had so little to say, that was itself so inarticulate in relation to them, to their relationships, and to their world. There was nothing in it remotely striving for explanation or reaching for an overview.

McCabe's work, by contrast, did reach forward in this way, even though there was never any smug bottom line. Though it was most often done in subtle and intricate ways, sometimes it was carried in a more overt and direct device. In *Roma*, for example, Mr. Digacimo peered at his daughter's copybook and enquired:

*Paulo:* 'Physical and psychological terrain. Fancy. Do you know what it means?'

*Maria:* 'Yes.'

*Paulo:* 'Tell us.'

*Maria:* 'Where you live determines how you think and behave.'

*Paulo:* 'Does it?'

*Maria:* 'Partly.'

So, the implication was, it was more than individuals moving within what scope there was for free will that stood indicted for the way things were.

### **Drama of Urban Life and the Rural-Urban Interface**

Of course, the way things were was changing. The physical and psychological terrain was shifting. The trend towards rural depopulation and the movement to towns and cities accelerated with increasing industrialisation. While the main trend continued to be in this direction, there was a countervailing trend to disillusionment with urbanisation and industrialisation and to counter-cultural romanticisation of rural life. The trend was strongest in the most highly industrialised countries. Hippie and quasi-hippie types fantasised about return to the land and alternative lifestyles. Armed with the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and *Mao's Little Red Book*, they dropped out of MIT or UCLA or UCD and headed off to Vermont or New Mexico or Connemara to set up communes and to grow organic sunflower seeds. The natives, particularly in the west of Ireland, were naturally somewhat puzzled and bemused by the influx of exotic refugees from the city lights. It would seem a subject crying out for dramatic treatment, both serious and comic, though it has received surprisingly little. It was not left untouched, however.

Thomas Kilroy's *Farmers* took on such a scenario. Set in a run down farmhouse inhabited by two couples, one pair Irish and the other American, Kilroy probed beneath the flight from urban life and explored the uncertainties and insecurities motivating the four central characters. Playing the characters off against each other, the Irish couple came over as the more conventional. Between the women, Nuala's intolerance was set against Judith's resilience. As to the men, Seán was more positive, seeking the simple life to aid his work as a poet, whereas Peter was more cynical and in flight from the pressures of American life. Of the two other characters who came into the picture, one was a child, the daughter of Seán and Nuala. The other was a local farmer, symbolic of the indigenous community in which the farm was set. The inability of the four refugees to respond appropriately to his overtures underlined their position as outsiders and the irony of their playing at being farmers.

Eugene McCabe's treatment of the flight from urbanisation brought further complexities into a consideration of its incongruities. It was not so simple to retreat to the agricultural realm as a haven from the industrial world, when confronted with the growing industrialisation of agriculture. In *The Apprentice*, a wealthy builder's son, disillusioned with his father's lifestyle, opted to go to agricultural college, in search of an alternative lifestyle closer to nature. Upon discovering that the policy of the college was to fertilise every inch of land, to pour feed into animals to fatten them fast and to make maximum profits by whatever means, he in turn became disillusioned with the alternative.

The interface between rural and urban life was constantly surfacing in Ireland's indigenous television drama in a way that distinguished it from imported material and that reflected the growing pains of the socio-historical transitions, co-incident with and integrally tied to the introduction of television.

With all that the televisual picture of rural life revealed of its dark side, what the counterpart of urban life offered was anything but a contrasting brightness. Its dark side was darker still and loomed much larger in the total picture of the city as a form of social organisation.

Bringing the rural-urban interface immediately into play was one of RTE's most prominent urban dramas, the award winning *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*. Young Martin De Porres Cluxton was first seen walking the green hills of the west of Ireland, along with a group of other boys and a Christian Brother in charge. It soon became

apparent that the boys were juvenile offenders, whose school outing belonged to a borstal type of institution. Sent away for theft, his third offence, Martin had got to the point where he no longer remembered Dublin or even what his parents looked like. The rationale behind his sentence seemed to be that rural retreat under religious supervision was suitable treatment for unhealthy symptoms of urban disease.

The play was concerned with the week in the life of Martin Cluxton in which he was released from the reformatory and returned to Dublin. It traced the transition from country to city, from inside to outside, from school to dole queue, from institution to home. It quickly became clear that Martin would never be at home, even at home, in the off-hand and even threatening reception given him by his own family. His status as a no-hoper, not only in the past, but in the present and future, was underlined everywhere he went, in his encounters with friends, neighbours, priests, social workers, delinquents and dropouts, in his signing on at the labour exchange, in his fruitless job applications, in his sense of having nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Influenced by the social-realist trend in British television drama in the 1960s, especially the more radical work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, the play, the brainchild of Brian Mac Lochlainn who co-authored, produced and directed it, employed the innovatory techniques of drama-documentary to give a realistic and closely observed picture of the culture surrounding chronic unemployment. Particularly interesting were the devices used to carry the striving for meaning and explanation, arising out of the narrative. A series of authority figures would periodically turn from playing their roles in the story to direct address to camera commentary on the situation and offering various interpretations of causes and consequences.

Also on the sound track were voice over pieces, embodying the reflections of Martin and others on what was happening and why. Various bits of dialogue, pub talk and radio interviews in the background, as well as the whole thrust of the narrative, embodied a strong drive towards elucidation. Throughout the play, there were strong undercurrents rejecting Catholic authority or charity, on the one hand, and rejecting 1960s style radical opposition, on the other. Priests and brothers spoke as realising that their resources were inadequate to the tasks. The pub revolutionary discoursing on class struggle and the philosophising drop-out were portrayed as impotent in the face of the problems they raised. The one may have realised that: 'Babies don't get bit by rats in Foxrock' and the other may have come to see that: 'The whole society is based on waste' but the viewer was left with a strong feeling that neither could or would do anything about it. What then was the bottom line, as far as the motivating perspective underlying the play was concerned? According to Martin McLoone:

Throughout the play, then, what is highlighted is the lack of professional state-funded support systems, again the social democratic structures which would alleviate the problems... In the end, therefore, *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* rejects Catholic charity, socialist organisation and rural escape as solutions to the problems of contemporary urban society. In doing so, it calls for the development of a caring welfare state reinforcing the message of *Tolka Row* and anticipating the message of *Strumpet City*.<sup>76</sup>

While this analysis may have over-stated the degree of conscious communication of message across a range of productions, it was a reasonable enough reading of the deep structure underlying this production, as well as others of the period.

Another project of Brian MacLochlainn's, who was very committed to the dramatic depiction of Dublin working class life, was an urban six hour serial, *The Burke Enigma*. It was cops and robbers Dublin style, an indigenous version of the imported television crime series. It adopted many of the conventions of the genre developed elsewhere: the use of film, authentic locations, rapid cutting; action-adventure sequences full of fisticuffs, car chases, arrests and interrogations; a plot structured around crime, investigation and solution. It was particularly influenced by British versions of the genre, such as *Z Cars* and *The Sweeney*. It was intended to be more than just a crime thriller with a Dublin setting, however. It was meant to engage in an exploration of certain themes beyond what the genre normally allowed. It set out to be a dramatic investigation of such matters as the nature of urban crime and its relation to legitimate business and to political power, the role of the matriarchal family and the existence of contrasting approaches to police methods.

The story was triggered by the murder of Mrs. Burke, the matriarch of the Burke family. This was the enigma, the mystery to which subsequent investigation was to find the solution. The plot developed by looking into the lives of each of the suspects, ie, the various members of the Burke family. The Burke family was described as: 'Your old Dublin family with the rosary beads in one hand and the hatchet in the other.' They were a mafia type family modelled on the Dunne family, who had built an empire based on various types of racketeering, prostitution, and money lending. Their rackets had spawned various legitimate businesses in an intricate web in which the straight half fed off the bent half and vice versa. Their accumulated power and possessions had also won them the protection of people in high places. Each of the big and bad Burke family had their own story. Willie Burke particularly embodied the tie-in of criminal activity to political and business activity. An up-and-coming politician, he was also a

night club owner, as well as being implicated in pornography, prostitution, arson and fraud. His wife, Sandra, was a younger and perhaps even tougher version of the deceased matriarch, up to her eyes in various rackets and not reluctant to call upon her husband's connections with senior gardaí. In the course of following them and the rest of the family, all sorts of aspects of the black economy came to light, as well as such matters as emigration, homosexuality and suicide.

The dominant point of view running through the serial was that of the police, more specifically that of the two detectives investigating the Burke murder. It was through their eyes that Dublin, the Burke family, the Garda Síochána and all else was seen. The differences between the two detectives were central to the serial. McGettigan, the older of the two, representing an older type of cop, was a Dublin detective with a Donegal background. His basic approach to crime was psychological, empirical, methodical and patient. It was to investigate, to accumulate evidence and to draw upon a shrewd knowledge of human behaviour gleaned from years of experience. He was liberal and humanitarian. He was cultured and interested in the arts. Hannon was a younger and a newer type of cop. A tough, streetwise jackeen, his inclination was to punch first and ask questions later. He was impatient and violent and aggressive. Although representing the official forces of law and order, he was disposed to use whatever methods he thought appropriate, whether within the law or not, and not only in the pursuit of justice. He was not beyond the pursuit of private vendetta either. At one point, he was suspended from the force for insubordination. At another point, he was on the verge of resignation. Both were highly individualist characters, more than willing to fight their corner against bureaucratic authority, but in very different ways. In terms of the genre, one was more in the mould of Maigret, Friday, Kojak, Columbo or Furillo, while the other was more in the mould of Regan, Starsky and Hutch, Bodie and Doyle, Dempsey or Crockett. In one episode, McGettigan himself described their divergent approaches:

‘When I went into the guards in '43, it seemed to be the simplest job in the world. Now it gets more complex every day... Take me and Hannon - we've different attitudes to the same job. Hannon looks at Dublin and sees all the things wrong -all the rot. The only way he thinks of curing it is with tough arm stuff. To be in the guards for him means a clean ticket to mop up the city. Stamp out any smell of trouble. To hell with the pimps and the winos and the prostitutes...I've no romantic notions about the city. The prostitutes are as much a part of it as the bishops. I wasn't employed by the force to change history, just to do me job, use me brains, do me best and go home and forget about it. That's what I think.’

Reviewers generally praised *The Burke Enigma* for the realism of its portrayal of contemporary Dublin and for the stylishness of its methods of production. Some qualified their general approval with complaints that came down to the rhythm and pace of plot development. It was in many cases compared favourably with *The Spike* which had preceded it earlier in the same year, 1978.

In an academic analysis of *The Burke Enigma*, Mary Kelly postulated that the reason why *The Burke Enigma* was accepted as realistic by its audience and *The Spike* wasn't had a lot to do with the degree to which they drew upon the existing conventions of a popular television genre.<sup>77</sup> The implication of this being that the audience's expectations and judgemental criteria were derived more from their accumulation of previous television viewing than from their direct experience of the reality represented or their knowledge of it from other sources. It was probably so and becoming increasingly so. As far as the criticisms of *The Burke Enigma* went, Mary Kelly put these down as well to the audience's expectations engendered by foreign examples of the television crime genre. Because the pace of plot development was slowed down by the more detailed characterisation of the criminal elements and by the examination of police methods and because the serial form spread the building of climax and resolution over six episodes, the norm of simple characterisation and fast climax and resolution within each episode was upset. In her more substantive critique of the narrative itself, as it resonated with existing ideological discourses in Irish society, she focused on two central and interrelated themes running through it. The thematic values she perceived as pervading the serial were a treatment of crime, violence and evil as endemic to the city and an ambivalence towards competitive individualism. Regarding the first, her point was that it was simply posited, as if in no need of justification: ‘There is no analysis of the social sources of crime, rather crime is presented as part of the very nature of cities.’ Regarding the second, she placed it in the context of the particular stage in Ireland's ideological development:

This concentration on competitive individualism as a source of good when represented by the police and as a source of destructive evil when represented by the [Burke] family is interesting. It is an ambivalence which articulates well...with a deep ambivalence in Irish culture and ideology towards individualism and especially competitive individualism. On the one hand, we reject it, it is not part of the romantic image of what it means to be Irish, which has been particularly prevalent in Irish drama and visual culture. On the contrary, we equate it with modernity, with urbanisation and industrialisation, with materialistic values. We counterpose these with the higher values of a sense of community, a belief in the family, a commitment to national (and often rural) traditions. And yet our economic system rewards the successful competitive individualist, such as Tony O'Reilly or Fergal Quinn, and our media delight in recounting their activities and successes; the IDA and government alike proclaim the need for native entrepreneurs.

She concluded that *The Burke Enigma* was more questioning than the usual television crime drama, but that it was also more ambivalent. It showed the various shades of grey, rather than the usual black and white stereotypes. Despite these features which upset viewers' genre expectations, it won acceptance because of its large measure of conformity to established genre conventions and to existing and accepted ideological values.<sup>78</sup>

This very acceptance formed the basis of Eoghan Harris' critique of *The Burke Enigma*. For him the lack of public controversy surrounding it meant that it had failed to meet the criterion of what he called 'Dowling's law', which he formulated thus:

No television programme which failed to offend a substantial section of Irish vested interests can be said to have discharged its obligations to Irish society.<sup>79</sup>

Harris, who had an alternative conception of the serial, felt it was too much of a *Z Cars* type of script and was produced with a great deal of cooperation with the gardaí. He believed it could have been done with more originality and bite to it.

For his part, Brian Mac Lochlainn believed that its acceptance meant that it had fulfilled its aims. It helped to make people aware of the existence of the Dunnes and raised public consciousness of the nature of their activities. He insisted that it did not compromise in its treatment of the gardaí and exposed the existence of serious corruption in Dublin Castle.<sup>80</sup> On the question of the realism of this representation of the gardaí, Kevin McHugh, who played Willie Burke and, like Brian Mac Lochlainn, was the son of a guard, expressed reservations. In his opinion, it had the realism of a plausible fiction in the manner of a plot from *The Sweeney* or *Columbo*, but it did not have the realism of a drama documentary exposing the true nature of the gardaí. The degree and level of corruption ascribed to the force were not credible in the latter sense, nor was it accepted as such by the audience in whom it touched no nerve as revealing something about Irish society.<sup>81</sup> In any case, Brian MacLochlainn had hoped the series would develop into a continuing drama, a sort of *Store Street Blues*. A second series was actually written, but ran into a situation where all deals were off with a change in head of drama. Plans to do a follow up to *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* also ran into various obstacles over the years.

Occupying the same territory as Martin Cluxton were the people in Heno Magee's two plays *I'm Getting Out of this Kip* and *Hatchet*. Showing the poverty, claustrophobia, frustration and violence of the lives of those living in urban slums, they made the lot of subsistence farmers, landless labourers, grass widows and other unfavoured rural elements look blissful. In both plays, someone from the area who had emigrated and made good in England returned to provide a point of contrast to a bleak, brutalised, trapped existence in Ireland and to hold out leaving Dublin for another country's cities as the only conceivable solution to the inexplicable problems of this country's cities. In *I'm Getting Out of this Kip*, the only hope to come into the life of no hoper Jimmy Carter, living in corporation flats with his alcoholic father and defeated mother, was the return of his older brother, who seemed to be doing well in England. In *Hatchet*, the cycle of snarling violence bred by a culture of chronic unemployment, overcrowded housing and general impoverishment was quite forcefully portrayed. It focused on the conflicting loyalties, brought to a point of personal crisis in the life of Hatchet Bailey. He had earned his name at the age of 14 in facing the animal gang and cracking skulls in defence of his father, the Digger, a hard man, long on the dole, illiterate, in and out of prison.

Hatchet was caught in the middle between his widowed mother, constantly inciting him to live up to his name and to fight her battles for her, and his young wife Bridie, pulling him in the opposite direction. He began to consider emigration as the means of escape from the environment that had marked him as a man of violence. Unable to analyse his environment, he nevertheless knew there was something drastically wrong with it and with what it had made him. Hatchet recounted a parable told to him by his probation officer and applied it to himself: 'A man went out to find his enemies and he found no friends. Now a man went out to find his friends and he found no enemies.' Bridie, for her part, wanted little more out of life than a bit of peace, away from the suffocating matriarchal presence and the violence. She wanted to be out of his mother's home, where she could do nothing 'not even dream' and to have a home of their own. She wanted only 'no more waking up and hating it'. The strength of Heno Magee's plays was in their descriptive accuracy, in portraying the problems and pressures of the population trapped in the cultural milieu of Dublin corporation flats. The weakness, however, was in the lack of an analytical power probing further. They were strong on description of consequences, but weak on insight into causes. They assumed that individuals needed to be understood in their environmental context, but focused only on the most immediate environmental context and failed to pursue larger questions of sources or solutions.

## **Class Consciousness**

The same could be said of much of RTÉ's drama of the period, both urban and rural, both comic and tragic. There was a strong class consciousness running through it, for example, but it was stronger descriptively than analytically. Much of it had a very light touch indeed. *Up in the World*, for example, was a ten part comedy series built around a family's transition from one residential area to another in an up market direction. There was much scope for comic relief in the situation, especially in the actions of the loquacious father of the family, not anxious for his new neighbours to know of his humbler origins. Giving an indication of the spirit running through much of it was an *RTÉ Guide* article by Norman Smythe, RTÉ drama script editor and script writer:

Life has become infinitely more complex since the spread of democratic ideas and one of our great losses has been the blurring of recognisable differences between classes. In the good old days, there was a clear cut distinction between the landed gentry and the landless peasants, between the people of quality and the rabble, between the bosses and the workers... It was a stable world where the lower orders knew their place and kept to it with the exception of a few dissidents who sought to rise about their station. The world...ran smoothly, governed by gentlemanly principles agreed to in a good-humoured way by both sides... Alas, times have changed and the pendulum has swung over. An Irish emigrant hears the Women's Liberation Movement marching up Fifth Avenue past Tiffany's. A Bantu washing dishes in a Wimpy Bar in Tottenham Court Road hears the cry of equality from a Professor of Applied Physics on his way to catch the train to his six bedroom house in Wimbledon. I was born somewhere between the swing of the pendulum and owing to the negligence of my father in not overcoming the inconvenience of poverty, I had to indulge in manual labour from an early age.<sup>82</sup>

Observing and registering the marks of class and ringing the signs of some of the changes, yes. Doing so in witty style and in clever images, yes. But leaving us any the wiser about the nature of class and the real character of contemporary changes, no. Certainly the bitterness of Irish labour history and the legacy of 1913, not to speak of generations of agrarian struggle, played no part in this placid picture.

Nevertheless, out of his own working experience of a world of navvies, barmen, night watchmen and factory workers, Smythe wrote several plays meant to fulfill RTÉ's perceived need for drama relating to the world of work in an increasingly industrialised society. *The Rag Pickers*, *The Seamen* and *The Prison* were close-up studies of relationships among men thrown together through their work that simply did this without any wider aspirations.

Whether as a major or minor theme, workplace relationships came increasingly into play. In series, such as *Partners in Practice*, *The Spike* and *The Burke Enigma*, and in plays, such as *People in Glass Houses* and *Oh Mistress Mine*, and in RTÉ-supported films such as *Exposure*, these were to the fore. In certain domestic drama, such as *Up in the World* and *What Happens When it Snows?*, these came into the picture to shed light on how a character's behaviour at work was related to his behaviour at home. In the latter, for example, the fact that the father of the family, a fitter in a jam factory, was considered a scab by his workmates constituted an important dimension of the overall characterisation.

A long way from the factory floor was the milieu of Kevin Grattan's *People in Glass Houses*, which took a semi-serious look at the machinations of the upper echelons of the work force. Looking at the urban nouveau riche thrown up by the Lemass era in their working lives, the play was full of the modern management manual jargon coming to dominate the business conducted in the new high-rise office blocks, the mushrooming glass houses popping up all around Dublin. In this world, career manoeuvring was covered with layers and layers of empty spoof about decision analysis, goal setting, creative feedback, ongoing systems, executive self-starters, quantifying segments. In one moment of truth, one up-and-coming executive, manoeuvring between two rival finance houses, found it difficult to sustain the bluff and abruptly changed key. He put it to his interviewing board: 'All this delegating, arbitrating, quantifying... I'm surprised you have any time to get any work done...' It was far from a radical critique of the parasitic character of financial speculation, but it did put a tiny prick into the inflated egos of the lightweights who rose to the top on the high tide of Ireland's economic expansion. It was only the tip of the iceberg in what called out for dramatic exposure in this quarter, but it has unfortunately been an area left otherwise untouched.

Another look at the nouveau riche of this era was Kieran Hickey's film *Criminal Conversation* shown on RTÉ. It opened on the high-rise world of advertising and projected some vivid images of the ethos of the PR milieu at an office Christmas party. The main focus of the film, however, was the domestic life of the superficially self-admiring, but deeply insecure, new Ireland. In the course of an evening dinner party, the masks came off and the reality behind the public roles stood revealed. Ironically, the truth was told only when pretending. The use of charades as a narrative device was itself a rather cutting comment on the manners and mores of Ireland's new managerial middle class.

## Drama of Suburban Life

The new sprawling suburbs became the locus for several successive, though short-lived, serials of the seventies. *Southside* was meant to break new ground for RTÉ, to be a suburban counterpart to the urban *Tolka Row* and the rural *The Riordans*. It was meant to be distinguished by the setting, by the kind of people, by the type of concerns and by the adult treatment of these. It was intended to have great topicality at a time when the men in dark suits and slim briefcases seemed to be well and truly on their way in a culture not far removed from its peasant past. Set in the semi-detached suburbia of Cork, it made the point that urban and suburban life was not confined to Dublin. It dealt with the problems of an unofficial parents' association, a trade union secretary, travellers, a priest involved in social action being stifled by his superiors. Above all, it took on marital breakdown, not the sort marked by sudden and spectacular crisis, but the much more common sort marked by slow and barely perceptible disintegration. The serial centred on two couples, each of whom had drifted apart and found themselves simply sharing a house with someone they had once married.

The next season brought a sequel entitled *Newpark Southside*, set on a new housing estate, with the Maher family moved from the foreground into the background. It also brought certain changes in tone, theme and treatment. Believing that *Southside* had gone too far in its emphasis on social comment and had made comedy incidental, it was decided to reverse the order, so that comedy struck the dominant note. Whereas the aim of *Southside* had been to say out loud what many Irish people spoke about only in whispers, the aim of *Newpark Southside* was more to entertain. However, the author of both serials, David Hayes, was anxious to make the point that, while the tone would be lighter, the comedy was to have its serious side and the laughter would have an edge to it. It would no longer have the urgency and intensity of direct social comment, but it would cast a cold eye on the changes taking place in the Ireland of its day and deal courageously with the relevant issues. There was still a concern with such problems as those of men who had worked their way up and were squeezed out by rationalisation and of people who found themselves in marriage that didn't dramatically break up but simply died over a number of years. Both serials were permeated by the assumption that suburbia created the conditions for a particular brand of social malaise.

Also suburban in setting was *Partners in Practice*, a medical series set up to give the Irish television audience, long familiar with *Emergency Ward 10*, *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, *Marcus Welby M.D.* and *Dr. Kildare*, an indigenous version of a popular genre. It was also to acknowledge the social importance of the population shifted into the huge housing estates in Ireland's mushrooming suburbs. The small fictional village of Sallybawn at the foot of the Dublin mountains, which had suddenly sprouted a vast residential growth, was modelled on Tallaght with its endless expanse of tacky-tacky houses and few amenities. One amenity Sallybawn was to have, however, was a new health centre. Sallybawn Health Centre, the central locus of the series, was to be the embodiment of the new medical scheme introduced in April 1972, characterised by a choice-of-doctor scheme, a staff of public health nurses and social workers, and equal health care for every section of the community, whether from corporation or private estates.

Each of the stories highlighted various aspects of life in this sort of seventies sprawling suburb, presenting the new face of working class life. There were suburbs and suburbs. Tallaght/Sallybawn was a world away from Foxrock or Portmarnock. In one episode, a Sallybawn character was saying what many were saying about Tallaght at the time, wondering what sort of planning, or lack of planning, had created such a place, a community with no community centre (in any sense of the term). Then turning around and answering her own question, the social worker saw the explanation in the triumph of market forces over social planning. Or put it in her terms: 'But, of course, community centres and libraries and playgrounds aren't as lucrative as shopping centres and supermarkets.'

Various storylines took up such matters as juvenile delinquency, industrial accidents, class differences, professional relationships, emigration, overcrowded housing, illness, domestic strife, children watching television violence, lost souls in the urban crowd and much more. However, like *Southside* and *Newpark Southside*, it ran one season and disappeared nearly without trace. In trying to trace the reasons, different people came up with different answers. For Carolyn Swift, the main writer, there were problems with casting and other aspects of production. The opinion of critics probably carried some weight, particularly that of Hugh Leonard who slated it, though Arden and D'Arcy praised it highly.<sup>83</sup> For Michael Judge, another writer involved in the series, the trouble was with the unevenness of the writing and the pace being too slow for the television audience of the day.<sup>84</sup>

Later, there were a few single plays set in suburbia, though certainly not as many as there should have been to give due scope to the problems deserving of dramatic treatment at this developing edge of Irish life. *Briarsville Forever* in 1977, written by Kevin Grattan and directed by Louis Lentin, was the sort of play promoted by Louis Lentin when he became head of drama in 1978 and instituted the Thursday Playdate spot. Believing that the television play should start where current affairs left off, he took the position that the television play could highlight social issues by showing new dimensions to them and by leaving a more memorable impact. Coming out of the author's own experience of a new estate much like the fictional Briarsville of this play, the dreams and disappointments of those

seeking a better life in the suburbs were brought up for consideration. Building the story around a young newly married couple, who had sunk all their savings into a house that had turned out to be damp, draughty and even dangerous, the difficulties of organising a concerted campaign among residents provided further reason for discouragement. Working through the residents' association, a plan to picket the show house in protest against the shoddy workmanship ran into resistance from residents, who could think no further than their fear of adverse publicity and its effect on property values. Collective activity or any sort of community spirit was being progressively eroded by the possessive individualism of suburbia. A second thread of the play was the state of marriage on the new estates and the world of women who got caught up in the world of pyramid selling, regarded by the author as 'the opium of the harrassed suburban housewife', though few others would have regarded it as such a central target. The connection with current affairs came, not only in drama taking matters up where current affairs left off, but the other way round as well, with news coming in where the fiction left off. A headline in the *Evening Herald* not long after read: 'residents row is echo of RTÉ drama'.

Moving a few steps down-market again was Jim Sheridan's *Mobile Homes*, an RTÉ version of a Dublin Theatre Festival play which caused a bit of a rumpus, mainly because of the presence of an outdoor toilet. RTÉ's rather infelicitously phrased announcement of the play had 'the author playing the title role'. Sheridan, who played, not a mobile home, but an inhabitant of one, presented an extraordinarily bleak picture in this drama documentary of life on a Dublin site. It showed tenants struggling for the most elementary of rights, coping with the cold and the dark after the landlord had cut off the electricity in retaliation, on top of the already intolerable conditions of cramping and lack of proper sanitation, not to mention explosive tensions from other sources. Amidst all this, a child was born and a child died. The death of the child was brought on by the conditions of this most impossible and degrading way of life. This play provided one of the very few occasions on which any character, let alone a central character, was a committed socialist. Sheridan, primarily through his own character of Shay, a painter of other people's houses with none of his own, showed rather simply how Engels' writings on housing had helped some at least to see their unhappy lot and their small-scale endeavours as part of a larger process, moving hopefully towards a larger solution. Several scenes raised political questions in very explicit terms. In one scene, Shay's father asked him: 'Who will organise vagabonds and riff-raff -the communists' to which he replied: 'Maybe, but anyway, we are not vagabonds and riff-raff.' Which was as far as things got before violence ensued and a woman's labour came on.

### **Class Structure, Social Systems and the Politics of RTÉ Drama**

Even though the possibility of collective action in response to social injustice was only sketchily raised and left hanging in the air, it was at least raised in a way that was absent in other productions like *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*, *Hatchet*, *I'm Getting Out of this Kip* or even *The Spike*. The fact was that, even in these productions, which RTÉ would point to as its strongest contributions in the way of urban drama or in the way of socially conscious drama, RTÉ had failed to come to terms with the real texture of contemporary urban life and particularly with its cutting edge. Even across the whole range of its drama, it had fallen far short of giving an adequate picture of the real social canvas of its constituent culture. It had been most remiss with respect to its representation of working class life and strikingly negligent in relation to the most socially conscious and culturally advanced elements of urban life.

What RTÉ has considered its prototypical working class drama has tended to focus on lumpen life, ie, on the culture of chronic unemployment, criminality and social welfare dependency. In other words, its working class drama has tended to focus on people who did not work. Part of the problem has been a lack of clarity about the nature of class. There has been a tendency to identify the working class by shabby clothes, flat accent, rough manners, lack of education, corporation flats, rather than by work. There has correspondingly been a tendency to identify the middle class by decent clothes, posh accent, cultivated manners, education, private housing, rather than by relationship to means of production. The Cluxtons and the Baileys were putatively working class, as were the kids in *Down the Corner*, a film made by the Ballyfermot community arts workshop co-funded by RTÉ. The teaching staff of *The Spike*, the medical staff of *Partners in Practice*, the detectives of *The Burke Enigma* and the residents of *Southside*, *Newpark Southside* and *Briarsville Forever* were regarded as middle class.

However, if more historically based and sociologically accurate definitions were to be applied, the profile would look different. Properly used, class is a term for locating a person's place in the social division of labour and distribution of wealth, for specifying their relationship to the means of production, distribution and exchange. The great divide is ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Defining the working class as those dependent on wage labour for their livelihood and the middle class as those with a stake in the private ownership of the means of social production, distribution and exchange, then even well-dressed, well-spoken, educated and home-owning teachers, social workers, nurses and guards would be working class, so long as they lived by wage labour and they had no stake in the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

Correspondingly, even the most badly-dressed, inarticulate, uneducated person, who owned land, stocks or shares, a shop, a pub, a van or other business would not be working class, however hard working.

Under capitalism, there are two major forces, capital and labour, generating the two major classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie, today the dominant class, originated under feudalism as the middle class between the aristocracy and peasantry, as merchants, who were neither lord nor serf, but made their way by buying and selling. There are also minor classes, such as the aristocracy, which has survived the mode of production which gave rise to it. There are also sub-classes. In terms of ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, there is a huge difference between major shareholders in major multinational corporations and small shopkeepers. The haute bourgeoisie has amassed unprecedented wealth and the petite bourgeoisie may be economically quite marginal and even on the verge of impoverishment. In terms of those of no property (in the productive/commercial sense), there is a substantial, if shifting, divide between those who work and those who do not. The proletariat is socially productive and has a culture shaped by the structure of work discipline. The lumpen proletariat is the opposite. The chronically unemployed as a subclass tend to have a culture that is unproductive, undisciplined, individualist and even anti-social, while the aristocracy is a parasitic and privileged upper class, the lumpen proletariat is a parasitic and impoverished underclass.

All of the above classes and subclasses warrant dramatic treatment, but the drama of any aspect of life within the social order would be enhanced by clarity about the nature of class structure and the real texture of the spectrum. Lumpen culture was and is undoubtedly in need of dramatic exploration, perhaps more fully and more sharply than what RTÉ has done. However, an insightful exploration of either working class life or lumpen life has been subverted by the confusion of the two and the pre-occupation with one at the expense of the other. It was certainly inappropriate to set out to give a dramatic picture of working class life and then to put those who did not work on centre stage. It has done scant justice to those whose hands have built our homes, whose brains have advanced our knowledge, whose leadership has pushed forward the struggle for social justice, to make the no-hopers, the spoofers and the ruffians the norm. The working class has been presented, not as a majority class whose labour has made the world go round and whose voice has demanded only what was their right, but as an aggregate of individuals, who were impotently idling or lashing out or chancing their arms.

In a liberal mode, they were represented as in need of liberal compassion and social democratic intervention, rather than in a conservative mode, as in need of criminalisation and authoritarian retribution. They were presented as dole fodder rather than as jail fodder. But these were not the only possible modes of representation of the working class. No matter how far to the right or left of this view individual producers, writers, heads of drama or controllers were, their actual productions embodied the dominance of a vaguely liberal sympathy for the inexplicably underprivileged. It was a tendency to operate on a set of implicit assumptions, rather than to bring them into explicit expression. It did not bring liberal sympathy into sharp conflict either with conservative complicity in class privilege or with a radical critique of the structural inequalities inherent in class society. It was a tendency to hug the ground just left of centre, not veering too much either to the left or to the right.

The best of these productions were characterised by vivid exposure, even reforming zeal. They were distinguished by close observation of local consequences, but not by a clear vision of wider socio-historical causes or alternatives. Whatever may have been intended, what came out was a condescending view of the working class, either as helplessly oppressed and needing middle class handling or as somehow inherently funny, functioning as a foil for middle class manners and calling forth middle class indulgent good humour. There was little sense of the working classes as competently organised to defend their own class interests, to read books, to discuss theories, to articulate their own views of the world. There was little sense of a working class subculture as characterised by work discipline, trade union organisation, adult education, labour songs, stories and rituals, political oratory, campaigns for social reforms, community festivals, sports, dances and a host of other activities that were far from the images of ineptitude, ignorance and squalor that were to the fore.

It was not that there were not corporation flats full of down-and-outs, drug addicts, drunkards, hard chaws, whingeing wives, loud-mouthed scrubbers, hard-necked whores, scheming chancers and blundering buffoons. It was that the cities of the seventies also had their labour leaders, their left wing intellectuals, their radical feminists, their political activists in many causes. They were not to be seen in RTÉ drama, except in the most fleeting and marginal way, if at all. There were Martin Cluxtons and Hatchet Baileys bewildered by it all, but there were no Bill Brands, with ideas about the whys and wherefores of it all, trying to make a difference. The class struggle, the emergence of new social forces, the movements that made these times most memorable for many, were missing from the televised representations of the era in drama. Nor were the powers-that-be, the most strident of the old social forces, the interests that managed to stem the tide of social change, much in evidence either. Nor were their working class defenders, the militant crew thumpers, the Catholic actionists and the blueshirt remnants. There was no real Irish equivalent of Alf Garnett or Archie Bunker. There was no dramatic representation, other than fleeting satirical sketches, of any elements with any sort of ideological edge.

It was also that the cities of the seventies were full of ordinary, decent, hard-working men and women whose lives, both at home and at work, threw up situations other than crime, corruption and violence, but more than worthy of dramatic treatment under the heading of urban or working class drama. The changing lifestyles of the times, penetrating to all sections of the population, gave much scope for drama. RTÉ did give a certain amount of dramatic attention to such people and such situations, but often without dramatic clarity about their place in the class structure of their society as it was relevant to the situation being explored.

Because of the lack of penetration into the reality of class in the lives of characters portrayed, the real structure of the social order shaping the parameters of their lives never came into sharp focus. The existing social order, in its basic structure, was taken as given, however much certain reforms within that structure might have been thought necessary or desirable. Capitalism was taken as given. When its flaws were exposed, the dilemma revolved around the polarity between the human and the inhuman faces of capitalism. The assumption, usually implicit and unexamined, was that individuals making a moral choice could put humanist considerations above commercial ones and solve such problems as were faced, without the necessity of any change in the structure of the social order. There was never a clear sense of the problem of social inequality as being systemic in nature, necessitating a systemic response in solution. Because the system never came into sharp relief as a system, the need to do anything about it as a system never arose. This would go a long way towards explaining why political activism, particularly the radical politics of either left or right varieties, were on the scale of marginal-to-absent in the overall picture.

The same could be said of the drama dealing with class tensions in a rural context. Resentment between landless agricultural labourers and their land owning employers surfaced again and again. It was represented as constructing barriers of communication, as blighting young love, as generating personal hostility and sexual tension. It was not represented as stemming from a historically contingent form of social organisation, whereby one class could appropriate the surplus value created by another. Class differences tended to be accepted as a historically inevitable condition, the abuses of which could be mitigated by mutual understanding and good will among individuals. It posed no structural problems, only personal ones, which could be resolved by everyone either knowing their place or being a bit more flexible about the rules for moving from one place to another.

*King of the Castle* was perhaps the most bitter expression of class tensions on the land. It showed the impotence of class tensions that did not rise to the level of collective class consciousness and structural confrontation. Class tension seethed and fed on itself and consumed all enveloped by it. It was a disintegrating and destructive force rather than an integrative and constructive force. *The Riordans* tended to keep class tension somewhere in between. Matters such as the wages and conditions of agricultural labourers were periodically raised and then diffused, as Éamonn Maher, Batty Brennan and Pat Barry all eventually found personal solutions in the way of upward mobility. Along the way, problems which arose gave rise to ineffectual personal resentment or effectual confrontation and resolution.

It was always in terms of each individual dealing with it alone on a personal basis, never turning to collective solidarity. Unlike the agricultural labourers on NY Estates in *Emmerdale Farm*, the Leestown variety never took the path of union organisation, despite the advancing unionisation of rural workers in the country at the time. All the same, the issues were sometimes raised with real bite, even between highly sympathetic and long established characters. At one point, Éamonn Maher resigned, leaving Tom Riordan unable to comprehend what had happened. Farmhands were hired and fired. They did not resign. Trying to understand, Tom asked Éamonn: 'All the time you worked here did I treat you fair?' Éamonn proceeded to explain that, when Comerford had gone off, Tom had offered to lend him Éamonn for a day or two. Still not seeing, Éamonn explained further: 'Well, you don't lend things you don't own... you'd look after me, all right, the way you'd look after the tractor or the stock'. It was a revelation of cutting condescension in the most benevolent of characters. Nevertheless, things were patched up on a personal level. Éamonn was soon back working for Tom and eventually acquired his own land.

Exemplifying the pattern noted by sociologists, this sort of social mobility was hostile to class-collective action, because, as David Fitzpatrick put it: 'it encourages queue-jumping rather than conspiracy among frustrated queuers to take over the bus.'<sup>85</sup> Across a range of other social issues raised in *The Riordans*, Luke Gibbons noted a similar tendency to blur and diffuse class tensions. Remarking on the relative absence of forms of collective action, which transcend familial and affective ties, he cited Jude's dispute with a rackrenting landlord. Although it coincided with an actual campaign among flat dwellers in real life, Jude's personal situation was mediated through Tom Riordan's intervention, acting both as her father and as county councillor. The need for organised campaigns for concerted resistance at a more engaged level was alluded to, but never really developed.<sup>86</sup>

Most of the time, it was individuals up against other individuals. The extent to which individuals were differentially placed to be unequal in the struggle was often raised, but never fully explored. Michael Judge's *The Decoy* looked at the personal dimension of urban development in the conflict between a property speculator and a

shoemaker who was a sitting tenant in a building now marked for other purposes. It was a conflict between one determined to make maximum profits and the other determined to defend his shop to the death. It was a story less about social forces than about personal relationships and the pressures people put on one another. Some pushed. Some resisted. Others got caught in the middle. In the process, each one changed. It did, however, give occasion to think about the nature of the social forces which had set off such changes. An explanation of how different individuals coped with a corrupt society was John Montague's story *A Change of Management*, adapted for RTÉ by Eugene McCabe. Some simply took on accepted values and triumphed. Most blew with the wind. Others discovered they couldn't beat the system and joined it. A few resisted and were destroyed.

### **Images of the Family**

Choices between acceptance or resistance came much nearer to home for most, in fact, *in the home*. Conflicts easier to comprehend than those involving class forces and social institutions were those nearest to hand, ie, within the family. In this domain, RTÉ drama did play its part in demonstrating that the family unit was by no means the unproblematic basic unit of social organisation that de Valera's constitution and the bishops' pastorals made it out to be. Far from being a warm and secure haven from the vicissitudes of the larger world, the family home was shown to be rent with vicissitudes of its own. Far from relieving the pressures of the outside world, the families of Martin Cluxton and Hatchet Bailey only intensified the pressures.

The family itself was both victim and victimiser in the face of these social pressures. The family was shown to be less a site of supportive relationships than an arena of threatening conflicts and authoritarian structures. Alternatively, it was a vacuum of casual neglect and acute loneliness. There were few homes in the dramas of the day that were not riddled with marital, parental or sibling tensions. There were few crowded houses that were not full of very lonely people. There were tensions between husband and wife in *King of the Castle*, *Heritage*, *The Spike* and *Criminal Conversation*. There were conflicts between mothers and sons in *The Burke Enigma*, *Hatchet* and *Sons and Mothers*; between mother and daughter in *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers*; between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in *Hatchet*; between father and sons in *The Country Boy*; between fathers and daughters in *The Spike*, between brothers in *Cancer* and *Only the Earth*. There were conflicts between all of these in *The Riordans*.

Admittedly, conflict is the stuff of drama and placid families leading uneventful, harmonious lives are not. Also the whole heritage of post-Ibsenite drama was to focus on family conflict. Even so, RTÉ drama gave a picture of family life at odds with the official ideology. The official ideologues were not hesitant to say so. Drama showed that the placid exterior often hid a muted sort of disharmony, which was very deep indeed, even if it was not loud. From the loneliness of old age in *The Cruel Fondness*, to the gulf between people who once married in *Southside* and *Exposure*, to the isolation of the odd-one-out child in *Partners in Practice*, there were many who felt acutely alone amidst all the clatter and superficial contact of family life. The urban homes shown, those of the Cluxtons, the Baileys, the O'Mahonys, the Burkes and most others, were major disaster areas. In *The Burke Enigma*, Joe Burke tried to articulate what he felt about the stifling, claustrophobic influence of the family: 'I mean the whole family thing - it's like a vice. You don't get room to breathe, to be yourself... No one gets away. The family has a hold on you... All of us, we're all caught in the web'.

Other plays too took on the drama of the individual struggling to define him/herself, over against the stultifying weight of the family. Some focused on generational conflict. *The Glory and the Dream* showed a bright lad from a working class background, wanting to go to university, instead of settling into a dead-end job, as family expectations laid down. *Too Short A Summer* showed another lad wanting to do the opposite, but meeting the same sort of resistance. *What Happens When It Snows?*, James Douglas's play about 'that fecund and most frightening of jungles, the family', showed how thorny things could get, when a son returned home with the girl with whom he'd been living in sin in England. *The Apprentice* was also about a break with parents' lifestyles.

These plays generally reflected the social shifts that had opened a new range of options for those at life's crossroads, which were not always comprehensible or acceptable to those who had no such options. The emerging stress on the rights and needs of the individual, struggling against the demands, not only of the family, but of the larger community, showed the developing displacement of more traditional quasi-feudal values by more modern bourgeois values. This pattern manifested itself in the whole range of productions, revealing the ambivalence regarding individualism that Mary Kelly noted in relation to *The Burke Enigma* to be deeply rooted in the Irish mentality of the times. The pressure of the demands for individual identity and self-expression upon the stability of the traditional family unit began to show and to play itself out in ever more complex ways. It was evident, not only in offspring wanting to fly the coop and go their own way, but in new dimensions coming into relations between the sexes.

## Conflicting Norms of Sexual Morality

It was possible to detect a struggle between old and new norms of sexual morality. Even where the old norms were in force among the characters, there was sometimes a new edge of critical exposure in the author's portrayal of the characters. Even in stories in which there was no hint of characters questioning the traditional norms in principle, there were revelations of a complexity of experience that nearly compelled a violation of the simplicity of their surface acceptance. It was more than norms and transgressions of those norms due to fallen human nature. It was that there were hints, not so much in the characters' own perceptions of their situations, but in the author's construction of the scenario, that the problem might be with the norms and not with those who transgressed them. This was rarely taken to its limits and followed through in a really satisfactory way, but even such hints could play their part in puncturing the hegemony of unquestioned traditional norms.

The revelations that things were not what they seemed in what might have looked like the most normal of lives made one wonder. The exposure of an unsuspected complexity in what seemed the simplest of lives gave cause for thought about the validity of trying to fit life's flow into such rigid bounds. There was the slip of the tongue, revealing a liaison that implied illegitimacy, from the old Donegal woman in *Mr. Sing, My Heart's Delight*. There was the illicit and violent intercourse between the religious and repressed Matt and Tressa in *King of the Castle*. There was the discovery of bigamy in the comings and goings of a west of Ireland man working in England in *Deeply Regretted By*. Such moments hit a nerve and carried a sort of paradigmatic force that left one thinking about how much more was hidden beneath the surface of even what looked quite traditional.

Of course, with the changing times, the surface was starting to look less traditional. There were sexual liaisons outside the bounds for all to see. In *The Riordans*, there was Jim Hyland leaving Jude Riordan and remarrying abroad. There was Jude taking up with a man with a foreign divorce. There was Paddy Gorey returning home with Sheelagh and living in sin in Leestown. There was the unmarried mother from England. Interestingly all these stories had a foreign connection, suggesting that the forces subverting traditional morality were external rather than internal to Irish society or that Irish morality was a hot house plant that could not survive in the open air. In *Exposure*, there was Oliver's affair with Caroline, whose presence created an uneasiness and a threatening quality, very tied to the fact that she was not only a professional woman and divorced, but foreign. In time, however, it became more possible to introduce such stories without the foreign influence. The forces contributing to the disintegrating marriages and adulterous liaisons in *Criminal Conversation* were quite indigenous, a fact which was given particular emphasis by a character's involvement in a 'Be Irish' television campaign, full of Seán Ó Riada music, 'I am Ireland' poetry and lush green scenery. Perhaps the most daring illicit liaison of all, only possible by the end of the decade, was that of the married and much loved Maggie Riordan with Pat Barry. By this time too, Wesley Burrowes could introduce unmarried mothers of the home-grown variety in *Sons and Mothers*.

The weight of the community on such transgressive relationships lay very heavily indeed. Jude was under constant pressure from the Marys and the Minnies. Sheelagh was refused pub service by her own sister, Julia Mac. Caroline was confronted with the furtive nastiness of the women working in the hotel and with the symbolic rape of the rifling of her room by Oliver's frustrated and repressed mates. Drama raised issues with which the community did not want to cope. Regarding contraception, Maggie Riordan went on the pill and all hell broke loose, even more in the real community than in the fictional one. Regarding broken or disintegrating marriages, Helen Diffley in *Whose Child?* had to stay legally married to a man she hadn't even heard from in ten years, whether she liked it or not, like her many real life counterparts. No matter what Frank and Margaret and Charlie and Bernadette in *Criminal Conversation* and all like them might decide they wanted to do, when confronted with the ruins of what once were marriages, they faced the state's law of criminal conversation and the church's prohibition on divorce.

The picture of Irish marriages among those who stayed together and might never consider separation or divorce was not very edifying either. The gulf of understanding and sympathy separating Scober and Tressa McAdam or Hatchet and Bridie Bailey was continents wide and oceans deep. The relationship between Jer O'Mahoney and his wife resembled guerilla warfare. That between John Willie and Sarah O'Neill was a veritable wasteland. Of course, there were also Tom and Mary Riordan, in what would have been considered a middling-to-good-marriage, but they at all times related to each other across the gulf of the traditional sexual division of labour, in which the opposite sex was always a semi-alien species. They were not exactly inspiring exemplars of mature sexual passion either. Sex was definitely something for the young. It was impossible to conceive of Tom and Mary in the act. Among the young, sex was something for men. Bridie either let Hatchet 'have his way' with her or had a headache, as the case might be.

The overall picture of sexuality in Irish society that came through was, it must be said, somewhat sordid. The sordidity, the kind born of the cycle of sexual repression and illicit indulgence, was there in Irish society and needed dramatic treatment, though it received more enlightened treatment from some authors than from others.

McCabe's various plays went closest to the edge and did so with the greatest insight. His images struck nearest to the raw nerves of Irish sexuality. There were images of severe sexual repression in Eric O'Neill's paralysis in the face of Rachel's emotional and sexual needs; in John Willie O'Neill's marriage to a woman who hated bodies, both his and hers which he had never seen; in Paschal and Pacelli McAleer, who walked through life as semi-automatons that didn't smoke, didn't drink and didn't 'interfere with girls', though they might well blow them to bits; in Joady and Dinny McMahan's slovenly and spiteful womanless house; in Benny Brady's praying in a loft while Joe masturbated. There were images of atavistic and bestial sexuality: in the view from Benny's loft of pissing and puking and gropes and groans from the town's hot blood; in the predatory sexual parrying of Gallagher the provo gunman, who notched up girls he screwed in ditches in the same way as he did with the targets he made into corpses; in Scober McAdam's view of sex as an itch, a scratch, a growth; in Maguire's cocky strut of taunting offers of his services as a stud; in Matt and Tressa's violent intercourse; in Mrs. McAleer who seemed as if she could give birth to her sons full-grown. There were also more sophisticated, if not respectable, images of modern sexual expression: in Isabel Lynam's affairs and abortion; in Harriet Armstrong's experience of marriage as a cruel trap.

Kieran Hickey's films also cut quite close to the bone and produced some penetrating images of Irish sexuality in the seventies. *Exposure* and *Criminal Conversation*, both written by Kieran Hickey and Philip Davison and directed by Kieran Hickey, were made by BAC Films in co-operation with RTÉ and transmitted by RTÉ.

*Exposure*, which won the Arts Council script award for 1977, was the story of three male surveyors from Dublin working on a government assignment for a week in the west of Ireland and their reactions to an attractive foreign female on a photographic assignment staying in the same small seedy hotel. The three men, who were conceived as in a sense the same man at three different ages, personified in a most striking way the immaturity of Irish male sexuality, what Hickey considered to be 'the condition of chronic adolescence in the Irish male'.<sup>87</sup> The film explored the dynamics of male bonding between the three and the build-up of erotic tension between the four, once Caroline entered the picture and embarked on an affair with Oliver. Oliver, the youngest, was the only unmarried member of the trio. The other two, Dan and Eugene, were married and shown in telephone contact with their wives in Dublin. Both were revealed as achingly lonely within their marriages. Dan, longer married, was resigned to it. He had been lonely for 23 years. He had left his wife years ago, even if he still lived under the same roof and had rows with her over the phone when away. Eugene, not so long married, was disappointed and frustrated, but still held out some bleak hope for the sort of bond with his wife that would ease his loneliness. He reached out painfully for some sort of expression of affection, while she chattered on superficially and insensitively about her mother, the baby, cups of tea, television and mass.

On the Sunday, the three went to mass and then the four went on a picnic, having an idyllic sort of day, full of high spirited joie de vivre, with Caroline taking zany photographs. In the evening, when the two, Oliver and Caroline, went off for an intimate dinner, the other two, Dan and Eugene, sank into their sorrows. In their frustration and resentment and fear, they broke into Caroline's room and started throwing her things around, taking particular delight in mocking her underwear and smashing her camera, as symbolic expressions of their fear of her, both in terms of her liberated sexuality and in terms of her professional skill and economic independence. It was meant to be a symbolic rape of her as a woman and repudiation of her as a professional. When Oliver and Caroline returned, Oliver behaved weakly, and faced with the choice, essentially betrayed her for them. Sunday night ended with Caroline left on the stairs crying, as the female victim of male psychological violence.

In a most interesting pattern of narrative closure, there was then a reversal of point of view, which drastically changed the overall resonance of the film. On Monday, the impact of the previous day was first experienced in terms of the re-bonding of the three in a mock-triumphant mood at the bar, deciding 'she was bad news anyway'. However, the scene shifted to Caroline upstairs, developing the photographs of the previous day, which had the effect of bringing the preceding events into focus from her point of view. In the final scene, the crucial still of the film, a photograph of the three, all jovial, arm-in-arm and smiling at her, came up before Caroline's day-after eyes, stirring reflections of how much cruelty and violence lay latent under the most affable and accepting surfaces. Just at the crucial point of exposure, she then switched on the light and watched the photograph fade, in a purposeful act of retaking control over the production of images and enacting her symbolic triumph in mastering the meaning of the story.

Another interesting aspect of this film was the way it flew in the face of personal and professional prejudices about stories with a message in the sense of having a symbolic meaning or carrying an ideological charge. The tightly structured narrative of this film was such that every character, every line of dialogue, every image and every action had an explicit symbolic function. Yet there was not the slightest hint of cardboard characterisation. There was not a word that did not flow naturally off the tongue. There was no esoteric imagery. There was nothing the least bit false or forced in the movement of the plot.

Most importantly, it was a challenging diagnosis of some of the diseases making Irish sexuality the somewhat sickly creature it often was. It was an analysis of male sexual attitudes that gave evidence of a healthy response in the more sensitive among the male of the species to some of the questions raised by the feminist currents of the time. It was not, however, the sort of weak response to feminist fury, whereby men were the evil doers and women were absolved from all evil. It mightn't have been a very flattering picture of the Irish male, but it wasn't exactly counterposed to a romanticised view of the Irish female. The Irish women came across as sexually repressed and repressive, in the nastily nagging or busily frigid wives and in the jealous and bitchy hotel landlady.

*Criminal Conversation* was also a very sensitive exploration of Irish sexuality in the seventies, though perhaps the threads were not quite so masterfully pulled together at the end to make its intended point. The reference of the title was to an old law, still on the books at the time, whereby a husband could take an action in the courts against another man for adultery.<sup>88</sup> The film spotlighted the incongruities in the situation of the nouveau riche caught between the conceptually vague new Ireland and the legally persistent old Ireland. It showed them to be floundering in a moral vacuum in which they had no secure guidelines within which to act, nor any credible criteria by which to judge their own actions or those of others. The central issue was adultery: what to do about it and how to judge it when done, especially once it became clear who was and was not doing it. At the outset, there was Frank chatting up every female he encountered and trying to diffuse the tension from his wife Margaret, who was uptight about his carry-on.

By the end, after an evening of truth, it transpired that it was Margaret who had been having an adulterous affair and that it was Frank who never had. All he ever did was the chatting-up. All the same, it left him unsure of his moral ground in coming to terms with his wife and his best friend. After all, to say: 'You went too far, Charlie. You don't mess around with your best friend's wife' was hardly to stand the high moral ground. In many ways, they were all shown to have no real ideas or values, whether old or new, that were firmly their own. In the reaction to the two films in Ireland, Hickey was made to feel as if he had touched raw nerves and violated taboos. This was not exactly surprising in view of the fact that he had. In the reaction abroad, there was a certain resistance to its images, which so decisively ran counter to the foreign stereotypes of Ireland. The people in these stories were modern and difficult men and women, far from the archaically simple lads and lassies of their stage Irish expectations. Hickey found Americans to be particularly slow-witted about them, which again was hardly surprising.<sup>89</sup>

There were other authors as well, who touched on such areas, but few with the same sort of penetration as Eugene McCabe or Kieran Hickey. Some perhaps felt that the light touch might be more effective or more acceptable to the audience. It was a strategy that went badly wrong in the case of the infamous nude scene in *The Spike*. Other productions handled the material with a better grip and with greater skill, although no degree of finesse would have protected such forays from the wrath of the prudish section of the audience, which was still formidable and highly vocal.

Joe O'Donnell's *The Lads* was highly controversial, first as a stage play, then as a television play in 1972, followed by a television series, a six part sitcom, in 1975. Set in a Dublin flat occupied by four young bachelors whose male bonding involved a common interest in 'birds and booze', it highlighted, in a lighter vein than *Exposure*, the condition of chronic adolescence in the Irish male and the threat posed by the liberated female. In a similar spirit, Wesley Burrowes' *Silver Apples On the Moon*, in the same territory as *Criminal Conversation*, cast a satirical eye on the woes of the womaniser and the double standards of morality, in the face of the discovery that what was sauce for the goose might also be for the gander.

## **Changing Roles of Women**

There was evidence in RTÉ drama of the seventies of the changing definitions of male and female roles working their way through Irish society at the time. It was more evident in some productions than in others. There were many portrayals of women in very traditional roles. This was hardly surprising, as so many people still played such roles. Such portrayals could in fact be quite insightful. There was Tom Murphy's character called by no name other than 'Mrs', symbolic of her own annihilation in nurturing the male ego. There was Eugene McCabe's Mrs. McAleer, the republican mother machree, counterpointed by the new generation IRA woman, Isabel Lynam, with her own ideas, her own liberated sexuality and her own involvement in military operations. There was Wesley Burrowes' Mary Riordan, constantly counterpointed by a whole range of other characters with other notions of women's role.

Other traditionalist portrayals lacked such critical edge. Hatchet's young wife Bridie and her sister Angela were perhaps more old-fashioned than his mother. In the way of the old adage, women put up with sex for the sake of marriage and men put up with marriage for the sake of sex. All, that is, except those who managed to escape the trap, like the bachelor, Joey, who asked: 'Why buy a cow, if ye only want a pint of milk?' It was not that it was not true that men worked and women wanted men to sort everything out for them and that women exchanged sexual favours for security and a standard of living. It was that there was more to it and some authors gave little indication of knowing this was so. Females were still being portrayed primarily as daughters, wives and mothers. Young girls'

dreams were of romance, even if experience led time and again to a rainbow's end in a dustbin, as in *Irish Revel* and *An Taoille Tuile*. Their education was geared, not to their intellectual development or employment prospects, but to enhancing their bargaining position on the marriage market. Thus Maria in *Roma* was told to study hard, so: 'with education maybe you marry a doctor' and Fiona in *The Spike* was sent to private school so: 'at least she won't marry into the flats'.

Marriage was the be-all and end-all of life for a woman, whereas it was one aspect of a fuller life for a man. Thus O'Mahony's scheme for the rehabilitation of prostitutes was 'to make them marriageable'. It was to trade a life where sex was sold to a succession of men who paid her for it one act at a time for a life in which it was sold to one man in exchange for all his worldly goods. It was to put aside a life in which they spread themselves under a jobber for a fiver for a life in which they could take him for all he was worth. Sex was a currency and the market had to be played to get the most for it. Thus there was the maid who tricked her employer into providing her with house and husband by spinning one of the oldest tales in the book in *God's in His Heaven*. Marriage was the road to social mobility and wives lived off both a husband's earnings and his social status. Thus there was the boss's wife and queen of the small town in *Too Short A Summer*. There was the principal's wife making constant demands in *The Spike*. There was the confidant in her husband's career moves in *People in Glass Houses*. When a marriage failed, it left a woman in a limbo, which it never did for a man, because it was never the whole meaning of his life. Thus the enormous difficulties for women, like Jude Riordan and Helen Diffley, trying to put their lives back together again.

Motherhood was the ultimate fulfilment for a woman in the traditional conception. As Maguire in *King of the Castle* put it: 'What's a woman for? To drain a man, make a child, rear a man'. Otherwise, she was considered good for nothing. When Isabel Lynam became pregnant by the IRA chief of staff, she asked herself, was she 'a mere seed bed for his own image.' The ultimate task was to give birth to a son. Anything she wanted done in the world, she did it through her sons, like Mrs. McAleer with her three green fields and two brave sons and Mrs. Bailey with her constant incitement to her son to settle her scores.

However, the portrayal of women was beginning to open out and to reflect the new range of options opening to women. There were an increasing number of women portrayed as other than or more than daughters, wives and mothers. There were more and more working women coming into the picture. In *The Lads*, there was a female researcher. In *The House that Johnny Built*, there was a female doctor. In *Partners in Practice*, there was a female doctor, who also had a family, as a central character. There was also a storyline about a woman writer. There were, of course, women working as nurses and social workers, jobs more traditionally open to women, if they had to work. There were also a number of women working as teachers in *The Spike*, *O Mistress Mine*, *Miracles and Miss Langan* and *Assault On a Citadel*. Teaching was, of course, another profession more traditionally open to women. These seventies teachers were not, however, the traditional types. Miss Corduff (*The Spike*) challenged Mr. O'Mahony for the job of principal and had higher qualifications. She was also divorced. Miss Toomey (*Oh Mistress Mine*) was the first female teacher in an all-male establishment. Miss Langan (*Miracles and Miss Langan*) was far more free thinking than was the norm. Miss Jenny (*Assault On a Citadel*) had an affair with a priest.

These new women tended to be strong, confident and articulate, sometimes more so than the men with whom they were involved. *Miracles and Miss Langan* and *The Cuckoo Spit* both concerned relationships between older women and younger men. These women were not only older, but intellectually and emotionally more advanced. Needless to say, these new women caused problems for the men who had to contend with them. Winnie, the woman researcher in *The Lads* with a mind of her own and with a shrewd way of assessing those she met, caused the lads to engage in some unaccustomed questioning and soul-searching. Dr. Rita O'Brien in *The House that Johnny Built* was more than a match for Johnny and defeated the calculating bachelor's matrimonial plans. Jenny in *Assault On a Citadel* brought Ned to a crisis in his vocation. Susan in *Miracles and Miss Langan* challenged Ben to come to life on an emotional level.

There were institutional problems brought to light as well. With the arrival of the new female teacher at the all-male St. Jude's in *O Mistress Mine*, the manners and mores of both class room and staff room received a severe jolt. When told that his plans for the new school in *The Spike* took little account of the projected female enrolment or the projected female staff, O'Mahony could only ask: 'You want more toilets. Is that it?' Obviously some had come a long way and others had not.

These seventies women violated many taboos, both in the pursuit of their professions and in the expression of their sexuality. They got higher degrees. They sought responsible jobs. They spoke their minds. They carried guns. They posed nude. They had affairs. They even seduced priests. They were not to everybody's liking. They were anathema to those to whom the taboos were still sacred and inviolable.

Perhaps some of the ground had been cleared earlier in the seventies in Granada's series *The Sinners*. These stories, set in earlier decades, insightfully explored the taboos twisting Irish life into its particular contours and blighting the course of intellectual, emotional and sexual development. The enormous psychological gap between the sexes, tied to the segregation of the sexes in the sexual division of labour, was constantly evident. TJ Mooney, the philosophical philanderer in *One Man, One Boat, One Girl*, made his considered pronouncement on the matter: 'I have decided that in what is commonly called love man creates woman after his own unlikeness. In love woman is man's image of what he is not'. Of course, once love was gone, the unlikeness proceeded in all its practical consequences. Men worked to pay for the home, but women ran it. As Mr. Lomasney in *The Mad Lomasneys* surveyed the domestic scene around him: 'I had no say in this. No one gives a damn about me. Except on payday.'

### **Contrasting Approaches to Religion**

A thread running through a number of *The Sinners* stories was the link between sexuality and religion. The pressure put upon the innocent and natural flowering of human fellow feeling among young nuns and brothers during their summer studies by the stern and sick strictures of the local priest was the theme of *The Man Who Invented Sin*. The repressiveness of the jansenistic attitude to sexuality, shaping Irish Catholicism, was a constant undercurrent. The young Englishman in *One Man, One Boat, One Girl*, asked about the secret of his success with the girls replied: 'I ain't got no tricks, Alphonsus - Maybe the fack o' the matter is I'm not afraid of 'ern, like all you bloomin' Irish'. It seemed to be an effect of Irish Catholicism that could survive belief in its doctrines. Rita Lomasney put it to Ned Lowry: 'You may think you're a great fella because you read Tolstoy and don't go to mass, but you'd be just as scared stiff if a girl offered to go to bed with you.' Rita's sexual waywardness was put down to a lack of religious fervour. Trying to pinpoint her uneasiness with her daughter, Mrs. Lomasney observed: 'Another girl would have a favourite saint or a favourite nun. Not Rita.' After she was dismissed from her job as a teacher for trying to seduce a seminarian, who had come home with a breakdown, she was sent off to the care of her aunt Sister Mary Gonzales. Like many who deviated, Rita never challenged the norms. She could still say of Ned: 'I was proposed to by the finest man in Cork - or would be if he had any religion in him.'

The emptiness of unquestioned beliefs and unthinking observance of rituals was a subtext of many stories. In *Exposure*, Oliver attended mass after sleeping with Caroline the night before and intending to do so again the night after. In *King of the Castle*, neither Matt nor Tressa would ever miss Mass, nor raise the slightest questions about the church's teachings. In *Traveller*, Michael and Angela could not go off on their awkward cohabitation and arranged smuggling operation without muttering the meaningless words of the marriage ritual. In *Deeply Regretted By*, Patrick Healy went through all the same motions - wedding, baptisms, communions, etcetera, in his second bigamous marriage as he did in his first.

Religion on RTÉ was a frequent presence. Most of it was still reverential in tone and seemed to be based on the assumption that the whole of the audience believed in the same thing and worshipped in the same way. The angelus, the mass, the God-slot talk shows, *Radharc* documentaries, the extravagant coverage of the pope's visit and many other manifestations were constant reminders of the place of the Catholic Church in Irish society. So too were such dramas as *Inquiry at Knock* (for the centenary of the alleged apparition at Knock), *Maloney* and *The True Story of the Horrid Popish Plot* (both further treatments of the life of Oliver Plunket). There was also the constant presence of an unchallenged Catholicism in a whole range of productions in the characters' speech, in the iconography of their homes, in their customs and beliefs.

Although perhaps marginal to the overall flow, there were occasional challenges to Catholic hegemony on the airwaves. The presence of spokespersons for other religions, whether tame ecumenists or rabid unionists, was seldom very challenging to basic beliefs. *The Late, Late Show* debate on atheism was. So great was the interest aroused by it that it extended into a further session on a subsequent night.

Drama also played its part in reflecting and advancing a more critical approach to religion. It was not so much in challenging basic beliefs. There was not a single production dealing with a crisis of belief, loss of faith or the problems of being an atheist or agnostic in a theistic society, at least not as its central theme. There was very rarely a character who was explicitly presented as an unbeliever. There was Ned Lowry in Granada's *The Mad Lomasneys*, for example, but his character was not developed in the direction of an exploration of his lack of belief in the text. Lack of belief, when it was occasionally present, was always present as subtext rather than text.

It was McCabe who gave it its most forceful moments. When asked what he believed in, Scober McAdam at least had a clarity that stood out from the muddiness of the rest. He believed that, when he died, he would be buried and rot in the ground. What he believed in was land: 'We come from it, live off it and go back to it. What else is there?' He thought that the poor in former times had to believe in what came after, because they had nothing else. He

then proceeded to mock those who still believed and the primitive, superstitious nature of their beliefs: 'Croagh Patrick, Lough Derg, Knock - knock, knock, who's there?' When asked about her beliefs, Isabel Lynam declared firmly that she did not believe in God. Her intelligent, questioning approach to all sorts of things was counterposed to the rock of ages, uncomprehending resistance of Mrs Aleer to whom all was simple: 'Too much learnin' is the ruination of the world. All a body needs is faith in God, his blessed mother, faith in your people and faith in your country.'

Wesley Burrowes also allowed the question of belief to surface in scenes in which Mary Riordan worried about her son Michael's loss of religion. She became agitated at signs of his free thinking and at his challenge to her to give a logical justification of beliefs she accepted on faith.

However, in bringing a critical edge into the treatment of religion, it was more a matter of exploring the contradictions within Catholicism, with characters who still basically believed, than in counterposing them to those who did not. There were Niall Tóibín's satirical sketches. There were other storylines in *The Riordans*. There was exposure of the church's complicity in class privilege in *The Spike*. There was a particularly Irish tradition of anti-clericalism, which pointed to the reactionary stance of the clergy and to the faults of the institutional church, without ever raising questions about the existence of God or the validity of Catholic doctrine. There were numerous examples of the evil done by those exemplary in the rituals of religious observance. There was the harm done to the travellers in *The Riordans*, whose embitterment was traced back to eviction by a landlord who was 'a good sodality man...gives to the foreign missions'. There were the criminal activities of the Burkes: 'Your old Dublin family with the rosary beads in one hand, and the hatchet in the other'. There were the McAleer brothers who blessed themselves as the victim's body twitched.

There were images indicting Catholicism and Protestantism alike. Again the sharpest were those of McCabe. Asked if she believed in Jesus Christ, Isabel Lynam answered:

*Isabel Lynam*: 'Not yours'.

*Mrs McAleer*: 'There's only one Jesus Christ'.

*Isabel Lynam*: 'Dozens, Mrs Mac, and they hate each other'.

When John Willie O'Neill thought of the two traditions, he said to his son: 'Catholics kneel under plaster saints. We sit with Christ under guns and swords'. Eric O'Neill shared his father's alienation from these 'loving tributes to violent death', but soon reaped the harvest of his heritage in his own violent death. Nor was it only Christianity brought up for such scrutiny. In her reflections at gun point, Harriet Armstrong went further back: 'The old testament...reeks of blood and empire.'

Less negative about the role of religion in Irish society were productions which turned on the differing reactions of the faithful to the post-Vatican II changes in the Catholic Church. Much of it dealt with the new types of priest emerging out of Catholicism's *aggiornamento*. In *The Riordans*, Wesley Burrowes tried to draw Fr. Sheehy, as a priest of the new age, while avoiding the obvious stereotypes of the 'swinging priests, singing priests, rebel priests, laicized priests'.<sup>90</sup> His crisis in his vocation and his departures from orthodoxy in his liberal stress on individual conscience over ecclesiastical authority were very credibly handled. In *Legion of the Rearguard*, Criostoir O'Flóinn's play, which was originally to be called *Aggiornamento*, Fr. Hackeen, the new curate in a provincial town, proposed to transform the old St. Patrick's temperance club into a modern youth club. However, the old guard in the town had other ideas and were determined to protect the status quo.

By the seventies, the decline in vocations had become a problem of major proportions in the church. Not only were fewer and fewer entering novitiates and seminaries, but, among those who did enter, more and more were leaving. *The Spike* dealt with the efforts of the church to protect its power in the educational sector in the face of this decline. Other productions probed the forces involved and the motives of those who left. *Miracles and Miss Langan* was a not very mature play by Neil Jordan about a seminarian, who left the seminary and began a relationship with a female fellow teacher in the school where he went to work. It did not leave the audience much wiser, either about the social forces or about the psychological dimensions of 'vocations'. It was an attempt to show people frozen, both emotionally and sexually, by their backgrounds, but it never really penetrated into their characters or their conditions with any sort of fruitful insight.

Of course, the most disturbing phenomenon to traditional Catholics was not so much the decline in entrants or even the departure of seminarians, monks and nuns. The most threatening development was the laicisation of priests, something quite outside the experience of previous generations of Catholics. These priests left for many reasons, but it was no secret that many left to get married. It was starting to seem like a veritable exodus and it was only right that it should receive serious dramatic treatment.

Seán Walsh's play *Assault on a Citadel* gave it such serious treatment. As the author was himself a laicised priest, who subsequently married, the play was grounded in his own intimate experience of the milieu. The play revolved around the dilemma of Ned, a country curate having a clandestine affair with the local teacher and coming to a crossroads in which he felt he had to decide whether to stay or to leave the priesthood. In an attempt to resolve his personal conflict and to come to a decision, he went off to a monastery to make a spiritual retreat. However, far from finding the monastery a source of solace from the conflicts besetting him, it was brought home to him that the conflicts were there too and indeed in the church itself. The title of the play was meant to be a metaphor within a metaphor within a metaphor. Ned's priesthood, the monastery, the church itself: all were citadels and all were under attack. Although for the monastery Vatican II was only a ripple with the waves still well from the shore, the older monks nevertheless felt dislodged and disoriented from what had reached them of the changes. As Brother Senan confided to Ned:

'Well, lately, like, there's unrest among us where there never was before. The older ones, like meself, don't take to the changes too well. We mightn't say it out, but it's there just the same. Ah, God be with the old days; black was black, white white an' devil the grey. Time gone by, there were mortal sins - meat on Fridays, a dance of a Sunday, not fastin' during Lent, goin' to a service in a Protestant church, even for a neighbour's funeral - and now we're told they're not. One year I'm prayin' to a saint, the next I'm told not to bother. Sure, what way o' goin' on is that? It's not that long ago devotion to the little flower was all the go; now you hardly hear her mentioned...A priest leavin' to get married? In my day, Father, unheard of... and you could tell one! Now they wear all sorts - jeans an' jackets, an' anoraks. Some with long hair. Mix that much, they do, the people don't know anymore where it's safe to use bad language. So I say to meself if there's a great fallin' off in the country, what must it be like in the towns an' above in the *city*?'

From the garden to the organ loft, it was the same story. In Fr. Cormac's analysis, television drama came into play as well in eroding the old order:

*Ned*: 'It's well for ye in ways - out of it.'

*Cormac*: 'You think we can't be got at? God bless your innocence, Father! They're coming at us from all angles. The mass media, huh! They haven't left us alone since the Vatican council. A full frontal attack! The world we turned away from, right there in the community room! Programmes and plays from pagan England, God between us and all harm! And make no mistake about it, Father, it's leavin' its mark...'

*Ned*: 'I can imagine.'

*Cormac*: 'This year, so far, three gone by the wayside, two priests and a brother.'

*Ned*: 'You mean ...?'

*Cormac*: 'Gone altogether. To get married. Rudolf's in London on a two year dispensation - trying' to make up his mind. Ignatius is gone off with a nun long since. And still no word of Athanasius.'

*Ned*: 'Athanasius?'

*Cormac*: 'Must be three years gone now. Just hung up his habit and walked away. Not so much as a by-your-leave or a note of explanation...'

*Ned*: 'It's the same story in the diocese.'

*Cormac*: 'Trickle, how are you! More like an exodus!'

Everywhere he went, there was a sense of siege. Even from his spiritual director, the glib Fr. Xavier, came another list of woes:

'Oh, we're takin' a bit of a hammerin' at the present time, I'll admit that. All this free thinkin' since Vatican ...God, I remember the time when you could hardly blow your nose without permission. And now look at us! The whole world goin' to Hell, headlong! Terrible things happenin' - divorce an' contraception an' abortion, wife swappin', communal livin', people not botherin' anymore to go to mass or the sacraments, doin' what they like... Even holy wedlock is goin' by the board. A few more years, Father, mark my word, and a handful o' mad priests round the world'll be the only ones wantin' to get married.'

In their worries about the church, the monks all sounded much the same. In their attitudes to Ned and his dilemma, they were quite different. For Fr. Xavier, Ned's anguished story was matched by a string of clichés. Indeed, the loquacious Xavier must have summoned every cliché in the book in his exhortations to Ned. For him, it was simply a matter of temptation and rising above temptation. A bit of effort, a few prayers and he'd be as right as rain. It was as simple as that. It was a tug of war between flesh and spirit and he had to deny the flesh for the spirit.

'Sure all you're sayin' is you're human. And you know as well as I do, you have to be a man to be ordained - and that means a full quota of the basic equipment. The sacrament of holy orders puts an indelible mark on the soul, but it 1 doesn't take one whit from the body.'

His body was nonetheless the citadel of the holy spirit and, he was told, the devil and his legions would stop at nothing to assault it. As to the woman involved:

'Let her go her own way. If she's all you make her out to be, she won't have that much bother getting a man on the open market ... You know the drill. No meetings, no messages. A clean break, it's the only way. Platonic friendship, how are ya! You'd only be tormentin' yourself, doin' the devil's work for him. If you just keep your head, you're home and dry...'

As to the alternative: 'Out there, it's dog eat dog... tied to a woman, brats hangin' out... your mother wouldn't be able to lift her head...' For Xavier, there was no real empathy and there was no real decision to be made. 'You are all ifs, buts and maybes. Stick to the facts - your ordination.' But with Fr. Cormac there was a kind of empathy or at least a respect for the validity of his love for a woman and a recognition that there was a real decision to be made and more than one way to go in righteousness. His last words to Ned were:

'But if you decided to...to... well, I'd hope you'd step out with your head high. Aye, and put out of your head every last word you ever heard about fire and brimstone and the wrath o' God. If there's no going back, there should be no looking back, either.'

Meanwhile, there was the woman, Jenny, waiting to hear of his decision. In the television version of the play, Jenny was a secondary presence and her feelings were largely unexplored. In the radio version, Jenny and her feelings were more to the fore. In the television version, it was never clear whether or not Ned and Jenny had actually made love. In the radio version, it could scarcely have been clearer. Indeed, a particular interior monologue dramatising Jenny's point of view, was an interesting illustration of the gap between what was perceived to be possible on radio, as opposed to what was perceived to be possible on television:

'I stumbled on a hillock, you kept me from falling. I knew what I had always known: that for all that you were still a man. I went a woman's way then, tempted you, let you think you were tempting me. Oh, say me the ten commandments, when my mind's not in a whirl, my heart beating like a wild bird in a snare, my secret places moist and throbbing for the relief that only the quivering thrust of a man can bring... Say me the sixth and the ninth when I'm scarfed and on my knees in a cold church of a winter's morn and I'll beat my breast, readily enough, and say 'mea maxima culpa' but don't whisper in my ear 'thou shalt not' when the weight of your body is pinning me down and you're...I won't hear, d'you see. Even-if it's thundered, I won't hear... '

It was a powerful portrayal of a woman with her own professional career, her own economic independence, her own emotional force and her own sexual expressiveness. At all events, Ned made his decision, at least his decision to apply for laicisation. Having come to realise that he had left the security of his family for the security of the church and had never had to face insecurity, standing on his own two feet, he decided he had first to face the world on his own to be in a position to decide to face it with Jenny.

Covering some of the same ground was the adaptation of Brian Moore's novel *Catholics* as a television film, made as a Welsh/ American co-production by HTV and CBS. It also showed that there was no place too cloistered or too remote to be touched by the intellectual and social changes, which Vatican II both reflected and promoted. It also indicated the resistance put up by those whose world was under siege from the new ways and the contradictory position they found themselves in, holding to conservative traditions based on obedience to authority, once the authority had turned liberal.

It was actually set in the future, in the closing years of the 20th century, on an island off the west coast of Kerry. The story concerned the controversy generated by Muck Abbey, where the monks had clung to the Latin mass, private confession and such traditional practices. Pilgrims were coming from all over Europe to their mass on the slopes of Coom mountain, attracting much publicity and television coverage. Following 'Vatican IV', moves were underway to come to an understanding between Christianity and Buddhism, and the threat of a Catholic counter-reformation was becoming an increasing source of embarrassment. The Vatican was determined that Muck Abbey be brought into line. For years, the old abbot had stoutly ignored the directives of his ecclesiastical superiors. The film, which made a genuine effort to grapple with ideas, centered on the encounter between the old abbot and a young priest dispatched from Rome, who believed in Christianity as the best agent of social change and prayed in the lotus position. Adding to the complexity of the intellectual confrontation, there was the most poignant revelation of the abbot's own loss of faith after he had been a priest for many years and a disclosure of how he had coped and even carried on as abbot.

## Historical Drama

Most of RTÉ's own drama, which actually attempted to come to terms with ideas, was set, not in the present or in the future, but in the past. There was the five part series *The Treaty Debates*, giving a dramatised documentary account of the Dáil speeches of 1921-22, which conveyed a striking picture of the assumptions and values of the period. There were also a number of dramatised biographies of Irish thinkers, which tended to have a sharp interpretative edge and to concentrate on conflicting ideas rather than to give soft hagiographical accounts of the facts of their lives. This was particularly true of the *Portraits* series, giving controversial interpretations of *The Dean* (Swift), *The Chief* (Parnell), *The Canon* (Sheehan) and *The Rebel* (O'Casey), written by Eugene McCabe, Anthony Cronin, Eoghan Harris, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy. It was also particularly true of *Gale Day*, McCabe's probe of Pearse's character, which touched on many dimensions and challenged the picture many were given at school. Of his attitude to women, for example, the verdict was: 'Their lower, or even their lighter side, he little understood...'

There was also the *Wits and Dreamers* series, featuring dramatised biographies of various figures of the Irish literary revival, such as Synge, Gogarty, Gregory and Moore, written and directed by James Plunkett. Other biographical productions were: *Mr. Joyce is Leaving Paris*, a portrait of the artist as an older man; *That Rooted Man*, a centenary tribute to Synge; *A Little Man Dying*, the last reflections of Oliver Goldsmith; *I Stood Well With All Parties*, an aristocratic perspective on the 'golden age' of Dublin, based on the memoirs of Sir Jonah Barrington; *When Handel Played in Dublin*, a picture of Handel's personal renaissance, coinciding with his visit to Dublin and the first performance of *Messiah*.

Another biographically-based production was *Teems of Times*, Dominic Behan's account of the life and times of the Behan family. The ten part series gave a fair picture of Dublin 'in the rare auld times'. It encompassed the family's births, marriages and deaths, the community's schools, strikes, unemployment, evictions, emigration, politics, pub talk and pawn shops. The 1930s came through as hard times for working class Dublin. Life for the Behans and their friends and neighbours had its distinctive joys and colourful craic, but it also seemed to have more than its fair share of sadness and struggle. The small events of their lives were sketched against such larger events of the nation as the general elections of 1932 and 1933, the eucharistic congress of 1932, the building workers' strike of 1937, the blueshirts, the slum clearances, the economic war. The material was there in abundance, but the production somehow didn't quite work. The stage-Dubliner carry-on was laid on too thick and was a bit hard to take. It was not only that the paddy-wacking style of performance and the music-hall type of production seemed inappropriate to the material, but the cardboard, claustrophobic type of studio settings flattened out and constricted material that called for more expansive open-air treatment.

There was also the fact that, although it was urban, working class drama, it was off the mark in meeting the needs of the contemporary audience for urban, working class drama. It pictured an idealised form of the already archaic urban community of the tenement. It projected a milieu with more lumpen and peasant qualities about it than proletarian elements. It focused more on the rural modes brought into the urban context than the new urban modes of the urban context. It illustrated a tendency in Irish urban writing, analysed by Fintan O'Toole, to make an increasingly urban and industrialised reality palatable by wrapping it up in rural, folksy images. The classic location for Irish urban writing has been the tenement which, in O'Toole's argument, was essentially an urban version of a rural setting. Tenements were a physical embodiment of decline, being the former homes of the ascendancy fallen into the hands of the poor, imposing a sense of a fall from the past rather than a ground for the future. The tenement came across as an enclosed world, a self-contained community, in which everybody knew about everybody else, more like the rural communities than the constant collision with strangers in city life. The tenement was presented as an urban community, where the main point of contact between people was in the domestic sphere, rather than in the world of the streets and the world of work, the distinctive elements of urban experience. The old peasant women in the rural folk play were transformed into Dublin 'ould wans' in the tenement play with little jarring effect.<sup>91</sup>

There was a fair amount of historical drama on RTÉ, sometimes giving the impression that RTÉ was more comfortable in dealing with Ireland's past than its present. The drama set in the past tended to be much more explicitly sociological and political than that set in the present, opening it to the sort of charge made by Michael D Higgins:

The gatekeepers of television and film feel yesterday is safely within the perimeters of the allowable. Today's structures are without. Nostalgia as a convention prevails. Realism is the realism of the past...they make programmes about dead and dying radicals and movements long gone, rather than the messy and dangerous present.<sup>92</sup>

The programmes about dead radicals and past movements were not only documentaries and drama documentaries based on factual accounts of Irish history. There was also drama based on fictional reconstructions of periods in Irish history. This was often done by foregrounding fictional characters against the backdrop of real historical events. Sometimes real historical figures interacted with fictional characters in the overall scenario.

RTÉ's most ambitious project in this mode was the eight part series *Kilmore House* in 1976, covering a canvas of 150 years of Irish history. It focused on the particular events in the lives of the members of the fictional Walsh family, occupants of the Catholic big house, set against the background of the grand events in the life of the nation between 1803 and 1945. The courtship of John Michael Walsh was set against the rebellion led by Robert Emmet. Patrick Walsh fought a duel after being called a coward for not coming out in support of Daniel O'Connell's cause of Catholic Emancipation. He was involved in land disputes and new railways, against the backdrop of the famine. Michael Walsh proposed to sell the family business to support the fenians. Dr. Shane Walsh found himself torn between his sympathies for tenement families and his own family's capitalist interests and capitalist values in a scenario haunted by the figure of James Larkin and the gathering storm between capital and labour. Fergus Walsh, an ardent socialist, found himself in a master-servant relationship that challenged both his radical principles and the fortunes of the family business. A visit from an American cousin coincided with de Valera coming to power, depression and economic war. Finally, Shay and Declan Walsh returned from service in the British forces during World War II to find Kilmore House in danger of being sold out of the family. The series sank nearly without trace, barely remembered by the audience and entirely wiped by RTÉ (unusual for drama made in this period). It was generally felt that production standards were not up to scratch.

There were also other productions dealing with particular periods within this larger canvas, ranging from Tom Murphy's powerful *Famine*, probing the whole psychological legacy left by the famine, to softer evocative period pieces like Kate O'Brien's *The Last of Summer* and Aidan Higgins' *Langrishe, Go Down*, both dealing with relationships between foreigners and natives, against the claustrophobia of Ireland at the onset of war.

Aside from RTÉ in-house productions, there were dramas from other sources shown on RTÉ and set in Ireland's past. There was Carlo Gebler's National and Film Television School (London) diploma film in 1979, *The Beneficiary*, a reworking of a Chekov story set in Ireland at the turn of century. A dowry-less woman, who married into a prosperous family, plotted her revenge, when denied her inheritance. There was the Dublin film co-operative's *The Hebrew Lesson* in 1973, a story of a conflict between a young IRA volunteer and an elderly Jew, who advocated peaceful dialogue as an alternative to violent action.

## Verdict on the Decade

All in all, Irish television drama covered an enormous amount of ground in the seventies. Whatever it did or didn't do as fully as the temper of the times might have seemed to warrant, it still did a great deal. Although it has been judged here as falling short in many respects, the overarching impression left by it was of a series of honest and impressive attempts to come to terms with the temper of the times.

It was an overwhelmingly liberal phenomenon, which was the source of both its vitality and its inadequacy. Liberalism<sup>93</sup> was and is a vital force in Irish society, still fighting for its place against formidable conservative forces. Insofar as Irish television drama captured this liberal thrust, it generated enormous controversy and manifested its continuing vitality. Liberalism was and is, however, an inadequate force for coming to grips with the problems with which it grapples, for it tends to deal with particular factors in a piecemeal fashion and lacks the synthesising power to put things in full socio-historical context and to achieve holistic perspective. Irish television drama has constantly stopped short of full penetration and total vision. Its strengths and its limitations have been the strengths and limitations of liberalism.

## NOTES to Chapter 5:

1. SCLC was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights organisation founded by Martin Luther King. NICRA was the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. The INLA was Irish National Liberation Army, the military wing of the IRSP.
2. Citizens for Better Broadcasting, *Aspects of RTÉ Television Broadcasting*, n.d. (1976).
3. When asked about the connection, co-author and director of *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* Brian MacLochlainn responded that he was directly and deeply influenced by the British television drama of the time and made clear in his interview for the job of producer-director at RTÉ that he was impressed by the work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett within BBC's Play for Today format and would like to do that sort of thing within RTE. Interview with Brian MacLochlainn, February 25, 1986.
4. Interview with Louis Lentin, January 24, 1985. In the 1970s, heads of drama in succession were: Chloe Gibson, Donall Farmer, Michael Garvey and Louis Lentin.

5. Interview with Eoghan Harris, July 17, 1984.
6. Wesley Burrowes, *The Riordans*, Dublin, 1977, p.20.
7. *ibid.* p.18.
8. Luke Gibbons 'From Kitchen Sink to Soap' in *Television and Irish Society*, McLoone and MacMahon (eds), Dublin, RTÉ/IFI 1984, p.39.
9. *ibid.*, p.41.
10. Patrick Gilligan, *RTÉ Guide*, January 20, 1978.
11. Brother Vivian Cassells, *Irish Independent*, February 23, 1978.
12. Tom O'Dea, *Irish Press*, February 4 and 11, 1978.
13. Ken Gray, *Irish Times*, February 20, 1978.
14. *Irish Times*, February 25, 1978.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Irish Times*, March 3, 1978.
18. *Irish Times*, March 7, 1978.
19. Confidential memorandum from Muiris MacConghail to department heads, producer /directors, production assistants, reporters and presenters, March 2, 1978.
20. Muiris MacConghail, RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 6, 1984.
21. *Irish Times*, February 25, 1978.
22. Interview with Noel O'Briain, June 21, 1985.
23. *Drogheda Independent*, March 10, 1978.
24. *Drogheda Independent*, March 17, 1978.
25. *Irish Times*, March 3, 1978.
26. Interview with Michael Judge, November 14, 1984.
27. *Irish Times*, April 24, 1978.
28. *Irish Times*, March 7, 1978.
29. *Irish Times*, March 13, 1978.
30. *Hot Press*, March 4, 1978.
31. *Irish Catholic*, March 9, 1978.
32. Interview with Niall Tóibín, May 8, 1985.
33. Brian MacLochlainn, RTÉ/IFI Seminar, July 6, 1984; Niall Tóibín, *Irish Times*, March 11, 1977 and interview, *ibid.*
34. *Irish Independent*, February 26, 1983.
35. *Hibernia*, April 6, 1978.
36. *Southern Star*, March 25, 1978; *Hibernia*, April 6, 1978; *Connacht Sentinel*, April 25, 1978.
37. *Dungarvan Leader*, April 28, 1978.
38. Interview with Peter McEvoy, April 17, 1986.
39. Louis Lentin, Introduction to *Passing Through*, Dublin, Turoe, 1977, p.7.
40. The texts of *Cancer* and *Heritage* are published in short story form under the title *Heritage and Other Stories* Dublin, O'Brien, 1985.
41. Eugene McCabe's *Victims*, Cork, Mercier, 1979, is the *Siege* story in the form of a novel.
42. Interview with Kevin McHugh, December 5, 1985.
43. Interview with Michael Garvey, July 16, 1985.
44. Interview with Wesley Burrowes, April 29, 1986.
45. Richard Hoggart, *The Listener*, February 28, 1980.
46. Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock and Philip Elliott, *Televising Terrorism*, London, Comedia, 1983, pp.132-136.
47. *RTÉ Guide*, November 25, 1971.
48. *RTÉ Guide*, October 3, 1977.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Cited in *RTÉ Guide*, January 18, 1979.
51. *RTÉ Guide*, October 3, 1977.
52. Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Irish Theatre*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1983, p.195-196.
53. *RTÉ Guide*, October 3, 1977.
54. Pat O'Hare, *Cork Evening Echo*, October 8, 1977.
55. *Roscommon Herald*, October 4, 1977; *Longford Leader*, October 14, 1977; *Leitrim Observer*; October 15, 1977.
56. *Connacht Tribune*, October 21, 1977.
57. Interview with Bob Collins, September 12, 1986.
58. Interview with Tom Murphy in *In Dublin*, May 15, 1986.
59. Fintan O'Toole, *Sunday Tribune*, December 8, 1985.
60. Interview with Michael Garvey, July 16, 1985.
61. *Cork Examiner*, March 10, 1977; *Cork Evening Echo*, March 12, 1977.
62. *Corkman*, March 18, 1977.
63. *Nenagh Guardian*, March 26, 1977.
64. *Western People*, March 19, 1977.

65. *Sunday News* (Belfast), March 20, 1977.
66. *Irish Press*, March 14, 1977.
67. *Nenagh Guardian*, March 26, 1977.
68. *Irish Independent*, March 11, 1977.
69. *Irish Independent*, March 12, 1977.
70. *Cork Evening Echo*, March 9, 1977.
71. *Irish Press*, March 10, 1977.
72. Ken Gray, *Irish Times*, March 14, 1977.
73. Tom O'Dea, *Irish Press*, March 5 and 19, 1977.
74. Editorial, *Cork Examiner*, March 9, 1977.
75. Kevin Rockett, *IFT News*, V, 2, 1982; Kevin Barry, 'Discarded Images: Narrative and the Cinema', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 6, no.1, 1982.
76. Martin McLoone, *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit., p.66-68.
77. Mary Kelly, 'The Burke Enigma', paper delivered to RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 1984.
78. Ibid.
79. Formulated by and named after Jack Dowling of *Sit Down and Be Counted*, cited in interview with Eoghan Harris, July 17, 1984.
80. Interview with Brian MacLochlainn, February 25, 1986.
81. Interview with Kevin McHugh, June 19, 1986.
82. Norman Smythe, *RTÉ Guide*, March 26, 1971.
83. Interview with Carolyn Swift, December 11, 1984.
84. Interview with Michael Judge, November 14, 1984.
85. David Fitzpatrick, 'Class, Family and Rural Unrest in 19th Century Ireland', in P.J Drudy (ed) *Ireland: Land, Politics and People*, Cambridge University Press 1982, p.55, cited by Luke Gibbons in *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit., p.43.
86. Luke Gibbons, op. cit., p.43-46.
87. Interview with Kieran Hickey, July 23, 1984.
88. Criminal Conversation is no longer actionable.
89. Interview with Kieran Hickey, op. cit.
90. Wesley Burowes, *The Riordans*, op. cit.
91. Fintan O'Toole, 'Going West: the Country Versus the City in Irish Writing', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 9. no.2, 1985.
92. Michael D. Higgins, 'The Tyranny of Images', *The Crane Bag*, vol. 8, no.2, 1984.
93. Liberalism in the broadest sense of the term refers to an attitude of mind favourable to economic development, civil liberties and cultural progress. In this sense, liberalism indicates support for humanistic, democratic and secular principles in contrast to conservatism, which appeals to traditionalist, authoritarian and religious norms. In this sense, the term liberal embraces all those who oppose conservative values. In Ireland, this tends to be those who take a relatively independent line vis a vis the authority of the Catholic Church or the Orange Order. However, in more precise historical usage, liberalism refers to the political philosophy occupying the middle ground between conservatism and socialism. It emerged as the ideology of the progressive bourgeoisie in a society in the process of industrialisation, struggling for equality before the law and freedom for market forces over against feudal restrictions and inherited wealth and privilege based on blood and land. As opposed to the outlook of the aristocracy or peasantry based on pre-capitalist norms or that of the proletariat based on post-capitalist norms, it is based on capitalist norms of individualism, particularism and pluralism over collectivism, organicism and coherence. Wherever on the spectrum, from laissez-faire to social democratic shades of opinion, the liberal sees whatever reforms may be necessary in isolation and does not call into question the nature of the system. In this sense, liberals are distinguished from both conservatives and radicals, as those who support social reform, but tackle such issues as arise one by one by piecemeal social engineering, which can be accommodated within the capitalist system.

## Chapter 6: The Eighties: The Satellite Era

### Ireland in the 1980s

Whereas liberal currents seemed to be the advancing wave of the seventies, the tide receded in the eighties and the offensive passed from those who wished to push forward to those who wished to pull back. The reasons for this turn of the tide were complex and not due to factors within Ireland alone. Intricately tied in to the ebb and flow of an increasingly globalised market economy, Ireland felt the full impact of economic recession and the accompanying wave of ideological reaction.

As to why world markets were in recession and why Ireland faced economic crisis, there was a seemingly impenetrable web of mystification. Either it was spoken of as a mysterious and inexplicable force of nature or it was put down to specific acts of will, such as an arbitrary decision of Arab sheiks to raise the world price of oil or the profligate spending of Fianna Fáil governments. It was, however, neither inexplicable nor so simply explicable by such specific causes. What was at stake could only be explained in terms of much larger forces. What was really happening was a global restructuring of capital. There was an economic crisis, because there was a struggle underway for a massive re-allocation of the world's productive resources and re-negotiation of the international division of labour. The post-war world was marked by inroads into the rate of profit made by the labour movement's struggles for higher wages and social welfare provisions, by the third world's challenges to the first world's ability to extract cheap raw materials and cheap labour from it and by various liberation movements, demanding the rights of excluded groups to their place in the sun, their right to produce and to share in what was produced.

In response, there was an attempt to reorganise the system so as to stem the tide, to re-seize the initiative and to restore an acceptable rate of profitability. It was a response, due less to a conspiracy of minds and wills than to the mechanisms of a system in disequilibrium functioning to restore equilibrium. The mechanism, the capitalist system, was pushing back to its original impetus, the unfettered free market, and pressuring to eliminate the fetters that had accumulated against its free functioning. Thus there came the recession, the receding tide, bringing the closing down of industries, the cutbacks in public expenditure, the decline in employment and the erosion of the power base of the trade union movement. Thus came the push to privatise and to dismantle the public sector, with its ideological concomitant in the glorification of the entrepreneurial spirit and individual acquisition, its cynicism about higher ideals and its rejection of social movements.

Crucial to the whole scenario was the new technology, brought in with breathless hard sell for the hardware of the electronic cottage, the paperless office, the wired society. Suddenly the bookshops were full of paperbacks with titles like *The Mighty Micro*, *The Micro Revolution* and *Microman*. The airwaves were alive with media pundits, initiating us into the glories of 'the information age', 'the third wave', 'the satellite era', 'the communications revolution', 'future shock' and 'post-industrial society'. There was a great torrent of words, full of the new slogans of 'information is power' and 'information for all', full of promises of a new leisure society, of new interactive capacity, indeed of a whole new era of democratic participation and consumer sovereignty.

However, all of these euphoric discoveries about the wonders of the microchip and future scenarios opened up by it tended to have a smothering effect, making it nearly impossible to see the wood for the trees. What was systematically obscured in it all was the whole dimension of the political economy of the information age, the structure of power of the third wave, the ownership and control of the wired society. The communications revolution was developing according to the imperatives of the market economy. Every mode of production generates a communications apparatus specific to its structural need to maintain and to expand itself. The new technology was being assimilated to the monetarist strategy of de-industrialisation, deregulation and automation. It was being used as an instrument for a retooling of the productive apparatus and a pruning of the work force, to pave the way for a whole new phase of capital accumulation. It was providing the technological basis for a new cycle of productivity, for a new level of control over patterns of production, distribution and consumption, for new forms of labour and social relations. It was making possible an unprecedented concentration of ownership and accumulation of wealth at the top, at the expense of an increasing marginalisation and impoverishment at other levels. Up against the power of stateless money, even the nation state was becoming increasingly powerless.

With the forces at work being so faceless and with the overall process seeming so impenetrable and out of control, the attempt to understand the world and to get a grip on it sometimes gave way to a retreat to the security of old certainties and to an appeal to supernatural intervention to take external control of a world with no apparent means of internal control. While satellites whirled in orbit overhead, a large part of Ireland retreated into its peasant past and fixed its gaze into the dark world in which plaster statues moved and uttered messages for mankind. Gathering around the kitsch icons of a mythical virgin-mother and addressing their supplications to persons long dead, if they ever really

existed, it turned its back on the real, if not so virgin, mothers who might be dying by their grottoes in the dark of the night and closed its ears to the realities of the living.

At the same time, it could not get enough of the televised rituals of British royalty or affairs of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* personae, no matter how parasitic and predatory their lifestyles, no matter how illicit and frivolous their liaisons, no matter how contrary to its own declared values. Yet it reaffirmed its refusal of the most minimal legal legitimacy to the most decent couple next door, who might be bound together in a second union. Those who were most enthusiastic about the visit of the US President to his tenuous roots on Irish soil and were most fawning and forelock-tugging before Ronald and Nancy Reagan didn't seem nearly so troubled about divorce and remarriage then. But when it came to the battered wife down the road or the deserted husband across the way, the same gushing hearts were hardened and determined that their neighbours should lead blighted lives, in the ruins of devastated relationships, so as not to threaten their own sacred marriages. During the referendum on divorce, they constantly asserted that they did not want their country to be like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, yet they did not want to do without *Dallas* and *Dynasty* either. Nor did they want to confront the meaning of the voyeuristic pleasure they took in it.

Ireland found its own confused and contradictory ways of combining old and new, of welding anachronistic traditions to the latest technologies, Knock being the most potent symbol of its ironic mixture of apparitions and airplanes. In this strange world of 1980s Ireland, mountainy men minded their sheep wired up to walkmans. Married couples came home from confession and communion to their thatched cottages and inserted a pornographic video into their VCRs to help their sex lives. Unemployed youths left their space invaders games to build bonfires and to follow the beat of the drum once the Orange marching season began again.

Not that Ireland was alone in manifesting such gaps between advanced technology and antiquated traditions. America was full of fundamentalist evangelists preaching born-again Christianity, creationist biology and reactionary politics-via- satellite broadcasting. A society that mastered silicon chips, laser surgery, supersonic transport, satellites and space shuttles fantasised itself as *Rambo*. The most sophisticated cinematography was put at the service of the silly supernaturalism of *ET*, *Gremlins* and *Back to the Future*. The most complex technology was enlisted in the flight from complexity into simple images which were infantile, but by no means ideologically innocent. A society which penetrated the secrets of the atom and pioneered the most awesome applications of its energy put the ultimate state power in the hands of a man with a comic strip mentality. It was a society whose technological capacity far outstripped its wisdom. It was a society producing more and more channels of communication for those who had less and less to say. And, with an insensitivity born of its internal contradictions, it continued to produce high grade hardware to disseminate low grade software.

Ireland became caught up in the whole world wide shift to the right. A massive wave of reaction overtook the progressive advances of preceding decades. It heard and saw and added its own to what was being said and done elsewhere, in an ever more blatant backlash against socialism, secularism, feminism and any such causes championed by the left. Indeed, the strident selfishness, made ideologically respectable by the new right, took the offensive, even against the middle ground of support for public enterprise, concern for civil rights and campaigns for piecemeal social reforms. The urban yuppie element, willing to step over anyone or anything in the path of its aggressive acquisitiveness, was perhaps even more insidious than the older rural rosary-reciting element, wishing hellfire and damnation upon feminists, free-thinkers and assorted liberals.

## **RTÉ in the 1980s**

The fact that the much-heralded communications revolution was caught up in a tidal wave of reaction had drastic implications for the situation of Irish broadcasting. The fact that it was pressing ahead on an aggressive laissez-faire push for a massive shift of power and resources from the public to the private sector had obvious consequences for the whole future of public service broadcasting. RTÉ, like other European public service broadcasting organisations, had become caught up in the debate between those intent on defending and extending the values underlying the European tradition of public service broadcasting and those who believed that the free market should reign supreme. In Thatcher's Britain, the free market option was in the ascendant. The *Hunt Report* in 1982, the *White Paper* in 1983 and the *Peacock Report* in 1986 came down firmly on the side of de-regulation of broadcasting, breaking with the Reithian tradition in British broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> The way was opened to a new level of commercial penetration, with a minimum of restriction on the free play of market forces, assuming that commercial competition was the surest guide to quality. Although the *Peacock Report* disappointed hard-line monetarists in failing to recommend the introduction of advertising on BBCTV, its other proposals supported the strategy of de-regulation and commercialisation, envisioning the eventual replacement of the licence fee with a pay-per-view system, based on scrambled signals only unscrambled by subscription.

The monetarist case came nicely packaged as widening the viewer's choice, as promoting diversity and initiative, as taking power from stuffy government bureaucrats and transferring it to the consumer. Underneath all the freedom-of-choice rhetoric, however, was the reality that it was freedom of choice only for those with the ability to pay. Moreover, the range of what they could choose was determined only by those with the resources to finance production. Paradoxically, real freedom of choice required public regulation, albeit a new democratic form of regulation, as opposed to the Reithian elitist form of regulation. Defenders of the public sector pointed out that freedom for the pike was death for the minnow. The only real freedom of choice was restricted to the elite, who held the balance of power in the struggle for control of the world's telecommunications systems.

It was Rupert Murdoch and not the next door neighbour, who was acquiring shares in satellites who would decide what consumers could choose. What they would be able to choose was foreshadowed in US cities with over a hundred channels with various episodes of *I Love Lucy* on a dozen of them. Ironically, more channels might in practice mean less choice.

In Ireland, such debate as there was on this question was often under the surface and somewhat confused. The most explicit confrontation in the struggle between public versus private control of broadcasting erupted in relation to government moves against the pirate radio stations. The whole episode was farcical, in somewhat typical Irish style, not only because the illegal stations immediately resumed broadcasting, but because public reaction was so successfully orchestrated by the pirates and so far off the mark as far as any real understanding of the issues was concerned. The whole debate was posed as being between public broadcasting, as if synonymous with censorship, bureaucracy, centralisation and boring programming, and commercial broadcasting, as if opening the door to freedom of expression, decentralisation and exciting programming. Vincent Browne, then editor of the *Sunday Tribune*, was particularly aggressive in making the case for deregulation, arguing that the same freedom as applied in publishing should apply in broadcasting and contending that the monopoly in broadcasting gave RTÉ an unfair advantage in attracting advertising revenue. Indeed, at a 1985 meeting of the Media Association of Ireland, he even asserted that he would not bemoan the closure of RTÉ.<sup>2</sup> This argument, of course, glossed over the enormous inequality in publishing. Not everyone who felt they would like to run a national newspaper could launch *The Irish Independent* or *The Sunday Tribune*. The fact was that there had been an erosion of support for public service broadcasting. There was little sense of it being perhaps the only guarantee of any sort of freedom of choice, the only bulwark against wall-to-wall *Dallas* and the best hope for relevant and vibrant programming.

Between section 31 and the decline of RTÉ, perhaps it was no wonder. John A. Murphy, professor of Irish history at UCC, went so far as to raise the question as to whether there might be some government conspiracy to run down RTÉ to the point where the public would be glad to put broadcasting in private hands.<sup>3</sup> RTÉ made no secret of its feeling that RTÉ had not been served well by successive governments. It argued that it was starved of funds and denied requests to devise a more efficient method of collection of the licence fee and that this meant that it lacked the necessary finance to satisfy audience demand for home-produced programming. A strategy of seeking co-production finance seemed to provide a partial answer to this problem, until the government clamped down on the tax-based investment schemes that formed the basis of RTÉ's limited partnership agreements. This hit drama production particularly hard.

Although Fianna Fáil, back in government in 1987, introduced new incentives for private investment in film making, it tied this to the strategy of rolling back the role of the public sector, simultaneously abolishing the Irish Film Board. The future of the public sphere became ever more precarious with Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats committed to quasi-monetarist policies on public spending and favouring the commercialisation of broadcasting in the context of the aggressive mood of deregulation prevailing at the international level. The Labour Party, although a weak presence in the coalition government from 1982 to 1987, did prevent Fine Gael policies from finding their way into legislation. It did not, however, have the power to implement its own policies, which were against the commercialisation of broadcasting. The Fianna Fáil government, facing no such obstacles, in October 1987 announced its intention of excluding RTÉ from local radio and of introducing commercial television.

Lack of government support has not been the only problem for RTÉ. There was increased competition from new sources, such as Channel 4 and VCRs. Also on the horizon were commercial alternatives, vying for audience and advertising revenue, in local radio, cable and satellite transmission. The very future of RTÉ seemed to be in question. RTÉ was well aware of the threat. Muiris MacConghail, television controller from 1983 to 1986, stated at the time of the publication of the *Hunt Report* and then the *White Paper* that it was the threshold to deregulation here as well as there and it would 'rend the very fabric of public service broadcasting'. He saw some hope of an alternative to the domination of international airways by US commercial interests in a concordat among European public broadcasting organisations in co-production and co-finance of programming alternatives. He emphasised the need to put together some sort of survival kit to defend public service broadcasting as the only alternative to being cannibalised by the Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Also addressing the global crisis in communications and the choices it posed for Ireland, Seán Mac Réamoinn stressed the need to have not only a strategy for dealing with the symptoms, which related to the fact that broadcasting had become spastic, but also a philosophy for dealing with the basic disease, which was rooted in the fact that Ireland had lost its way. As broadcasting both moulded and mirrored its society, the problem needed to be tackled on both levels to be in a position to face the challenge of the new technologies of communication, 'instead of watching with the glazed look of a mouse confronted by an army of cats.'<sup>5</sup>

It was a brilliant image for capturing the vulnerability of a small nation, not quite believing in itself, confronted with the voracious forces looming before it. Taking up the mouse metaphor a few years later, Con Bushe argued the need for small countries like Ireland to harness their resources intelligently, if not to become cultural dependencies of the powerful and wealthy taking increasing control of the means of communication: 'If the mouse is to survive alongside the elephant, she must think and act as a smart mouse and not as a mini-elephant'.<sup>6</sup> He strongly defended the concept of public service broadcasting, while stressing the need for a new legislative and economic framework for it, if it was to renew itself and withstand the onslaught from the apostles of free trade.

Although many in RTÉ expressed a self-critical need for renewal within the parameters of public service broadcasting, others felt that RTÉ needed a shake-up that only breaking its monopoly and opening it to commercial competition would bring. This certainly seemed to be the thinking dominant in the national press, in the commercial sector and, most importantly, in both government and opposition in the oireachtas. Ted Nealon, the minister of state for communications in the coalition government, described the *Hunt Report* as 'a very good model' for coming to terms with the future of broadcasting in an Irish context.<sup>7</sup> Amidst all this, RTÉ has felt itself about to be swamped, fighting against formidable odds for both audience and advertising revenue.

The EEC looked at ways Europe could band together to withstand the American onslaught reflected in the 'Television Without Frontiers' directive. RTÉ began to expand the net in drawing upon a wider field in its imported programming, showing more European, Latin American, Australian and Canadian material. Much of this sort of development was in the spirit of the *MacBride Report*'s demand for a new world information order, which reflected international disquiet over the pattern of global information flows. UNESCO became a centre of protest against the one-way vertical flow of information from centre to periphery. Because of its calls for a reassessment of the values implicit in US media and the implications of US dominance of international communications, the US withdrew its support for UNESCO.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the forces of protest against the encroachments of wall-to-wall *Dallas* were not so powerful as the forces out of which *Dallas* emerged onto the centre of the world's stage. Of course, the patterns of dominance in the televisual representation of the world were tied to the patterns of dominance in everything else. Even the UN was becoming a shadow of what it once was in the power struggle with the international financial forces in the ascendant in the world arena. Never before in history has so much power and wealth been so concentrated in the hands of such a faceless few. Not that they had a clear vision or unified strategy about what to do with it.

A discernible slippage of support for public service broadcasting made its presence felt even from within its own institutions. Even within RTÉ, there was a wavering in the face of the monetarist barrage. Although there was always a diversity of opinion regarding the balance between commercial and public service aspects of television, the shifting of the balance was a reflection of the general ideological climate, in which the fulcrum against which everything had to be kept balanced kept moving to the right. There was also a certain careerist courting of commercial contacts, so as to be able to jump ship at the right time and place.

RTÉ, like other such national institutions, was being caught in the middle between forces of increasing centralisation at one level and forces of increasing decentralisation at another. At the same time as there was a trend towards concentration of ownership and control of the commanding heights of world communications, there was also a trend towards fragmentation of production, transmission and reception on other levels, both of these trends making inroads against the middle level, nationally-based institutions heretofore in control of communications. It was the trend at the bottom that received most attention. The proliferation of cable and satellite and video cameras and players gave rise to proclamations of the de-massification of the mass media. Indeed, it was said that every viewer was becoming his/her own programme controller and even his/her own producer, director, editor, performer and crew.

However, to get carried away with this sort of thinking was to equate ownership of a VCR with ownership of Sky or HBO and to put a student video project or a ten minute spot on late night Channel 4 on the same level as a production of *Lorimar* or *Spelling* or distribution by Viacom. It was true that more space opened up for independent production companies, but this did not put City Vision on a par with Paramount. Nor did it put *Attracta* in the marketplace with the same chance as *Lace*. Nor did it bridge the gap between the bank balance of those who made *The Best Man* and those who made *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Arguing that this communications revolution called for a reappraisal of the role and resources of RTÉ, the government commissioned a team of management consultants from the firm of Stokes Kennedy Crowley to carry out a review of the structure and of operations of RTÉ. It was an initiative not exactly well received by RTÉ, though it did not have much choice in the matter. It came in 1985 in the midst of a series of internal upheavals in RTÉ and as an instrument in a power struggle between the government and the RTÉ Authority during which the government suspended appointment of a new director general until it could put a new Authority in place. It was therefore difficult to take at face value the claim that SKC were brought in to provide an in-depth study of RTÉ necessitated by impending developments in broadcasting. As Gene Kerrigan put it, it was 'the kind of story you'd need to be locked to believe and ought to be locked up for telling'.<sup>9</sup> Of course, no one did believe it. Nevertheless, those who told it got their way. Not only that, but stuck RTÉ with the bill for it, adding to its already severe financial problems. There was considerable resentment in RTÉ on a number of counts. When the outgoing Authority proceeded to appoint a new DG, despite the minister's request, the minister overruled the appointment. It was felt to be gratuitous interference in legal broadcasting from a minister who took no action against illegal broadcasting. RTÉ felt its efforts were being sabotaged by the government. It was being deprived of revenue and subjected to unfair competition through pirate broadcasting, which did not pay tax, PRSI, performing rights fees, etcetera. It was forced to abandon a number of co-productions in the pipeline, due to the action of the minister for finance in undercutting the financial basis for external investment.

It was also feared that the SKC report was to be the means, not only of affecting the appointment of the DG, but of laying the basis for the entry of the private sector into the more profitable aspects of public broadcasting. Muiris MacConghail said it was time to say 'no, minister'.<sup>10</sup> The atmosphere of uncertainty and upheaval already prevailing at RTÉ was sharply accelerated during the period of the SKC review. It was felt that RTÉ was full of people who understood the problems and possibilities of RTÉ in the satellite era better than any firm of management consultants ever would. It was felt that bringing in a commercial firm such as SKC was treating broadcasting as a commercial business like any other. It failed to recognise the difference between providing programmes and manufacturing packets of biscuits or tins of peas. It implied that it was possible to assess RTÉ by examining its financial and administrative structures, without reference to the particular character of its product. It could investigate costs, cash flows, staffing levels, work practices, fixed assets and the like, but it could shed no light on the quality, range and relevance of programmes. RTÉ did, however, co-operate with the SKC review and a number of groups within RTE, particularly the trade unions, made representations and submissions. When the SKC report came out in September 1985, it recommended: rationalisation of managerial structures, revision of work practices and financial methods (total costing, indexation and direct collection of the licence fee, reduction of staff numbers), increase in home production by 35%, expansion of sources of programme production (in-house production, co-production, commission of independent production), development of international sales, provision of programming and services to satellite broadcasting, making software, rather than hardware, the investment priority.

RTÉ staff reaction to the report, although critical, was relieved that it did not recommend the worst that had been expected: the splitting up of RTÉ and the privatisation of the profitable areas of public broadcasting. The fact that it took on board suggestions made in trade union submissions evoked positive response and support for its proposals on total costing, the licence fee, managerial efficiency and higher output of home-produced programming. There was, nevertheless, criticism of it as a 'price is right' type of report, that did not deal with a number of issues of central importance, such as programme quality, industrial democracy and the relationship between RTÉ and the government. RTÉ undertook to reappraise its operations, both to implement such recommendations of the SKC report as it saw fit and to attend to matters of programme quality as well. There was a flurry of re-organisation, resignations, voluntary redundancies and new appointments.

There was an atmosphere of a new broom. By mid-1986, there was a new RTÉ Authority, a new DG and new management across the board. There was a sense of things having been suspended in air, shaken up and beginning to settle down once again, so as to concentrate on the primary activity of programme making. The autumn 1986 schedule showed a 15% rise in home production, although it included the lowest ever output of home-produced drama. Drama had perhaps suffered most from the administrative upheaval and the financial crisis.

### **RTÉ Drama in the 1980s**

RTÉ drama in the early 1980s was not unlike that of the late 1970s. Such changes as came to characterise the eighties evolved and only became apparent over a period of several years. They did not suddenly erupt on new year's day 1980. Thursday Playdate and then Sunday One were regular slots for single plays with a strong drive towards realistic drama of contemporary social relevance. There was, however, a discernible drift in the direction of the policy characterising Niall McCarthy's time as head of drama, overseeing the virtual demise of single plays dealing with contemporary social issues.

The early 1980s plays were not, any more than those of the late 1970s, radical reassessments of the fundamental structures of Irish society or revolutionary visions of alternative structures. They were liberal probes into

particular areas of social tension. They were not panoramic reconstructions of the temper of the times, but more flashlight illuminations of particular dark corners, close to the particular experience of particular authors. They were often revealing and insightful, but insofar as they were cameos without context, they were not perhaps as revealing and insightful as they might have been had they been constructed with a higher degree of contextual richness and socio-historical expansiveness. Many of these plays were domestic in setting and devoted to close-up examinations of family relationships at their pressure points. Accurately observed as some of these relationships and pressures were, most could have benefited from a more acute awareness of the evolution of the socio-historical context in which these relationships and pressures were rooted.

Parental tension came in for a fair airing. The generation gap was, of course, a perennial site of dramatic conflict, but the accelerating tempo of social change was widening the gap and increasing the difficulties of bridging it. Maureen Donegan's *Choosing* portrayed the growing pains of a young lad in his first year at university. Every new encounter, every new experience, seemed to open new cracks in the monolith that was his world and to bring new stresses in his family life. In outgrowing his parents' world and growing into his own new world intellectually, morally and socially, crucial moments were his first sexual experience with a more worldly-wise fellow student and his first encounter with the life of those working on Kinsale oil rigs. Maeve Binchy's *Ireland of the Welcomes* explored the differential effects of emigration on successive generations. It showed the enormous psychological and cultural gulf between Irish parents, who had emigrated to Britain, and their children, who had grown up there. The impending decision, about whether to return and build a new life for the family back in Ireland served as a stimulus for bringing such differences to a head. In the more confined world of *The Lost Hour* and its sequel *The Key*, adapted from John McGahern's novel *The Leavetaking*, growing pains took a heavier toll, as there was no such room for manoeuvre. Growing up in a back-of-beyond garda barracks, a sensitive young boy struggled to cope with the death of a mother and the life of an insensitive father, as he was saddled before his time with the weight of an adult world.

Parental pressures surrounding mating occurred again and again. Babies on the way had a way of resolving certain matters on the surface, while leaving certain deeper matters unresolved, in *Teresa's Wedding* and *One for Sorrow*. William Trevor's *Teresa's Wedding* showed an unwanted marriage, under the shadow of an unwanted pregnancy, arranged by parents and priest, fatalistically committing the next generation to resign themselves to reproducing the resignation of the generation that went before. Seán McCarthy's *One for Sorrow* showed two young people and four disapproving parents, under the pressure of pregnancy, followed by the birth and sad death of their baby.

Marital problems, not surprisingly, loomed fairly large at a time of continuing re-definition of sex roles and changing socio-sexual mores. A number of plays subjected the institution of till-death-do-us-part marriage to serious critical scrutiny and examined the particular pressures and acute contradictions surrounding it in an Irish context. *Teresa's Wedding* showed a very typical pairing under a very typical pattern of circumstances in a typical country town. On this very traditional terrain, on which no one had anything but the most traditional approach to sex roles and relations between the sexes, it was clear how enormous was the gulf between the separate psycho-social worlds inhabited by the separate sexes. Teresa, the typical girl, could only really talk to her girlfriends. Artie, the typical guy, could only really talk to his mates. The painful awkwardness in their perfunctory talk to each other was further underlined by their acute inability to establish any sort of eye contact, even when there was something important to discuss with each other. Not only was each closer to other friends than to each other, but all the external rituals of mating were far easier for each to cope with than their actual mate.

In their traditional upbringing, most particularly for the female of the species, it was getting married that was the important thing, not the relationship with the person married. Teresa, like her sisters and friends, had always pictured her wedding in the (ironically titled) Church of the Immaculate Conception, followed by the reception in the very lounge bar in which she stood, with everything imagined to be exactly as it was. Only the bridegroom had been mysterious. He was only part of the picture as a kind of vague, faceless, bodiless presence. Indeed, at the actual wedding the actual bridegroom was still a vague enough presence. Each of them saw members of the opposite sex as interchangeable parts, with neither of them anything very special to each other. It was the same for their peers, just as it had been for their parents. As Artie's father put it: 'You have to make the most of a thing like this... when you weigh it all up, isn't one marriage like the next one? A pig in a poke at the best of times'.

It told the truth about so much Irish mating and marriage: a dance, a bit of awkward sex in a dark field, getting caught and making the most of it. Alternatively, there were the patterns of Teresa's sad sisters: using a well-off man to get out of the town and growing embittered with the boredom of calculating marriage or recoiling from the shock of sex, seeing men as vulgar farm animals, refusing to consummate marriage and longing for escape to a convent. Taking a somewhat sardonic stance in relation to it all, the bottom line was that perhaps Artie and Teresa would make ago of it: 'At least, there was nothing that could be destroyed'.

Showing another couple caught in the trap of a shapeless marriage, but not so resigned to it, was Michael Callan's *Love is...* Unsure of each other and their future together, a time of reckoning was coming for Larry and Dee Mitchell, showing evidence of the more modern pressures on marriage and confusion of sex roles. A shadow was then cast upon the struggle towards resolution by a charge of rape, bringing all sort of private intimacies into the public arena, once the machinery of the law was set in motion to confuse further the already confused situation. Another marriage with the life gone out of it, coming into crisis was featured in Barbara McKeon's *Still Love*. The prospect of finding the love and understanding a woman sought brought up for consideration the wisdom of taking promises for life at the age of twenty. It posed the question of whether a wife and mother could move on from a husband and children, who had become strangers to her or whether it was too late to change course. However, it did so in such a gauche, shallow and pokerfaced manner, as to pose no serious challenge to anyone who did not want to consider it a serious question. Also focusing on a wife and mother taking stock of her situation was David Hayes' *If You Want to Know Me*. When her husband returned home after three months in a hospital and her four grown sons were home for the occasion, this woman began to realise that she had submerged herself in her family for thirty years and that she had no life of her own. This sort of treatment of a middle-aged woman in this sort of mid-life crisis was a break from the more traditional Irish treatment of the wife/mother role, although it had become something of a cliché in international terms.

For those who decided they wanted out, there was, of course, no divorce. There was, however, that particular Irish solution to an Irish problem: annulment. Tom MacIntyre's *Painted Out* had a certain documentary value in outlining the awkward procedures of the annulment process and the mental gymnastics of its tribunals. As drama, however, it was an empty shell. There was no convincing characterisation of the female journalist seeking the annulment, no real sense of what her marriage had been all about, no plausible account of her motivation in pursuing a procedure she scorned. It was mostly talk, talk, talk, empty judicial talk, and it left one feeling flat, dissatisfied and disoriented, rather than incited to sort out the issues it was presumably intended to raise. Hugh Leonard put the disorienting effect down to the direction, criticising the shooting of the tribunal in close-up as making it like sitting too close to a tennis match or reading a novel in which every second word was italicised.<sup>11</sup>

An earlier more engaging RTÉ play by MacIntyre was a comic morality play entitled *Scruples*, the primary point of which was to observe that 'Scruples only affect the best. Most of the population around here never heard of them.' However, a secondary point worth observing was that this moral divide between the scrupulous and the unscrupulous was the point of tension within a marriage. Radically different moral standards prevailed between a conscientious ex-schoolmaster, pillar of a small town community, and his battle-axe of a wife when he became beset with scruples over a sum of unpaid tax in the past and she insisted he should put it out of his mind. It was a recurring scenario, whereby the practical woman regarded a man's principles as silly and indulgent luxuries that could ill be afforded. It was a dramatic scenario with a number of variants, all rooted in the traditional sexual division of labour, whereby women were totally circumscribed by the practicalities of domesticity, freeing men to engage in impractical philosophy. It was a scenario which was breaking down, although it remained untouched in numerous backwaters and pockets of resistance.

Some plays brought together marital tensions with cultural tensions. They explored the interface in scenarios in which the divide between English and Irish, Protestant and Catholic, formed the point of tension in a marital situation. Jennifer Johnston's first written-for-television work *The Bondage Field* was a gritty, highly-charged play, revolving around the shock and subsequent soul-searching of a young English woman, who only discovered that her Irish husband was an IRA volunteer when he was arrested and brought to trial. Looking back, she needed to unweave the implicit lie knit into their relationship. Looking ahead, she had to decide whether to stand by her man or to leave him to his eight years in prison and put Ireland and its troubles behind her. In doing so, she had to cope both with the breakdown of trust between them and with the gap between their cultural backgrounds, which was wider than she had ever imagined. When two IRA men came to visit her, they tried to explain her husband's behaviour in an appeal to the historical context: 'the way kids get brought up here... the shadows that get laid across their minds... an unending spiral'. But, far from drawing her in to their world, it only made it seem more alien.

Less gritty, in fact so smooth and so thinly textured as to border on unreality, were the mild mannered and statically conceived religious differences between the comfortable and complacent suburban couple in Barbara McKeon's *The Parting Gift*. When Stephen, described as English, Protestant, middle class and divorced, was tragically killed, the question arose as to whether he would be buried as a Protestant or a Catholic, so that they would be buried together. Kathleen insisted he be buried in his own faith. The Catholic priest who performed their wedding ceremony was in attendance at his funeral. Thus her parting gift to him: the burial of religious differences. It was the mildest of middle class liberalism and gentlest of progressive ecumenism, at least by the standards set by Jeremiah Newman and Ian Paisley. But, quite honestly, it was difficult to care, at least for anyone who had been spending the previous two decades discussing the death of God and world revolution, attending marches and funerals north of the border and struggling for a bit of secular space to the south of it.

From coming of age to memories of lost youth, there were pictures of contemporary life at the various stages of the life cycle, though mainly in a kind of claustrophobic close-up that missed that chance to construct character and context in way in which the one illuminated the other. It wasn't that writers, directors and the rest didn't try to do so. It was that one was left with the strong impression that few had either the psychological or the sociological insight to do so any way satisfactorily.

Youth was seen mainly within the family home or within the immediate circle of family friends in the local community. Schools seemed to be a no-go area after *The Spike*, though *Choosing* did give small glimpses of student life at university level. There were some interesting critical representations of Christian Brothers education during this period, but they were in other media. In the cinema, there was Cathal Black's *Our Boys* and, in the theatre, there was Neil Donnelly's *Silver Dollar Boys*, Irish counterparts of the Australian *The Devil's Playground* and the American *Catholic Boys*. On the female side, the only representation of convent education was in the cinema, in Desmond Davis' film of Edna O'Brien's story *The Country Girls*. But, as far as television was concerned, schools were virtually absent in RTÉ's in-house productions, though Irish schools did appear occasionally in co-productions, in the *Access* dramas and in British television drama set in Ireland. There was not a single school in any of its serials in the 1980s. Barbara McKeon's *Amy* took youth into a city centre disco, dreaming of a better world than the real one and not easily finding it, pushing some into a dangerous world of fantasy and self-deception. The author's aim was to say something about relationships in a society that promised the good life, but seldom delivered it, but it was hard to say what this was.

Moving into the world of work, the overall picture was fairly sketchy. There was the disco in *Amy*, where Amy and her friend Val worked as waitresses. There were the Kinsale oil rigs in *Choosing*, where the students were exposed to workers as 'the ones who really run things'. There were factories featuring in three different plays, each finding dramatic conflict in the lives of factory workers at three different levels. Martin Duffy's *Your Favourite Funnyman* concerned the personal and artistic conflicts of a factory worker by day and stand-up comedian by night. Once he began writing his own material and sacrificing secure routines to develop his craft, he met with discouragement from all sides, from wife, factory boss, cabaret manager and audience. Deciding that Ireland with its peasant background and provincialism was hostile to talent, he took the boat.

*Men of Consequence*, Martin Duffy's next play, dealt with the trade union activist up against the system. John Burke, lathe operator and alienated wage labourer, produced a newsletter, giving details of the company's takeover by a multi-national corporation, managers' salaries and expense accounts. In turn, the management recommended to the company doctor that he be superannuated on the grounds of 'temperamental unsuitability for work', making him, at the age of 28, not only unemployed, but unemployable. His appeal for union support ran up against the stone wall of the average worker interested only in his own wage packet and the union representative settled into a cozy, mutually back scratching relationship with management. Anyone wanting to change the world was a square peg in a world of round holes. The company's welfare officer, however, was once a social worker who wanted to change the world and had been seduced by notions of Carson's as a caring organisation. Faced with the reality of his position as the company's hatchet man, he was brought into a crisis of conscience over the management's use of the superannuation scheme to victimise a dissident worker.

The representation of women was very unflattering, although not altogether unrealistic. It was the time-honoured image of women as having small minds, filled with the trivial practicalities of life, incapable of seeing beyond small details and home comforts to larger principles and social causes. In two parallel domestic scenes, John Burke, the trade union activist, and Tom Nesbitt, the welfare officer, were pictured at home with their wives discussing the situation. John Burke's wife mocked him for playing the hero and stirring up trouble and argued that supporting his wife and children shouldn't leave him any time for trade union crusades. In a tone of shrill and embittered bitchiness, she asked if she was supposed to be honoured to live in misery with some eejit, who thought he was a hero of the working classes. He in turn gave out to her for being small-minded and always taking the bosses' side. When he explained that he had his principles, she replied: 'You can't eat principles'. To which he replied: 'You can't shave without looking yourself in the face'. In the other home, where everything about the scene was externally more genteel, the conflict was the same. Tom Nesbitt's wife, amidst a comfortable standard of living no lathe operator would ever see and without having to work, launched into an arrogant and superior tirade against the 'pathological trade unionist'. From her pampered suburban life, she moaned on about troublemakers:

'That type moans about anything that might constitute a day's work... The root of the trouble is always a small group of agitators who would rather spend hot air than do an honest day's work'.

Without even knowing the man, let alone ever doing a day's work at a lathe, she pronounced him just one more troublemaker put in his place. As to her husband, she told him he was too soft. She remembered when he wanted to change the world and said she thought he had 'grown out of all that'. When it came down to it, his job gave her a nice life that she did not want jeopardised by him 'getting the name of being too much on the workers' side'. In the end, no one's nice life or not-so-nice life was sacrificed, even if their principles were. Both men were transferred to other jobs.

John Burke agreed to desist from trade union activity. Tom Nesbitt became assistant personnel manager. With fatalistic resignation, it was decided that no protest on the part of either would matter, because neither were 'men of consequence'. For John Burke: 'A consequence is the result of some effective action... working class people are bred to be inconsequential.' In becoming what he was bred to be, he could keep his factory job and his nagging wife. The Nesbitts could stay secure in suburbia. It wasn't a very flattering picture of men either. There was nothing great for men to see when they shaved. It was not a very flattering picture of Irish society, all told, but it was fair enough as far as it went.

Also on the terrain of the multinational company in Ireland, in relation to the workforce, was Edmund Ward's *Visitors*. Raising problems on a different scale and level, it examined the implications of IDA policy on industrial development, which allowed multi-national companies to set up in Ireland with the help of IDA grants and then pull out when the grant concessions expired. This made possible not only the exploitation of the worker as wage labourer, but as tax payer as well. In the case of the particular rip-off, fly-by-night operation of this play, the man assigned to oversee the creation and demise of the town's brave new world of industrial development was a local lad made good. Twisting the knife, it was their own John Kinsella who would preside over the con-job of Rathkilly's 400 job white elephant and be the instrument of their betrayal. Commenting on his title of vice-president in charge of factory relocation, he cynically observed: 'Looks better under my signature than chief con-man, subsidy-juggler and extortioner of maximum tax concessions. Shorter too.'

Also in the realm of industrial relations, though smaller again in scale and personal in implication, was Kevin Grattan's *Payoff*. Like his *People In Glass Houses*, it looked at workplace relationships and career aspirations in an office environment. It centred on the reflections surrounding the retirement of Charlie Gallagher, a conscientious insurance clerk who was never promoted and never 'got on' in the company. Because he was a man who could not be bought and never played the game, the mandatory presentation, the expected speeches and all the normal rituals of retirement in the offing were proving a source of embarrassment to the management. The drama played on the contrast between the small successes of a man considered to be a failure and the huge failures of those considered to be successful. Despite the pathos of an apparently wasted life, he had a certain fulfilment and integrity, which, in a different light, could make those caught up in craven cowardice, infighting and backstabbing seem the real losers. Giving the bottom line on his life, the retiring man told his co-workers:

'Before you go flinging my life in the dustbin, let me tell you it wasn't a waste. There are a couple of people I'm glad I met, books that gave me pleasure, photographs, paintings. Does none of that count? Is it so important to have your name on the door?'

Perhaps it shouldn't be so important to have one's name on the door and other things should count, but these were exceedingly modest claims and very small individual victories on the scale of things.

It reflected a particular theme running through much of modern literature, that of the individual, dropping out of the rat-race and finding his identity within rather than without, in his soul rather than on the door. The drama of contemporary working life tended to be somewhat narrowly conceived. It tended to pit powerful systems over against impotent individuals, who either conformed or resisted the system in their individual ways. At least they were individuals who actually worked and sometimes had ideas and manifested some degree of social awareness, rather than lumpen, inarticulate, anti-social, quasi-criminal figures. However, the absence of drama dealing with the consequential collective activity of the working class was particularly conspicuous at a time when hundreds of thousands were engaged in national work stoppages and marching on the streets, demanding tax equity for the PAYE sector, demonstrating the class tension building up in Irish society and the power of the trade union movement to harness it.

The fate of those having to uproot themselves and emigrate to find work was still a recurring theme, with the question of the possibility of coming home again looming much larger than the advantages of going where the labour market took them. On similar terrain to Maeve Binchy's *Ireland of the Welcomes* was Seán Walsh's *The Dreamers*. It was about two mates working as labourers and living in a bedsit in London, talking about achieving many things and returning to Ireland and raising the question of whether their dreaming had become a substitute for living. The comings and goings of emigrant labour, with many variations upon the theme, was also a prominent motif in serials and co-productions.

A new twist to migration patterns was implicit in the policy of attracting writers to Ireland through tax exemptions. There was an effort during this period to get such writers to write for television to give a view of Ireland from both inside and outside in this way. Out of this came such plays as Edmund Ward's *Visitors* on the role of the multi-nationals in Ireland and Peter Driscoll's *The Babysitters*, a psychological thriller. In *The Babysitters*, as in

*Passing Through*, a literary tax refugee was present in the drama as a central character. Ireland's experience of finding its way and giving cultural expression to its experience in an increasingly cosmopolitan context meant many new twists and turns to old traditions and the emergence of all sorts of hybrid phenomena. The characteristically modern preoccupation with psychotherapy found expression in Gabriel Rosenstock's Irish language play *Airc*, an off-beat treatment of the psychiatric institution and the funnier side of group therapy.

However, whatever the trials and tribulations, the joys and the sorrows, life went on and time passed. The problems of coming of age gave way to problems of ageing and memories of lost youth. In both plays looking at life from the vantage point of its later years, music played a key part, as the carrier of strong memories and frail hopes. In Lee Gallaher's *The Second Last Post*, the death of an obscure piano player reunited the members of a former band and revived their remembrances of the days of the Aces High. In reviving the legend of Charlie D'Arcy and not allowing the star of their show to be consigned to a four-and-a-half line obituary, they were seeking to rescue their own disappointed lives from varying degrees of obscurity and to give them a new dimension of significance. There was a sort of desperation in their reliving of old times and replaying of old tunes, revealing a series of shattered lives where 'most of the knockdowns happened on the inside of the bodies.' In Eugene McCabe's *Winter Music*, an old piano left over after an auction at a derelict estate became the symbol of lost opportunities and the embodiment of last hopes, for an elderly spinster living with her two bickering bachelor brothers. Into the atmosphere of decay on their dilapidated border farm, where they lived their dour domestic life, Annie wanted only to bring this one beautiful, if also dilapidated, thing. The disappointment of even this one modest wish, and the pathos of seeing it rot and then smashed outside her door, left her feeling that she would be better off dead.

There was a strong driving purpose in the drama policy producing the plays of this late 1970s-early 1980s period. There was a strong demand for contemporary drama taking on the problematic areas in Irish society. There was a willingness to take risks. There was opportunity for new writers. However, in assessing the results of this wholly admirable policy, it was generally agreed that the productions of this period were of very uneven quality. Some, like *Deeply Regretted By*, *Assault on a Citadel* and *An Taoille Tuile*, were excellent scripts and excellent productions. Others, however, radiated a certain sincerity and raised important issues, but showed signs of inadequate script development and make-do production. Some were actually painful to watch. *Still Love*, although the direction gave it an attractive visual look, was based on a script which gave hopelessly superficial and stilted treatment to a conflict between love and marriage, which must have been irritating and alienating to anyone to whom such conflict had come as a deep and highly charged experience. *Painted Out* gave such flat, myopic treatment to breakdown of marriage and annulment procedures that it lost the wood for the trees and did nothing to make anyone care.

## Historical Series

Although the emphasis was on contemporary written-for-television drama, there was still some historical drama and literary or theatrical adaptation. There was a four part adaptation of Kate O'Brien's novel *The Ante Room*, set in late-victorian Ireland and vividly evoking the claustrophobia and guilt-ridden milieu of the Catholic bourgeoisie of the era. In an environment heavy with Catholic ritual, social respectability and impending death, illicit love was pitted against family loyalties, social mores and religious prohibitions with tragic consequences. There was the six part series *Tales of Kilnavarna*, adapted from John B. Keane's books by Joe O'Donnell. It gave an amusing and affectionate picture of the manners and mores pervading traditional Irish rural life, with each episode coming at it with the focus on a particular prototypical character with a particular role in the community. There was *The Postman's Story*, *The Publican's Story*, *The Matchmaker's Story*, *The TD's Story*.

To celebrate the O'Casey centenary in 1980, there was a thirteen part series entitled *Seán*, based on O'Hare's autobiographies and adapted by Michael Voysey, Neil Jordan and Eugene McCabe. It was not regarded, in or out of RTÉ, as a successful production. Part of the problem was perhaps with giving the autobiographies, generally regarded as shapeless, self-indulgent and inaccurate, such weight in a serious biographical treatment of O'Casey. There was also the fact that the style of the production was very stagey. It was a theatrical style of television that was becoming less and less satisfactory to an audience becoming increasingly accustomed to a more filmic style of television. There was also a co-production arrangement with BBC to make television adaptations of O'Casey plays, with RTÉ making *The Silver Tassie* and BBC doing *Red Roses for Me* and *Juno and The Paycock*, to be shown on both channels to mark the centenary.

The really outstanding historical drama of this time, indeed of RTÉ's whole history, was *Strumpet City*. It was a seven part adaptation of James Plunkett's epic novel, an international bestseller first published in 1969, giving a panoramic view of Dublin life during the years 1907 to 1914, years of direct and bitter confrontation between capital and labour. The epic scale and penetrating truthfulness of Plunkett's novel were skilfully reproduced and even enhanced by the quality of virtually every aspect of the RTÉ production: the script by Hugh Leonard, the direction by

Tony Barry, the performances by Irish actors, the use of film and authentic locations. It was RTÉ's most expensive production to that date. It functioned as a showcase product, marking RTÉ's biggest breakthrough on the international market and establishing RTÉ's credentials as a producer of high quality television drama. It was shown and acclaimed in 52 countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa, Australia and Latin America. It received only a very limited airing in the USA on CBS cable television. Although it would have seemed the ideal product for the PBS Masterpiece Theatre slot, it was rejected on the grounds that the accents would have been incomprehensible to an American audience, an ironic comment in a world where there was no problem with the accents in *Dallas* from Montevideo to Milan to Manila. It was, of course, tied to the problem of the one-way global flow of communications and the fact that even what the more cultured element of the American audience, gravitating to the PBS, could accommodate from abroad was limited. In Plunkett's view, they prefer upper-crust British stuff to anything with a working class content.<sup>12</sup> It would seem that RTÉ had its eye on the American audience. The casting of Peter Ustinov as the king and of Peter O'Toole as Larkin brought the whole force of the Hollywood star system to bear upon its marketability. Such casting was hardly necessary, or even particularly appropriate, either for aesthetic reasons or for considerations of historical verisimilitude. It was obviously connected to the movement of RTÉ productions and personnel into the international arena.

However, these were only cameo roles and Irish actors bore the weight of conveying the more important characters and their meaning in Irish social history to their most important audience, that of contemporary Irish society. It was enormously well-received by the Irish audience and was particularly popular in Dublin. The characters were extraordinarily well conceived and well conveyed to counterpoint each other and to create a comprehensive social canvas. Stating his intentions in setting the story up in the way that he did, Plunkett said:

I wanted to explore what I knew of the city, to get it out of myself and find a shape for my feeling about it... Thinking that O'Casey had dealt with the submerged, deprived city and Joyce with the seedy gentility, I thought I would try to get the lot in - the company director types, the priests, the decent working men, and the utterly outcast.<sup>13</sup>

And get the whole lot in he did. In a brilliant orchestration of complementary and contrasting elements, he encompassed the entire social spectrum and brought in, not only capitalists, clergy, workers and wives, but the different types of capitalists, clergy, workers and wives. Among the capitalists: Mr. Bradshaw, a ruthless rackrenting landlord, represented the exploitative and conservative Catholic bourgeoisie. Mr. Yearling, a more cultured and humanistic company director type, represented the liberal traditions of the Protestant ascendancy. Among the priests: Fr. O'Connor was the militant defender of both Catholic doctrine and class privilege and the connection between the two. Fr. O'Sullivan was the embodiment of a more humanistic interpretation of religious duty and of more organic ties to the working class. Fr. Giffley was the whiskey priest, whose posting to a slum parish corresponded to a descent from grace. Among the working men: Mulhall was the voice of the working class militant, as ideologically committed to socialism as Mr. Bradshaw and Fr. O'Connor were to capitalism, Catholicism and aristocracy. Fitz was the prototypical honest worker, not much concerned with articulated ideologies, but caught in a web of ideological contradictions, because of his loyalty to his fellow workers and sense of fair play, on the one hand, and his ties to the clergy through his faith and his ties to the ruling class through his wife's domestic service, on the other hand. Hennessy was the more marginal worker, in and out of employment, lacking in work discipline and always bordering on or crossing over the line into lumpen life. Rashers Tierney was the extreme of the lumpen proletariat, an indigent tramp living on the city's waste and ending up as a rotting corpse in a church basement.

Among the women, all, except those in domestic service, owed their standard of living and place in society to their sexuality. From the pampered luxury of the childless Mrs. Bradshaw to the precarious poverty of the fertile Mrs. Hennessy, they lived by their status as wives. All, that is, except the prostitute Lily Maxwell, whose femininity was associated with more direct financial arrangements. The women, although they occupied definite ideological positions, tended to be ideologically unconscious and inarticulate, functioning as 'humanising' influences, pulling men away from their moral principles and political ideologies to domestic practicalities and general human qualities. Only Miss Gilchrist was the direct voice of a political position, that of militant fenianism, a rural nationalist ideology marginal to the urban class struggles of her Dublin context.

With so many characters directly or indirectly bearing so much ideological weight, some might argue that they were stereotypes. There was a popular prejudice to the effect that characters who spoke for strong ideological positions became ciphers and could not be richly textured individuals or psychologically complex human beings. The characters in *Strumpet City*, however, were colourfully individual and often quite complex. In fact, their ideological specificity enhanced the strength and quality of their characterisation. There were also a number of interconnections cutting across class lines, a fair amount of attention to human qualities binding people outside ideological categories and separating people within them.

Martin McLoone argued that this thrust to a general humanism had the effect of containing and disguising class oppression. Criticising the characterisation from the opposite angle, he contended that the emphasis on general human qualities forced the individuality of each of the characters into a pattern of stereotypes. According to him, the characters that were the strongest mouthpieces for political positions (Mr. Bradshaw, Fr. O'Connor, Mulhall) did not move. Their confrontations resulted in ideological stand-off. A pattern of movement and compromise was pursued through the symbolic presence of children, as victims caught in the middle, and the regressive stereotyping of women. Thus Mary was the chaste rural maiden become loving mother (Mary-virgin-mother) and Lily was the proverbial prostitute with a heart of gold.<sup>14</sup> Asked to reply to this argument, Plunkett commented that McLoone read too much into the text. He conceded, however, that if an author cared enough about character, if he dealt with the human element in all characters, class lines would be blurred.<sup>15</sup> But this was perhaps to concede too much. Tony Barry argued that the characters were not stereotypes in the sense of being clichés. They did represent the people of the time and showed the history of the time in terms of the truth in the souls of ordinary people. They were based on people the author actually knew.<sup>16</sup>

The defence could be put in even stronger terms. Because the characters in *Strumpet City* were representative types of a particular socio-historical conjuncture, without being rigid reproductions of clichéd characteristics, they were able to mobilise audience interest simultaneously in their individual life stories and in the historical fate of the forces which they represented. Because they represented social forces, as embodied in full blooded and richly specific individuals, they manifested all the more vividly the reality of class oppression. Unlike *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which manipulated audience sympathy for the human vulnerability of characters deeply implicated in class oppression, *Strumpet City* never lost its critical edge or blurred class lines. *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were constructed to bring the audience into a myopic identification with Pam's bereavement, Clayton's financial problems, Fallon's amnesia, Amanda's royal romance, Blake's affection for his children, while cutting out any consideration of the class structure which supports such people in their luxurious, exploitative and parasitic lives.

*Strumpet City*, however, was structured in such a way as to counterpoint the opulence of Kingstown with the poverty of the inner city tenements. Even within the Bradshaw household in Kingstown, life upstairs was constantly seen against life downstairs. No matter how warm, gentle or concerned Mrs. Bradshaw was seen to be, it was clear that her way of life was grounded in the exploitation of others, as servants, as tenants and as workers. There were no details about masters or mistresses detached from relevant details about their servants. The landlord's life was seen in clear contrast to that of his tenants. The employer's place in the scheme of things was sharply focused vis-a-vis the labour of his workers.

Neither Plunkett nor Barry have done *Strumpet City* full justice in insisting it was 'not political' but 'about people'. This failed to take account of the way in which any construction of what a person's life was all about was implicitly political. A person's life was inevitably shaped by forces larger than himself/herself, by political structures which determined their place in the scheme of things. A production might or might not approach this with honesty and insight. *Strumpet City* did, whereas *Dallas* and *Dynasty* did not. It illuminated the class forces through the characters and highlighted the social structures through their stories, in contrast to the way in which most productions systematically obscured class forces and social structures through their myopic and sentimental view of character and storyline in which they not only foregrounded individuals but de-contextualised them. The place of the towering figure of Larkin in the overall narrative was significant in this respect. In much of the folk tradition surrounding Larkin in the Irish trade union movement, he has been treated as a mythical figure, whose individual will determined the course of historical events. In songs and stories, the rise and fall of labour corresponded to the coming and going of Larkin:

'Then on came Larkin like a mighty wave.  
We stood by Larkin through thick and thin.  
Then Larkin left us. We seemed defeated.  
The night was black for the working man.'

Within the narrative, those on both sides constantly referred to 'Larkinism' and 'Larkin's union' and spoke of Larkin as a charismatic figure, who single-handedly provoked the labour crises of 1913:

*Mulhall*: 'Larkin will put a stop to stevedores being paid in pubs'.

*Fr. O'Connor*: (*On coming across riots in the street*): 'Mr. Larkin's handiwork, no doubt'.

However, it was not entirely fair to argue, as McLoone did, that *Strumpet City* conspired in the reproduction of this view of Irish labour history. The casting of Peter O'Toole in the RTÉ production might have indicated such a tendency. However, the structure of the narrative itself subverted it. Plunkett quite deliberately kept the figure of Larkin in the background, so as not to throw the construction out of balance. It was the class forces, as embodied in the ordinary people of the time, which were foregrounded in the story as a whole. Not that the figure of Larkin was not important in a truthful telling of the story of the times. Historical forces have been embodied in a particularly powerful

way in the leaders that history has thrown up. An ironic footnote to the story came when RTÉ was shooting crucial scenes for *Strumpet City* in O'Connell Street and had to take great care to keep the formidable statue of Larkin out of shot.

The story line of *Strumpet City* was a complex narrative. Opening on the young Mary leaving her country home and going into domestic service in the city, it followed her in coming to terms with the duties and restrictions imposed by the Bradshaws, through falling in love with Fitz, a Dublin worker, and subsequently marrying and bearing children in a Dublin tenement. In an intricate weave of plots and subplots, the mounting tension between capital and labour featured prominently, not only in terms of exploitative wages and conditions, but in terms of the elemental struggle for the right of trade union organisation, culminating in the lockout of 1913, which reduced the Dublin working class to starvation and brought the immediate objectives of the labour movement to defeat. Along the way, there was the fanfare of the royal visit; the abandonment of Miss Gilchrist to the workhouse; the imprisonment of Rashers, Mulhall, Bannister and Larkin; the blacklisting of Farrell; the scabbing of Hennessy; the use of confraternity food parcels to break the strike; the confrontation at the docks as starving children were put on the boat to working class homes in Protestant England; the accident at the foundry in which Mulhall lost his legs; the tragic deaths of Miss Gilchrist, Mulhall and Rashers; the final enlistment of Fitz in the British Army.

The narrative was full of ideologically charged discourse. There were overt declarations of political allegiances:

*Fr. O'Connor:* 'We condemn Marx.'

*Mr. Yearling:* 'You broke Parnell.'

*Pat Bannister:* 'Royalty will go. So will the exploiters.'

*Speaker at mass meeting:* 'The employers, the police and the clergy are our enemies.'

There were expressions of fundamental values:

*Larkin:* 'An injury to one is the concern of all.'

*Fr. O'Connor:* 'Surely sin is the only thing worth being concerned about'.

Such discourse was rich in resonance, each such statement carrying the force of a pattern of historical flow and a philosophical positioning in relation to it. All characters, including Big Jim Larkin, spoke for something larger than themselves and so their utterances were weighted with socio-historical significance. It was not simply speech, however, which was the vehicle of socio-historical meaning. The very structure of the narrative was the primary device for conveying what was at stake. The constant juxtaposition of contrasting milieux, contrasting ideas and values, contrasting emotional responses, contrasting material conditions both within and between scenes, gave the story its focused historical sweep and sharp cutting edge.

It was a story of brave struggle and bitter defeat, leaving Dublin as prostituted in the end as in the beginning, thus the significance of the title. Opening on the strumpet hailing royalty on the occasion of the king's visit and closing on it being forced to prostitute itself to the power of capital, Dublin was *Strumpet City*. Like Lily Maxwell, it had its endearing features and it had ties of loyalty transcending both feudal bonds and market forces but it had succumbed to contagious disease. Coming to the ideological bottom line of *Strumpet City's* significance in RTÉ's history, McLoone's analysis made very strong claims, regarding it not only as a turning point for Irish television drama, but as a consummation of the ideological project of Irish television over two decades:

The real significance of the serial lies in the way in which it inserts itself into Irish culture in a specific way and at a specific historical moment... despite the rather hard-nosed practicality of its conception, *Strumpet City* stands as a paradigm of the ruptures and contradictions of contemporary Irish society... *Strumpet City* can be seen to analyse how the Church eventually overcame the oppositional forces of socialism and liberalism at a crucial moment in the formation of the modern Irish state. The victory that this represents does not, however, re-affirm a consensus, or a status quo... as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Edward the Seventh* does for constitutional monarchy and social democracy in contemporary Britain. On the contrary... the contemporary resonances are not re-affirmation of this victory, but a confirmation of the values of defeated forces and an implicit acknowledgement that the struggle continues. *Strumpet City* attempts to open out hidden, disguised or temporarily defeated ideologies... The thrust of the narrative was towards social democracy, but the combination of its formal devices and the fissures in contemporary Ireland gives equal weighting to other oppositional elements.<sup>18</sup>

Such conclusions were well warranted.

In Tony Barry's view, historical drama could be a cop-out from the present. *Strumpet City*, he argued, proved that it need not be. Unlike *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, which lingered on the problems of the

privileged and glossed over the cultures they robbed, *Strumpet City* was honest and pulled no punches on difficult questions. Historical drama, in his opinion, should only be done if it was honest. If not, it should not be done.<sup>19</sup>

RTÉ proceeded to produce more historical drama, some of it equally large-scale, at least in terms of the resources put into such productions, but whether any were as rigorously honest or as challengingly resonant in contemporary significance was another matter.

### Co-Productions \*

\* Regarding co-productions, the degree of RTE involvement varied considerably from one production to another. The *Year of the French*, *Caught in a Free State*, *Love Stories of Ireland*, *Night in Tunisia*, *A Life*, *Summer Lightning* and *Spring Cleaning* were RTÉ-initiated projects, in which RTÉ had full editorial control and foreign input was limited mainly to financial investment. In the case of *The Year of the French*, there was script consultation, casting and subtitling involvement from the French side. At the other extreme were productions initiated elsewhere, with the editorial control residing elsewhere with minimal RTÉ input, such as *The Irish RM* and *Roses from Dublin*. In the same category too were *Good Behaviour*, *Langrishe, Go Down*, *Ballroom of Romance* and *One of Ourselves*, which were essentially BBC productions, although the latter two had an RTÉ director. In a middle category, there was *The Price* which was initiated and directed by Astramead, but had an RTÉ executive producer. In an altogether different category was *When Reason Sleeps* initiated by Strongbow, with three out of the four films being made by Strongbow and one being made by RTÉ.

Like *Strumpet City*, all of the subsequent historical mini-series were literary adaptations. Unlike *Strumpet City*, all made after 1980 were co-productions, due to changing conditions on the world market. Always the most expensive type of television to make, rising costs and the high technical standards set by imported drama had upped the ante as far as drama production was concerned, even more so in the case of elaborately mounted costume drama in a period setting.

*The Year of the French* was a six part adaptation of the novel of the same name by Thomas Flanagan. It was an RTÉ co-production with Channel 4 in Britain and FR3 in France. Despite the huge resources put into its production, including five months filming and a £2 million budget (more than twice that of *Strumpet City*), it was nowhere nearly so successful. Set in 1798, it concerned the influence of the principles of the French revolution in Ireland, resulting in a French invasion of Ireland in an alliance with Irish forces in rebellion against British rule. It showed the positions taken up by such historical figures as Theobald Wolfe Tone, George Moore, John Moore, Owen McCarthy, Fr. Murphy, Lord Cornwallis and General Humbert. It showed how the United Irishmen, the whiteboys and the impoverished and oppressed peasantry put their hopes in the arrival of the forces of republican France, to free them from the tyranny of British monarchy and its agents, including the Castle Catholics, in Ireland. It showed, more than anything, soldiers to-ing and fro-ing, marching here and marching there, generals planning battles and soldiers fighting battles.

The enduring impression left by it was of large-scale action adventure battle scenes, of in-between discussions of politics (in the most superficial sense of the term) and of the poet McCarthy speaking in the most high-flown poetic language at the drop of a hat and with a straight face. The injection of some romance into the scenario did not add much in the way of penetration into the human dimensions of it all. It certainly added nothing to the credibility of the McCarthy character. In addition to spouting instant poetry for every occasion, he made love with his trousers and boots on. There was little to take it too far from the level of pre-adolescent boys, mad on battle scenes and not yet interested in sex. But then if that were the intended audience, they could have done without the politics, the poetry and the romance altogether.

Although it was beautifully filmed in parts and the music of the Chieftains gave it a certain style, as did some of the dialogue by Eugene McCabe, it was a very flawed production. Even on the simplest level, the subtitles were full of mis-spelling and incorrect punctuation. (It was a tri-lingual production, made in English, Irish and French). More serious, however, was the fact that it lacked any deeper penetration into the socio-historical context. Criticising it from this angle, Eoghan Harris described *The Year of the French* as an *Ivanhoe*-type of production, which evaded such important questions as class conflict among the peasantry and imposed a simple cowboys-and-indians formula on the complex historical landscape of late 18th century Ireland.<sup>20</sup> Michael Garvey, who directed it, said in retrospect that the production had a frantic quality and admitted that it was difficult to believe in McCarthy. He observed that they went to great lengths to avoid paddywackery, but perhaps they went to the opposite extreme and made the production too reverential to work.<sup>21</sup>

The same could not be said of the next major historical mini-series made in a RTÉ-initiated co-production. *Caught in a Free State* was a four part dramatisation of the activities of German intelligence in Ireland during World

War II. The original idea came from director Peter Ormrod and the script was written by Brian Lynch, based on such historical accounts as Enno Stephens' *Spies in Ireland*. Given the German angle, RTÉ made a strenuous effort, through its director of sales and co-productions John Baragwanath, to interest German television services in investing in the project as a co-production. Despite various changes offered in relation to their objections to the script, German television not only declined to invest in it, but refused to show it once it was made as a co-production with Channel 4. The Germans did not feel their agents were treated in a suitably respectful manner. They objected to suggestions of sexual ambivalence and generally found the images presented not teutonic enough.<sup>22</sup> Not that anyone was treated in a particularly respectful manner. From foreign diplomats to the indigenous plain people of Ireland, nearly all were figures of fun. There was certainly a fair bit of paddy-wackery about it, even if the paddys were only one species in a generally wacky menagerie.

It was meant to tell a serious, and even tragic, story and to reverse the traditional view of Irish history during 'the emergency', the Irish euphemism for World War II. Far from underplaying, or even denying, Irish flirtation with the forces of fascism, *Caught in a Free State* put the highly ambiguous nature of Irish neutrality to the fore. It not only showed such diverse dissident forces as the IRA and the blueshirts to have been anxious to have their lines of connection to Nazi Germany, but also indicated a certain sympathy among the more official representatives of the Free State. It was also meant to show how history had its farcical, and even ludicrous, elements. Indeed, it gave the farcical and ludicrous elements the upper hand. Some of it was in the nature of political irony. There were such moments as the IRA chief of staff revealing that even thought his title as 'de jure head of the Irish government' a bit of a joke. There were such utterances as the IRA woman's comment: 'Violence, I know, is a sacred thing'. Some of it was simple slapstick, like a German agent scurrying about in drag. Some of it was stage Irish clowning, with most Irish characters having a silly music hall sort of song-and-dance shading to them.

The whole thing had an oddly disorienting effect. At times, the insightful treatment of the serious pressures on the Irish government during the war or some reference sparking memories of the enormous suffering the war meant for so much of the world, in juxtaposition with cheeky music or knockabout carry-on, had a jarring effect. When asked if it was supposed to be funny or serious, those behind it answered 'both'. There are, of course, very different ways of combining the comic with the tragic, of juxtaposing the humourous with the serious side of things. For some, this particular way of doing it worked supremely well. For others, it did not. The clowning seemed gratuitously added on to the succession of events, rather than organically flowing through them.

However, for stage Irish clowning and knockabout paddy wackery, it would have been hard to beat *The Irish RM*, another co-production of the same period. One of Channel 4's first commissions, the first series of six episodes was made by a consortium which included RTÉ. It was enormously popular, not only in Britain and Ireland, but in more than 30 other countries including the USA. A second and third series were subsequently made. An adaptation of the Somerville and Ross stories, it was set in Skebawn at the turn of the century. It opened with the arrival of an English resident magistrate in Ireland and followed him through a whole gamut of farcical experiences of revelation and adjustment, as he attempted to come to terms with the quaint and comic ways of the native peasantry. Setting up Peter Bowles as the stage Englishman, as foil to a whole range of stage Irishmen, it pitted English common sense, sobriety, responsibility and fair play against Irish superstition, drunkenness, fecklessness, charm and deviousness.

Like the literary works of Somerville and Ross in their own time, the television production confirmed all the English caricatures of the Irish. It moreover got the Irish to conspire in the caricaturing of themselves, once more playing the paddy and tugging the forelock and being grateful to be noticed by the rest of the world at all. Even the bit of bite to the portrayal of colonial attitudes in both colonisers and colonised in the literary source were lost to the clowning of the television production. It was escapist farce, painting a 'good old days' big house picture of the past: full of foxhunts, horseflesh, eccentric old ladies, educated gentlemen and pig ignorant peasants, made attractive by stylish camera work, lush landscapes and Chieftains music.

The first series of *The Irish RM* was immediately followed by a six part mini-series *Roses from Dublin*, as if an Anglo-Irish co-production, parading English stereotypes of 19th century Ireland, should be complemented by a Franco-Irish co-production, parading French stereotypes of 20th century Ireland. Using a parallel device to the coming of an Englishman to Ireland, this variation had a Frenchman coming to Ireland. This French photographer proceeded to fall in love with a comely colleen from County Kerry by the name of Spring Kavanagh. Also featured were the said colleen's five formidable Finn McCool brothers, all gigantic veterans of Irish Rugby Union, along with a Greek poet and a chic Parisienne married to a Dingle publican. It was a whimsical 'all their wars are merry' view of Ireland, which might have been amusing to the sort of circussy crowd that gathered at Beaubourg on a sunny day, but it was ridiculous to an Irish audience. Reviewing *Roses from Dublin* in *The Irish Press*, Tom O'Dea envisioned its inception in a crowd of television executives in an airport hotel deciding to buy all the film footage left over from the Sally O'Brien Harp advertisements, along with the Cadbury Milk Tray advertisements, and to intercut these with film footage from *The Quiet Man* and *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* and videos of Triple Crown matches. He called it a 'gigantic hoax' that kept all the secrets of the real Ireland firmly hidden.<sup>23</sup>

The next co-produced mini-series was *Good Behaviour*, a three part adaptation by Hugh Leonard of the Molly Keane novel. It was back in the territory of the Anglo-Irish big house. Unlike Somerville and Ross, writing in the heyday of the ascendancy, Molly Keane wrote of it within its decline and her work was a series of laments for its passing. It was more perceptive regarding the manners and mores of the gentry, but also more inward looking. *Good Behaviour* was an ironic commentary on the codes of behaviour prevailing in the big house, but it was also an insider's indulgence of their claustrophobic world. An RTÉ-BBC co-production, it was very much in the tradition of BBC costume drama. Set on a country estate with the fairy tale name of Temple Alice, the head of the household was dying amidst the shabby elegance of a house full of champagne tastes and unpaid bills, full of emotionless decorum on the outside and emotional conflict on the inside. Whatever happened, the codes of 'good behaviour' had to be maintained. So narrowly focused was the drama on the domestic sphere that the outside world was all but invisible. It was not even all that recognisably set in Ireland and did not cast Irish actors. It seemed like any other English country house drama, except for the presence of an Irish maid who kept the major happy with forbidden whiskey and her hand under the bedclothes. It carried no real Irish resonance. It was the odd Irish character who looked somehow out of place. It treated the Anglo-Irish as English. It showed a class facing extinction from forces which it could not comprehend or confront, but it shed no light on those forces and left the impression that the author herself could not comprehend or confront the wider socio-historical forces shaping her characters in their claustrophobic world.

The remaining co-productions of this period (with the exception of *The Price*) were not mini-series, but once-off dramas, no longer called single plays, but more appropriately called television films, and reflecting the shift from theatrical to cinematic styles and structures. Most were literary adaptations set in the past.

The most successful was the award-winning RTÉ-BBC co-production *The Ballroom of Romance*. Based on William Trevor's short story, originally set in 1971, this production pushed it back into the 1950s. In the same vein as *Teresa's Wedding*, Trevor was taking up the exploration of dead-end lives, lack of meaningful human contact, especially between the sexes, and marriages of convenience. In the same mood of resignation, the central female character considered her lot and went on to face her bleak and inevitable fate in a loveless marriage. In this story, the no longer-young (36) Bridie had been living a typical life of quiet desperation, looking after an aged parent and watching life pass her by. The drudgery of her work on the farm and the banality of her evenings with her father by the fire were relieved only by her weekly trip to a tawdry dance hall in the middle of nowhere. The ballroom scenes gave a vivid picture of the lives of those left behind in a rural community depleted and desolated by the ravages of emigration and by the legacy of underdevelopment. In a ritualistic speech, the owner of the dance hall related the latest news of those who had emigrated, banns, marriages, and babies, and struggled to strike a note of reassurance: 'Old values are falling away from us, but they are still here in this ballroom of romance.'

And indeed they were. In the ballroom, the females were all stiffly pasted up against one wall and the males against the other. When they came together, they shuffled awkwardly around the dance floor. There was little dialogue, but when they spoke, it was extremely awkward and roundabout. The talk between members of the same sex was a bit easier and more direct. 'The boys' were at their easiest in a hidden place with their smokes and 'hard stuff' and bawdy talk of sex. The females commented on the males of the species, looking for suitable partners and finding most of them hopelessly wanting, even if 'their mothers think they're lovely'. As for Bridie, it was her night of coming to terms with the fact that she had been coming here for a long time and that it had 'no dignity': 'You don't need it when you're young'. Facing up to her lost youth and declining options, she decided that this phase of her life was over and that she had danced her last dance in this 'ballroom of romance'. Having lost her first love through emigration and having just had another hope dashed upon learning the drummer in the band was to be paired off with his landlady, she weakened in her resistance to Bowser Egan, even though she hated the way he had a swig of the bottle before 'having a go' at her. After all, his mother was about to die and he had land to sell and her farm needed another pair of hands. Even though an even more desperate woman was beckoning Bowser, Bridie knew she had the edge and identified her value with her dowry. Others shared in such identification:

*Madge*: 'What's she got that I haven't?'

*Bowser*: 'Land.'

The tie of sexuality to property was asserted very strongly indeed. Bridie accepted the admonition of her friend: 'You can't change the way things are, Bridie' and went again into the field with Bowser. It was a poignant and perceptive evocation of a particular cultural milieu. It was a small-scale, but sharp-edged, critique of Irish rural society, very much at variance with glossy Hollywood or Bord Fáilte images of it. It was, in fact, highly pessimistic, reflecting William Trevor's characteristic sense of doom. It was an intricately textured picture of Ireland, as a place where dark and inextricable forces overcame decent and helpless people, who could do nothing but suffer with as much dignity as they could muster. It was extremely well received, both by those who understood it and by those who did not. Oddly enough, it set off a wave of soft-centred nostalgia for 1950s Ireland and its dance hall culture. One heard endless 'those were the days, my friend' reminiscences about the bicycle clips, the bands, and the whole ambience, accompanied by a sentimental longing for the simplicity of bygone days. There was also a surge of revivals

of ballrooms of romance. This was more a comment on its audience than on the production. The nostalgia reflected a fear of social change and a wish to escape into rose tinted memories of safer times.

The direction given to the production by Pat O'Connor was true to the story and did not bask in nostalgia. The visual style was sophisticated, but not at all showy. The camera held on the stillness, instead of cutting back and forth. It gave a static sort of picture of static men and women sitting against the solid wall to capture the way in which people were trapped in their circumstances, knowing they were going nowhere and had no way out. It followed the cyclists at night through the spaces between the rural homes and showed the small lights against a vast darkness to convey the remoteness and isolation of rural life. It showed the garishness of the brightly lit ballroom amidst it all and the tackiness of the milieu and did not attempt to give a false glossiness to it.

There were various sorts of criticism laid against it, however. Barbara O'Connor's audience research indicated that urban youth found it alienating, because it was rural, and that working class women found it too slow-moving and lacking in storyline and dramatic suspense. While her extrapolation from limited data, to the general conclusion that the female audience for this type of one-off play was confined to middle class women, was unwarranted and based on questionable criteria for determining class, some of her other observations of the film were more substantial. She particularly called attention to the way in which the film was narratively closed in the recurrent motif of resignation to fate. She also noted that the setting in time and place tended to distance it from the contemporary female audience.<sup>24</sup> Another critical angle on the story, remarked upon by Kevin McHugh, concerned the fact that its dominant point of view was from outside the milieu it scrutinised. It was one culture looking at another in a way that sometimes seemed patronising.<sup>25</sup>

The same production team followed *The Ballroom of Romance* with *One of Ourselves*, another RTÉ-BBC co-production. It was an adaptation of another William Trevor story, originally entitled *An Evening with John Joe Dempsey*. It was a coming-of-age story, featuring John Joe Dempsey on the occasion of his fifteenth birthday. At his happiest when alone with his fantasies or when keeping company with the town eccentric, John Joe was at a turning point in his life and under pressure to give up both fantasies and friend to become 'one of ourselves' in the town. At the point of leaving the Christian Brothers school and going to work in the sawmills, John Joe was preoccupied with his imaginary encounters with the middle aged women of the town in suggestive or seductive situations or with listening to Quigley tell tales of looking through windows and seeing virtually every married couple in the town in their most intimate moments. Given the day that was in it, John Joe was diverted in his messages to the shop-cum-pub by Mr. Lynch, who introduced him to his first bottles of stout and smokes and told him a certain story he took it upon himself to tell to boys who had no fathers. It concerned the 'Piccadilly glory girls' he had encountered when he left West Cork to join the British Army during the war. When intoxicated with his mates, an arrangement was made for the six of them to 'satisfy themselves' on one of the glory girls. While waiting to get 'down to business', he had a vision of the statue of the holy virgin mother that his mother had given him for his first communion. On that very night, he later discovered, his mother had a dream of him with his legs on fire. As he interpreted it, his mother saw him being licked by the flames of hell and sent out a message that he was to have a visit from the little statue in his bedroom. The moral of the story was: 'The facts of life is one thing, John Joe, but keep away from dirty women.' Like his mother and the rest who were telling him how lucky he was to get work in the town, Mr. Lynch told him to leave thoughts of emigration alone and stay away from the heathen crowd over in England.

In the cinema with his mother that evening, the atmosphere of the small town of the 1950s was effectively evoked in minute detail: the ritual greetings and polite conversation, the discomfort of priest and married woman at the amorous scenes, the rebuffs of the town eccentric by its 'respectable' people. John Joe was acutely aware of the artifice of the town. He knew that married men went off dancing with girls and came home and told their wives they were playing cards. He saw through Mr. Lynch's explanation of why he joined the British Army, why he returned to Ireland, why he never married. He knew that he went to get away from his mother and that he came back and never married, because of her hold on him. He thought that only Quigley told the truth. But it was put to him by Brother Leahy, Mr. Lynch and his mother that he had to choose between being 'two of a kind' with Quigley or 'one of ourselves', with the rest of the town. They excluded Quigley, because he was without pretence. John Joe would give in, because it was the easiest thing to do. He would be like the rest of them on the outside, He would conspire in the pretence. He would leave Quigley to go his own way muttering 'one of ourselves', He would however, keep his fantasies. He would take refuge in an interior world which no one could touch. Alone in his bed in the darkness, he could make of the town anything he wished to make of it and be more alive in his fantasies than he ever would be in any of his other activities or encounters. He both would and would not be 'one of ourselves'.

Like *The Ballroom of Romance*, it was a bleak picture of the dead-end, numbing hopelessness of provincial life. It also was, nevertheless, filtered through a soft-focused, rose-tinted nostalgia for 1950s Ireland on the part of some of its audience. It was seen by Pat O'Connor as an opportunity to satirise, with as much kindness and subtlety as possible the emptiness and oppressiveness of an environment cut off from healthy debate and lacking in openness, enlightenment and generosity. It was, it would seem, too kind and too subtle for those still most locked into such an

environment to see the satire. Perhaps it was just as well. Those who had eyes to see, saw, and the rest were spared having to write letters of protest or to pass resolutions of condemnation.

There was a rash of coming-of-age films set in the recent past around this time. Some of them were considerably less incisive than *One of Ourselves* and lent themselves much more obviously to a flabby and meandering nostalgia for adolescent adventures and past decades. It was hard to see the point of *Night in Tunisia*, other than evoking the atmosphere of summers in Laytown in the early 1960s and detailing the particular memory images deriving from the author's own adolescence. An RTÉ-Channel 4 co-production, it was an adaptation by Neil Jordan of his own short story of the same name. It was given an attractive visual style by Pat O'Connor's direction and it was rich in the atmospheric detail of Neil Jordan's fiction.

It was full of beaches, sand dunes, waves, seaside huts, chalets, dance halls, saxophones, radios, photographs, records. It had people talking, walking, waiting, dancing, kissing, quarrelling, making music, playing tennis, getting through puberty and beginning to come to terms with the opposite sex. It seemed, however, indulgent of all this particular detail to no apparent purpose. It all seemed ill digested. It never came together into anything coherent. It was quite lacking in narrative drive or dramatic tension. It never said anything significant or profound, although it had an aura of significance and a kind of pseudo-profundity about it, which made it extremely irritating to someone who knew the difference. It was not really enough to have a teenage would-be tragic heroine talking of walking into the sea and committing suicide. Even when the dialogue seemed to be at its most probing, it went nowhere:

'They tell me you were nearly drowned.'  
'I wanted to know what it would feel like.'  
'Like going to another place.'  
'Tunisia.'  
'Where's that?'

It all led nowhere, except to personal memories of adolescence in Laytown in the summer seasons of the 1960s.

In an effort by RTÉ to promote more effectively its film versions of literary works, the next stories were chosen to be packaged together into an anthology series under the title *Love Stories of Ireland*. Four films were made under this title as RTÉ-Channel 4 co-productions and the four were shown on successive weeks on RTÉ and in the Film on Four slot on Channel 4. (For external sales, there were six films packaged under the anthology title, with *Ballroom of Romance* and *Night in Tunisia* added to the package). According to John Lynch, the executive producer of the series, it was very difficult to find Irish love stories. There were actually very few and they were all sad.<sup>26</sup>

The most memorable and the most successful (in that it won several international awards) was Seán O'Faoláin's *Lovers of the Lake*. It concerned a middle aged, middle class, married woman, who had been involved for six years in an extra-marital affair. Full of mental contradictions and moral confusions, she decided to make a pilgrimage to Lough Derg and asked her lover to drive her there and back to Dublin. When he tried to fathom her reasons for 'all this penitential stuff', it all made little sense. Not only had she no rational explanation, but she had scant regard for rationality, which she, like many women, considered a male domain. In turn, he, like many men, had learned to expect anything but rationality from a woman. Her conflict was presented on one level as a conflict between the flesh and the spirit, as a situation in which the spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. For six years, she confessed her sins of the flesh and her spirit repented and promised to give up her affair. She insisted that she always meant it and yet she always weakened and succumbed again to the flesh. Following her on to the island, her lover continued to probe the meaning of her pilgrimage. Trying to bring both rationality and reality to bear upon her scrambled account of things, he confronted her with his reading of the situation:

'I know you feel you ought to get rid of me, but you haven't the guts to do it on your own, so you run for the mountains and get your druids to do your dirty work for you by magic.'

After listening to her declare according to the ritual, 'I renounce the world, the flesh and the devil' he confronted her with the antithesis:

'I believe in the flesh, Jenny, and in the world. I don't believe that your body and my body are evil. You are not going to renounce the world. You're tied to it hand and foot'.

And so she was. She was, in any case, more in a 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet' mood. She would complete the penitential exercises, break the fast at midnight with a sumptuous candlelit dinner with her lover in Galway, sleep for the first night in separate the mind or the will. Life would carry on, as before, unresolved.

Filmed on location on Lough Derg, with real pilgrims as extras, the RTÉ production was a richly atmospheric representation of the sense of the place and its strange effect, as described in O'Faoláin's text. It evoked the way in which the brief harsh utopia worked its magic: how the incantations and passionate exchange of energy drew one in, how exhaustion worked on the mind, how objects began to disconnect, how hallucination and ecstasy set in, how the flesh was used to produce an extraordinary spiritual experience. The haunting music on the soundtrack, composed for the production by Jim Lockhart, underscored the blending of druidic, medieval and modern elements in a most effective way. The film showed Ireland both at its most primitive and its most urbane. The co-existence of the most superstitious and the most sophisticated elements, often in uneasy and illogical juxtaposition with each other, not only in the same culture, but even in the same person, left a thinking person with much food for thought.

The saddest of the sad stories was perhaps *A Painful Case* from James Joyce's *Dubliners*. It also concerned an extra-marital love affair involving a married woman, although in this case it did not extend to expressing itself fully in the realm of the flesh. Both Mr. Duffy, a clerk in a merchant bank, and Mrs. Sinico, the wife of a sea captain, led somewhat dull and lonely lives, each taking solitary comfort in music and literature. When they met a deep bond developed between them, each opening up and coming alive as never before in walking and talking and sharing their deepest selves with each other. Mr. Duffy saw himself as a social rebel, at least in the realm of theory, scorning the social conventions of the middle classes in turn-of-the-century Dublin, and yet holding himself aloof from the radical currents of the day, never quite fitting into the Irish Socialist Party and only commenting from a distance on the suffragette movement. Above all, he was an admirer of Ibsen and believed his plays pointed to the right way to live. Once he had introduced Mrs. Sinico to *A Doll's House*, she seemed to identify and find courage in Ibsen's Nora, who left her husband to be true to herself. He, however, proved less than courageous in the face of the concrete challenge to follow through and act out his beliefs. Retreating from the bond between them to the 'incurable loneliness of the soul', he decided it was best for them not to meet again. He then resumed his methodical daily routines, aloof and alone, on the surface little different from before, expressing his reflections in his solitary writings. For him, the bottom line of the affair was:

'Love between man and man is impossible, because there mustn't be sexual intercourse. Friendship between man and woman is impossible, because there must be sexual intercourse.'

She, however, was not able to carry on as before, even on the surface. For her, life had lost its purpose and she took to the drink to get through the loneliness. After two years with no contact, Mr. Duffy only learned what had become of her in the evening paper:

#### Death of a Lady at Sydney Parade *A Painful Case*

At first, he tried to justify himself. He could not have carried on in a life of deception with her and he could not live openly with her. What else could he have done? And yet, when he was honest, he knew that he had not done it. He had withheld life from her.

A gentler and more sardonic story was James Plunkett's *The Eagles and the Trumpets*. It spotlighted the lives of three lonely and unhappy people, each of whom momentarily allowed themselves to raise their hopes and wish for romance and happiness. Cutting between Dublin and a small provincial town, it showed something of the depressed economic and cultural condition of Ireland in the late 1940s. In Dublin, a young office clerk had finally saved the money to get back to the provincial town to resume the budding romance begun with the town librarian when on holiday the year before. A friend prevailed upon him to lend him the money, promising to pay it back in time for him to take the later bus. Failing to get the money and therefore the bus, he decided that romance was on the side of the rich and proceeded through the various stages of the pub crawl with his mates. His mates went on about how it was worth having holidays abroad, where the girls were easier, making their motto: 'Sin is worth saving for.' But money, whatever way it expanded life's options, was what he did not have. So, with one drink after another, he resigned himself to the narrowness of life without it. Meanwhile, the young woman in the country town watched the early and late buses come and go in sad disappointment. Approached by a commercial traveller, whose life had its sad disappointments, she consented to keep him company and each filled at least a little of the emptiness of the other. The bottom line of it all seemed to be that it was bad to want anything too much, because one would probably never get it. There was no indemnity against life's petty tyrannies. One's emotional possibilities were, and always would be, restricted by economic conditions.

The story most stretched to fit into the series was William Trevor's *Access to the Children*, in that the setting had to be changed from London to Dublin. (It had originally been made in a London setting in a BBC production twelve years earlier). It was the story of the disintegration of a man, who left his wife and children for another woman, who subsequently left him. Living alone in a flat, out of a job and drinking more and more, even his days of access to the children were becoming more difficult, going round and round the same routine of zoos and cinemas and museums

and back to his flat. He talked of all of 'them getting back together and being a happy family again'. Unable to come to terms with the fact that his wife had picked up the pieces of her life, gone back to work and formed a relationship with another man, he became more and more pathetic. It was a straightforward enough story in one sense, but in the context of Irish society at the time of its production and transmission, it came across as a cautionary tale against any straying from the straight and narrow path of the institution of marriage. It was perhaps a bit unusual, in showing the man as suffering most from the breakdown of marriage. It was more of a simple, sad story than anything else, without the same sort of sharp edge as some of Trevor's other stories.

Another RTÉ-Channel 4 co-production took a literary piece, this time of the long-ago-and-far-away variety, and set it in Ireland. Based on Ivan Turgenev's *First Love*, originally set in 19th century Russia, *Summer Lightning* was set in mid 19th century Ireland and arguably lost considerably in the translation. Adapted by Paul Joyce and Derek Mahon, Joyce described his intention as wanting 'to take a pre-freudian story and to treat it in a post-Freudian way'.<sup>27</sup> It was a story of a young lad's first experience of love, as told by his mature self, with Paul Scofield doing the honours as the latter, and presumably boosting its sales potential on international markets, in topping and tailing the production and narrating the story in voice-over. It was a coming-of-age story in which an adolescent 'in love with life' discovered, through a traumatic experience, 'the deviousness and complexity of the adult world'. Captivated by a 19-year old girl with a circle of ardent suitors, a 14-year old boy observed them in their drawing room machinations and resolved to kill her leading suitor, once he discovered who he was.

The trauma came when his investigation revealed his father's face in the summer lightning. Despite the fact that heartbreak, suicide and death in childbirth ensued, one did not feel the force of the tragedy. Despite the emphasis on internal states and the articulation of such reflections as 'First love is like revolution...' one did not feel the penetration of psychological depth. Despite the talk of the failure of the 1798 rebellion, the hopes for Irish nationhood, the fears of clerical interference, the suffering inflicted by the famine, one never felt convinced of the credibility of its Irish setting. Certainly touches such as the transformation of an impoverished Russian princess into a tipsy Ringsend social climber added nothing to its authenticity. Despite the considerable resources channelled into its production, it left the impression of a shallow and glossy period piece, done to no particular purpose.

By way of theatrical, rather than literary, adaptation was the RTÉ-Channel 4 co-production of Hugh Leonard's stage play *A Life*. It was the story of Desmond Drumm, a minor civil servant, who had discovered he was about to die and set about preparing an audit of his life. A pompous and pedantic man, his acerbic tongue and condescending presence had a way of creating acute discomfort in those around him. Refusing to accept the evasions and inexactitudes that others promoted, or at least let pass for the sake of peace, he constantly called others to account by his own standards and found them wanting. Now it was time to call himself to account. Finding that he had standards instead of friends and that what he called principle was vanity, his unravelling of the complexities of his life began to break down his defences.

His review of his life brought him far more anxiety than satisfaction when the balance sheet was totalled. His career in the civil service he regarded as 'work of doubtful value for a government of doubtful morality.' But it was his most immediate personal relationships which were most under scrutiny, namely with his loyal and self-effacing wife, Dolly, his amiable first love, Mary, and her good natured wastrel of a husband, Lar. The other characters effectively counterpointed the character of Drumm. Where he was hard, they were soft. Where he was meticulous, they were messy. Where he was rigid and unyielding, they were compliant and flexible. In flashbacks to the past and in talk of the present, they weighed each other up. The crisp, taut dialogue ranged from gentle chiding to harsh accusation. Between Desmond and Mary, it was gentlest: she remembering him as having 'a face like a plateful of mortal sins' and he telling her she had 'a mind like a mayfly... a head full of film stars and their divorces'. Between Desmond and Lar it was harshest, the ne'er-do-well Lar never having been forgiven for taking Mary from him. Whereas Lar was inclined to bend over backwards to smooth everything over, the instant a hint of conflict arose, Desmond was inclined to go for the jugular and to thrive on conflict.

In the reviews, the play itself was much admired, while the style of the RTÉ production was more controversial. Louis Lentin's direction was deliberately theatrical. It not only put the emphasis on dialogue and performance, but actually staged the play in studio as if it were being done in theatre. A number of critics felt that there was an incongruity between the staginess of the production and the naturalistic and intimate character of the television medium. Charles Hunter, reviewing it in *Theatre Ireland*, concluded: 'RTÉ has still to discover that special arena between the proscenium arch and the film location where television drama can hold its own.'<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this was not fair to RTÉ drama as a whole, but it did give sharp expression to the terms of a spectrum on which *A Life* was near enough to the one end.

At the other end of the spectrum was the beautifully filmed on-location *Spring Cleaning*, which was far more cinematic than theatrical, with its moody attention to visual detail and its spare dialogue. An RTÉ-Channel 4 co-production, it was a short story turned into a television script by Ann Barrett, making it the only co-production to be

based on an unsolicited script by an unknown writer. It was also exceptional in that it was set in the present rather than in the past. The story concerned the reactions of a young woman, who had been working in London and travelling abroad, to the whole culture of rural Ireland upon returning home. Through flashbacks and dream sequences, as well as through her present encounters, various aspects of the world in which she had grown up, but had now outgrown, came before Nancy's consciousness. She beheld the physical neglect of the womanless house inhabited by her father and brother and set about 'spring cleaning'. She responded to their unadventurous eating habits and banal conversation by trying gently to introduce new dishes and new subjects.

Moving through the wider community, she came across various people she once knew. The mother and daughter who ran the shop-cum-post office fussed over her with a barbed and devious bitchiness that she let pass. Her friend Brid told her she would be afraid to travel abroad, which brought Nancy to reply that people were too safe. Her old crowd was still enjoying the pub craic and country and western music, which made her ask how they could listen to such 'crap'. The mating habits of the Irish male provoked her strongest comments. In the midst of Tadhg's swaying and slurring and alcoholic groping in the car park, she pushed him off and asked: 'How do you put up with it? This is no life. There are whole chunks missing. What about the poor bugger who can't stomach craic?' There were several vague references to her brother Peter who 'smelled something rotten and got out', but there was nothing further to explain.

RTÉ featured in the story in bringing the larger society into the rural community. In the morning, Nancy was shown listening to Gay Byrne on radio, while tidying up. Some of the talk was typically frivolous: Was it better to have beauty or brains? Beauty was better 'because most men can see better than they can think.' Some of it was typically semi-serious to serious. There was a letter from a Donegal woman with a sexually demanding husband. There was a letter from a separated woman co-habiting with a separated man, both with children, in a country that did not allow divorce. Nancy's response to it all was to go on about women not knowing what Gay Byrne was doing to their minds and about the whole country lacking privacy. When the television news came on in the evening with a report of a bomb in Belfast, Nancy's comment was: 'Like the wild west, isn't it?' Nancy could not fit back into the old life, or even, she eventually decided, some new version of it. She argued she would be a hypocrite if she went to mass, though she admitted it was a great place for meeting people. She refused her father's suggestion that she take a job at the builders' suppliers, because she 'would be like a caged beast'. Her father understood no more than the rest of them. He asked: 'What the hell has got into you, Nancy? I don't know what you want.'

It was not only her father. The problem was that the viewer did not know either, nor even have a sense that Nancy knew. The basic problem was that the script was too slight and too superficial to bear the weight of the expectations it aroused. It never delivered anything approaching a coherent critique of the society being sized up or even credible criteria for making specific criticisms of it. It never indicated any positive values, in terms of which this culture was judged negatively. It never articulated any new beliefs which undermined any of the old beliefs. It never came to terms with any substantial question it raised: What were the whole chunks of life that were missing? How was country and western music written off as 'crap'? Why did she not go to mass? When it came down to it, Nancy did not really stand for much, except casseroles as an alternative to fries, brown rice as a variation on spuds, travelling instead of staying home, wearing see-through blouses instead of being ashamed of the body, and keeping sex out of car parks and off radio. While most of these were positive, or at least harmless, they were not exactly substantial.

Regarding the last proposition, however, it was arguably neither positive nor harmless. Nor was it insubstantial. As an analysis of Irish society, this judgement of the country lacking privacy in this context was wide of the mark. One of the most moving experiences of radio which many people will ever have, came one day when Gay Byrne's entire programme was devoted to reading listeners' letters sparked off by the death of young Ann Lovett, giving birth by a dark grotto, cold and alone. Letter after letter related vivid details of deeply traumatic experiences, that had never been recounted before. Secrets harboured for years and never confided to those nearest were revealed via radio waves to the society as a whole. Listening left an overwhelming sense of there being too much of a shameful sort of privacy in the country and an enduring memory of the liberating effect of breaking it. The role of RTÉ in general, and the *Gay Byrne Show* in particular, in breaking it, has been one a progressive person might be expected to acknowledge and appreciate rather than knock or deprecate.

Ann Barrett obviously intended her own contribution to be progressive, but the limitations of her conception of what was considered progress reduced her script to a rather insubstantial assertion of a vague individualism. The fundamental point for her was 'the individual's search for identity' which was, to be sure, progressive in a society which still put such weight on conformity to tradition. Discussing *Spring Cleaning* in a magazine interview, Ann Barrett stressed: 'The important thing to realise is that life can be shaped in any way you want it.'<sup>29</sup> This psycho-social naiveté made it impossible for it to penetrate either psyche or society in a mature way. It was obviously not perceived to be particularly penetrating, as it passed nearly unnoticed. The general reaction seemed to be to see it as recycled Edna O'Brien and to ask what was the point. One reviewer, after chiding Nancy's efforts to bring brown rice to an uncaring community, conceded that the picture of rural Ireland in *Spring Cleaning* was accurate enough in a

factual sort of way. The problem, he argued, was that it was a tedious half-truth and that this sort of meandering melancholy seemed to be the only sort of drama of interest to RTÉ-Channel 4 co-productions. It was art, he conceded, but it was pointless and deadly.<sup>30</sup> It was, in fact, a very artistic production in many respects. There was a very sophisticated visual style given to it by Tony Barry's direction. The enduring impression left by it was of richly-textured and well-framed scenes of rooms and landscapes, dominated by Tara McGowran's beautifully expressive face on which the camera lovingly lingered, often in close up, and seemed to allude to deeper emotions than any that were written for Nancy. The whole style of the production made it seem to be promising a significance that it did not fulfill.

The most controversial of the co-productions was the six part mini-series *The Price*. An RTÉ-Channel 4 co-production, this time initiated from the other side of the water, the original idea came from the British actor, Peter Barkworth. Inspired by a newspaper photograph of the industrialist, Rolf Schild, whose wife and daughter were kidnapped in Sardinia, he was fascinated by the psychological pressures and moral ambiguities arising out of such a crisis. The production company with which he was associated, Astramead, was in the driving seat throughout the production. Although the story was set in Ireland, it was scripted by Peter Ransley, who had never before set foot in Ireland. Much of the criticism of the series centred around the representation of Irish life by a writer who was accused of knowing nothing about it beyond the clichés of Fleet Street tabloids, with the backing of RTÉ and with the expertise of Irish cast and crew.

The first episode opened in London on the relationship between Geoffrey Carr, a wealthy computer businessman, and his wife, Frances, a pampered and parasitic woman, who married him for his money and manipulated him into giving her whatever she wanted. Her daughter by her first marriage was a younger version of herself. An incident in which they hid Geoffrey's briefcase was indicative of their spoiled and selfish lifestyle, in which they grabbed everything which the wealth from the business he had built up could give them, while expressing contempt for him and even obstructing his work. What Frances now wanted was for Geoffrey to buy her the ancestral family home in Ireland. Her flirtation with the Irish side of her Anglo-Irish identity and possession of the big house of Kilnameath in County Wicklow brought her under the scrutiny of an IRA breakaway group, hatching a scheme to redeem their standing in the Provisional IRA. The episode ended with a powerfully staged kidnapping scene, in which Frances Carr and her daughter were dragged from their car and their driver killed, amidst the lush green hills of Wicklow.

Subsequent episodes traced the build-up of tension in the aftermath of the kidnap. The consequences were explored from a number of different angles: the raw nerves and changing relationships of kidnappers and kidnapped; the emotional shock and financial arrangements of the next-of-kin faced with the ransom demand; the reactions of friends and relations; the machinations of business associates; the advice of the insurance agent; the investigations of the gardaí; the role of the media; the pressures on the boy who witnessed the act; and the wailing recitation of the woes of the gael and the brave deeds of Irish heroes by his republican granny. Episode four ended with a cliffhanger, as the three kidnappers put on their hoods and decided to 'do it'.

Episode five was preceded on RTÉ by a warning about violent scenes not suitable for children. In this episode, Geoffrey received the severed finger of Frances. A rendezvous for delivery of ransom money was arranged and Andrew, a former lover of Frances, was shot dead by the inept gardaí in the confusion. Meanwhile, Frank became another of Frances' lovers, as a sick sexual relationship developed between kidnapper and kidnapped, between mutilator and mutilated, between the soldier of the army of national liberation and the lady of the big house. Nearly in one breath, he spoke of watching her, filling that house with junk "as if there had been no Bloody Sunday" and then asked if he could touch her breasts. The episode ended on a quite shocking scene with the camera first on Frank and Frances engaged in sexual intercourse, almost as if animals in heat, and then cutting to the distressed face of her daughter in the same room, registering her terror as Frank reached orgasm.

In the final episode, Frank and Frances continued in their sexual liaison to the distress not only of her daughter Clare but also of his comrade Kate. Meanwhile, the gardaí, induced to try using Carr's computerised methods, began to close in on them. In due course, the gardaí arrived, bargained, killed the kidnappers and rescued the kidnapped. Frances, as manipulative and cruel as ever, found ways to punish Geoffrey, accusing him of having 'a price' he would pay for her, beyond which he would not go. She told him that sex with him felt dirty, whereas with Frank it felt clean. She told him that Frank was more honest than he. This after lying to him about her being raped. It ended with her news of her pregnancy and insistence that he take her word that it was his child, while taking spiteful pleasure in the fact he would always be in doubt.

Although *The Price* was generally acclaimed in Britain, it met with a great deal of adverse reaction in Ireland. Viewers who wrote into RTÉ's *Mailbag* programme were extremely negative about it:

'I wish I hadn't looked at it.'

'I never thought I would see such filth on Irish television.'

'How has RTÉ sunk so low?'  
'I switched off, as I wouldn't subject my children to such filth.'  
'It was unfit for any decent person to see.'  
'Such co-productions depict the Irish as war-mongering and inferior'

There were particular objections to 'foul language', the presence of the slop bucket and the sex scene in episode five. Critics too, both in the national and provincial press, were quite negative. Aodhan Madden in *Hibernia* called it 'godawful', 'abysmal' 'a nasty exercise in moronic paddy wackery',<sup>31</sup> Joe Ambrose in *In Dublin* condemned it as 'offensive rubbish', 'a vicious fable' and 'the latest example of national self-abasement'.<sup>32</sup> The *Sunday Tribune* carried a sneering review by Éamonn Dunphy in his regular column,<sup>33</sup> followed by a full feature a fortnight later, which was an extended and well-reasoned analysis by Fintan O'Toole.

Putting it in the context of a historical relationship, whereby Ireland has come to be seen as a place which fills the gaps in English experience, a place full of exuberant violence, quaint religiosity, demonic boozing and wild fantastic language, O'Toole perceived *The Price* as fitting into this pattern. England, seen in well ordered orchards, dining rooms and computerised offices, was depicted as a highly civilised, if very dull, place. Ireland, in contrast, was full of wild scenery, wild passions and wild, if rather stupid, people. Irish violence, he contended, was packaged as a theatre of thrills for an English audience to provide an exotic sensation for the tired English palate. This was embodied particularly in the relationship between Frank and Frances in which violence was the trigger for erotic excitement. O'Toole also took strong exception to the reduction of the motivation of the kidnappers from the political to the personal and the interpretation of the mysterious political turbulence of the Irish in terms of the categories of sexual jealousy and envy of the big house. In reducing Frank's politics to the desire of the surly farmhand for the fine lady, the political terror of Northern Ireland was transformed into a down-at-heel version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. O'Toole also raised the question of stereotyping, particularly in respect of the representation of the granny and the gardaí, which supported a general picture of the Irish as a people so inexplicably sunk in the mire of past wrongs that they could not cope with modern living. It was a picture which exempted Britain from any responsibility for Ireland's current problems. O'Toole argued strongly that RTÉ's involvement in *The Price* was a major abdication of its responsibilities, in putting the scarce resources of a national public service broadcasting organisation in the service of the creation of images of Ireland over which the station had no editorial control. It was, he argued, the logical outcome of the whole co-production policy, which produced images of Ireland, which were either nostalgic or distorted.<sup>34</sup>

Other critics took issue with its pace, which was regarded as too slow, at least by the standards of US action-adventure series. Some criticised it for various false notes or factual errors, ranging from the gardaí shooting an innocent unarmed man or the taoiseach guaranteeing there would be no extradition or a sharpshooter using a submachine gun to someone actually finding three public phones which worked within one minute. Many others had their say about it. *The Price* was at least a talking point and stimulated many people to discuss many questions it raised. Within RTÉ, there were different reactions from those responsible to the criticisms made of it. The controller, Muiris MacConghail, admitted that RTÉ was not as careful as it should have been in identifying problems of caricature.<sup>35</sup> The head of drama, Niall McCarthy, in contrast, stood over every line. He compared the criticism to the reviling of Synge for defaming the Irish people in *Playboy of the Western World*, seeing both as pressure for censorship that stemmed from an inability of the Irish people to see negative aspects of their lives.<sup>36</sup> Many of the critics of *The Price*, however, would have been the first to see the negative aspects of Irish life. It was a question of how finite resources were channelled into the creation of a finite number of images among a multitude of possibilities. Many of the particular criticisms of *The Price* were well founded. Certainly an analysis such as O'Toole's was hard to fault.

That said, however, it must also be said that it was not as bad as those who dismissed it as 'abysmal' or 'moronic' claimed, especially against the history of chronic, and often moronic, stereotyping in film and television representations of Ireland. While it was a deeply flawed production, it had its good points. It was well made in the sense of having a strong narrative drive, a sophisticated visual style and some excellent performances. It was also full of interesting and intelligent characterisation even if no character was explored as fully as the interest they aroused seemed to warrant. Perhaps the biggest problem was that *The Price* failed to deal satisfactorily with any issue it raised, whether psychological or political. This was, to some degree, because it separated the one from the other in a way that distorted both. Those who made it concentrated on the psychological at the expense of the political and therefore missed all that was psychologically interesting in the interconnections. A more insightful exploration of the political motivation of Frank and Kate would have made all the difference in establishing the credibility of their characters. The very belief that the two dimensions could be detached cut off a certain level of perception. This belief was clearly stated in the promotion of *The Price*:

'Detaching itself from the political ramifications of such a story, *The Price* examines the human cost of kidnapping...' *RTÉ Guide*  
'If we delved into politics, it would have dominated the series, so it was necessary to be apolitical.' *TV Times*

But it was not possible to be apolitical. Attempting to deal with political matters in an apolitical manner led inevitably to distortion. The distortion was far from deliberate. Much of it stemmed from a subconscious reflex of the post-imperial English mind, which could not penetrate Irish culture, but only perceive it through a glass darkly.

## **In-House Drama**

During this period, in which the making of drama came to be increasingly consigned to co-production, RTÉ in-house production of drama ground nearly to a halt. In 1986 and 1987, RTÉ's drama output, including both co-production and in-house production, was the lowest in its entire history. In 1984, the only in-house one-off drama made by RTÉ was the Irish language film *Raic*. In 1985, there was none.

*Raic*, by Antoine Ó Flaharta, was about as far as television could get from the US action-adventure series. It was a picture of Connemara in 1942 in which there was so little happening as to be almost a still life. It was deliberately slow-paced and uneventful, so as to convey the static and remote character of Irish life, especially Irish rural life, during 'the emergency'. It was a portrait of a community at peace listening on the wireless to the world at war. It was a community in which nothing much was happening, except in reaction to what was washed in from elsewhere. The only milestones in the history of the place came from outside: a bomb found in the sea in 1917, which exploded and killed those who went to roll it ashore; the body of a German soldier whom they buried in 1942; along with the odd dud mine washed ashore during World War II. All of these were *raic*, flotsam and wreckage, as were some of the people, like the old doctor who came back there to die and his daughter who lost her job as a teacher.

Otherwise the only in-house drama productions in RTÉ in the mid-eighties were a running rural serial, a clerical sit-com, a short prison serial and an experimental series in community dramas which turned out to be a controversial platform for amateur drama groups.

## **The Rural Serial**

The rural serial has been perhaps the area in which RTÉ can claim the most solid and long standing record of achievement. It has developed in a nearly unbroken line of continuity, beginning with the fifteen year run of TAM-topping *The Riordans* through two mini-series of the stylish *Bracken* to the eighteen year run of TAM-topping *Glenroe*.

*Bracken* first appeared as a six part mini-series in January 1980 and reappeared in a second six part mini-series two years later in January 1982. It centred around the brooding figure of Pat Barry, who had become a regular character in *The Riordans* in its last days, when he came to work as an agricultural labourer on the Riordan farm after Benjy Riordan went away. Called 'the cowboy' in *The Riordans*, he had an air of the rugged individualism and dour masculinity of the wild west about him. Played by Gabriel Byrne, who went on to achieve international star status, he was the only male character in the whole run of *The Riordans* to have developed as such an obvious sex symbol. Indeed, he soon replaced Benjy, not only in the work of the farm, but also in Maggie's affections in the most noteworthy adulterous affair in the history of Irish television drama to that time. In the new series, Pat Barry had passed over the mountain of Slieve Bracken separating Leestown from the townland of Bracken whence he had come. Made on location in the Wicklow mountains, *Bracken* was set in sheep farming territory. It was written by Wesley Burrowes who, with characteristic concern for verisimilitude, immersed himself in the economics of sheep farming. It used real sheep farmers as extras.

Returning for his father's funeral, Pat Barry then set about taking over the small and run-down farm left to him and his emigrant brother. Facing problems on all sides, his determination to push past all obstacles had to contend with formidable odds. The land was poor. The ewes had been left up on the mountain. His brother Christy returned with his grasping wife Lily, demanding half the value of the farm in an immediate lump sum. The agricultural advisor informed him he would not be able to get a mortgage to buy them out. His rich neighbour Ned Daly, a self-made land baron, owning 500 acres adjacent to Barry's 35 acres, applied numerous pressures to force Barry to sell out to him, including framing him for a spate of sheep stealing in the area. His affair with the daughter of the big house, Louise Daly, complicated matters and provided Pat with both an alibi and a weapon against her father. By the end of the second series, she also provided him with a way out of his difficulties with his brother and sister-in-law, when they married and she came through with the money to buy them out.

Meanwhile, Pat Barry's only real friend, Miley Byrne, was shattered by the discovery that his father Dinny had been Daly's accomplice in framing Pat. Much of the second series followed Miley's adventures after he emigrated,

working on a building site in England, lodging with Christy and Lily Barry in Manchester and coming to terms with Dinny, who followed him across the water to beg him to return. The second series saw both Dinny Byrne and Ned Daly as broken men, each of them fleeing to England pursuing something they had lost in Ireland. Meanwhile, back in Bracken, Pat Barry was still struggling against the earth and the bitterness of generations' (as the promotional material put it), while finding passing comfort and a bit of winter warmth with Jill Daly, wife of Ned and mother of Louise, and Eve, the fiancée of the agricultural advisor, when Louise was also abroad. However, all of the wandering Celts eventually returned to home soil in time for the wedding of Pat and Louise. *Bracken* ended with Pat and Louise going off on their honeymoon, Ned and Jill selling up and moving away, Peter and Eve breaking off their engagement, Christy and Lily getting their money, and Miley and Dinny settling back to their old life.

While connected to *The Riordans*, even bringing Delia Maher from Leestown to visit Pat Barry in Bracken to underline the connection, *Bracken* was a new departure in many respects. It certainly brought a new style to the rural serial, employing production techniques which strikingly marked it off from *The Riordans*. The credit sequence, combining panoramic overhead shots of the wild landscape of the Wicklow mountains with medium shots of the leading characters, emphasising the star casting of Niall Tóibín, Dana Wynter, etcetera, immediately signalled a stylish production, well able to hold its own in the sphere of international sales. It also adopted a narrative style characterised by heightened drama, tighter plotting, accelerated pace and clearer resolution. It would not be true to say, however, as Luke Gibbons has, that the transition from *The Riordans* to *Bracken* involved a narrative shift from a naturalistic to a melodramatic genre.<sup>37</sup> It did involve the drama-enhancing use of music on the sound track and a stronger narrative drive, complete with cliff-hangers. It did pit the heroic figure against enormous odds. But it did not go in for exaggerated incident, inflated sentiment or manichean contrast between good and evil. The characterisation was complex. The plot was basically plausible. The acting was not noticeably less naturalistic than in *The Riordans*.

The most important difference perhaps was in the undercurrent of values, deriving more from the entrepreneurial spirit of early capitalism, bourgeois individualism and the Protestant ethic than from traditional Catholicism. It pitted the lone individual against both nature and neighbours. Pat Barry became more like *The Virginian* than one of many characters in *The Riordans*. This affected the picture of the rural community it projected. Far from being the basically cohesive and co-operative force that it was in Leestown, it appeared as a disparate and disquieting presence in Bracken. In fact, the community in *Bracken* was far more like that in *King of the Castle* than in *The Riordans*. It was a menacing and malevolent presence, permeated by social inequality, land hunger, poverty, peasant cunning, avarice, exploitation, vengeance and dog-eat-dog deviousness. Co-incidentally, both Niall Tóibín and Joe Lynch played parallel roles in the two productions, Tóibín as the self-made gombeen now occupying the big house, but without the breeding that traditionally went with it, and Lynch as the devious small holder and occasional hired hand to the big house.<sup>38</sup>

*Bracken* set itself apart from *The Riordans* in foregrounding the lone individual over against both community and family. The family also was no longer the cohesive and co-operative force it was in *The Riordans*. It too was more of a disparate and disquieting phenomenon in *Bracken*, when it came into play at all. Pat Barry was essentially alone. Those human bonds which came to mean anything to him, with Miley, Delia or Louise, were not ties of blood. His family ties were the source of trouble. He had fallen out with his father and never made it up before he died. His brother was threatening his very livelihood, claiming an equal share in the land in which he had invested his labour and his brother had not. The other families too were in disarray. It was not only for the Barrys that family ties were a source of threat, but it was true for the Byrnes and Dalys as well. There was no father figure at all comparable to the patriarchal Tom Riordan. Neither Ned Daly nor Dinny Byrne was in any position to exercise such moral authority or to command such filial loyalty. There was most certainly no mother figure even remotely parallel to the nurturing Mary Riordan.

Indeed, it was the absence of any sort of mother figure at all in the Barry and Byrne households that was most striking. The only mother figure at all was the high-born and self-absorbed Jill Daly, whose maternal instinct did not keep her from a flirtation with her daughter's lover, making her as far from Mary Riordan as it was possible to be in rural Ireland. The younger women in *Bracken* were a breed far removed from the dutiful Maggie Riordan and the earthy Delia Maher, although Louise Daly was not altogether unlike Colette Comerford. The women in *The Riordans*, old and young, were, for the most part, rooted, responsible and very hard-working. The women in *Bracken* were all up-market, pampered and non-productive. They were not part of the world of work. They moved only in the sphere of leisure.

Its representation of women was one area in which *Bracken* did perhaps strain credibility and deserve what criticism came its way. Carolyn Swift, who believed that the representation of women in RTÉ drama has been generally bad, has singled out *Bracken* as particularly bad, in that all the women were nothing but male fantasies.<sup>39</sup> Barbara O'Connor has made *Bracken* the lynch pin in an argument reaching the generalised conclusion that what changes there were in the representation of women in RTÉ drama were regressive rather than progressive. In her view, *The Riordans* gave a high visibility to women and gave a public airing to women's issues. In so doing, it challenged

the patriarchal status quo, whereas *Bracken* marginalised women, portraying them either as sex objects for men or as pawns in a male power struggle. The women in *The Riordans* were not so overtly sexual as in *Bracken*, but they were productive, most of them engaging in some sort of work. The women in *Bracken* seemed to represent the move to a more secular, ostensibly more liberated, view of sexuality, but ladies of leisure, more concerned with their own sexual needs and doing no work, were not necessarily more progressive.<sup>40</sup>

While the more generalised argument about the overall development of the representation of women in RTÉ drama being in a regressive direction, might not have been sustainable, because it was an over-generalisation based on an under-representative sample, the criticism of *Bracken* was fair enough. The women did seem to be derived more from male fantasy than from concern for sociological verisimilitude. That all the women featuring in a portrait of an impoverished rural sheep farming community should be posh, pampered, idle and sexy really was stretching sustainable probability beyond the limits. Eve, above all, (even her name signifying her role as temptress) had a snake-like seductiveness about her that was over the top. She was certainly never plausible as the fiancée of the naive Peter, whose own character became increasingly implausible, once engaged to her, and went completely off the rails, in taking at face value her story about deciding not to get married but to become a nun. With regard to the other female characters, while they were individually credible on a certain level, the fact that they were not counter-balanced by other female characters made the overall picture of women one of questionable credibility. There were no traditional rural women. There were no genuinely liberated women either. The fact that all the women were parasitic, from the queenly take-it-all-for-granted Louise to the vixenly scratching and clawing Lily, was very problematic indeed.

Another problem was that the script was soft on women in a way that it was not on men. There was never any real edge of exposure in scrutinising their behaviour. The script was constantly questioning Pat Barry's actions and his motives, but not Louise's. When Pat declared he was 'taking nothing', 'no handouts', he was told he was 'coddin himself'. When Louise spoke of being 'equal partners', there was no counterpointing comment or implicit query. Pat, whatever about marrying for social mobility and material avarice, did bring his labour to bear upon the land and had worked very hard indeed for whatever he had. But the emphasis was on what he was taking from Louise, who had never done a tap to earn what she had to give. Throughout the series, Louise was shrouded in royalist imagery:

*Eve (to Pat):* 'So princess marries the shepherd boy and lives happily ever after?'

*Christy (to Pat):* 'She's a queen, you know that?'

That the beautiful and poshly-bred daughter of the big house be referred to thus was understandable enough, but that such honorific use of royalist imagery in a republic and positive reference to parasitic creations be taken at face value was something else.

In other respects, however, the script was much sharper and more honest. It gave a complex picture of the unequal odds in the struggle between the small man and the big house, without making it a black and white contest with all good on one side and all evil on the other. Pat Barry may have been a bit of a cowboy, but he did not wear a white hat and ride off on a white horse into the sunset. He was both hero and anti-hero, with very ambiguous motives. He could hold his head high with the dignity of labour, but he could be cunning enough to make even the innocent and trusting Miley cynical. In a very telling exchange in which Pat seemed to be championing the cause of social justice, Miley proved uncannily astute. When Pat began giving out about the fact that 70% of the land of Ireland was owned by 5% of the people, Miley commented:

'Do you know all this thing about the 5%... you don't want all that money and wealth shared out. You just want them to move over to make more room for yourself.'

There was an acute sense at times of how unjust the whole distribution of resources was. It was not just the enormous gap between the 5% and the rest either. Even between those at the bottom, there were all sorts of intricate injustices. That Pat should have to listen to his brother say 'I'm only tryin' to protect what's my own' and to put up with the pressure from his sister-in-law, at even a further remove, declaring 'We've come for our share', was not fair. That he should work so hard and have to give an equal share to his brother grated on him, especially when the brother not only did not labour on the land, but 'never even asked me how the lambing went.' Sometimes the point was made by juxtaposition of scenes and the disparity of wealth on the ground was made vivid by showing Dinny and Miley and their lambs in a tiny congested cottage and then cutting to Louise and Jill sitting in idle and spacious comfort in the huge sitting room of their luxurious mansion.

It had its humorous side as well, not unlike that of *The Riordans*. There was the visual humour of all the sophisticated people, principals and all, at the Daly-Barry wedding in simple dress and Dinny and Miley arriving in top hats and tails in their old banger. There was the wry verbal humour of the Byrne household: 'pull up a sheep and sit down' {which was evidently heard all over Wicklow for ages afterwards}. There was the irony of Pat Barry coming up to his wedding, remarking wistfully: 'I'm going to miss my virginity.' The sexual explicitness was a bit different. It

was the way *The Riordans* had been developing, but *Bracken* definitely upped the ante and brought it into a realm nearer that of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* than the early days of *The Riordans*. It was a far more open and confident break with old taboos that seemed to draw strength from what had been made acceptable by foreign television. It did so, unfortunately, with fantasy figures, which were more akin to those of foreign television than to real people drawn from real Irish life. Its similarity to *Dallas* and *Dynasty* was, in fact, another source of criticism laid against it. Eoghan Harris felt that this made it a production more in the tradition of Mills and Boon romance than a social and agricultural tract for the times.<sup>41</sup> This was perhaps too harsh. The romance was both too cynical and too soft in the manner of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, but it did draw its strength from a sociological insight and agricultural verisimilitude that made it far more honest than *Falcon Crest*.

In 1983 *Glenroe* took up the tradition of the rural serial and preserved the thread of narrative continuity by taking the characters of Miley and Dinny Byrne from *Bracken* as the starting point for a new scenario constructed by Wesley Burrowes. The first episode opened in *Bracken*, revealing that Dinny and Miley Byrne had just sold their farm to Pat Barry. Still at odds, Miley was keen to find a new place, while Dinny was content to have the money from the sale to flash in the local pub. Insisting that he would emigrate again rather than sit around and watch his father drink away everything they had, Miley forced a decision to buy a new farm in *Glenroe*. *Glenroe* marked the movement of the rural serial into closer geographical and cultural proximity to the urban environment, parallel to the drift of social development, which was narrowing the gap between city and country. *Glenroe* was a fictional village down the mountain from the fictional *Bracken*. It was that part of Wicklow bordering on Dublin, where the rural village like Kilcoole (where the village scenes were shot) was nearly a Dublin suburb. It was an environment Brian MacLochlainn, its original producer and director, called 'rurban' (a buzzword that never quite buzzed), where rural life was nearer to urban life.<sup>42</sup>

*Glenroe* not only took characters from *Bracken*, but aspects of its narrative pace and visual style as well. In other respects, it was closer to *The Riordans* than *Bracken*. Its format was a 24 episode-per-year serial. It therefore had more interwoven storylines, strung out over a longer period, meaning looser plotting and a lower degree of resolution. Although it seemed slow in comparison to *Bracken*, it was by no means a reversion to the pace of *The Riordans*. The average half-hour episode of *The Riordans* consisted of six scenes, whereas for *Glenroe* the average was twelve, reflecting both the accelerated pace of modern life and the acclimatisation of the television audience to fast-paced American productions.

*Glenroe* was somewhere in between *The Riordans* and *Bracken* in its picture of the rural community. The community of *Glenroe* came across as a more congenial and co-operative force than that of *Bracken*, especially in the first year of the serial, when the role of the growers' association was a running storyline. Yet, even in its moments of greatest communal solidarity, it never seemed as centred or as cozy as Leestown. Most of the time, the community was a vague, diffuse, background presence, with more particular social relationships in the foreground. Family ties loomed larger in *Glenroe* than in *Bracken*. Although family relationships were shown to be more important to individual characters than in *Bracken*, they were by no means so locked into them as in *The Riordans*. The family unit came across as a much less conventional and less stable institution than in *The Riordans*. In the first year, the majority of characters were single, widowed, separated or divorced. The only conventional household anyway resembling that of the *Riordans* was that of the Brennans, who were more in the background of things anyway. The Byrne household was father and son. The Moran household was father and sons. The McDermott household seemed to be, and soon was, mother and daughters. The Maher household was brother and sister.

In its earliest episodes, *Glenroe* was preoccupied with the dynamics of 'blow-ins' coming into an established community and striving to establish their own niche in it. Most scenes were constructed to explore the adjustments made by Dinny and Miley in finding their way about *Glenroe* and to introduce the inhabitants of *Glenroe* in terms of their reactions to Dinny and Miley. In agricultural terms, the move from *Bracken* to *Glenroe* meant a shift from sheep farming to vegetable farming. For the Byrnes, the transition involved, not only missing the sound of the sheep, but mastering the techniques of horticulture. While Dinny was preoccupied with ingratiating himself in the household of their nearest neighbours, the McDermotts, and in the local pub, the Molly Malone, Miley was anxious to get down to business.

The instrument of his introduction to the latest in horticultural techniques, if not the latest in mating rituals, was Bidy McDermott. Bidy, the central female character, was a far cry from the women in either *The Riordans* or *Bracken*. Technically competent and extremely industrious, she held a diploma in horticulture and seemed to do a hard day's work and then more again. As Dinny saw her, she was 'Doing a man's job ...wearing men's trousers'. Indeed, the unmistakable impression was that she could run circles around most men, even men who came much nearer to doing a day's work than Dinny Byrne ever seemed to do. Miley was quick to respect her as a farmer and to defer to her agricultural expertise, even if slow to see her in any other light. After her father died, she assured her mother that they were not helplessly alone in the house and that she was pretty good with a shotgun. In the world beyond her farm, she seemed equally liberated. In the pub, she bought her round and spoke her mind. At the meetings of the growers'

association, she was not only strong-minded and articulate, but quite the rabble-rouser, inciting others to organise and do something about the scandal of the Dublin market and imported vegetables. At one point, she showed such leadership as to be elected chairperson of the growers' association. As able as she was to match any man in the world of work, she was by no means butch. She was a very sexual young woman, even if she was not so confident and assertive in this sphere as in the other. She was liberated enough to reject the coquettish and manipulative ways of her self-centred sister Carol, who had all the men, including Miley, in a hopeless whirl. She was traditional enough, however, to wait to be asked, and wait she surely did, for Miley to take notice and eventually to pop the question. She was a fairly conventional bride and changed her name to Biddy Byrne. By the fourth year, she was still strong-minded and hard working, but some of the edge had gone off her. She was a bit more the settled rural bourgeois, preoccupied with real estate transactions, than the new breed of militant small farmer, challenging the operation of market forces and committed to co-operative principles and collective solidarity. She was still, however, one of the best female characters on television, certainly one who captured the imagination of the Irish audience. In a song sung by Brendan Grace on *The Late, Late Show*, Biddy, with her blue jeans and wellies and tractor, was compared with the women in the imported soaps, with their Paris fashions and high heeled boots and fast sports cars. In the words of the chorus: 'You can have your Pam from *Dallas*, I love Biddy of *Glenroe*.' Although *Dallas* and *Glenroe* were constantly vying for top place in the TAMs and the audience seemed to want both, there was no contest as to which elicited more affection, identification and respect for authenticity, in relation to their female characters, as to other aspects of their respective portrayals of contemporary life.

The characterisation of women as a whole was more credible than in *Bracken*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty* or *Falcon Crest*, as well as less traditional than in *The Riordans*. Mary McDermott, the most prominent mother figure, was no Mary Riordan. Very chic in attire and still sexually attractive she was engaged in an adulterous affair with the wheeler-dealer estate agent Dick Moran, even when her elderly husband was still alive. She was also still a quite traditional Catholic, which at times made her characterisation questionable. Her refusal to marry Dick, who was divorced in England, because she considered him still married, while sleeping with him and acting as if he wasn't married, did not always ring true. However, given the number of seemingly sensible women, who have been schizoid in this sort of way, it could pass. The only really inauthentic note regarding Mary was in the third year, when she walked right into an instant highflying career as a PR executive, in much the same way as Pam Ewing or Alexis Colby became instant oil executives or Sue Ellen became a top notch fund-raiser for medical research at the flick of a scriptwriter's whim at the word-processor. But then it has since come to light that Sue Ellen's career at Grayson Research was only Pam's dream, in the most audacious stroke of arbitrary script-writing yet, which made the occasional excess from Irish scriptwriters seem very small indeed.

Other females reflected the changing times in their various ways. The middle-aged women of Mary's generation were even less willing than she was to stay in the old ruts. Ruth Moran and Molly Malone both left their husbands and went off to make new lives for themselves, seemingly with less angst than Jude Riordan. It was hard to know, all the same, as neither was very fully explored. Nor was the up-market businesswoman, Barbara Downes. Neither was the alcoholic wife of a high flying businessman, the Sue Ellen-like Theresa Marshall. Nancy Brennan, on the other hand, was more like the various older women, who were more traditional rural types. Madge O'Regan and Daisy Hefferon, who were played off against each other as rivals for Dinny's favours and for the job of priest's housekeeper, both seemed to disappear without trace. The actress May Ollis, who played Daisy, died quite suddenly, but her lines in the episodes then in production were simply given to another character and nothing in the script ever explained what happened to Daisy. Mary's Auntie Florrie, who came to fill the older woman slot, smacked of a stage-Irish geriatric cuteness that made her a bit hard to take as a serious character. The next to fill the slot, Teasy McDaid, also represented more the same kind of scriptwriting silliness than anything else, but eventually settled in to become a long running character.

The younger women were of various sorts. Some of them were yuppie types, not unlike the younger women in *Bracken* or *Falcon Crest*. Their characters were never really convincingly drawn. Carol McDermott worked or didn't work, where and when it suited her. After her aspirations to the big house were disappointed, she went off travelling around the world. Her one-sided romance with George never rang true. Mandy, who succeeded her as secretary in the Moran office, never took believable form. She came across mostly as an eighties amoral upwardly mobile clothes-horse, who would hardly have been likely to slap Matt's face after Miley told her the story of the good fun all around when Des broke in on Nuala giving Matt a massage after the aerobics class. The punky Nuala was a much better and more believable character. She was also one who pushed at the borders of traditional male-female roles and challenged those whose minds were stuck in the traditional grooves. Like Biddy, she was one to do a day's work. At first, she did the vegetable round with her brother and later reverted to it in an arrangement with Biddy and Miley. In the second year, she worked in the garage as a mechanic, side by side with Des Brennan, with whom she eloped. When Miley came looking for Des to do a job on his van, David Brennan assured him that he could entrust it to Nuala: 'She could strip an engine and put it back together blindfolded. She's great with cars.' To which the reaction was an admiring 'tough nut.' In general, the representation of women in *Glenroe* built on the better side of what it was in *The Riordans* and *Bracken*, in that the women tended to be productive and rooted and, at the same time, assertive

and sexual. The spunkier young women tended to be more nuanced characters, both better written and better acted than the rest.

As a whole, the male characters were perceptively written. The character of Miley Byrne evolved considerably, from the time of his first appearance in *Bracken*, where he functioned essentially as a foil for Pat Barry on the one hand and Dinny Byrne on the other. In *Glenroe*, as he came into his own, there was a new strength to his character. After long years, he knew what to expect from his chancer of a father and had decided to take so much and no more. He had learned where to draw the line, how to put his foot down and be firm. With others, he was far less suspicious, in fact far too trusting in the face of fairly obvious deviousness. On several occasions, he took Dick Moran's self-serving scheming to be beneficent generosity. So reticent was he to admit the bad side to people or to be vindictive, when the bad was too plain for anyone to miss, that his father said of him: 'If someone stole that lad's jacket, he'd thank them for leavin' his trousers.'

He could certainly be very dense as far as women were concerned. He was totally offside in dealing with Carol. When even the dogs in the street knew about Mary's affair with Dick, Miley hadn't a clue. When it could scarcely have been clearer how Biddy felt about him, he believed his proposal would come as a complete bolt from the blue. He had no idea what her answer would be. His behaviour was often full of endearing irony. After telling Matt Moran that *he* didn't know how to handle women, he turned to George Manning, the ever-single squire, who was perhaps even more hopeless where women were concerned, for man-of-the-world advice on how to go about making a proposal of marriage. The blind-leading-the-blind male camaraderie of the scene was very funny and indicative of the characteristic humour of *Glenroe*. The character of Miles Finbarr Aquinas Byrne, more than that of any other character, was played with a touch of the tease that had worked only because of the style and skill brought to the part by Mick Lally. Wesley Burrowes, in speaking of the feedback process between actors and characters, admitted that Miley in particular has evolved in relation to what Mick Lally has made of him, which, in fact, has turned out to be far from what was originally intended.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the honest and high-minded Miley, who was quite without guile, Dinny was the quintessential rural rogue, who was overflowing with guile. When not spoofing in the pub, he would be scheming and prying into everybody else's business with all the peasant cunning he could muster. While not always as clever or as successful at it as he wanted to think, he did manage occasionally to pull the wool over somebody's eyes, even if the like of Dick Moran usually saw right through him. The only sorts of things he ever did resembling work usually involved some manner of pretence or double dealing, like buying supermarket eggs and dirtying them up to sell as farm fresh free-range eggs. Still, most of his transgressions were minor on the scale of things. None was as nasty as the plot to steal sheep and frame Pat Barry in *Bracken*. His character was considerably softened, indicating a pattern playing itself out across a number of productions, whereby it seemed difficult to impossible to maintain a central character as a blaggard in a long-running serial.<sup>44</sup>

Relations between the sexes were still quite traditional, although some storylines did ring the changes. The first and second years were thick with romantic quagmires, particularly involving the younger single characters. Biddy, Carol, Nuala, Bernie, Mandy, Miley, Paul, Matt, Des, Paddy and David seemed constantly to be combining and recombining in pairs and triangles. Not that the older characters were exempt from all the pairing and triangulating. Unlike in *The Riordans*, sexuality in *Glenroe* was not just for the young, corresponding to a trend in international television, gradually coming to terms with the fact that older people, even women with grown up offspring, were still sexual beings. The like of Mary McDermott, Sheila Grant or Angie Watts, however, were much nearer the mark than Alexis Morrell Carrington Colby Dexter. Older characters tended to be more traditional in their manners and mores than the younger ones, but by no means inflexibly or humourlessly so. They were more comfortable with the traditional division of labour between the sexes, for example, but recognised that it was no longer taken for granted. Even when Stephen asked: 'Why would I be interferin' in the woman's side of the business?' it was a bit tongue-in-cheek. Even though he lived by the old lines of demarcation, he knew his sons would not. He sympathised with Nuala in her difficulties with Des, who was trying to force her into the old moulds, and knew that the traditional mothering given his son was creating problems for his daughter-in-law, which she did not deserve.

Even the oldest and most traditional characters bowed to new ways with an endearing graciousness and showed they implicitly respected a wisdom in new ways that was not their own. When the elderly Michael McDermott was putting his affairs in order, there was a rather fine scene between himself and the priest:

*Michael McDermott*: 'It's hard sharin' out between women. If you have a son, it's easy.'

*Fr. Devereux*: 'Now, Michael, I wouldn't let the feminist women hear you talkin' like that.'

Michael went on to speak of his marriage at the age of 50 to Mary when she was 18. He regretted taking her youth. The priest replied that he had given her a home, comfort and security. To which Michael in turn replied:

*Michael:* 'And do You think that was a fair exchange?'

*Fr. Devereux:* 'You'd want one of the new breed of priests to answer you that one, Michael. I have a list in my head of all the things a man shouldn't do to his wife. When it comes to what he should be doin', I'd be only guessin'.'

Fr. Devereux, although he was of the old breed, tried his best to cope with new realities which did not or would not fit into the old categories. He had words with Matt Moran, when Matt and Michelle decided to live together and have their baby without marrying. Nevertheless, when it came to the crunch and Michelle was in an accident, he included in his prayers 'her husband Matt'.

Yet, most of the time, he was as bewildered as anybody else .by all the anomalies of post-referendum Ireland. In the prolonged irresolution of the relationship between Dick Moran and Mary McDermott, they were awaiting an annulment from Rome. Meanwhile, Matt Moran and Michelle Malone brought their baby for christening, with still no word of a wedding. In a moment when at a loss as to what to make of it all, he remarked on what a confused world it was: 'You have the ones who *can* get married and *won't*, and you have the ones who *want* to get married and *can't*'.

The new and the old popped up again and again in uneasy coexistence or in ironic confrontation with each other. The script was at its best when highlighting the tensions and ironies in the interface between old and new. Old habits of thought built up over generations did not die easily, whatever the new challenges undermining them in present experience. Dinny Byrne, in particular, embodied the old peasant psyche rooted in the centuries of experience of those who were landless, or near landless, and yet trapped on the land. Dinny might have moved down from the mountain, where he and Miley cut each other's hair twice a year along with shearing the sheep, into a world of unisex hair salons, but to take the man from the mountain was not to take the mountain from the man. Certain things, like the tie of sex to land and livestock, were etched in his brain and ran in his blood, no matter what anyone said. At one point, Mary tried to tell Dinny that he was defeating his own purposes in pushing Bidy and Miley together, while contriving to determine her exact assets. She warned him to 'stop going around like some mountainy matchmaker, reducing everything to money and land and livestock'. Miley, unlike Dinny, was put off by her assets and his lack of them. When he finally overcame his inhibitions, he stood in the cottage, pleased as punch, talking of what a pearl of a woman she was: 'If I had a choice of all the women of Ireland, I couldn't have done better.'

Dinny, while he distractedly nodded and agreed, was sitting at the table, busy with paper and pencil, calculating the acres. When he got to the pub, there was light-hearted talk of the nerve of the blow-ins taking the best of their women. To which Dinny responded in terms of the need to bring new blood into their breeding lines. The parallels between human pair-bonding and barnyard breeding was more than once the occasion of humorous double entendre. There was, for example, a sequence in which Mary got herself into a state over a conversation between runny and Fr.Devereux about a greyhound's pregnancy, which she took to be about Bidy.

*Glenroe* was full of rich and well-rooted humour. There were light laughs based on simple malapropisms (about 'agrophobic dancing') or simple mix-ups (like Miley automatically taking off his boots and getting ready for bed in the old cottage on his first day back from the honeymoon). There were more penetrating ironies (like George's insight into his own character and situation, realising that he made contact across the gap between the big house and the rest by playing up to being a figure of fun).

Although it was kept generally light, *Glenroe* had its serious aspects. Occasionally, it took up social issues, like the economic plight of small growers, the dumping of industrial waste and the failure of lumpers to pay tax and PRSI. Although it backed away from this sort of congruence with current affairs issues, the story about the Dublin market was first investigated by the *Today-Tonight* programme. What had proven impossible to do as a factual report, because people wouldn't talk, could be pursued in fictional format. It was the only time *Glenroe* showed such a sense of a crusading mission or approached any issue with such resolution or with such strong words as spoken by Stephen at a meeting of the growers' association in the first year:

'As we know from our own shattered history, there are very nice people with nice clothes and hairdos who would be the very ones to squash growers right back into the ground.'

In the third year, the storylines involving Oliver and Theresa Marshall illustrated several instances of particular exploitation on the ground of the plain people of *Glenroe* by those sort of 'nice people with nice clothes and hairdos'. When Theresa Marshall in an alcoholic haze in her big fancy car ran into the vegetable van driven by the pregnant Nuala, it was she who was at fault, but it was Bidy, Miley and Nuala who had to suffer the consequences, including loss of earnings, while the insurance got sorted out. It subsequently became clear that the Marshall empire was built on smuggling operations, but only after he had skipped the country with all the money Mary had been left by Michael, who had denied himself all the comforts it could have brought him for years.

However, such attention as there was to social injustices and class differences tended to be so isolated and particularistic as not to bring into clear focus the systemic character of such injustices and the structural inequality of class. There were odd instances of snobbery, like Nancy Brennan calling Paddy and Nuala Maher 'only tinkers from the side of the road' and laying down the law about 'bringing the like of that into the house'. Yet they were so successfully upwardly mobile as to cut off any disturbance about class oppression. Paddy became quite the man of property, inheriting a pub, and Nuala was not long in being accepted into the family and inheriting in her turn. At the other end of the spectrum, the character of the squire was constructed as being so benevolent and so helpless that the most impoverished and oppressed would want only to mother him. The character of George Manning seemed to be derived more from English theatrical farce than anything typical of Irish life.

There was an indulgence of the big house that had the effect of smothering any sort of reflection on how the ascendancy acquired their big houses or how incongruous it was for one man, however nice, to occupy such a vast residence, when whole families were cramped into one room. In fact, the big house was made to seem highly accessible, in that the humblest resident of Glenroe would be welcome there and in that it was twice within the grasp of Mary, who as a simple girl of 18 married an elderly small farmer, to become its mistress. Not only did George Manning propose to her, but Dick Moran was at one point on the verge of buying it, if she would marry him and live there.

*Glenroe* drifted more and more into a preoccupation with the problems of people of property and a soft-centred indulgence of the minor joys and sorrows of their lives. In a period of recession, when more and more sections of the population have been threatened with marginalisation and impoverishment, it was not really telling the truth of the times to construct a scenario where sudden unearned wealth and/ or entrepreneurial skill allowed virtually every character to be upwardly mobile and prosperous. It gave a very easy ride to the spirit of the entrepreneurial eighties. Michael's secret long-ago investments that had turned up trumps, Dinny's long lost brother, incommunicado for 50 years, turning out to be a wealthy monsignor, Paddy being left a pub in England out of the blue and barmaid Bernie returning as a rich widow to buy a business in Glenroe, Teasy inheriting a fortune won on the stock market: all these were plots bearing more resemblance to plots in *Dallas*, *Dynasty* or *Falcon Crest* than to the reality of life in 1980s Ireland. Indeed, the characters themselves seemed conscious of it. On the telephone when Bernie came into his office, Dick Moran assured her: 'Oh, we've more heavy deals going than *Dallas*'. (*Looking at her*) 'More glamour too.'

This too was in line with a trend in international television, whereby television had become increasingly reflexive. In the beginning, television tended not to refer to television. Television drama certainly did not refer to television drama. By the 1980s television had become very self-referential and television drama everywhere was tending to refer to other television drama, particularly the American variety. From the beginning, the characters in *Glenroe* seemed to draw more on imagery derived from American television serials than from anything in Irish culture (high or low / traditional or modern) to give shape to their own experiences. When Bidy and Miley came into the pub, Paddy remarked: 'Here comes Mork and Mindy.' When the up-and-coming young lawyer Paul Moran came into company, Nuala inquired: 'How are things on *Flamingo Road*?' When Miley was out on his vegetable round and asked if he had grapes, he replied: 'What do you think this is *Falcon Crest*?' When the culprits who robbed the McDermotts were caught, Matt was thrilled by it as 'real *Hill Street Blues* stuff'. When asked about Oliver and Theresa Marshall, Michelle described her as a 'Sue Ellen type' and him as 'like Miss Ellie's husband'.

Except for this link to the rest of the world through television itself, *Glenroe* seemed curiously cut off from anything outside itself. This was undoubtedly to the liking of many of the audience, who wanted their own lives cut off from all but an amiable reflection of the more manageable problems of everyday life or the faraway fantasy problems of imported television. However, when even the smallest approximation to the violence on US serials made its presence felt on *Glenroe*, they did not like it at all. That the McDermott home, as cozy as their own and as real to them as those of their actual neighbours, should be violated was too threatening. It brought echoes of the very real violence of contemporary Ireland and the very frightening breakdown of social discipline all too near. Its transmission, as it happened, coincided with a spate of attacks on the elderly. Even though it was all tidied up and no real harm was done, unlike most real robberies where the robbers nearly always did get away with it, there was a great deal of negative audience reaction to the episode. *Mailbag* brought Wesley Burrowes on to answer his critics. He argued that the same audience was watching *TJ Hooker*, *Miami Vice* and *Rambo*, where violence was presented in a way that really was corrupt, but they only gave out in relation to *Glenroe*, where it was not. He maintained that such violence was part of Ireland as it really was and that it was important to face up to the black spots of Irish society. The fact that *The Riordans* did so, he claimed, was why it lasted so long. The role of the programme was to stimulate, not to sedate.

Except for this mild and marginal incident, *Glenroe* did not do much to face up to the black spots in Irish society. It did not generate anything like the sort of controversy that *The Riordans* did. Indeed, some connected with *The Riordans* along the way felt that *Glenroe* was on the whole functioning more as a sedative than a stimulant. When answering the critics on *Mailbag*, one felt Wesley Burrowes was back on the tightrope he had walked in writing *The Riordans* and was struggling to find the right balance between entertaining and grasping nettles, but for long stretches

of *Glenroe's* first five years, he seemed to have come off the tightrope and to be standing decisively on the entertainment side. In the initial promotion of the serial, Burrowes stated on the *Day by Day* programme that he had 'no social motivation' in writing *Glenroe* and that he felt it was unnatural to see a small community as a microcosm of the social problems of the nation. In other public statements, he asserted firmly that *Glenroe* was not about issues, but about people and their relationships and that the primary motivation behind it was to entertain.<sup>45</sup> His hands were sometimes raw from grasping nettles in *The Riordans*, he said. The balance in *Glenroe* was deliberately to comic relief over against social issues. If *Glenroe* ran up against social issues, it wouldn't dodge them. The scandal of the Dublin vegetable market was given as an example of an issue not dodged.<sup>46</sup>

However, a dramatic serial is a construction and it can be constructed in such a way as to be either perceptive or myopic in relation to the social order in which a small group of characters in a small community live out their lives. It can look outwards at the world in tune with the relevant rhythms of their lives or be turned in on the details of their lives in cozy isolation. Interestingly, Burrowes wrote a most perceptive critique of *Coronation Street* for the insulation of Weatherfield from contact with the real social and economic problems of the times:

There is hardly any crime in Weatherfield, no vandalism, no drug problem, not even any real drunkenness, no wife-beating. There is no unemployment, or if there is, it is not mentioned. No one feels the pinch and, if they do, there is always a pint of ale and a bacon butty to ease the pain. It seems to me that there is something contradictory in a policy of seeking to convey images of reality without ever touching on these real issues. It is surely unreal, for instance, that the sporting affiliations of the lads never surface in the Rovers. Even more unreal that a bitter year-long miners' strike, in which the Lancashire pits played a prominent part, never merited a mention. There was one story in which a new lodger in Hilda Ogden's house was discovered to have been a strike-breaker and hounded from the Street but unaccountably, since that one brief but successful experiment in exposing the Street to some cold areas from outside, there has been a lurch back towards the kind of safe triviality which could one day make the Street irrelevant.<sup>47</sup>

In the same spirit as Burrowes was so sharply critical of a programme for which he had genuine admiration, it was appropriate to lay the same critique at the door of *Glenroe*. There was hardly any crime in *Glenroe*. There was no unemployment. There was no poverty. No one seemed to feel the pinch. If they did, there was always a pint of Guinness or a pan of rashers, sausages and black pudding to ease the pain. There was never a hint of anything like the bitter year-long VEHA strike, which tore asunder families, neighbours and co-workers in Wicklow, or like the Kerry babies tribunal which revealed a great deal about the darker side of rural Ireland. There was never a mention of either of the two constitutional referenda, both of which involved the whole nation, except for the fictional citizens of *Glenroe*, and divided the whole population into two bitterly opposing camps.

*Glenroe* did not even push very hard at the boundaries of accepted sexual morality, which was the forte of *The Riordans*. The affair of Mary and Dick was stretched out in a paralysis of prolonged indecision and never really took on the issues it raised. The refusal of Michelle to marry, even while living with Matt and after having a baby, was more of a whimsical wilfulness than a matter of firm principle. Biddy and Miley, for all viewers could tell, were virginal to their wedding night. Biddy, unlike Maggie a decade earlier, stuck to church approved methods of family planning. In the most old-fashioned way of dealing with the matter without having to discuss it, she marked the calendar for Miley to see. When there was a news item, followed by an interview with Mick Lally on *Morning Ireland* about Mick Lally leaving the show, because he refused to do a nude scene in which Biddy and Miley would make love before their wedding day, there was a massive reaction. Even though it was done as an April fools joke, there were thousands of phone calls and letters to RTÉ taking it at face value and praising Mick Lally for taking his stand against nudity and pre-marital sex and for keeping *Glenroe* 'wholesome'. It showed how little had changed since *The Spike*.

*Glenroe* did little to disturb that section of the audience which would have been up in arms if it had attempted to push back the borders by challenging the assumption that nudity was sordid and by exposing the unwholesome attitudes to the human body prevailing in Ireland. It only pushed very timidly at attitudes to pre-marital sex in the Matt and Michelle story. It hedged its bets on the divorce issue in the Dick and Mary story. Whenever queried about it, Burrowes gave the state of legal uncertainty surrounding divorce in the country as the reason. Nevertheless, in a country where so many were acting decisively outside the law, this did not constitute an altogether adequate reason. The final resolution could scarcely have been safer, with Dick's church annulment coming through and Dick and Mary having a respectable Catholic wedding in Rome and settling into a respectable bourgeois marriage back in *Glenroe*.

The production schedule of *Glenroe*, which necessitated setting of story-lines nine months prior to transmission, set limits to its topicality, as far as unpredictable news items might be concerned. All the same, it constituted no obstacle to taking on many ongoing and deeply rooted social problems, which it did not take on. Going into its fifth year with a production schedule closer to *East Enders* or *Brookside*, it raised hopes that it could not only produce its Christmas episodes for Christmas, but be truer to its times in deeper ways as well.

Although *Glenroe* threw up attractive characters and set them in amusing interaction with each other, it tended to skate across the surface of the human condition, rather than to engage in a more penetrating scrutiny of the human psyche. There was not one single character articulating an advanced idea or expressing a really deep emotion. There was no intellectual or emotional edge to it, no great thirst for truth or justice, no deep searching of the soul. There was no questioning of Catholic doctrine in principle, whatever the falling off in practice. There was little to challenge the status quo, whether of church or state, in any sort of fundamental way. While was not deep or daring, it was clever and charming. Nevertheless there were still hopes that it would open out in new directions, even if it had yet to fulfill its potential to probe the human psyche or to lay bare the true social fabric of the times. Wesley Burrowes, addressing himself to some of the points raised in this critique, both in conversation and in an *In Dublin* article, admitted that the fourth year of the series had a problem of focus. He also admitted that he was a bit 'conscience-stricken' over the fact that everyone was so comfortable. Once he realised that nobody even worked for a wage, that everybody was an entrepreneur, he took it to heart and introduced a working class kid (Chuck) coming to work for Biddy and Miley. He intriguingly promised a 'major social upheaval' involving the three main characters in the fifth year,<sup>48</sup> but it did not happen and Chuck too ended up in the rags-to-riches cliché.

Whatever its faults, it carried on the tradition begun in *The Riordans* and taken up in *Bracken*. It regularly recycled and updated themes from *The Riordans* in new storylines, with recurring motifs, ranging from relationships between priests and greyhounds through honeymoon preoccupation with crops and livestock to the 'maybe there're not doing it right' reaction to babies not coming nine months after wedding. It also regularly re-affirmed its narrative continuity with *Bracken*, with a chance meeting and subsequent visit from a woman they knew in Bracken, the presence of Bracken guests and a telegram from Pat and Louise Barry at Biddy and Miley's wedding and a trip back to Bracken where Biddy met Pat Barry. Most importantly, however, it continued the process of weaving a rich tapestry of rural life, giving RTÉ perhaps the most impressive track record of any television service in the category of the rural serial.

## Urban Drama

The same could not be said of its record in the category of the urban serial. Its portrayal of urban life over the years was, it was generally agreed, patchy and inadequate. Since *Tolka Row*, there was an enormous gap that was never adequately bridged by subsequent productions such as *Southside*, *Partners in Practice*, *The Spike* or *The Burke Enigma*. This was the source of a great deal of dissatisfaction with RTÉ. Although everyone in RTÉ saw the problem, there was difficulty in generating an effective response to it. Both inside and outside RTÉ, it was asked: Why, in a time of rising unemployment, was there no Irish *Boys from the Blackstuff*? Why, in a period of mounting crime and social indiscipline, was there no Irish *Hill Street Blues*? Why, with all the interesting storylines inherent in earning a living, raising a family, understanding the world and coming to terms with the complexities of urban life, could RTÉ generate no Irish equivalent to *EastEnders* or *Brookside*?

*Inside* was specifically designed as a response to this demand for an urban serial, which would come to grips with the problems of contemporary life. It was made in 1985 and ran for thirteen half-hour episodes. Another thirteen episodes were in pre-production in 1986, when the decision to carry on with *Inside* was reversed. There was general agreement, even among those who worked hard to make it succeed, that it had failed to meet the need for contemporary urban drama. Perhaps the most fundamental problem was the setting. Three scenarios for an urban serial were originally considered. One was to be built around a Cork trade union official and his family, along with another family hit hard by unemployment. Another involved a middle class doctor working in an inner city medical practice. The third was a prison.

The reason given for the choice of the prison setting was that it had to be studio-based, because of lack of finance, and that the prison environment was the most claustrophobic of the possible settings.<sup>49</sup> However, to make a prison serial in a situation in which there was a lot of urban drama being generated was one thing, but to do so in the face of virtually nothing else was another. It revealed a disorientation, in which there was no scale of priorities, no sense of proportion about what was central and what was peripheral, no coherent picture of the overall shape of contemporary urban life. It was too narrowly conceived. It once again put a disproportionate emphasis on lumpen life. It reinforced the tendency to equate urban life with drugs, violence and vulgarity. It made criminality the norm. It suggested that RTÉ still had problems dealing with normal urban life, a point made very strongly by Fintan O'Toole on a *Slants* programme featuring an analysis of the state of RTÉ drama. The exposition of what *Inside* was all about in the *RTÉ Guide* feature introducing it actually equated the prison environment with urban life. Joe Dunlop, the main writer and script editor, went so far as to call prison life 'a microcosm of the world going about its business':

We wanted an urban series and Kilderry prison is a mirror image of inner city life. Sex, family life, work, trade unions, politics, violence, drugs are all found in prisons - in shadow and in substance.<sup>50</sup>

It was not possible, however, for the prison environment to bear so much weight, without drastically misconceiving the relation of the prison experience to the whole of urban life.

Nevertheless, even given the limitations of the prison setting, there was still some potential for opening some areas of contemporary urban life of social importance and of dramatic interest. It was potential never fulfilled, because the scriptwriting was utterly lacking in direction or penetration. Despite the enormous talents of directors, designers, cast and crew, which were channelled into *Inside*, they could never compensate for the inadequacies of the script. The various scriptwriters never jelled into a team working to a common purpose. The script editor, who had no apparent qualification for the job and no particular knowledge of either prison life or Irish society, never handled the material with any authority or made the various bits and pieces into anything coherent. Even while it was still in production, Mannix Flynn, the one scriptwriter with prison experience, complained about the guidelines given to him for writing the script. He claimed that he was told not to deal with politics. He argued that there was a reactionary mentality in Ireland that RTÉ had never really challenged and that *Inside* whitewashed everything it touched, right, left and centre.<sup>51</sup> However, what Mannix Flynn considered whitewashing and others considered necessary editing, left much scope for debate. His scripts, even more than the rest, made criminality the norm and put prison at the centre of urban society.

Throughout the serial the scripts were flat, fragmented and unfocused. The plots were not only thin and forced, but they were riddled with implausibilities and non sequiturs. The fifth episode, for example, ended with a cliffhanger, with the prison governor receiving a kidnap note with what looked like the severed finger left over from *The Price*. Yet, amidst all the nail-biting concern about the governor's kidnapped son in the sixth episode, it was never mentioned again. At the end of the episode came the announcement that the governor's son was released unharmed, with no explanation of the finger.

Characterisation was extremely weak. There was not a single moment of real insight into the inner life of any character. There was not a single line of memorable dialogue. Some of the more experienced actors, like John Cowley, Kevin McHugh and Jim Bartley, were able to invest their characters with a kind of presence beyond what was written for them. Other characters either fell flat or went leaping over the top. Most of the prisoners were created in the mould of what Eoghan Harris called the 'funny nose factor'.<sup>52</sup> In a *Slants* discussion of *Inside*, Brendan Kennelly saw the civil servant from the department of justice as a 'mix of Clark Gable and Dracula'. The prisoners brought into the *Slants* discussion commented that the screws were too wide awake, that the chaplain lacked all conviction, that the social worker would not have worked so closely with the governor. No one seemed to find the prison governor plausible. The characters of the governor, Frank Walker, and the social worker, Cara Blair, showed signs of having been conceived as Frank Furillo-Joyce Davenport figures as part of a strategy for making *Inside* Ireland's answer to *Hill Street Blues*. However, it lacked the complexity, the grounding and the authenticity of *Hill Street Blues*. There was no way in which the surface resemblance of certain television characters to other television characters could make up for the lack. Nor could the overtly reflexive references in the dialogue. It was not enough to have Duffy say to Devlin 'Let's be careful out there' for it to summon the same resonances as such a penetrating serial as *Hill Street Blues*, which probed the crosscurrents of the particular social history in which it was so firmly rooted.

*Inside* was not firmly rooted. It penetrated no crosscurrents of social history. It tended to float above its material. Storylines involving drug addiction, prostitution, rape, fraud, robbery, mental illness, suicide, professional rivalry and extra-marital sex all had a second-hand, hear-say feel about them. There was no immediacy. There was no sense of an experiential grounding. There was no firm point of view. So anxious were those involved not to privilege anyone particular point of view that what they ended up with was, not many points of view, but no point of view. Rather than showing prison from the points of view of citizens, prisoners, relations, prison officers, prison governors, social workers and civil servants, prison never seemed real from any point of view at all.

Attempts to inject a bit of grittiness through vulgar language and bawdy humour did not really work. The street-wise dialogue always seemed strained and second-hand. Very occasionally, there was a joke worthy of a laugh: 'And she says 'I think you're a rotten lover!' And he says 'How can you tell in a minute and a half?' However, most of the attempts at humour fell flat:

*Fr. Rowan: (Introducing two Legion of Mary singers at a prison concert) 'These are the best. They've played for the Pope'.*

*Joker: 'Is that the fella that lives in the Vatican?'*

Although the script note called for 'lots of laughter' at this point, it was simply more than even the most eager-to-please among actors and extras could manage. This was a serious defect, since in the absence of any other binding element, there was a tendency to rely on the wit to carry the whole thing. A lot of the so-called humour was of the

'Hey, Mary, let's have a look at your g-string' variety'. The female characters and the representation of female sexuality bore all the marks of male locker room fantasy.

Following upon the decision to give the serial a prison setting, questions were raised about how to provide a female presence in an all male environment, both to give the drama romantic interest and to provide work for actresses. The somewhat glib attempts to solve this problem led, first of all, to distortion of the role of the female social worker within the prison. Cara Blair was portrayed as working all hours at a desk inside the governor's own office, for no other reason than to inject a bit of romantic interest into the everyday business of running the prison and to spice up certain scenes with sparks of sexual tension. The other main vehicle for introducing a female presence was in the prison visiting scenes. The helpless and naive Sorcha Joyce or the elderly and elegant Lady Jane talking about what she wanted to do in bed with her husband of many years might have stretched the power to suspend disbelief just a bit, but they could perhaps pass. But Helen Carey, who kept coming back to the prison out of a need to discuss her rape with the rapist, was stretching it too far. Even less believable was Rose, who came to visit her pimp-turned-prison-inmate and told him of how she got onto an AnCO writing course by wearing a tight sweater and cut-away bra and creating a situation where 'Yer man didn't know whether he was comin' or goin''. It was similar in form to a story told by a character called the Archdeacon of a scam he did on a bank manager who was a 'knicker freak', while a certain model crossed and uncrossed her legs, and prisoners salivated even at second remove.

There was much sexual innuendo in the dialogue, particularly in the later episodes, much of it reflecting male voyeuristic anxiety about what other men were like in bed and male bewilderment over the real nature of female sexuality. The talk of one of them, while on parole, getting himself a 'man eater', who was back looking for more, was typically male wishful thinking, as was the bravado about Rose making 'plenty of racket' when she was 'getting what she wanted'. The interjection of doubt about whether she really meant it, with the woman taking perverse pleasure in the area of doubt, was a reflection not only of male sexual insecurity, but of the alienation of sexuality from emotional intimacy. If such themes were going to be raised, it would have been better to give them more enlightened and extended treatment, rather than consigning them to the throwaway jocularity stemming from prison visits.

Another function of the prison visiting scenes was to show the connection of the prison to the outside world. However, these scenes were as bitty and as narrowly conceived as the rest and they never really fulfilled the function of opening the prison out to a larger social context. The only effective storylines in this category were ones that showed criminals being affected by crime on the outside while they were inside. These stories, particularly those involving the burglary of Joyce's house and the death of De Vere Gorman's wife had a table-turning irony to them, as victimisers became victims. But they also had the effect of portraying the outside world as being like the prison writ large.

None of the other devices for bringing the outside world into view did anything to change this picture of it. RTÉ news bulletins, in scenes where prisoners were listening to radio or watching television, were about gangs of youths in stolen cars ramming garda vehicles or heroin smuggling operations, all adding to the picture of the city as inherently violent and sordid. The politics of *Inside* tended to be vague and superficial, manifested in ill-digested, vague news items about 'the government' coming under fire from 'the opposition' over its economic policy; Kelly referring to 'the mafia up in Leinster House'; Cagney claiming that money could buy judges. Most references to structures of power reflected a kind of lumpen anarchism and contributed to the picture of the society as a whole being the prison magnified, with people on the outside being even more bent than those on the inside.

*Inside* never came to terms with any of the particular issues it raised, nor with the social roots of crime, nor with the structures of power defining the role of the prison in the larger social order. There was a considerable defensiveness about social issues on the part of those shaping *Inside*. Even though it had its origins in an instruction from the controller, Muiris MacConghail, to meet the case made by those who were criticising RTÉ drama for not dealing with contemporary social issues, there was a negative attitude about issues, ideologies, political systems and social contexts in the prevailing view of what drama was all about among those responsible for *Inside*. The script editor and writer, Joe Dunlop, emphasised that it was 'not a series with a mission - it's drama' and that it was 'not a crusade, it waves no banners'.<sup>53</sup> The senior producer/director, Noel O'Briain, did not want to be involved in socially committed drama, because, in his opinion, it made people into two-dimensional ciphers for socio-political points of view. He believed that there was too much emphasis on social systems and that the real causes of problems were in people's hearts and not in social systems.<sup>54</sup> In the same spirit, the other producer / director, Gerry Stembridge, even in the course of giving a most incisive critique of *Inside* upon its denouement, emphasised that neither of them were 'ideological directors'. Both tended to bend over backwards to insist that they were not interested in issues or ideologies, but in 'people as people'.<sup>55</sup>

However, dealing with people as people both raises issues and makes ideological assumptions, which even those who erect barriers of resistance can be more than ready to face in practice. All the same, to penetrate people's lives most effectively, it might be best to give explicit attention to the social systems shaping their hearts and minds

and their options in life. To construct drama which was really consequential and gripping in illuminating human experience, it might be best to be conscious of sorting out issues, which after all arise out of human experience and reflect its needs and priorities. Indeed, characters embodying strong socio-political points of view, like Bobby Grant in *Brookside* or Joyce Davenport in *Hill Street Blues*, could be far from two dimensional, unlike characters in *Inside*. Indeed, their social commitment can often make for much stronger drama than anything happening on *Inside*.

Another source of defensiveness possibly having a bearing on the shaping of *Inside* would be even harder to assess. That was the shadow of *The Spike*. In the early stages of development of *Inside*, Seán Cotter, the executive producer gave an interview to *Hot Press* for a feature article on soap opera as social documentary. Although the article centred on *Glenroe*, Cotter mentioned the new urban serial, which, he promised, would be 'dealing with current issues of urban society'. In answer to direct questions about *The Spike*, he answered that they would be aware of *The Spike* in making *Inside* and 'gird our loins a bit'.<sup>56</sup> For his part, Noel O'Briain, producer and director of both *The Spike* and *Inside*, often made the point that RTÉ drama had never recovered from *The Spike*. It had erected barriers of self-censorship that had yet to be breached.<sup>57</sup> For their part, reviewers panned *Inside*. When relaying the news that it would not be back Gene Kerrigan in the *Sunday Tribune* approvingly pronounced it as having 'gone to the land of *The Spike*'.<sup>58</sup> It did so, however, without stirring up even a fraction of what *The Spike* revealed about Irish society, either directly or indirectly. It simply fell flat.

It was, however, one dead-end explored and eliminated on the way to creating another urban serial, which, it was hoped, would surpass *Tolka Row*, avoid the pitfalls of *The Spike* and *Inside*, and fill the need for a contemporary dramatic coming-to-terms with Irish urban life in the 1990s.

There was another series with a contemporary urban setting during the same period, although no one made any great claims for it as meeting the need for contemporary urban drama. *Leave It to Mrs. O'Brien*, a situation comedy revolving around a priest's housekeeper, was set in the Liberties area of working class Dublin. Originally to be called *The Good, the Bad and the Clergy*, the first series was written by Dublin housewife Angela McFadden with Joe Dunlop as script editor. The second and third series were handed over to Joe Dunlop altogether. The first series was simply twee. It was full of exaggerated stage Dublin accents, awkward attempts to make the normal carry-on between priests and housekeepers look inherently cute and strained efforts to get badly-written inanities to sound like jokes. The second series was presented as 'going for more character depth and less caricature ...more reality ...stronger stories'.<sup>59</sup> What distinguished the second series, however, was even less character depth, more caricature and less reality. The stories were not stronger, but they were more inflated. Instead of plots hingeing on a bold boy spiking the gravy and getting a very stuffy nun drunk, they instead hung on Mrs. O'Brien arriving back from Spain with a holdall stuffed with money or Fr. Michael meeting an English producer named Lulu in a Greystones hotel room to audition for an 'all priests show'.

It was more slapstick than satire. There was no evidence that it gave a single decent laugh to the adult Dublin audience. There were vague stories told around RTÉ about remote places where the locals gathered around the pub television and nearly split their sides laughing. Indeed, somebody must have liked it, as it topped the RTÉ2 TAMs. Whoever did or didn't like it, it wasn't the critics. Reviews were generally scathing. For example, Gene Kerrigan's column in the *Sunday Tribune* read:

Heads should roll over *Leave It to Mrs. O'Brien*. People should be sacked, thrown on the dole and given lousy references... The strained, illogical plots are devoid of jokes. Mrs. O'Brien says 'Janey!' and the camera holds on her like she's just done a Dorothy Parker. The thing is, in every sense of the word, witless...The existence of this show means that other things must be left undone. Even if RTÉ was dripping with resources, it would be a shame to squander them so ineptly.<sup>60</sup>

Another review, actually quoted in the *RTÉ Guide*, was equally caustic:

Sometimes things can be so bad that you can laugh at them for that reason, but this series doesn't even succeed on that dubious level. There were no characters remotely resembling any real person in the whole thing.<sup>61</sup>

On various occasions, director Brian MacLochlainn defended the series. One line of defence was that it was made for a target audience of those between 7 and 14 and over 50. They were, he argued, not a very demanding audience, but one that deserved to be catered for in RTÉ schedules.<sup>62</sup> Another strategy was to go more aggressively on the defensive and put the criticism down to 'Baggot Street pseudos whose parameters of vision do not stretch beyond Stephen's Green to Morehampton Road'.<sup>63</sup> This was in the context of an interview criticising RTÉ for having 'lost its nerve' and calling for hard hitting programmes like some of the more courageous and adventurous efforts of the sixties and seventies.

Others, however, were arguing that precisely what RTÉ needed to turn itself around was to stop leaving it to Mrs. O'Brien. Questions were being asked about why, in such a farcical country, RTÉ could generate no decent comedy and why, in the current social climate, RTÉ could produce no social satire. An *In Dublin* article posed those questions quite sharply, comparing Britain and Ireland in the sphere of television comedy:

The Brits are a stodgy lot. Their pubs are for guzzling plough man's lunches, while discussing football results. Dull, mild-mannered and respecters of persons, they have Rowan Atkinson, Pamela Stephenson, Billy Connolly, John Cleese and *Spitting Image*. We, of course, are wits to a wiseacre. Pubs full of naturals only waiting to be discovered, a sidesplitting political set-up, an instinctive sense of the absurd and a delight in vicious abuse. We leave it to Mrs. O'Brien, pay Derek Davis and tolerate Twink. The poverty and paucity of social and political satire on RTÉ since the heyday of *Hall's Pictorial Weekly* ...is a failure of nerve, of imagination, of elementary competence. We've never produced anything as vicious as *Spitting Image* ...Is it prudery or a failure of courage or political pressure?<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, stories were told indicating one or all of the above. Whatever the reasons, Irish audiences were watching *Yes, Prime Minister*, *A Very Peculiar Practice*, *Hot Metal*, *In Sickness and In Health*, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, and *Spitting Image*, from across the water, while seeing nothing comparable at home, rooted in areas of Irish life crying out for the purging that bold satirical treatment could bring. In 1985, for example, RTÉ gave fairly straight-faced news coverage of the 'moving statue' phenomenon throughout Ireland and staged discussions of it in which the credulous made all the running.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, it stopped a spot on *TV GaGa*, which was to be an interview with the Virgin Mary, suggesting that Immaculate Conception Clinics be set up around Ireland. Yet, over on Channel 4, *Who Dares Wins* did a skit reporting that, since the miracle of the weeping Madonna of Mourne, there had been similar phenomena all over Ireland: the dribbling Madonna of Drogheda, the jumping St. Joseph of Jordanstown and the Christ in Cork seen to be doing aerobics.

### Access Community Drama

Other than *Glenroe* and *Leave It to Mrs. O'Brien*, the only home produced drama about contemporary Ireland made and transmitted in 1986 was an experiment in community drama by the *Access* team outside the aegis of the drama department. After two previous series of *Access Community Television*, in which RTÉ technical expertise was put at the service of various community groups to convey their aims and activities, it was decided to apply the *Access* method to drama. Claiming that some community groups had been experimenting with drama as a means of describing their experience, the *Access* team approached the Amateur Drama League, seemingly making the assumption that community drama and amateur drama were synonymous.

RTÉ invited sixteen amateur drama groups to a seminar and asked them to submit scenarios for scripts reflecting contemporary Irish life. Seven plays were chosen and shot on location on video tape with an outside broadcast unit in local houses, pubs, supermarkets and streets. They dealt with such themes as adolescence, education, unemployment, moving house, emigration, suicide and attacks on the elderly.

*Fresh Salmon* by the Dublin Olivian Players concerned a dinner party given by a young advertising executive, putting wife and lifestyle on show to impress his bosses. The scenario, except for an unemployed brother-in-law with punky gear, seemed somewhat passé. It was meant to contrast middle class pretensions with working class earthiness. The farce, however, was too facile, with the script going over the top, with strangers engaging in grossly insulting behaviour at first meeting and with hosts fawning and cringing, despite every conceivable insult.

*The Changeling* by Relay Productions, Ballinasloe, was a simple slice of everyday life for a young school girl, whose mother's hospitalisation was interfering with her swimming practice. Despite a bit of imaginative direction, it was a somewhat insubstantial piece.

*Win Some, Lose Some* by the Rush Dramatic Society concerned the pressures upon a young unemployed man, with a working, pregnant wife and in-laws accusing him of being a waster. After losing money on the horses and robbing an old man of his savings, a crisis developed in which everybody had an instant change of heart and all ended happily ever after. The play was overwritten and the lines were delivered at breakneck speed, without a pause in sight. It was somewhat dishonest in showing the problem of unemployment giving way to instant solution and in circumstances that might have been expected to have accentuated, rather than solved, the problem, with the crime being the catalyst for bringing the son-in-law into the father-in-law's business.

*There Has To Be a Reason* by the Leixlip Theatre Group concerned a young lad's suicide and the reactions and reflections of those who knew him. It bore an uncanny resemblance to *Death of a Schoolboy*, a German television series shown on RTÉ not long before, although it seemed a pale imitation of a really excellent production. Unlike

*Death of a Schoolboy, There Has To Be a Reason* did not really penetrate its subject and brought no insight to bear upon any reason for the awful tragedy of suicide.

*Emigrants* by the Charlestown Little Theatre Group put a spotlight on factors in present day life in a rural community, which brought young people to the belief that they had no option but to emigrate. It showed the rural gombeen alive and well in times of recession, operating a 'Dallas Disco' to provide expensive entertainment for the enforced leisure of the unemployed. It also indicated the hazards of illegal immigration to the US, with the departure of the young emigrants coinciding with the news that their whole support network had collapsed. RTÉ producer, Michael T. Murphy, considered this play to have come nearest to meeting the aims *Access* had set for this series.

*Moving On* by the Moat Club, Naas, was the story of the relationship between a young lad and a tramp, against the background of the family's impending move from Naas to Galway. It had touches of *One of Ourselves*, though it lacked the irony of the Trevor story. It also struck false notes based on simple factual errors. For example, when the father was trying to convince the daughter at university that she should transfer to UCG, she replied 'You can't study social sciences in Galway.' which must not have impressed staff and students in the social science faculty at UCG.

*Vandals* by Everyman Productions, Sligo showed the sentencing of a deprived youth to community service in a city dump by a judge calling him a blaggard and a vandal. Meanwhile, the judge's daughter, a student, began work on an archaeological dig adjacent to the dump. When the plans of the local senator to build a pub on the site came to light, a demonstration was organised. Both deprived delinquent and privileged daughter had come into confrontation with authority and raised questions about who were the real vandals in Irish society.

Reviewers tended to subject the *Access* dramas to favourable comparison with *Inside* and *Leave It to Mrs. O'Brien* and to welcome them as filling the vacuum that had opened in RTE drama of contemporary life. Gene Kerrigan's review of *Emigrants* was typical:

What we saw was recognisable, something that doesn't happen too often in RTÉ drama. We saw the insides of modern working class homes, for instance, something RTÉ seldom shows and usually gets wrong when it does.<sup>66</sup>

However, it was argued that both reviewers and RTÉ itself had put the work of professionals in an unfair light in a situation in which greater freedom and scope was given to the work of amateurs in creating contemporary drama. The professionals took strong issue with the fact that RTÉ was giving such an opportunity to amateurs, many of whom had other jobs, in a situation in which there was a dearth of drama and professionals were on the dole queues. Both Equity and the Society of Irish Playwrights, the unions representing actors and writers, protested over RTÉ filling television time with amateur drama, in the context of cutbacks in professional drama production and high unemployment among actors and writers. Kevin McHugh also objected on two further grounds: that there was a huge gap between community drama and amateur drama groups and that professional standards and artistic values were perceived to be implicitly under attack.<sup>67</sup> Following a meeting of the RTÉ trade union group with the RTÉ management and a union instruction to the producer not to proceed with the project, plans for a second series of *Access* dramas were discontinued.

The *Access* dramas were nevertheless grappling with contemporary Irish life in away in which no other drama productions emanating from RTÉ at the time were, which made them popular with the Irish audience and won them recognition in the Jacob's Award given to their producer, Michael T. Murphy.

## **RTÉ and Independent Drama Production**

With the trend toward commissioning drama from independent production sources and away from exclusive reliance on in-house production, RTÉ would be entering into all sorts of unprecedented relationships with outside groups, for which rules had yet to be established. The 1980s saw a burgeoning of the independent sector in film and video production. RTÉ had involved itself with independent drama production in various ways already. In the case of films such as *Maeve*, *Attracta*, *Anne Devlin*, *Our Boys*, *A Second of June* and *It's Handy When People Don't Die*, RTÉ co-financed their production. In the case of other films, such as *Angel*, *Ascendancy*, *Desecration*, *Outcasts*, *Pigs*, *The Country Girls*, *The Best Man*, *John*, *Love* and *The Schooner*, which received finance from such sources as the Irish Film Board, the Arts Council, the British Film Institute, Channel 4 or just managed on a shoestring, RTÉ promoted them at least by buying them in for transmission.

The stories told in these productions were diverse in style, in setting and in theme. Some went back to shed new light on older folk ways. Attempting to come at Irish history from some new angle were: *It's Handy When People Don't Die* by John and Tom McArdle, which gave a 'fool on the hill' view of the 1798 uprising and the whole process of historical mythmaking; *The Outcasts* by Robert Wynne-Simmons, which cast a certain light on the social roots of magic and witch-hunting in the conditions of 19th century rural Ireland through the process by which a young girl became a scapegoat for the ills of her village; *Anne Devlin* by Pat Murphy, which saw the 1803 insurrection from the point of view of the female patriot; *Ascendancy* by Edward Bennett, which filtered the events of World War 1 local sectarian strife and industrial conflict in Belfast in 1929 through the experience of the disturbed daughter of a unionist politician and wealthy ship builder.

Others were set in the more recent past. Some showed signs of being Irish reflections of the worldwide wave of 1950s nostalgia. *John, Love* was John Davis' National Film School (London) diploma film. It was a simple cameo of a boy's first communion day in Dublin in the 1950s, with no particular heightening, tension or climax. *The Schooner* was an Aisling Films production of a Michael McLaverty short story of a Belfast boy, who was sent to spend his summer with elderly relatives on a remote island off the north coast of Ireland. It was similarly impressionistic in mood and pace, with no strong dramatic drive. *Our Boys* by Cathal Black was set in a Christian Brothers school in the 1950s and brought more of a critical edge to its material. It intercut naturalistic drama with archival footage, striving to come to terms with the influence of the religious order in Irish society. *The Country Girls*, Desmond Davis' film of the Edna O'Brien novel, also looked at the role of religious orders in Irish society. In the context of two Clare girls coming of age and rushing headlong into sexual awakening, it dwelled on all of the religious iconography of Irish Catholicism and the stultifying social climate of rural Ireland in the 1950s. Whatever the shock effect of the novel in the 1950s, there was only a nostalgia effect in the film in the 1980s. It was more of a superficial 'Isn't it great how awful it all was' Irish obsession with Irishness, lingered upon and good for a laugh, but done to no deeper purpose.

Others dealt with various contemporary themes in Irish life, both rural and urban, both north and south. *Two by Forsyth* was a Tara Productions adaptation of two stories by Frederick Forsyth, set in Dublin. Both *A Careful Man* and *Privilege* were modern parables on the discrepancy between law and justice. *Desecration*, which won the Arts Council script award for Neville Presho in 1980, provided the scenario for a clash of cultural values. When a surveying team found evidence of potentially valuable deposits on an archaeological site about to be designated a national monument on an island off the west coast of Ireland, a conflict was set in motion between those who simply wanted the immediate material benefits of industrial development and those who wanted to preserve the national heritage. The best lines went to the latter, especially to Muiris, the main spokesman preaching against 'the gospel of the gombeen,' which proclaimed it was a simple matter of poverty versus progress. At the end of the film, when the preservation order arrived just after the publican-incited locals had destroyed what was to be preserved, his considered judgement on it all was: 'The forces of darkness are just one step ahead of the forces of enlightenment.'

Another film which set the forces of darkness against the forces of enlightenment, at least in the background, was *A Second of June*. Francis Stapleton's film was set on Bloomsday 1984 and foregrounded a supposedly Ulyssean fiction of two youths moving through Dublin, against the background of President Reagan's visit to Dublin in June 1984. However, the background actuality footage of the street protests of the anti-Reagan demonstrators was arguably of greater interest (especially if you could see yourself in it) than the foreground fiction, which seemed trivial and insubstantial, however hard one strained to find the Joycean significance in it all. It did, however, give a sympathetic picture of Dublin, showing the city in some of its more congenial aspects in one of its prouder moments. Cathal Black's *Pigs*, also set in Dublin, did the opposite. Featuring Jimmy Brennan, who wrote the script and played the central character, it wallowed in the squalor at the margins of inner city tenement life. It was one more effort featuring lumpen low life as if it were the essence of urban life. It seemed to glory in the decay of Dublin. It indulged the degraded and degrading culture of its parasitic underclass, but it offered no insight into the phenomenon. It had some cinematic qualities signalling significance, but never delivered the significance.

Bringing more insight as well as more humour to bear upon its corner of contemporary society, *The Best Man* showed the culture of its own Derry as both full of congenial camaraderie and in need of critical reflection. By spotlighting the life style of a free-wheeling, hard-drinking, wise-cracking bachelor, it cast an analytical eye on the subculture of the Irish male and on men's attitudes to women and to marriage. As Billy Maguire, ageing and anti-marriage bachelor, prepared to do 'best man' for yet another of his friends soon to be lost to his world of pubs, clubs and betting shops to the threatening world of women and home, it sparked reflections on basic assumptions. Written and directed by Joe Mahon and cast from the local community in the tribal spirit of Derry City, it was made by Northlands Productions on a shoestring budget of £5000, with some technical input from RTÉ. Most importantly, it asked questions of some psycho-social significance. Did a familiar Irish character like Billy talk so much because he was afraid of the quiet, because he was afraid to hear himself? Did he drink so much because there was nobody who needed him to be sober, because the mother needed him to be drunk, as nagging him was her sole purpose in life?

Why was Jamesie a bore, except when on the drink, even to his wife, who wanted him off it? It was a refreshing and well regarded production, which won two awards at the Celtic Film and Television Festival in 1986.

There were a number of other independent productions set in the north. Not surprisingly, the troubles loomed large as a catalyst of dramatic conflict. Some of these were much more illuminating than others. *Angel*, Neil Jordan's first film, was anything but illuminating. It was the extreme example of a tendency to use the politics of northern violence without really dealing with it. In fact, in its way of giving stylised, fatalistic film noir treatment to political violence, abstracted from the political context which brought it forth and sustained it, it did more to obscure than to explain it. Its dark, doom-ridden, de-contextualised approach to its material actually made the political forces involved seem opaque and inexplicable. It took the politics out of politics and left only images of a saxophone player, a dance hall, a murder, a beach and a trail of vengeance, all to no apparent purpose. It belonged to the whole cultural trend, encompassing pop videos, hyping dark, discordant, romanticised images, as if their very production and juxtaposition necessarily constituted deeper meaning. It also harmonised well with the British establishment's view of the north, which saw the Irish soul as inextricably implicated in some kind of primordial blood lust.

*Attracta*, Kieran Hickey's film based on William Trevor's short story, also centred on the political violence of the north. Although it came at the politics of the troubles from an oblique angle, it embodied a drive towards lucidity, which was altogether absent in *Angel*. It examined the effect of a particular newspaper report on an ageing provincial schoolteacher. It looked back on the violence of previous generations and queried the role of the education system in accepting and perpetuating violence. It dealt with social conscience and sins of omission. It showed the shattering effect of a teacher's realisation that: 'I had a story to tell and I did not tell it.'

*Maeve*, Pat Murphy's film about a London student coming to terms with her Belfast roots, confronted political forces and their ideological assumptions with a refreshing directness that set it apart from many other productions. Much of it centred on the tension between republicanism and feminism, as filtered through Maeve Sweeney's efforts to tie together the various strands of her experience of life. It effectively captured the texture of a culture on the ground. It was rich with the concrete imagery of Orange parades, Paisley speeches, the Virgin Mary, Sunday mass, British soldiers having sexual intercourse with bored looking women up against the walls, traditional Irish music, country and western music, guns, gelignite, barricades, prisons, protests, Connolly posters and women's meetings. It dealt with very advanced ideas. It took on such issues as: the interpretation of the past in understanding the present; the role of story-telling and myth-making; the differences between male and female perceptions; even the nature of reality. The dialogue was full of intellectually provocative statements, such as:

'The past is a way of reading the present.'

'The past has its own reality.'

'The past has its own power.'

'We need to appropriate myth and move forward and not be used by it like our fathers.'

'We fit our fantasies to our circumstances.'

'Reality isn't given. You have to take it.'

'You think there is only one form of knowledge.'

'What you're proposing is no story at all.'

'Men's relationship to women is just like men's relationship to Ireland.'

'You don't want to win. You just want to be world-weary.'

'What is there to win?'

These highly philosophical, probing words were woven through the narrative and dialectically juxtaposed with such antithetical words as: 'Do you want your head full of lead, Mrs.?' In pulling the whole rich mixture together, *Maeve* could have been more coherent. It did, however, take on the striving for meaning and coherence and it did so in a most creative exploration of the possibilities of narrative form.

Of course, most television attention to the north was in the form of news and documentary rather than drama. Two productions, however, used drama to examine the codes and conventions of news and documentary coverage of northern violence. *Giro City* and *Acceptable Levels* both stripped away the taken-for-granted quality of media treatment of current affairs and revealed the problematic character of its hidden processes. *Acceptable Levels*, made by the Belfast Film Workshop and Frontroom Productions, raised the whole question of the responsibility of the media in the events it reported, as well as giving a vivid picture of the contrast between an expense account sojourn in the Europa Hotel and life in the Divis Flats.

## British Television and Irish Drama

Channel 4's policy of commissioning independent films opened up new space for productions falling between the cinema and television categories. *Angel, Maeve, Attracta, Anne Devlin, Ascendancy, Acceptable Levels, Giro City, The Outcasts* and *The Country Girls*, all received both cinema exhibition and television transmission nearly simultaneously, as did other films such as *Moonlighting, Another Time, Another Place* and *The Ploughman's Lunch*.

Channel 4 was also responsible for the adaptation of John Banville's novel *The Newton Letter* in a television film entitled *Reflections*. It was on the territory of the big house gone to seed. The scarcely perceptible plot concerned the gap between the inhabitants of the big house and the mistaken assumptions that a stranger made about them. The stranger, a scholar up against writer's block in a book on Newton, concocted stories to fit the facts, as he observed them, until new observations forced him to revise his stories. He first took them to be Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy, until one of their relations began speaking approvingly of the IRA and it became apparent that they were Catholics. The loose, impressionistic, filmic treatment failed, however, to convey the flavour of what Banville was about in his tetralogy on the scientific mind.

Channel 4 in Wales (S4C), in recognition of its Irish audience (stretching from Wicklow to Cork), produced a trilingual drama made in Dublin, Derry, Cork and North Wales. *Troubled Love* concerned Trish, a Welsh-language student at UCC, who fell in love with Gareth, a secret agent for the SAS. When she returned to her native Derry after Bloody Sunday, he followed her, in another variation of a Romeo and Juliet plot.

Channel 4's *It's our World* series, devoted to drama by and about young people, gave the opportunity to Dublin Youth Theatre to make *Debs* about a debs' ball in Dublin, recording the details of a modern rite of passage. Even Channel 4's experimental four minutes slot had a four minute drama with an Irish theme. *Uncle Bob*, made by Picture Palace Productions, showed a man being taken hostage and shot by an IRA man on the run.

The ITV network also produced drama with Irish themes, though very little compared with the BBC. A stylish production dealing with Ireland was Yorkshire Television's three part thriller *Harry's Game*, later edited into a television movie. Written by Gerald Seymour for a British audience, it had the feel of a certain type of British production about it, at times carrying echoes of other British thrillers like *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, or *The Professionals*. The plot centred around the hunt for the IRA man who assassinated a cabinet minister. Following the London murder, agent Harry Brown was sent under deep cover into the streets of Belfast to find Billy Downes, the murderer. The haunting theme music by Clannad conveyed a sense of primordial striving and elemental tragedy, both in Harry's game, which was a game of death, and, by extension, in the whole process by which an ancient culture had become caught in a cycle of relentless blood lust.

In a critique of *Harry's Game* from a Northern Irish point of view, Brid Keenan honed in on its portrayal of women and its representation of Irish culture.<sup>68</sup> The women, according to her analysis, were all types, wives, mothers and the like, whose presence in the text was only in relation to men. The female characters were essentially foils for the male characters. They were forceful at home, while weak in the public sphere. They were inarticulate. They lacked solidarity with each other and competed for men. They used sex to get what they wanted. They exploited innocent children by hiding guns in prams. She particularly objected to the absence of positive images of republican women. Irish culture, she argued, was always presented in visual ugliness. Irish culture was presented as a lack of culture. It was a picture of inarticulate people leading incoherent lives. It was a British view of Ireland, which made London the norm. It saw violence as the problem, rather than as the result of the problem.

Its whole way of selecting and underscoring events was given the aura of objectivity, with the verité use of camera and the appearance of real newscasters and appearance of real locations. Although it was far from ideologically neutral, it was made to look as if it was. It was ideologically ambivalent, however. Although aspects of the narrative played on the parallel between IRA and mafia activities, other aspects steered away from it. Billy Downes was portrayed neither as a criminal acting for personal gain, nor as a psychopath in the grip of primal blood lust. Many scenes, showing him at home and within his own community, challenged the conventional British stereotypes of the Irish terrorist and placed his actions within a humanising and political context. In their book *Televising Terrorism*, Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott noted the ideological ambivalence of *Harry's Game*:

Consequently, there is a tension in the narrative between depiction of the IRA as a ruthless mafia-like organisation and the exploration of its social and political roots... unlike the world of *The Professionals*, we are not invited to forget about the political and just concentrate on the force. Billy's violence is not portrayed as indiscriminate and meaningless ...the deconstruction of conventional stereotypes is also evident in the portrayal of Harry. He is not presented as a straightforward positive hero and his actions are shown to be questionable rather than admirable ... Harry's unauthorised use of force against an unarmed man puts him morally and politically on a level with his terrorist opponents ... At the same time, because he is acting

against orders, as a freelance vigilante, his action appears as a personal lapse, due perhaps to strain ...rather than as part of a deliberate counter-terrorist strategy sanctioned by the secret state.<sup>69</sup>

Another Gerald Seymour script, *The Glory Boys*, was in the same genre as *Harry's Game*, but without its redeeming features. The plot revolved around an Arab-IRA conspiracy to kill an Israeli scientist. In its portrayal of both the manic provo and the terrorist Arab, it was all cliché. There was little more to either of them than flashing eyes, foul language and blood lust.

In a lighter vein, there was LWT's production of Stewart Parker's *Blue Money*. It featured an Irish cabbie in London trying to break into showbiz, whose life was changed by finding a huge amount of money in the back of his taxi. It also featured stylish shots of O'Connell Street, the Larkin statue, Hanlon's Corner etcetera, once he took flight to Dublin. As things began to close in on him, he was offered the chance to escape extradition by giving the money over to the IRA. It ended with his interrogation back in London. It was a bit of a lark and it was an opportunity to see drama against a Dublin background, but it didn't exactly leave the viewer pondering the meaning of life.

A more serious drama was UTV's first major drama production in many years. Originally a stage play premiered in Dublin, Graham Reid re-wrote *Hidden Curriculum* for television and shifted the weight of emphasis to the rundown comprehensive school featuring in the story, giving greater impact to the meaning of its title. There was much interesting dialogue about education and the education system built around the conflict between the school's two most committed teachers. Cairns, the well-born and well-meaning head of English, attempted to change attitudes through the system, but found his efforts thwarted and began to see the inadequacies of the system. Dunn, his protégé from the same social background as his students, was cynical about the system and bucked it at every turn, but began to realise that his education had distanced him from his own class. Meanwhile, in the domestic sphere under siege from paramilitary elements, there was the father of their star ex-pupil, who had turned out to be a UDA commander. His father, who betrayed the son to the police, lived in terror as a born-again Christian with a common law wife. Bridging the two worlds, there were Boyd and Allen, two unemployed ex-pupils, talking to the one and terrorising the other and in between aimlessly roving the streets. There was a sense of youth drifting into paramilitary activity by default, as if it were the only thing available to fill the emptiness, standing as a most serious indictment of both Irish and British society.

Other ITV productions with an Irish setting or dealing with Irish subject matter included: *The Christmas Tree*, a Jennifer Johnston story about an Anglo-Irish woman coming to terms with her impending death, and *Rat in the Skull*, a Ron Hutchinson play about an IRA man undergoing police interrogation.

Perhaps the most important British independent production taking on the troubled story of contemporary Northern Ireland was the six part mini-series *Lost Belongings*. Written by Stewart Parker as a modern version of the ancient story of Deirdre of the sorrows, it was an intricate and incisive narrative, capturing both the deep resonance of enduring myth and the vivid particularity of contemporary reality. In its basic storyline, it paralleled the inherited myth quite precisely and was, on one level, a story for all time. In its detailed texture, it conveyed the specificity of its context with a richness and precision that made it, on another level, very much a story of its own times. It was a most masterful re-appropriation of myth within every layer of its multi-layered text. The myth, variously called 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu' or 'Deirdre of the Sorrows', functioned within the narrative on a number of levels. From its deep structure to its surface naming, the old story resonated powerfully within the new one. It was also imaginatively incorporated into a scene in the Maze prison education hut in which an English liberal studies lecturer was replaced in mid-lecture by an IRA prisoner as part of his escape plan. As the one voice took over from the other, the story of the evolution of the Deirdre myth was traced from the eighth century tale in old Irish to the Yeats and Synge versions in twentieth century Anglo-Irish literature. The provo escapee, wearing the academic's clothes and imitating his voice, took up reading the ancient text:

'What was it that brought about the exile of the sons of Ooshna?

It is a tale quickly told... At the girl's birth, the prophet warned: O Deirdre, your fair face and fortune

Will bring terrible harm upon us. Ulster torn apart in your time...

Cruel and terrible acts committed

Out of fury at Ulster's King,

Your small graves will be everywhere. A story for all time, Deirdre.'

Other elements from the past were also stitched into the fabric of the present events, as old stories were interwoven with new ones in a complex tapestry, in which references to Orpheus and Eurydice, Jonathan and David, Jesus, Nero, Hadrian's wall, the barbarians at the gates of Rome, the red hand of Ulster, the battle of Hastings, the penal laws, the famine, the Irish literary revival, Easter 1916, Pearse, Connolly, Collins, de Valera, the black and tans, the 2nd Dáil, the Somme, the launching of the Titanic and other such persons and events from the past, whether factual or fictional, reverberated into the present with the powerful force of myth. Significantly, the locus of

rendezvous, where the young Deirdre met with her lover Niall, was the Ulster Museum. In the iconography of the series, relics of the Celtic bronze age mingled with the latest computer technology, encompassing Celtic high crosses, sheela-na-gigs, dolmens, burial chambers, ogham script, mummies, looney victoriana, dadaist bric-a-brac, photos of Ian Paisley and William Windsor, churches, coffins, flags, dolls, guns, Guinness, silver teapots, filofax, fire engines, fruit machines, space invaders, cameras, clarinets, books, newspapers, newsletters, radios, televisions, transit vans and jet planes. Its sound track moved from the music of Mozart and Elgar, through loyalist and republican ballads to bitter, funny, illuminating, painful dialogue, to gunfire, sirens, screams and sobs. In a speech full of both anger and irony, a researcher broke up the making of a BBC documentary on Northern Ireland (going for a superficial Heinz 57 view of the various forces involved) during a scene in which Catholic and Protestant businessmen were sitting together and stuffing themselves and arguing over hunger strikes:

'What we have here, your highness, is thirty bloated bourgeois bastards, stuffed to the eyeballs with grub and booze, arguing the pros and cons of a hunger strike. Hunger! That's your Irish history lesson, but you don't want to know, do you? The poor, bloody, demented folk heroes up the road deliberately dying of hunger... while our captains of industry and commerce down here choke over their profiteroles, arguing the toss. As if it mattered a damn to them... 'cos they run the show... come what may, republic or union, orange or green, these are the boys in charge! While those deluded skeletons up in the maze stagger on behind the same old flag and drum, along with the demonstrators and the rioters and the dole queues and the whole damn stupid circus. That's what we have here by the way of history. It doesn't fit your nice, neat English picture book programme, does it? No, no, you didn't come here to see this... I quit. Make up your own myth.'

The production (unlike that of the BBC documentary) combined epochal sweep with credible and careful characterisation and sensitive and vivid setting of scene. Its characters embodied every conceivable religious, political, national, generational, sexual, occupational and class position in relation to Northern Ireland. They were Catholic and Protestant, republican and loyalist, and every shade thereof. They were British Army, RUC, UVF, Orange Order, provos and stickies. They were Irish, British and American. They were academics, journalists, broadcasters, musicians, policemen, prisoners, preachers, propagandists, fund raisers, businessmen, teachers, students, gunmen (both legal and illegal armies), musicians (both high culture and low culture). They were lumpen, proletarian and bourgeois (with allegiances to aristocracy). Not one of them was a mere cipher for an ideological position. Every one of them was a full-blooded character, whose characterisation was all the richer for ideological specificity. It was a matter of conscious construction. Articulating his intentions in the writing of it, Stewart Parker put it:

As a playwright, my overriding concern is to keep faith with the individual lives and aspirations of all my characters, and yet do equal justice to the big public events and historical forces which have been crucial in shaping their destinies.<sup>70</sup>

The same complexity of construction was evident in its settings, which ranged from the cosmopolitan streets of London to the embattled streets of Belfast to the unapproved country roads of the Irish border, from working class estates to the corridors of power, from universities, concert halls and museums to prisons, hospitals and pubs, from Sinn Féin HQ to an Orange lodge. Its plot held together such diverse events as sectarian killings, Orange parades, IRA funerals, media productions, undercover intelligence operations, archaeological field work, musical careers, domestic conflicts, garden parties, soccer matches, love affairs and tragic deaths, never simply juxtaposed, but integrated in a deep dramatic logic.

Although *Lost Belongings* took up enduring mythical themes, such as exile, revenge and tragic death, and echoed the familiar themes of contemporary northern drama, such as sectarian strife, love across the orange-green divide, even the young boy and the older female music teacher, it was nevertheless a fresh and original synthesis. It gathered so much into itself and did so in a way that was so unique in expression and yet so rooted in common experience as to constitute a real work of art, something that the medium of television can most surely produce, despite all claims to the contrary. It was a production that both RTÉ and BBC had let slip through their hands. It was finally made by Euston Films in association with Primetime Television and Channel 4. It was transmitted on the ITV network over six weeks, with each episode repeated on Channel 4 the same week.

It was the BBC, however, which produced most in the way of television drama dealing with Ireland. Most of it was set in the north and took on various aspects of the troubles within the texture of everyday life. Some came at the politics of the situation quite directly, whereas others did so more obliquely.

*My Dear Palestrina*, an adaptation of a short story by Bernard McLaverty, took sideward glances at the political tensions of 1957 Derry, while putting the main focus on a boy growing up and learning the power of music. It showed his consciousness taking its own distinctive shape under the influence of his mentors. His piano teacher spoke to him of the importance of having heart, because, without it, technique was nothing. The blacksmith, opening his horizons in another direction, spoke to him of the hope of the future being in the unity of the working class.

*Shadows On Our Skin*, an adaptation of the Jennifer Johnston novel by Derek Mahon, also looked at life through the eyes of a young boy in Derry trying to sort it all out in relation to the various views of his elders. Untouched by the lessons of his teachers, the nationalist sloganising of his father, and the paramilitary sympathies of his older brother, he gravitated towards a young female school teacher and considered how the world looked from her point of view. Amidst an atmosphere full of menace, constantly passing barricades, army patrols and paramilitary presences, he found that a small indiscretion had betrayed the person who mattered most to him.

*A Night of the Campaign* by Robin Glendenning also used the device of a youth's experience of political realities vis-a-vis the influence of a mentor. In this play, a 16 year old schoolgirl, because of a crush on a student teacher from Queen's University, went out to campaign for the Alliance Party in a republican stronghold in West Belfast. Against the opposition of her parents, whom she considered to be political eunuchs, complacent in their suburban comfort, she discovered a hitherto unknown world. As she went from door to door, she met with madness, abuse, squalor, unruliness and harrassment. It presented a fairly farcical picture of Alliance Party activity by a former full-time Alliance Party organiser. It brought a letter of protest from the vice chairman of the Alliance Party in *Radio Times*, complaining of the picture of the party as full of cranks and misfits and canvassers parroting slogans.<sup>71</sup>

Another device running through several productions was that of the son or daughter of the family coming home from England and coming to terms both with their parents and with their Irish roots. *The Cry*, an adaptation of a John Montague short story by Derek Mahon, was set in a small country town in Northern Ireland in 1959. The son of a republican family, working as a journalist in London, found himself immediately at cross purposes with his father. In response to an incident, in which a young lad out too late with a girl was beaten up by the B-specials, father and son argued over violent versus non-violent methods, the gun versus the pen, in resisting injustice. Taking up the challenge, the son set out to prove the power of the pen by bringing his journalistic trade to bear upon the incident. What he did prove, pushing up against a stone wall, was the power of those in power to intimidate those who were not.

*The Mourning Thief*, Desmond Hogan's first television play, also featured a returning son in conflict with both father and republican heritage. The son, still carrying the psychological scars of a brutal childhood, considered his father to be a man of another age and was highly critical of his continuing adherence to the ideals of 1916. The father, on his death bed, was consumed with anger at his son's betrayal of his heritage. The dialogue, in a claustrophobic domestic setting, was full of fierce exchanges, in which the intimacies of family life were interlaced with questions of Irish political history.

*The Long March* by Anne Devlin, with structural similarities to *Maeve*, featured the returning daughter. The family home, in a recurrent pattern in these stories, was one with a political father and an apolitical mother. Her father, a trade union activist and socialist politician, existed on a completely different plane from her mother, who was pre-occupied with details of her sister's wedding and could never see anything larger than the effects of events on her domestic details. Helen was a disappointment to both her parents. Her father, who believed she had responsibilities to the trade union movement and socialist cause, because the Labour government had won her the right to her education, disapproved of her politics, from her previous days in Peoples Democracy to her current flirtation with Provisional IRA and INLA elements. Her mother, on the other hand, was unhappy with her having any sort of political involvement at all and with her leaving her husband. When Helen went to visit her former teacher, preoccupied with writing a book on political terrorism and having problems with his wife, there was a parallel situation to that of her parents. It was set against the background of such actual current events as the hunger strikes and the death of Airey Neave in 1978. Amidst it all, Helen became involved with an INLA man, ten years younger than herself and found herself involved in another such parallel situation. Colm, her lover-on-the-run, put it to her: 'You women are all alike. There is a war going on and all you can think about is being together.' Helen later reappeared in her home environment, like *Maeve*, with her hair shorn and into painting and art college now. Helen's point of view, possibly the author's own, like that of *Maeve* and Pat Murphy, came across as a confused confrontation of republicanism, feminism and socialism. Her father's point of view, presumably based on that of her own father, Paddy Devlin, seemed both clearer and more credible in her play.

A number of productions gave strong expression to women's experience of Northern Ireland in one way or another. In addition to plays by female writers, such as Pat Murphy's *Maeve* and Anne Devlin's *A Long March* and *Naming the Names*, it was also notable in some plays by male writers. Foregrounding female lives against the background of the class structure and sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland, there were some quite interesting leaps of the male imagination in empathy with female experience. Stewart Parker's visually innovative play, *Iris in the Traffic*, *Ruby in the Rain* followed two women, preoccupied with small problems, going their seemingly separate ways. As one struggled with a broken shoe strap and the other with a streaming cold, there was the constant background presence of Belfast under siege, with armoured cars, shattered buildings and political slogans everywhere in evidence. Amidst it all, Ruby, a social worker, was reluctantly sucked into a complex situation related to the troubles at fifth remove. It left one thinking of all the ripples that could spread out from the splash of a single stone.

Bernard McLaverty's *The Daily Woman* showed a young mother, severely oppressed in terms of class, sex and sectarian divisions. Going out to work to clean the house of a comfortable Protestant politician to support her children and lay-about, insensitive husband, she gave way to an impulse to break out of her rut. The consequences of her mystery tour proved full of simple surprises, sensitively explored, without a hint of cliché. Michael McLaverty's short story, *Aunt Suzanne*, adapted for television, was a sad, sensitively-told tale of an old woman, isolated by her spinster status, old age, alcoholism, poverty, intolerance and religious taboo.

Mike Leigh's *Four Days in July* honed in on two couples, one republican and one loyalist, having their first babies against the background of Belfast 12th of July rituals. Following the two pairs on parallel tracks, until they converged in hospital, both the similarities and the differences in their lives became apparent. Using improvisational methods, which may have made for over-indulgent dialogue, it had a gritty and earthy feel to it and many moments of truth. Some such moments foregrounded the distinctly female experience of childbearing, sometimes with a touch of disarming humour. Describing the earthier side of the glorious experience of childbirth, one woman admitted: 'I felt like a burst balloon, as a matter of fact.' Much of the talk was highly political, about emigration, about UDR duty on the border and IRA activities in Long Kesh. Catholics talked of what it was like raising twelve children in tiny houses. Protestants talked of Catholics breeding like rabbits and scrounging on the dole. It was acknowledged by its makers as a highly political production and it was unapologetically republican in its sympathies, without caricaturing the loyalist side. While some scenes hit against the barriers of prejudice, others broke through to the affinities. A scene in which the republican couple were singing songs to get themselves to sleep combined Orange songs with green songs, ranging from *The Sash My Father Wore* to *The Patriot Game*. It was the vehicle for Leigh's view of myth: 'Myths are comforting, they anaesthetise rationality ... Both sides stand for ideals that don't exist any longer.'<sup>72</sup> Whatever about such statements as a definitive overview of the nature and role of myth, it did say something about the function of particular myths in a particular context.

The really outstanding drama foregrounding the trials and tribulations of contemporary domestic life, against the background of the political turmoil of Northern Ireland, was Graham Reid's *Billy* trilogy. The first play, *Too Late to Talk to Billy*, set in 1977 in the Donegall Road area of Belfast, where the author grew up, introduced the Martin family. The Martins were a working class Protestant family living in a bleak council house and caught in such a web of poverty, violence, alcoholism, disease and disillusionment that sheer survival required a constant struggle. It opened on the family living under the shadow of the mother's imminent death in hospital. The father, coming and going in drunken rage, refused to visit her, in bitterness stemming from an extra-marital affair years before.

The second play, *A Matter of Choice for Billy*, set in 1978, traced the shifting relationships within the Martin family after the death of their mother and the emigration of their father. It fell to the two oldest, Billy and Lorna, to become father and mother to their two young sisters, Ann and Maureen. It centred on the tensions arising for Billy and Lorna in reconciling their prematurely parental responsibilities with the choices surrounding mating and the more normal activities of people their age. Both Billy and Lorna had it put to them by their respective partners. Billy had to decide about the nature of his commitment to Pauline, his 'fenian nurse-friend', once she had a job offer from Canada. Once she then decided that she would rather live in sin than Toronto, Billy moved in with her. Lorna was confronted with an old-fashioned proposal-cum-engagement-ring from John Fletcher, ex-UDA hard man. Although she tried to explain some of the feelings of a modern woman, he walked out in a huff and became the hard man on the street once again.

The third play, *A Coming to Terms for Billy*, set in 1980, showed the fragile stability that Billy and Lorna had achieved for the family thrown out of balance once again by the return of the errant patriarch with his new English wife. Norman, now dried out, and Mavis, a no-nonsense ex-schoolteacher, planned to make a home for the two younger daughters in England, setting the family at odds and provoking a new crisis. Like many another play, much hinged on the coming and going between Ireland and Britain, raising all sorts of questions of identity. Between the two youngest daughters, with one wanting to go and the other wanting to stay, the dialogue came up against it:

*Maureen*: 'I don't want to go. They hate the Irish over there.'

*Ann*: 'But we're not Irish. We're Protestant.'

It was the classic contradiction for Ulster Protestants. Were they Irish or British? It was left for the audience to ponder. There were other storylines, interwoven through the trilogy as subtexts, raising many penetrating questions. One recurring theme was the construction of masculinity vis-à-vis the hard-man ethos of the paramilitary subculture. Even in the claustrophobic domestic scenes, full of the details of pots of tea, tins of beans, bottles of beer and Uncle Andy spitting into the fire, there was always the palpable presence of menacing paramilitary activity. Although neither Norman nor Billy ever joined the UDA, they lived within a network of tribal ties in which they were inextricably enmeshed. Billy was seen in strong contrast to his friend Ian, who was in the UDA and into its macho posturing, but was pathetically weak, easily manipulated and thoroughly henpecked. Billy's fighting spirit was not the result of

frivolous daring-do or false pride. He was abrasive, but there were reasons for his abrasiveness. When confronted by his would-be stepmother, he knew his anger was grounded in hard experience:

*Mavis:* 'You're very defensive.'

*Billy:* 'I've had to do a lot of defending.'

*Mavis:* 'It takes a big man to admit he's in the wrong.'

*Billy:* 'It takes an even bigger man not to be in the wrong.'

At the end of the third play, the quasi-oedipal tension between father and son climaxed in a bitter verbal row in the domestic sphere. It came to resolution in a physical confrontation in the public sphere, as they jointly confronted UDA heavies and proved themselves harder men than the hard men. It was more than an adolescent, macho ritual of male bonding, however. Their reconciliation was not achieved in an isolated bout of bravado, but in the hard-won humanity each had precariously achieved, as each had matured and mellowed in and through the events of the three plays.

Also interesting was the construction of femininity, amidst a subculture so full of stress and strain and macho men. The women came through as stronger, clearer, more competent, more hard working and more worldly wise than the men, all the more so for doing what needed to be done, without all the pomp and strut. There was an edgy, electric, but well-earthed, humour running through it. There were no hilarious one-liners, but there was an ironic edge and an emotional charge in the tense, taut dialogue that often brought a feeling of wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. It aroused a raw recognition and empathic involvement that challenged the viewer to come face to face with a gritty truthfulness that eschewed the easy answers. It never degenerated into slushy sentimentality. The *Billy* trilogy had an exploratory edge to it that was far from exhausted by the end of the third play. Many a viewer wanted the trilogy to become a tetralogy and they were given their way, in a fourth play entitled *Lorna*. It centered on the struggle of Lorna to find her own place in the sun, in a situation in which she was no longer dependent nor depended upon.

In the meantime, Graham Reid wrote six plays for the BBC under the title *Ties of Blood*. The separate plays were unified by a common theme, with each addressing in its own way the relationship between the security forces and the citizens of Northern Ireland. In doing so, he sought to move away from the stereotypical images of Brits, Paddies and Prods and to probe the complexities and ironies in real people and their relationships. Certainly characters such as a black Catholic soldier from Liverpool, a Catholic RUC officer and a Welsh army chef wanting only a peaceful life listening to records of Welsh choirs, broke with the standard stereotypes. He had his own three year stint in the British Army to draw on in portraying what different sorts of people it encompassed.

*McCabe's Wall* dealt with the social pressures upon a delicate relationship developing between a lonely Welsh chef in the British Army and a lonely spinster toiling on the small holding of her die-hard republican father. During the visit of her brother and sister-in-law from England, the barriers and tensions of the McCabe household surfaced. Her father, whose laboriously built wall had been destroyed by an army patrol, was determined to keep out all alien influences and intrusions.

*Going Home* concerned a West Belfast Catholic woman, who married a British soldier and lived with him and her two children in married quarters in England, alienated from her family and community. With her father dying, she came home to effect a reconciliation. Meanwhile, in another part of Belfast, a young Protestant woman fell in love with a Catholic soldier from Bradford.

*Out of Tune* featured a bandsman, who requested a transfer into the infantry, so as to be a 'real soldier' in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. It also revealed something of the hostility between the British Army and the RUC. There were strong words on the nature of the conflict, with an older sergeant insisting that it not be dignified by calling it a war as it was only a series of murders. He depicted it as a ludicrous scenario, with soldiers playing at being policemen and policemen playing at being soldiers.

*Invitation to a Party* underlined certain features of the social life of a divided community, which made it imperative to beware of taking any invitation at face value. A young army pay clerk, with his wife and family in Scotland, joined his colleagues for a night out, which ended in tragedy. *Attachments* followed three soldiers leaving Liverpool for their first posting in Belfast and traced the gap between their expectations and their experiences. It showed the tie of images of militaristic exploits to images of masculine sexuality. It also featured a ranting loyalist granny inciting aggression and an indulgent republican granny meeting with treachery, when an IRA unit burnt her house and blamed it on the British Army to provide a story for *Saoirse*. *The Military Wing* looked at the small tensions and large traumas besetting both staff and patients in the military wing of a Northern Ireland hospital. It took on situations, ranging from a triangle between three army nurses, with lesbian undertones, to a malingering soldier, a drugs overdose and a mortar attack on the camp.

Reid insisted that the plays were written without any sense of mission, even without interest in the grand political issues. He claimed that there were no plays about Northern Ireland. There were only plays about people as people, who happened to be in the security forces or in contact with them.<sup>73</sup> The distinction, however, was unreal. The inclination to make it, arguably, led to a failure to explore, as fully as he might have, the ways in which people as people were what they were and did what they did, because the grand political issues were what they were in the context of the complex culture of Northern Ireland. Much of the problem was with a restrictive definition of politics, which tended to limit awareness of the intricacies of the political dimension of personal lives. *Ties of Blood* was full of intelligent and highly nuanced characterisation, revealing dialogue, and authentic set pieces, but never added up to anything more coherent. It showed something of the full-blooded complexity of the situation on the ground, but it did not illuminate its socio-historical context in a way that raised consciousness above the level of an increased awareness of the detailed texture of the situation in close-up. *Ties of Blood* enhanced understanding in terms of detail, but not in terms of depth.

Also setting its sights on the security forces, albeit in narrower focus, was *Contact*. It was a detailed, close-up picture of an SAS border patrol on duty in South Armagh, with almost no dialogue and with very little drama. It was based on a book by AFN Clarke, a former para regiment officer, and it was very definitely Northern Ireland from a British Army point of view. Des Cranston analysed its techniques as similar to those of the western. The use of the high-image-intensifier lens effectively dehumanised and depersonalised the land and its people, together with the problems that caused such operations to be mounted. It left the audience, he argued, with sympathy for the patrol, whose lives were as bleak as those they were patrolling. He felt it implicitly explained much about the archaic infantry campaign in the Falklands and the psychology of daring-do soldiering.<sup>74</sup>

Falklands fever, as it affected the Irish living in Britain, was given disturbing treatment in *The Queen's Arms*. A meek, hardworking Irish barman found himself suddenly caught between two terrors, simply by being Irish in a certain time in a certain place. In an English pub, overflowing with union jacks, jingoistic songs and bellicose talk, the drunken landlord and locals turned on him for not being British and falsely accused him of being in league with the local provos. Leaving the pub, having been given his marching orders, with the crowd inside turning nastier, the menacing approach of the provos awaited him on the outside.

The events in *We'll Support You Ever More* by Douglas Livingstone related to ripples from the Falklands war at further remove. David Hollins, a second lieutenant in the British Army, only returned to Northern Ireland because numbers were down due to deployment of troops in the Falklands. As a result, he died. In a plot structure similar to *Missing*, his father, haunted by his son's death and disturbed by the army's silence on the nature of his secret mission, went to Northern Ireland to investigate. He saw and heard many things. Much of it was difficult to understand from a British point of view. What he learned, perhaps more than anything else, was how elusive Ireland was to the British mind. When he returned, the conversation between husband and wife was:

'Was it worth it?'  
'I don't know.'  
'Did you find anything out?'  
'I don't know.'

It was a good yarn, not only full of who-did-what suspense, but also implicit questions about why.

The number of BBC plays dealing with aspects of the armed campaign was quite remarkable, even given its undoubted potential for dramatic conflict. There were not only all these plays, and still others, such as *Fire at Magilligan* by Harry Barton and *Shergar* by Bill Morrison, coming at it from various angles and putting it at the centre of focus. There were also other plays which brought it in as a secondary theme, such as *The Blue Dress* by William Trevor, in which the main character did a journalistic stint covering the situation in Belfast in the middle of the main story.

There were also series and serials, which brought Ireland and its troubles into play in various ways. Least impressive of BBC's efforts in this field was *Foreign Bodies*, a six-part situation comedy series around the cliché scenario of the Protestant Romeo and the Catholic Juliet, which settled for a series of weak jokes playing on the most caricatured of misconceptions across the orange-green divide. It not only did not add to the reputations of joint-playwrights Graham Reid and Bernard Farrell, but subtracted from them that they could possibly write such pathetic material.

More impressive was a series which was surer in its aim in dealing with many matters including the troubles. *Black Silk* was a most interesting series, centering on the public and private life of a black barrister in Britain. The second episode, written by Shane Connaughton, revolved around the victimisation of an Irish family, living in England for twenty years. It effectively made the point that, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, a person was

presumed guilty until proven otherwise. Despite the fact that a hearing was held to determine whether habeas corpus was abrogated by the Prevention of Terrorism Act and that the man was released without charge, it ended in tragedy all the same. After interrogation, the man was no longer certain whether he had done anything or not. He was no longer certain of anything, except that he couldn't go on living in England. In the end, he put on a Batman costume and threw himself under the train.

*Blood Money* was a serial about a kidnap of the son of a United Nations administrator general from a posh English boarding school. Although some members of the underground group carrying out the kidnapping were portrayed as cold, fanatical and cruel, the Irish member of the group was not. He came across more as a decent man driven by a sense of injustice, stemming from the suffering of the Irish people, going back to the famine. His actions were depicted as wayward and wrong headed, but his motives were treated with a certain respect.

*Crossfire*, a serial about an informer inside the Provisional IRA, was made but withdrawn from the schedules. Its transmission was suspended due to objections from BBC Northern Ireland to the effect that it glorified the IRA and made the RUC look like the keystone cops.

In an effort to break from the stereotyped treatment of Ireland, the BBC commissioned a series of plays about Ireland from Irish writers such as Frank McGuinness, Anne Devlin and John McGahern, making two stipulations: that they were not to be about either the armed conflict or love affairs across the orange-green divide. *Scout*, *The Venus de Milo Instead* and *The Rockingham Shoot* dealt with sport, art and education, with notions of masculinity, the inevitability of emigration and the tensions of inflexible nationalism.

British historical series and serials also brought Irish history to bear, especially as it affected the mentality of the Irish living in Britain. Jim Allen's serial *The Gathering Seed* showed the influence of Irish connections and Catholic traditions on working class life in Britain in the period before and after the 1<sup>st</sup> world war. Set in the same period was BBC's production of *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, Jennifer Johnston's novel adapted by Derek Mahon. It traced the relationship between the son of the Anglo-Irish big house and an Irish agricultural labourer from boyhood into the trenches of the world war, raising questions of class, sex, nationality, politics and war. It featured diverging attitudes to class division, national independence, militarism and masculinity.

Another BBC big house drama was the adaptation of the Molly Keane novel, *Time After Time*. In it, the Anglo-Irish ascendancy was well into decline in an era long past that of *How Many Miles to Babylon?* or even *Good Behaviour*. The elderly inhabitants of this County Wicklow country estate lived their childish, sexless, petty lives, in a crumbling house, with no money and no prospects. In their hermetic habits and feudal mentality, they were obsessed with the past, unable to cope with the present and fearful of the future. Even though their meanness, incompetence, spitefulness and self-indulgence were clearly exposed, they were still oddly indulged. It came across as a myopic picture of myopic people.

Away from both the Anglo-Irish big house and the civil strife of northern streets, another BBC drama with an Irish theme was *Tuesday's Child* by Terry Johnson and Kate Lock. It was set in and around the confessional of a Catholic church in Britain. It explored, in a simple but striking fashion, the attitudes of three characters, two priests and one young woman, all Irish, to faith, miracles, science and sexuality. It particularly probed the play of the imagery of annunciation and virgin birth on the mind of a simple and sheltered girl.

Transmitted during the summer of the moving statues in 1985, it highlighted the role of religious fantasy in minds without coherent criteria of credibility and in lives thrown off their bearings. It gave expression to a fundamental contradiction in Catholic teaching and practice. On the one hand, it taught the possibility of miracles, such as virgin birth. On the other hand, it backed away from it, preaching the singularity of the event, when people followed through with its logic and believed they experienced miracles in their own lives. There was a scene where the symbolism of the conflict between faith and reason and the irony of the odd juxtapositions between science and religion were very striking indeed. The priest, a doubting Thomas (named Thomas), who had doubts about Marian doctrine when young, and had a strong interest in science, stepped out of the confessional and accidentally smashed a statue of the Virgin Mary with a rolled up copy of *Scientific American* in his hand. He then stooped to scoop up the pieces, wrapping them in the magazine, with another statue of the Virgin Mary looking down as he did so. It was provocative and yet gentle, in that it was stimulating to the sceptic without being overtly offensive to the believer. It was the sort of motif, exploring the edges of religious experience, essential in coming to terms with the Irish mind, that arguably should have been taken up by RTÉ and not left to the BBC, especially at a time when it was so relevant to events and attitudes in Ireland.

## **Other Sources of Irish Drama**

Although Ireland and Britain were the main sources of Irish drama on television, there were occasional productions elsewhere touching on Irish experience in one way or another. Often television productions in the US, Canada or Australia followed emigrants from their lives in Ireland to their new lives on foreign soil. Series such as *The Captains and the Kings*, *The Mannions of America* and *Ellis Island* showed Irish immigrants making their way in America in the mode of the American rags-to-riches myth. Other series, such as *Against the Wind* and *Eureka Stockade*, showed Irish rebels transported to Australia in British attempts to suppress unrest in Ireland, only to persist in rebellion and play a leading role in fermenting unrest in Australia. *Waterfront*, an Australian production which looked as if it might have been influenced by *Strumpet City*, referred to Irish political history and showed Irish immigrants as playing their role in the class struggle on the industrial front. *The Thorn Birds*, in a different key, saw Irish-Australians at the far end of the rags-to-riches scenario, although touches like the repeated mispronunciation of Drogheda detracted considerably from its credibility.

Characters in US action-adventure series, sit-coms, soap operas and films constantly referred to their Irish roots or justified what they did by caricatured 'Irish temper'. *Ryan's Hope*, a daytime soap opera, revolved around a bar owned by Irish immigrants in New York and constantly played on the standard Irish-American clichés about Ireland and the Irish. *Hill Street Blues* regularly featured a street gang called the Shamrocks. Its leader dressed like a leprechaun and carried a shillelagh. *Spencer for Hire* constantly dropped references to Easter 1916, Sinn Féin and IRA gunrunners. Briefing sessions on international terrorism in the spy genre, such as in *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, automatically included the IRA in the catalogue.

*Choices of the Heart*, an American television movie about Jean Donovan, the US lay missionary killed in El Salvador, had scenes of Irish university life in the 1970s, in which everyone spoke with leprechaunish accents and seemed to look at the world through Legion of Mary eyes. Two episodes of *Remington Steele* made in Ireland went the length as far as over-the-top caricatures of Ireland were concerned. Even given the general style of the series as a botched attempt at spoof, the Irish episodes were ludicrous, without being funny. Both employed Irish actors to play the paddies, while keeping the stars playing Remington and Laura to the forefront of the childishly contrived excuses for plots. Given the rather fine record of MTM in producing higher quality drama and the future involvement of MTM in Ireland in taking over Ardmore studios, the series in general, and these episodes in particular, could not but be a disappointment. Not to be outdone on pseudo-Irish whimsy, *Moonlighting*, which was a rip-off of *Remington Steele* anyway, also had an Irish episode, in which a red-haired, brogue-speaking colleen named Kathleen Kilpatrick came into the office, claiming that she was a leprechaun, and hired David and Maddie to protect her against a man trying to steal her pot of gold.

All in all, there was nothing to match British productions for Irish drama made outside Ireland. In the 1980s, British productions in some respects outreached Irish ones in coming to terms with the cutting edge of contemporary Irish life. Certainly in relation to the north, it was British television structures employing Irish talent, and not RTÉ, which made the running. Most of it was extremely fair and fair in a way that was not altogether reducible to the 'there's bad bastards on both sides' formula. The better end of it showed how the complexity of the cycle, whereby all were injured and injuring, was such that no simple prescription about forgiving and forgetting would begin to cover it. The best illuminated the socio-historical roots of the conflict and the socio-historical conditions sustaining the cycle, even if it could see no way out or offer no definite solution. Kenith Trodd, who produced a number of British dramas of Irish life, shed light on the 'delicate thuggish balance' operating in British television that has made it difficult but possible for radical drama to be made and for television to take risks that it would not take elsewhere in the world.<sup>75</sup>

## The RTÉ Television Drama Debate

No such dynamic was operating in RTÉ by the mid-1980s. Whatever else about the drama of the period, it was certainly not radical (in the sense of getting at the roots of things). Whatever else it was doing, it was not taking risks and it was not coming to terms with the cutting edge of contemporary Irish life. The further RTÉ went into the 1980s, the more its drama policy came under attack, not so much for what it was doing (as in the 1970s), but for what it was *not* doing. There was growing disaffection among the sections of its audience that had appreciated the more daring drama of the previous decade. There was increasing criticism in the press. There were rumblings in many quarters. The most articulate disaffection and the most biting criticism, however, came from within RTÉ. What *Access* (RTE's in-house organ) headlined as: *THE TV DRAMA MARATHON DEBATE*<sup>76</sup> erupted at the RTÉ/Irish Film Institute summer school in July 1984, filled the pages of *Access* for issue after issue through the autumn, featured in several *Slants* programmes the following spring and spilled over into the national press at several points along the way.

The most elaborate and eloquent critique of existing drama came from playwright and producer, Eoghan Harris. RTÉ, he argued, was failing to meet its responsibilities to the Irish audience which it had a duty to serve by

being the public voice of a society speaking to itself. Drama was of particular importance in fulfilling this task with its power to make sense of the world, to purge the soul and to illuminate contemporary social problems through the ritualised process of public enactment. The section of the audience most alienated, he suggested, was that of urban working class youth, who were starved of contemporary drama relevant to their life experience. He advanced several reasons for this neglect. At a time when Ireland needed RTÉ as never before, RTÉ was being deliberately run down by government. At the same time, those responsible for drama policy within RTÉ had retreated into aestheticism and timidity. They had become tired, middle aged and comfortable, he contended, and they wished to avoid dealing with discomfiting social problems. The excuses, he insisted, would not do. The problem was essentially not lack of facilities or finances or scripts. The problem was of the will to do, to face their society and its problems, the cold mornings, the hard work and the controversy.

Another factor, he suggested, was that they had been seduced by the prospects of co-productions into diversion from their domestic responsibilities in favour of the buzz of rubbing shoulders in the high-flying world of international stardom. They had turned away from gritty, messy, problematic contemporary reality in favour of glossy art house films, based on safe adaptation and soft-centred nostalgia. There was a need for drama to take up the burning issues of the times where current affairs left off, to go beyond the institutional aspects into the psychological aspects, to ask the moral questions, to provide the illuminating and purging power that only drama could bring to bear. What was most important was to have a story to tell. In RTÉ, Harris argued, the people with a story to tell were in current affairs and not in drama. So unbridgeable did he believe the gap to be as to propose taking drama away from the drama department and giving it to current affairs, who would 'go in for the hard stuff', who would chart the necessary dialogue of a democratic society about unemployment, about drug abuse, about sexual equality, about the high-tech world US investment had brought to Ireland, about many issues of social concern. He cited *Hill Street Blues* and *Boys From the Blackstuff* as models. He dismissed accusations that he was calling for agit-prop propaganda as glib and empty. All good drama, he insisted, had a point of view. The Harris strategy was to shift the emphasis in drama production from film to video, to utilise talent outside RTE, to develop new writers, to tap into the expertise of social workers, doctors, teachers, psychologists, to adopt more flexible trade union practices.<sup>77</sup>

Eoghan Harris was not the only one arguing for such a reorientation of strategy. John Sorahan, head of outside broadcasting (who was appointed director-general by the outgoing RTÉ Authority in 1985 but not confirmed by the minister) had been highly critical of RTÉ's diversion into co-production to the neglect of domestic issues. So too was Louis Lentin, producer/director and former head of drama, who put forward a very strong critique of the drift of RTÉ drama policy in the 1980s and also advocated a radical reorientation. The whole climate had changed for the worse, he argued, with the over-reliance on co-productions, with the material chosen to suit co-producers, rather than to do its duty to the Irish audience and to use drama to speak of the problems and traumas besetting an intensely troubled society. At a time when such drama was never more necessary, the situation was never so bad. There were large areas of both rural and urban experience being left untouched by drama. RTÉ was hiding its head in the sand. *Glenroe* was soft. It blurred reality and did not face up to social problems. *Love Stories of Ireland* and *A Life* were nice pieces, which should have a place in the schedules, but not at the expense of everything else.

Like Harris, Lentin believed that the weight of emphasis should be on contemporary socially relevant drama, which took up real issues where current affairs left off. Current affairs could deal with the facts of the situation, facts which tended to be forgotten. Drama could flesh it out, present the human aspects of the situation and make it hit home. The stuff of RTÉ drama should be such issues as the growing hostility to party politics, the confrontations between the unemployed and travellers, the drugs problem, marital breakdown and Ann Lovett stories. He too dismissed arguments about lack of finance, lack of facilities and lack of good scripts as excuses for what he considered to be the real lack, lack of desire. The preoccupation with TAMs resulted in reducing RTÉ to producing pap. It had no guts. The problem was not money, but how money was allocated. There was money being spent on programmes like *The Rose of Tralee* to keep viewers happy and to keep the ratings up, without allowing people to have a good honest look at themselves and, above all, without making them think. Rejecting the entertainment versus social issues dichotomy, he asserted that entertainment should be something that stimulated and provoked thought. The way to turn drama around at economic cost was to shift the emphasis from occasional big film projects for expensive co-productions to more frequent smaller, lower budget dramas experimenting with the potentialities of video. He advocated the single play format, which he believed could deal with difficult issues more strongly than serials, because of its ability to get in and get out quickly. It was also the best vehicle for developing new writers for television. There had never been any sustained concentrated effort to cultivate Irish writing for television. No sooner had the door opened in the 1970s than it was slammed closed again in the 1980s.<sup>78</sup>

Martin Duffy, film editor and playwright, came into the debate at this point. Under Louis Lentin, he said, drawing on his experience as an up-and-coming television writer, at least there had been a ladder. Under Niall McCarthy, there was only a greasy pole with a platform at the top. Only the most established writers could be used in expensive co-productions. He worked on the co-productions as a film editor, which he admitted had stretched his technical expertise. At the same time, he stressed the importance of not being seduced by the glossiness. He would not

write the saleable, inoffensive, technicolour yawns, which were in vogue. It was a catch-22 situation for writers. He recommended that RTÉ stop making costume drama and institute a policy of affirmative action for contemporary urban drama. He too felt that the problem was one of will. He feared that the television drama debate would simply fizzle out, leaving no change in its wake. Apathy, he pessimistically put it, could weather all storms.<sup>79</sup> Kevin Grattan, who also had his career as a television writer curtailed with the change in policy, took a similar view. He agreed with Lentin about the need for a regular slot for single plays. As to financing contemporary drama, RTÉ should cut back 10% on everything else and do without *The Rose of Tralee*, *Housewife of the Year* and other such productions.<sup>80</sup>

The proliferation of these sort of programmes at a time of drastic fall-off in serious drama and documentary production was the basis of the trade union critique of the autumn 1985 schedule. The FWUI called for the re-deployment of existing resources away from such productions sponsored by commercial interests as undermining the integrity and independence of RTÉ. Equity demanded that RTÉ fulfill its duty as a national broadcasting station by pursuing a drama policy which would concentrate mainly on home-produced drama, written by Irish playwrights, directed by Irish directors, performed by Irish actors and designed by Irish designers, on themes relevant to the Irish audience, with full editorial control remaining in Irish hands.

Producer John Lynch, who supported the Equity motion, made the point that, in a confident society, such a motion would have no place. With regard to co-productions, he felt that it was necessary to see both the advantages and the inherent dangers. The dangers were loss of identity and a tendency to gombeenism in management, performers and crew, resulting in a drying up of the well of inspiration, imagination and truth. To see the shilling in the new world was fine, he said, but it was necessary to consider the exchange rate. Otherwise, the Irish people would be slaves in their own country. Who will respect us, he asked, if we didn't respect ourselves? RTÉ had shown that it could produce drama of a very high standard when it took control. RTÉ's principal duty was to put the nation on the screen. Whether in co-productions or in-house productions, the problems, according to Lynch, were imitation and conservatism. There was a tendency to go for a safe approach. There was a need to have a clear policy, to develop scriptwriters, to take risks and to stop doing twee stories about priests and their housekeepers. It shouldn't try to please everybody.<sup>81</sup>

Playwright Michael Judge thought Harris' proposals very good and should be tried. Instead of co-productions, which put Irish drama at the mercy of others, RTÉ should be doing Irish plays for an Irish audience about such themes as men's attitudes to feminism, belief in Catholicism as the one true faith, the effects of single sex schools and corporal punishment in the education system, violence in the home and false nationalism.<sup>82</sup> Carolyn Swift felt that RTÉ needed to examine its conscience over its treatment of writers through the years, while sheltering heads of drama who were afraid to tackle plays relating to the here-and-now lives of viewers. She wanted to see RTÉ drama deal with contemporary themes relating to socio-political problems and women's problems.<sup>83</sup> Ultan Macken remarked on how much of RTE drama had been rural-based at a time when half the population lived in cities. The arrival of ENG cameras meant that video drama could be made at economic cost. Drama should be a mirror of its society. There was a need to go to it and find the money somewhere.<sup>84</sup> Michael Murphy agreed with Harris that RTÉ drama was not reflecting present Irish reality. It was feeding the audience a prime-time diet of *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Falcon Crest* instead of reflecting its own way of life. He believed that the *Access* dramas then in production would go some way to meeting this need.<sup>85</sup>

Various people came in on the debate and spoke their piece. Some occupied intermediate positions between the drama policy of the Niall McCarthy period and the full-scale Harris-Lentin critique of it. Christopher Fitz-Simon didn't like the tone of the debate with its emphasis on contemporary social issues. He wrote to *Access*:

Some of your commentators would seem to wish us to believe that if a play deals with 'contemporary social issues', concerns the 'man in the street' and takes the part of the lower classes against the rampaging and grasping bourgeoisie, it must therefore be a good play. This is just silliness. A good play, whether for television or the stage, can treat of any subject, and is all the better for not pointing a moral.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, he noted that Louis Lentin had given drama a regular slot, through which Irish authors had the opportunity to develop in a manner appropriate to television. Whether these were successful or not, there was an overall impression of commitment to Irish authors and the Irish audience. What he saw as the priority was for Ireland's considerable literary and dramatic tradition to be given the budget and encouragement it deserved.

James Plunkett also dissented from the tone of the Harris critique. He recoiled from the idea that everything had to have a 'grim sociological message'. He was taken with O'Casey's idea of wanting to put not only bread on the table, but also flowers as well. He felt that Harris wanted to get the flowers out of the way. On the other hand, he disapproved of the style of younger writers who never raised their heads from their own navels and were concerned with nothing outside their own individual desires. He missed the style of writing in which there was a consciousness of society and of other people having rights and suffering. He believed it important that writing be informed by the tendency to reach out, to challenge the potentialities of other people and to set up systems to look after the

oppressed.<sup>87</sup> Michael Garvey also took issue with Harris' proposals. For him, it was a matter of taking issue with the whole aesthetic of social realism. He wished to make a plea for formalism, contending that realism had had its day. The plays of the Lentin period, with the exception of *Deeply Regretted By*, didn't work. On the other hand, he had his criticisms of co-production policy, especially as it had involved doing *The Irish RM*, which he had refused to do when he was controller and RTÉ was more the master of its own house. He felt that the audience were being dulled through the sugar fantasy of imported drama, with its uninvolved infantilism and covert imperialism. There was a need to break away from broadcasting like a leaky tap. There was need for an epiphany through the sort of formalism that would make audiences aware of foundations. Ultimately, however, he asserted, the only guarantee of good drama was good people. Drama, as Garvey saw it, was essentially a moral activity, even though moral judgements had become unfashionable.<sup>88</sup>

The reaction of those responsible for drama policy to the discontent varied from sympathetic consideration of the critique to defence of current policy and dismissal of the criticisms laid against it. The controller, Muiris MacConghail, took the criticisms quite seriously and went a long way towards conceding their validity. The move of television fiction away from radio and theatrical traditions to a more filmic grammar had affected the choice of themes and had for the time being left television drama in disarray and had brought the replacement of social realism by historical nostalgia. Moreover, the rising costs of production necessitated co-production, which meant that 'we are not entirely masters in our own house.' He agreed that *The Price* had revealed the weaknesses of RTÉ's co-production strategy, though he was proud of *Caught in a Free State*. It was important, he felt, that co-productions be used to bring something of the integrity of traditions of Irish writing to an international audience. There was a need, however, to find a formula balanced in favour of the contemporary. It was necessary to break from existing approaches to scheduling and to move away from hierarchical and monopolistic in-house production to provide a new atmosphere in which creativity could flourish. He felt that the problems of contemporary Ireland were being dealt with far more successfully in current affairs than in drama. There had been a failure to bring the quality of Irish writing to bear in television drama. He would like to see contemporary drama dealing with elections, the aftermath of the referenda, political morality and clerical influence in education and politics. He noted that the politician was a particularly under-represented figure in Irish drama. He wished to see the drama department meet the case made by the critics.<sup>89</sup>

Niall McCarthy, who presided as head of drama over the controversial drama policy of the 1980s, did not accept the case made by the critics and was not disposed to make any concessions to it. He defended the drama of his period as more appropriate to the majority Irish audience, who did not go to theatre and whose traditions and tastes were solidly Hollywood. For previous heads of drama, according to McCarthy, television drama meant theatre on television. Irish literary and theatrical traditions, he claimed, were not so strong as people thought. Most Irish people were much more into cinema than theatre. Home-produced television drama in the past had done well, but was never as successful as imported film drama. The mass audience looked to *Dragnet* and *Hawaii 5-0* and not plays at the Abbey or the Gate. The way to reach the Irish audience was to make drama that was the same as the imported material in form but Irish in theme. Theming, he admitted, had become related to what could be co-produced. RTÉ could no longer decide for itself what it could do. This lack of autonomy, he thought, was not too high a price to pay for the possibility of co-production. Co-production had saved RTÉ drama at a time of rising costs and budget cutbacks. It had made it possible for RTÉ to produce the high quality productions the audience wanted and to overcome the limitations of RTÉ's habitual production methods, which were geared to day-to-day broadcasting, but were not up to the production standards set for drama on the international market. McCarthy stood over all the drama for which he had been responsible. He defended not only the filmed co-productions like *The Year of the French*, *Love Stories*, and *The Price* which had brought RTÉ drama up to the production standards of the international market, but also the in-house, studio based, video productions of his period, like *Inside* and *Leave It To Mrs. O'Brien*. Despite the criticisms made of it, he made no apologies for making three series of *Leave It To Mrs. O'Brien*, citing the TAM ratings as his justification. The last thing he wanted, he asserted, was an educated Dublin 4 view of Ireland dominating the drama department. There was another audience there, he insisted, and he had found it. There were productions, he contended, covering a broad intellectual and cultural spectrum, which he defined as spanning from *Raic* to *Leave It To Mrs. O'Brien*.

The implication of this line of argument was that the critics had not come to terms with what the Irish audience really wanted, whether high technical standards or low cultural standards. If there was an audience there for cinematic glossiness and no challenge to uneducated tastes, the argument seemed to go, they should get it. If it was expensive to produce, the money had to be raised through co-production finance, whatever compromises it required, short of gross distortion. McCarthy was critical of the Lentin policy and the productions issuing from it. It was theatrically-based, middle class, sixties drama, which he considered already old fashioned when it was transmitted. The Thursday Playdate and Sunday One plays on rape and marriage breakdown were not really successful, according to him. McCarthy dismissed the Harris proposals as an attack on professionalism. A political commissar with a bag of money could only produce propaganda. It was not possible to commission genius. If RTÉ was failing to produce serious drama tackling serious social issues, it was because it wasn't being written. If Harris was making a *cri de coeur* for an Irish *Boys From the Blackstuff*, let him write it or show him where it had been written.<sup>90</sup>

John Baragwanath, head of sales and co-productions, also strongly defended what RTÉ had done in the way of co-production and what had been achieved by RTÉ being out there in the international marketplace. The finance was not there for RTÉ to make high quality film drama independently. It was important for drama to be made on film and to raise the money to make it through co-production investment and international sales. It was necessary for RTÉ to make compromises, to stop being insular and to be relevant to wider audiences. If there was a world wide shift from public service broadcasting to more commercial programming, RTÉ had to adapt to it. Baragwanath regarded the whole television drama debate in *Access* and elsewhere as utterly sterile. The controller and critics, he contended, were indulging middle class attitudes to the working class. The critics, he argued, were naive about commercial forces. In fact, the whole debate, in his opinion, was worse than sterile. It had actually been harmful, in that it had given RTÉ a way of walking away from the problem of finance and had given the impression that good drama could be made cheaply. Good drama cost upwards of £400,000 per hour and they had made it more difficult for the money to be found.<sup>91</sup> Tony Barry also defended this policy. It was not possible to commission genius. Most scripts didn't have the magic. It couldn't be produced by edict or by an experimental video unit. Political drama could only succeed when written out of a writer's own experiences and talents. There was also the consideration, he added, that, in a time of recession, people didn't want to be reminded that they were poor. He did want to see scripts coming in asking questions about contemporary Ireland, but felt it was necessary to deal with the fact that the audience was conditioned to *Dallas*. Drama, he believed, needed to be made on film and was dependent on co-production.<sup>92</sup>

RTÉ's *Slants* programme devoted to critical analysis of the media, which ran for two seasons, did two features on RTÉ's television drama policy. The first in 1985 featured a critical commentary by Fintan O'Toole and a studio discussion with Richard Kearney, Colm Ó Bráin and Muiris Mac Conghail, which stressed storylines and settings and aired the problems highlighted in the television drama debate in *Access*, with the weight of emphasis on the lack of contemporary urban drama and the unacceptable face of co-production policy. The second in 1986 concentrated on the formal and financial trends in television drama in interviews with British television producers and on the case for co-productions in a studio discussion with Colm Ó Bráin and Tony Barry.

Meanwhile, the momentum building behind co-productions was broken, not by the debate, but by the government closing off the financial avenues that had made it possible. It was replaced, not by contemporary urban drama, but by a near standstill in drama production, with the only movement being in fits and starts, lacking in clear overall direction and strong dynamic thrust.

Despite a willingness to meet the demand for contemporary drama illuminating social experience, there was an extraordinary inability to generate an effective response. *Inside* failed because it was narrowly conceived and vacuously written. *Access Community Drama* failed because it bypassed professional writers and performers and gave creative opportunities to amateurs which were denied to professionals. *Glenroe* and *Leave It To Mrs. O'Brien* proceeded as before. *The Island* was essentially a South African theatrical adaptation, worthy, but not solving the central problem. The one co-production to proceed since then was an RTÉ/Channel 4 co-production, with Strongbow in the driver's seat. As part of a series of four films under the title *Where Reason Sleeps*, RTÉ undertook to make the fourth, entitled *Fear of the Dark*, by Robert Wynne-Simmons. It was one more picture of Dublin centred on lumpen elements, to which was added not any sort of insight into the socio-historical milieu, but an obscurantist flirtation with supernaturalism. Certainly a series of four one-hour films with the common theme of an individual coming face to face with the (so-called) supernatural could be expected only to add to the darkness and the clutter of the cultural terrain rather than to bring any sort of illumination or order into the difficult task of sorting out the meaning of contemporary experience. It represented the triumph of entrepreneurial hustle above all other criteria in determining what sort of drama was made.

Since the upsurge of the television drama debate, there were various changes in RTÉ and hopes were raised. Bob Collins, who became director of television programmes and later director-general, considered it a priority to re-establish RTÉ-produced drama focusing on Irish themes for an Irish audience, although this did not rule out co-production, as long as there was a line drawn beyond which RTÉ would not go. International production methods and international saleability could not be allowed to determine what was done. Commenting on the terms in which the television drama debate had been conducted, he thought it had tended to throw up dichotomies which were unreal. Relevance did not equal issues. Issues did not equal propaganda. Good drama did not equal astronomically expensive drama. There could be co-productions and in-house productions, single plays and series, historical or contemporary drama, expensive or inexpensive drama, film or video drama. Drama, he believed, could bring insights not possible in other forms. Asked about themes for future drama, he replied that the muse needed to flow and that themes could not be predetermined, but would like to see drama dealing with unemployment, emigration, the changing pattern of rural/urban differences, problems of women and the issues raised by referenda. Asked if there were any no-go areas for drama, he replied emphatically there were not.<sup>93</sup>

The issues raised in the Kerry Babies and Granard cases highlighted problems seething beneath the surface of Irish society and crying out for dramatic treatment in all their ramifications, which only came to the surface in newspaper reports or judicial proceedings, which necessarily left the deeper or more subtle dimensions untouched. Commenting on this phenomenon, former RTÉ producer Nuala O'Faolain wrote in *The Irish Times*:

In societies which have flourishing movie industries and lots of home produced drama on television and lively domestic theatre and publishing opportunities, the arts illuminate society. They turn light on to corners of social experience ...and make them intelligible. The arts ...help countries know themselves ...Here we have judicial proceedings instead of the arts. Almost everything we learn about each other we learn through the courts, as reported and amplified by journalists ...take the lives revealed by the Kerry Babies Tribunal... a world no Irish writer or dramatist I know has dealt with ...people like Joanne Hayes happened long ago in real life, but they've yet to arrive on the stage of the Abbey or in *Glenroe*. What was revealed of Fr.Niall Molloy's lifestyle was as far as one can get from the lovable priests in *Leave It To Mrs. O'Brien*. He was also very different from the tortured, austere priests equally acceptable in the national stereotype stakes ...Investigative journalism is in touch with the way real people behave, but investigative reports are not the medium for how a day feels, the wanderings and coincidences, and eating a mixed grill... it never examines the texture of the world in which the criminal acts occur ...One of the worst things about having little art about how Ireland really is now, and learning it instead from the courts and from journalism, is that our experience of Ireland is tainted with criminality. On RTÉ not many dramas - a few, and not many surprises in series ...But there's so much untouched and unexpressed and apparently likely to remain so.<sup>94</sup>

While the television drama debate in the public arena continues in spurts with commentaries such as Nuala O'Faolain's, there was a quieter underground dissatisfaction that nothing so far has come anywhere near alleviating. When probing the perception of RTÉ drama on the part of various sections of its audience, there was invariably expressed some degree of alienation and a feeling that large areas of significant experience remained untouched. Those who might have the skill to create what could alleviate the alienation of the audience were in some cases themselves alienated from RTÉ. The playwright Frank McGuinness stated quite starkly on RTÉ's *Saturday View* programme in October 1986 that, although he had written television drama for the BBC, he felt that RTÉ had no interest whatsoever in what he had to offer. In querying professionals about their perceptions and prescriptions, every one had a list of important topics not being treated. Niall Tóibín wanted to see sharp dramatic treatment of Irish politics, of the legal system, of the Catholic church.<sup>95</sup> Kevin McHugh wanted to see drama properly investigating contemporary society by showing forth the system and dealing with ideas, to see drama policy break from anti-intellectual traditions, from lack of strategic planning and from the notion that all social problems belong to the lower orders.<sup>96</sup> Fintan O'Toole called attention to whole areas of Irish experience which were disenfranchised in drama policy: life on the suburban estates, the changing nature of the work environment, political corruption, the education system, the moving statues phenomenon and rural-urban conflicts. He wanted to see drama dealing with situations like an old Christian Brother coming to terms with a school turning coeducational, with city kids going to the gaeltacht, with country people coming to work in Dublin.<sup>97</sup>

The strongest sense of what should be done in RTÉ drama in the future ironically emanated from various quarters outside the RTÉ drama department. RTÉ's head of current affairs, Eugene Murray, admitted to an intense interest in the possibilities of television drama, stemming from a growing frustration with the limitations of current affairs methods of dealing with important stories. A business studies graduate with years of work in investigative journalism, he had an intimate knowledge of the world of stock brokers, bankers and PR men, a world full of stories with dimensions that current affairs coverage simply could not get at. Even on the most superficial level, there was the difficulty of getting people to talk. Particularly frustrating was the experience of hearing people talk freely of various matters in the *Today-Tonight* hospitality suite and then watching them go on air and deny any knowledge of such matters. On a deeper level, there was the whole area of characterisation, which could not be developed in current affairs. Again it was the concept of drama taking up issues where current affairs left off. He believed the priority should be popular drama, as opposed to the high-brow, art-house drama of co-productions, while at the same time avoiding the dangers of being too populist. It should not be inhibited by fear of offending sectional interests. It needed an ideological concept to come to terms with what forces were actually operating in the society. The starting point should be in ideas about the world, interest in some subject matter, views about society, not a mystification of form.<sup>98</sup>

Taking up the case for an experimental video unit to test the possibilities of new mobile, lightweight, single camera video techniques for drama production, he was producer of a pilot project to set such experimentation in motion. The pilot *City Limits* was a 25 minute drama made in 1986, written and directed by Paul Cusack and improvised with actors connected with Passion Machine. It arose out of the perceived need for an urban serial. Because it was aimed primarily at an audience of urban youth into the culture of pop videos, Cusack was looking for 'street credibility' and made his starting point locations which would represent this lifestyle: streets, video shops, pool halls, and launderettes, etcetera.<sup>99</sup> It was a promising experiment in so far as it showed the potentialities of new

developments in video technology for making on-location urban drama. What was not so promising was its basis in a questionable conception of street credibility, which seemed to be defined as synonymous with the activities of lumpen youth tied into the black economy and tainted with criminality. In this sense it was in the RTÉ tradition of urban drama after *Tolka Row*, stretching from *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton* and *Hatchet* to *Inside*, in identifying the city with the violence, vulgarity and criminality of lumpen culture.

However, the debate rose and fell without resolution. The issues it raised were not settled. Hard things were said on both sides. Charges of executives turning away from the traumas of their own society to move in the high-flying expense account world of glossy films and glittering prizes were met with charges of propagandists wanting to grovel in ghettos, shout on soap boxes and make do with the shoddiest and most rag-tag methods of production. Hardened caricatures, inappropriate associations and false dichotomies sometimes littered the debate. The concern for high production values, for reaching an international audience and for the financial advantages of co-productions was not altogether misplaced. Nevertheless, the concern for taking on the burning social issues of the times, for relevance to the life experience of the Irish audience and for facing up to risk, challenge and controversy should have been paramount. There was good will, social concern and hard work on both sides, although there was clearer vision, higher values and stronger passion in some quarters than in others.

## Conclusion

My conclusion at the time of the publication of the first edition of this book in 1987 was that there was the potential to create meaningful and memorable television drama in the future, if only drama policy moved:

- to clarify its aesthetic criteria
- to come to terms with ideological considerations
- to break free of patterns of perception that were plodding and particularistic and that failed to see social phenomena socially
- to stop taking the safe path and the soft option and to take the risks of challenging the higher potentialities of its audience, instead of pandering to its lowest tastes
- to reach for the heights and to probe the depths of human experience, instead of being fixated on mediocrity and preoccupied with the trivial ups and downs of the most trivial lives
- to come to terms with life higher up the evolutionary ladder, to see the drama in people with advanced ideas, creative vitality and social commitment
- to deal with all stages of the life cycle and give dramatic expression to the value of wisdom and maturity and not put an exaggerated emphasis on youth, privileging its perceptions above all others
- to open out its representation of the city to include its professors, its politicians, its lawyers, its journalists, its doctors, its artists, its athletes, its computer programmers and its construction workers, and not to go always for the no-hopers and for liberal indulgence of lumpen life
- to break away from conceptions of the city which make criminality central or, even worse, make it cute and chic
- to open out its representation of the country to show its wage labourers, its struggling small farmers, its political activists, its teachers and students and to stop giving disproportionate attention to its gombeens and dwelling on small details of small lives within the narrowest horizons
- to harness the best writers, the best actors, the best directors, to the task of creating drama at the cutting edge of contemporary experience
- to do so with the most appropriate technology to each form, setting and storyline, without renouncing the aim of achieving the highest production standards possible
- to be far firmer and more resourceful about finding the finance for it

These were the hopes with which this author and much of the audience looked to the television drama of the next decades.

## NOTES to Chapter 6:

1. The Hunt committee was set up by the British conservative government to make recommendations on the future of cable systems in the UK. The Peacock Committee was set up to consider how broadcast and print media in the UK might develop if the BBC were to be financed through advertising revenue and other sources rather than through the licence fee.
2. Vincent Browne, at a Media Association of Ireland meeting, 'Broadcasting Policy: Business as Usual or All Change', 16 November 1985.

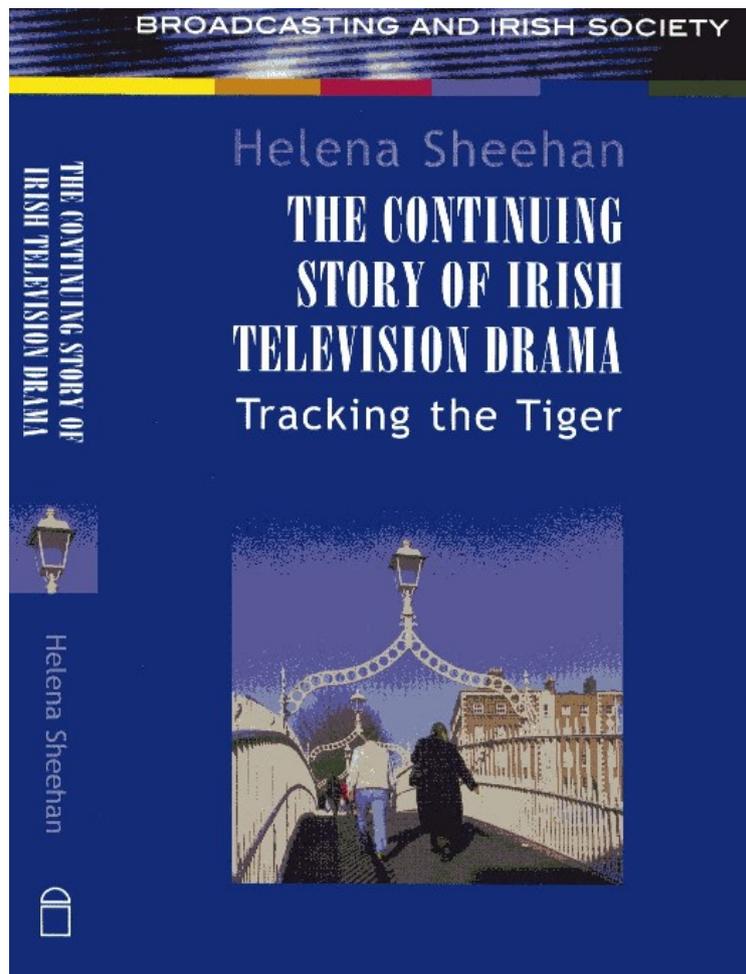
3. John A. Murphy 'Tackling the Crisis', *Irish Broadcasting Review*, Spring, 1983.
4. Muiris MacConghail, communications conference at the College of Commerce in Rathmines, April 30, 1983.
5. Seán Mac Réamoinn 'Crisis and Challenge', *Irish Broadcasting Review*, Summer 1981.
6. Con Bushe, *The Irish Times*, June 5, 1985.
7. Interview with Ted Nealon, April 27, 1983.
8. The MacBride Report was the report issued by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems under the chairmanship of Seán MacBride: *Many Voices, One World; Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*, Paris UNESCO, 1984.
9. Gene Kerrigan in *Magill*, March 21, 1985.
10. Muiris MacConghail, RTE/IFI Summer School July 8, 1985.
11. Hugh Leonard *Sunday Independent* September 18, 1983.
12. James Plunkett, *Irish Literary Supplement*, Spring 1986.
13. Ibid.
14. Martin McLoone, 'Strumpet City -The Urban Working Class on Television' in *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit.
15. Interview with James Plunkett, 22 April 1985.
16. Interview with Tony Barry, 6 November, 1984.
17. McLoone later qualified his use of the term 'ideological project', explaining that what he meant was not a matter of intentionality and individual motivation, but a matter of deep structures in *The Crane Bag*, Vol.9 no 2, 1985, pp.73-74.
18. McLoone, op.cit.
19. Interview with Tony Barry, op.cit.
20. Interview with Eoghan Harris, 17 July, 1984.
21. Interview with Michael Garvey, 16 July 1985.
22. *Magill*, 7 March 1985.
23. Tom O'Dea, *Irish Press*, February 26, 1983.
24. Barbara O'Connor, 'The Presentation of Women in Irish Television Drama', in *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit. and RTE radio panel discussion *On The Record*, July 5, 1984.
25. Interview with Kevin McHugh, September 4, 1986.
26. Interview with John Lynch, October 30, 1984.
27. *RTE Guide*, April 5, 1985.
28. Charles Hunter, 'Not Such a Good Life', *Theatre Ireland*, No.8, Winter 1984.
29. Ann Barrett, *In Dublin*, January 9, 1986.
30. Peadar Mac Eoin, *Magill TV Guide*, January 16, 1986.
31. Aodhan Madden, *Hibernia*, August 1985.
32. Joe Ambrose, *In Dublin*, February 7, 1985.
33. Éamonn Dunphy, *Sunday Tribune*, February 3, 1985.
34. Fintan O'Toole, 'The Price of Shame', *Sunday Tribune*, February 17, 1985.
35. Quoted by Paddy Woodworth in 'The Politics of Drama in RTE', *Magill*, March 7, 1985.
36. Ibid.
37. Luke Gibbons, op. cit, p.46.
38. When asked about the parallels between the two productions, Wesley Burrowes claimed that there was no conscious connection. Interview with Wesley Burrowes, November 13, 1984.
39. Interview with Carolyn Swift, December 11, 1984.
40. Barbara O'Connor in *Television and Irish Society*, op. cit.
41. Interview with Eoghan Harris, July 17, 1984.
42. Brian MacLochlainn, *RTE Guide*, September 9, 1983.
43. Wesley Burrowes, Society of Irish Playwrights Workshop, October 4, 1984.
44. Michael Judge indicated that the same process had resulted in the softening of Charley Conway in *Harbour Hotel*. Interview November 14, 1984.
45. Wesley Burrowes, *RTE Guide*, September 9, 1983.
46. RTE/IFI Seminar, July 1985.
47. Wesley Burrowes, 'Coronation Street: The Correct Use of Soap', *In Dublin*, October 31, 1985.
48. *In Dublin*, 2 October 1986.
49. Interviews with Niall McCarthy, July 17 and November 1, 1984.
50. Joe Dunlop, *RTE Guide*, November 8, 1985.
51. Interview with Mannix Flynn, May 21, 1985.
52. Interview with Eoghan Harris, March 3, 1986.
53. Joe Dunlop, op. cit.
54. Interview with Noel O'Briain, June 21, 1985.
55. Interview with Gerry Stembridge, March 3, 1986. Also his contribution to the RTE/IFI Seminar, July 2, 1986.
56. 'A Superior Brand of Soap', *Hot Press*, October 14, 1984.

57. This point was made on numerous occasions in conversations with Noel O'Briain.
58. Gene Kerrigan, *Sunday Tribune*, May 25, 1986.
59. Joe Dunlop, *RTÉ Guide*, January 31, 1986.
60. Gene Kerrigan, *Sunday Tribune*, April 27, 1986.
61. Review quoted (with no source cited) in the *RTÉ Guide*, January 26, 1986.
62. Interview with Brian MacLochlainn, February 25, 1986.
63. *RTÉ Guide*, September 12, 1986.
64. Michael Murphy, 'Funny Business', *In Dublin*, February 6, 1986.
65. This was not to say RTÉ gave no scope for expression of incredulity. The fact that credulity dominated in the general atmosphere surrounding these events was due more to a whole climate of reaction in the culture as a whole than to any specific intent in RTÉ. Those who believed were on the offensive and those who did not seemed to be lying low.
66. Gene Kerrigan, *Sunday Tribune*, May 25, 1986.
67. Interview with Kevin McHugh, September 25, 1986.
68. Brid Keenan, RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 2, 1986.
69. Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock, and Philip Elliott, *Televising Terrorism*, London, 1983, pp.94-96.
70. Stewart Parker, introduction to script of *Lost Belongings*, London, 1987.
71. *Radio Times*, August 31, 1985.
72. Ray Comiskey interview with Mike Leigh, *Irish Times*, January 29, 1985.
73. Graham Reid, *Radio Times*, November 12, 1985.
74. Des Cranston, *Theatre Ireland* No.11, Autumn 1985. A longer version of this article was given as a lecture at the RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 11, 1985.
75. Kenith Trodd, cited in *Theatre Ireland*, *ibid*, p.30.
76. *Access* (RTÉ in-house publication appearing fortnightly) through Autumn 1984.
77. Interviews with Eoghan Harris, July 17, 1984 and March 3, 1986. Also speech given by Eoghan Harris at RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 6, 1984, and articles in *Access*, Autumn 1984.
78. Interview with Louis Lentin, January 24, 1985. Also speech given by Louis Lentin at RTÉ/IF Summer School, July 6, 1984, and articles in *Access*, Autumn 1984. Also interviews with Louis Lentin by Charles Hunter in *Irish Times*, November 8, 1984 and by Mary Kavanagh in *In Dublin*, November 7, 1984.
79. Interview with Martin Duffy, April 22, 1985. Also article in *Access*, Autumn 1984. Also quoted by Paddy Wordworth in *Magill*, March 7, 1985.
80. Interview with Kevin Grattan, November 8, 1984.
81. Interview with John Lynch, October 30, 1984. Also article in *Access*, Spring 1985.
82. Interview with Michael Judge, November 11, 1984.
83. Interview with Carolyn Swift, December 11, 1984. Also article in *Access*, Autumn 1984.
84. Ultan Macken, *Access*, *ibid*.
85. Michael Murphy, *Access*, *ibid*.
86. Christopher Fitz-Simon, *Access*, *ibid*.
87. Interview with James Plunkett, April 22, 1985. Also interview in *Irish Literary Supplement*, Spring 1986.
88. Interview with Michael Garvey, July 16, 1985. Also RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 4, 1986.
89. Interview with Muiris MacConghail, July 8, 1986. Also article in *Access*, Autumn 1984 and speeches at RTÉ/IFI Summer Schools, July 6, 1984 and July 4, 1986.
90. Interview with Niall McCarthy, July 17, 1984. Also article in *Access*, Autumn 1984 and speech at RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 6, 1984. Also article by Paddy Woodworth in *Magill*, March 7, 1985.
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96. Interview with Kevin McHugh, December 5, 1985.
97. Interview with Fintan O'Toole, October 28, 1986.
98. Interview with Eugene Murray, October 9, 1986. Also speech at RTÉ/IFI Summer School, July 4, 1986.
99. Interview with Paul Cusack, October 9, 1986.

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