

Soap Opera and Social Order: Glenroe, Fair City and Contemporary Ireland

Dr Helena Sheehan



paper given at IMAGINING IRELAND conference at the Irish Film Centre on 31 October 1993

ABSTRACT: *Biddy, Bella and the big issues of the day*

How far can contemporary Ireland recognise itself in *Glenroe* and *Fair City*? To what extent do its characters, settings and storylines testify to the temper of the times? What relation do these serials bear to the lives we lead?

This paper will look at Ireland's two currently running television serials in terms of the larger pattern of social experience. It will query both the presences and the absences in their representation of contemporary Ireland. It will explore the soap opera form in terms of its potential for imagining Ireland in a more expansive and penetrating fashion. It will draw strong conclusions about the failure of existing serials to fulfill this potential.

Soap Opera and Social Order

What is the relation between soap operas and the social order in which they are set and seen?
To what extent is it possible to trace the temper of the times in television serials?

Television soap operas came into the world and into my own life in America in the 1950s. It was my mother and not me who was their target audience, but I saw as much of them as school holidays and parental indulgence would allow. They were utterly addictive. Women would organise their days around their 'stories' and they became an essential ritual of everyday life. These stories were meant to be about ordinary lives of ordinary people in ordinary towns of the time, although it was extraordinary how many affairs, surprise appearances and disappearances, exotic diseases, afflictions of amnesia, murders, kidnappings and frauds befell such a small number of characters in such small towns.

Looking back on them, they nevertheless seem an integral part of that world. They were populated with fictional ensembles of people of the time. Their views and their values, their myopia and their innocence, was that of the age. What was not so innocent was of the age as well. These serials all had grand cosmological titles like *The Guiding Light*, *Love of Life*, *Search for Tomorrow*, *As the World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Secret Storm*, *One Life to Live*, *The Edge of Night*, *Another World*. The underlying philosophies consisted of such bland maxims as the wise-sounding but intellectually empty declarations as the daily voice-over which announced:

"As the sands of the hourglass, so are the days of our lives."

These daytime dramas did take up matters rarely permitted on primetime television then, such as marital breakdown, frigidity, extramarital sex, alcoholism, professional malpractice. They did so, however, within tightly circumscribed boundaries. Although these serials featured many transgressions of traditional values, it was unthinkable to question those values. Whatever problems and pitfalls characters encountered in their pursuit of the American dream, they never ceased to believe in it. Their tragedies were due to natural disasters or human failings, but there was nothing wrong with God, marriage, motherhood, apple pie or the American way.

This was by and large what most people in this society naively believed. It was certainly what everyone I knew believed. However, for those who did see beyond it and would have raised further questions, there was always the blacklist to prevent them. It was a conservative form produced by an extremely conservative and confident society.

However, "*the times they were a changin*" and so was soap opera, although not without time-lag, evasion, distortion and co-optation.

Meanwhile, other societies took up the genre and made it their own. In Britain, *Coronation Street* began its long life, followed by *Crossroads* and later by *Brookside* and *Eastenders*, not to mention those which fell along the wayside at various stages, such as *Albion Market* and *Eldorado*.

In Ireland, the first serial to take off was *Tolka Row*, meant to be Ireland's answer to *Coronation Street*. It began its 5 year run in 1964 and it was the only RTE experiment in an urban serial to capture the imagination of its audience and to live on in folk memory. The shorter-lived *The Spike* has a special place in folk memory too, but that is a different story.

These productions are described at length and in context in my book [Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories](#) published in 1987.



In 1965, RTE opened up what has been the most successful and the most enduring line of development in indigenous soap opera, that of the rural serial, beginning with the 15 year run of *The Riordans*, bridged by the series *Bracken* (built around the character of Pat Barry from the last days of *The Riordans*) and taken up by *Glenroe* (built around the Byrnes from *Bracken*) running for 10 years so far and likely to continue for some time yet.

To what extent can this fictional trajectory be seen as tracking the social history of Ireland during these years? As I have written about this at some length in my book at least up to 1987, I shall only summarise my argument here and then take it up for the period since 1987.

The Riordans and RTE itself emerged into the midst of the Ireland of the Lemass era and was an integral part of the struggle between liberal and conservative views and values that was playing itself out with some vigour in these years. *The Riordans* was firmly modernising in its mission, while giving sensitive and sympathetic expression to traditional values. Despite being given a voice in such well drawn characters as Mary Riordan, this section of the society did not respond well to their values being challenged in any way at all. They mobilised again and again to put pressure on RTE and the programme was surrounded by considerable controversy.

It has been said that the two strongest forces battling it out in RTE over the years were the Knights of Columbanus on the one side and Official Sinn Fein / Workers Party on the other. The strength and influence of both has always been exaggerated in my opinion. What has always prevailed has been the liberal consensus.

When RTE drama was at its bravest and its best, that is in the 1970s, particularly the late 1970s, liberal views and values were struggling against still strong and effectively mobilised conservative forces. The best drama was a dramatisation of this struggle, both in soap opera and other genre (which still existed and even flourished at that time). The left, which was more than Sinn Fein the Workers Party, came in behind the liberal position and gave it added edge, but never really pushed for the representation of a more radical position in drama production. My own research revealed to me again and again programme makers who were much more radical than any programmes they made.

RTE sometimes fought bravely and sometimes cringed cravenly in the face of the backlash that came at it. This has arguably left a legacy of caution in the aftermath of confrontations in which RTE was blooded in the process.

This is only one factor, however, in the shifting landscape of television drama as it moved through the 1980s and into the 1990s. During this time, there has been much less drama and what there has been has been much more tame. Why? The changing climate of international broadcasting, the

erosion of the ethos of public service broadcasting, the accelerating costs of drama production are also factors, but still do not constitute sufficient explanation in my opinion.

The liberal consensus seems to have lost its drive and its verve with the weakening of forces to the left and right of it. Traditionalist forces are no longer as strong as they were and significant liberal values have been accepted by the new right, which is now a far more formidable force than what is left of the old right. Radical forces are going through a period of defeat and disarray. Liberal forces, left to themselves, tend to be bland and confused without the pressure of forces to the left and right of them.

It is not that Irish society has settled into some sort of insipid unanimity. It is a society more deeply divided than ever it was, a society of more various views and values than ever existed before. However, it is a more complex and confused society, a society in which the battle lines are not so clearly drawn, a society that seems unable to imagine itself dramatically.

It is not that it does not plod along and try and achieve something along the way. It is not that *Glenroe* and *Fair City* bear no resemblance at all to the society in which we live. There is much that we recognise, much that charts the difference between the way we were and the way we are now. Our soap operas are more stylish and technically sophisticated than ever before. The society they portray is more complex than ever before. Certainly the women are more liberated and the lifestyles are more various than ever before.

However, there is so much left out, so much of this society as I experience it missing, that watching these programmes is a source of constant disappointment to me.

Glenroe, now in its 11th year, came on to the scene in 1983 and won a special place in the hearts of an audience whose screens were dominated by *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and *Falcon Crest* as well as *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale Farm* and *Brookside* and *Eastenders*. It was more honest and down-to-earth than the prototypical productions of glitzy, yuppie, junk bond Reaganite America, although it did not probe very far into the problematic areas of contemporary society as did the serials which managed to survive in Thatcherite Britain. But it was ours.

From the beginning, Wesley Burrowes, mastermind of this whole line of development of the rural serial, disclaimed any 'social motivation' in *Glenroe*. He proclaimed that it was unnatural to see a small community as a microcosm of the social problems of the nation. He said that his hands were raw from grasping nettles, as he had done in *The Riordans*, and that *Glenroe* would be 'not about issues, but about people and about their relationships'. It was meant to be entertainment and not sociology.

I disagree profoundly with this approach and often argued the toss with Wesley Burrowes when I was involved with *Glenroe* in my research and I elaborated the argument at some length when the book was written.

Although I have watched it faithfully in the years since, seen all sorts of characters come and go and all sorts of storylines opened up and closed down, my analysis of *Glenroe* would be substantially the same as it was in 1987.

Despite Wesley Burrowes's disclaimers, *Glenroe* probably had more edge to it in its first year than at any time since, when its characters were presented as struggling small farmers, challenging the operation of market forces and formed by the ethos of co-operative principles. Also there was irony and insight in the storylines built around the dynamics of blow-ins finding their way in an established community and the mating rituals of the young and single, as well as of the not-so-young and not-so-single.

Biddy Mc Dermott especially was an excellent character, one that rang the changes of the era. She was deferred to for her horticultural expertise and her hard work, which left many a man in the shade. She showed leadership qualities as chairperson of the growers association. She spoke her mind and bought her round. She was at the same time a very sexual young woman, even if not so confident in this sphere as she was in other matters. She was liberated enough to reject the coquettish ways of her sister Carol, but traditional enough that she had to wait to be asked and wait she surely had to do when it was Miley Byrne to do the asking.

Characterisation on the whole has been very credible and storylines at their best have explored the growing edges of Irish society, especially in highlighting the tensions and ironies running along the interface between the old and the new. Dinny Byrne especially embodied the peasant psyche rooted in centuries of experience of those who were landless or near landless yet trapped on the land. Things like the tie of sex to land and livestock were etched in his brain and ran in his blood. Yet he was constantly counterpointed by codes and choices made by other criteria, charting the changes in the experience of class and gender.

However, *Glenroe* has drifted more and more into a preoccupation with the personal 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 substantial sections of the population have been threatened with marginalisation and impoverishment, it has not been telling the truth of the times to construct a scenario where sudden unearned wealth and/or entrepreneurial skill has made virtually every character upwardly mobile and prosperous. It gave a very easy ride to the spirit of the entrepreneurial 1980s.

Sudden windfalls came the way of Mary Mc Dermott, Dinny Byrne, Paddy Maher and Teasy Mc Daid during a period in which the writing of *Glenroe* seemed to be more influenced by *Dallas* and *Dynasty* than anything happening in Ireland. Even after Wesley Burrowes confessed to being a bit conscience stricken over the fact that everyone in *Glenroe* was so comfortable and he introduced the character of Chuck, a working class kid supporting a family, to redress the balance, Chuck too turned out to be so upwardly mobile as to have last year returned from Australia as a successful businessman beginning a substantial business in Glenroe with Dick Moran working for him. Fr Devereaux is the latest to come into big money and I wouldn't be surprised if it becomes the means of making a rich businessman of Blackie Connors. Lately Biddy and Miley are feeling the pinch and we shall see where that is going.

For much of the time *Glenroe* seems curiously cut off from anything outside itself, caught up in its own cosiness and cuteness, sometimes aimlessly recycling some of the more throwaway plots from *The Riordans*. Despite a change in production schedules to eliminate much of the lag between

production and transmission and to allow for greater topicality, it has not done much with it except to have Christmas episodes for Christmas and spring weather for spring planting.

Although *Glenroe* has thrown up attractive characters and set them in amusing interaction with each other, it has tended to skate across the surface of the human condition, rather than to engage in a more penetrating scrutiny of the human psyche. There has been no character articulating an advanced idea or expressing really deep emotion. There has been no intellectual, emotional or moral edge to it, no great thirst for truth or justice, no deep searching of the soul.

There has been no questioning of catholic doctrine in principle, whatever the falling off in practice. There has been no challenge to the status quo, whether of church or state or marketplace, in any sort of fundamental way.

While it has not been deep or daring, it has been clever and charming. It is a programme for which I feel a special fondness as I was very involved with it when writing my book (which was launched by Mick Lally) and I learned much of what I know about television production from my time in studio and on location when it was being made. I still believe that it could open out and develop in new directions and come to the cutting edge of contemporary experience and be something more special than it already is.

Fair City came on the scene to answer the strongly felt need for contemporary urban drama after other 1980s attempts to fill this gap fell flat, most notably *Inside*. *Inside* was clearly a cul de sac, being set in a prison and based on a caricature of urban life, ie, what could be more characteristic of a city than crime? There was in the 1980s a sharp debate about drama policy in RTE (related in my book and enhanced by the publication of the book itself), which focused on the need for drama at the cutting edge of contemporary life. However, despite all the pressures inside and outside RTE, the situation has not only not improved, but it has substantially disimproved. There is less drama than ever and what there is tamer than ever.

Beginning in 1989 and now in its 5th year, *Fair City* has not yet fulfilled the hopes which were invested in it. Although it has achieved high TAM ratings, it has not captured the popular imagination, although I believe that it still has the potential to do so.

The opening sequence (on video) evokes Dublin, but Carrigstown does not feel to me like Dublin. It is more like a 1950s rural village than a 1990s city. Everybody lives in each other's pockets and knows each other's business. Nearly everybody works in the immediate area. This is soap opera convention, but it is not urban life. The only serial to break with this has been *Brookside*, where characters lived in Brookside Close but moved about and worked in the larger city in a way that worked and opened up new territory for the genre, even if it has collapsed back into the convention now, with nearly everybody living and working in each other's pockets.

Those involved in the production of *Fair City*, to whom I have been talking while writing this paper, answer that the budget does not allow for location shooting. I do believe that *Fair City* should be given the resources necessary for location shooting, and if it needs to be taken from the *Eurovision Song Contest* or the *Rose of Tralee*, so be it. However, I don't believe that this alone would solve the problem, because I think it goes deeper. It is a problem of vision.

Even without location shooting, dialogue could refer outward in a way that it rarely does. Characters could come and go from the larger city and they could read books and newspapers, listen to radio, watch television, communicate by fax and e-mail: in countless ways they could be constructed in a conscious and dynamic relationship to the wider world.

There is an enormous defensiveness among those who work in the area of tv drama about social issues. Those currently involved in making both *Glenroe* and *Fair City* argue that the role of their programmes is to entertain. Their serials are to be about people and their relationships. However, if issues arise out of characters and their interactions, they inevitably say, they will deal with them.

However, this begs all the questions, such as what people find entertaining and why. It evades dealing with the fact that the whole thing is their construction. The characters and their interaction are their constructions. The whole scenario can be constructed in such a way as to be either expansive or myopic in its relation to the social order. It can either look outward at the world in tune with the relevant rhythms in the lives of interesting characters living interesting lives or it can be turned in on the trivial details of characters who live in cosy claustrophobia (and doing so without insight into the cosiness and claustrophobia).

The soap opera may be in its conventions a cosy and conservative form, with its origins in an extremely cosy and conservative society, but it is nevertheless a form which has enormous potential to open out and to show the structure of the social order and to probe the human psyche as it shaped by the social order. There is so much time to develop character, so much scope to elaborate the twists and turns of storylines. Instead of fulfilling this potential, soap operas have tended to go round and round, recycling soap opera cliches, rather than venturing into this almost uncharted territory.

For most of *Fair City*, characters have come and gone, consumed their pizzas and pints, done their deals, had their flirtations and affairs, their births, marriages, separations and deaths in a so-what sort of way, without sufficient rhyme or reason, without specific texture, without particular perception.

I do think that *Fair City* is improving. Running storylines which seem fruitful are: Rita going back to school and doing her leaving cert English, Bella adjusting to living in a flat out of Carrigstown, Barry's ideas about running the school, Natalie planning to come back to work after her baby is born not knowing those who smile and tell her to take care are plotting against her. Bits of dialogue giving it more texture: Natalie referring to her baby as 'yer wan kickin' away like Paul Mc Grath' and Lorraine wanting to stay in the room because it was 'all part of family interaction. We learned it in life skills'.

But *Fair City* needs to engage with the society in which it is set in more ways than this, as does *Glenroe*. Here are some questions I ask those who make these programmes:

- What do Bidy and Bella think about the big issues of our times ?
- Does anyone in *Glenroe* or Carrigstown have left or right wing views ?
- Has anyone noticed that the map of the world has been redrawn ?

(massive world historical events, which turned my world upside down,
registered only in the Manning's adoption of a Romanian child)
Did anyone notice that Ireland elected a feminist President ?
Does anyone vote ?
Has anyone ever been to Belfast ?
Were the residents of Glenroe and Carrigstown the only people in Ireland with no opinion
on the X case ?
Are they the only ones in the country not to make remarks about bishops and babies ?
Is everyone a religious believer ?
(except for Rory, who is also a greasy, lying, swindling, drug dealer)
Will GATT agreement or structural funds allocation affect them ?
Does anyone belong to a trade union ?
Does no local TD ever come into Teasy's or Mc Coys ?
Does no one go to TCD, UCD, DCU or any 3rd level educational institution ?
Does no one work at Intel or Unidare or Aer Lingus ?
Why do such a disproportionate number of characters own small businesses and those few
who work for a wage work for them ?
Is Clancy supposed to represent the whole capitalist system ?

It is not that any one of these absences is that conclusive, but taken together they indicate what I
at least find missing, at least the surface of what I find missing. But, staying on the surface for a
minute, let me indicate some characters I would like some day to see: a married laicised priest, a
nun who lives in a flat after coming under the influence of liberation theology in Latin America, a
trade union official, a programme manager, a GPA executive, a computer hacker, a philosopher (why
not?), a novelist, a journalism student, a night cleaner, a carpenter who can only find work in the
black economy, a person who is long term unemployed, a punter who votes PD and thinks *The
Sunday Independent* is the fount of all wisdom, a communist whose life came into crisis in 1989.

Why not? There is authentic drama in these lives. I am speaking here out of my own life and the
lives of those I encounter in my own life, which is far more dramatic than anything I see called
drama on television. Everyone will have their own list of elements in their own experience crying
out for dramatic representation and being left undramatised.

Adding such characters would not solve the problem in itself, but written well they could open out
the scenario to show the structure of the social order in terms of the rhythms of everyday
lives. But to show the structure of the social order, it is necessary to see the structure of the
social order and here is the real problem, why our serials only skate the surface of our times and
do not penetrate to the deep structures. It is not simply an aesthetic matter. It is an
epistemological problem. It is rooted in the contemporary crisis in narrativity, which is rooted in a
deeper crisis of world view. To quote Lukacs:

Without a *Weltanschauung*, it is impossible to narrate properly or to achieve a composition
which would reflect the differentiated and epochally complete variety of life.

The problem of *Glenroe* and *Fair City* is the problem of imagining Ireland, particularly for the
liberal intelligentsia, which is the force predominating in RTE and in drama production. The liberal

intelligentsia is itself, by the way, the most unrepresented force in our drama, which is no accident. They do not see themselves and their society with the clarity necessary for perceptive and powerful drama. Narrative competence and dramatic drive are rooted in definite point of view.

The problem of soap opera in our society is a problem of vision.



This paper was given at the IMAGINING IRELAND conference at Irish Film Centre on 31 October 1993.

Postscript:

An updated analysis of *Glenroe* (taking it up to its final episode in 2001) and *Fair City* (taking it to 2002)

appeared in a book [The Continuing Story of Irish Television Drama: Tracking the Tiger](#) published by 4 Courts Press in 2004.

This book is a sequel to [Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories](#) RTE 1987. It takes the story forward another 15 years.

A chapter in [Mapping Irish Media: Critical Explorations](#) (edited by John Horgan, Barbara O'Connor & Helena Sheehan) published in 2007 took *Fair City* up to 2006.

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

e-mail: helena.sheehan@dcu.ie
