

“*The Furrow: navigating the rapids, 1950–77*”, in *Periodicals and Journalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland: Writing Against the Grain*, (Mark O’Brien and Felix Larkin, eds.), Dublin, Four Courts, 2014, pp. 173-187.

## John Horgan

The 1950s in Ireland, it can be said without much fear of contradiction, have had a bad press. Tom Garvin’s *tour d’horizon* of this decade described a society ‘divided over who had responsibility for governing the country, and an underground and rather confused struggle ... between secular and religious authorities, neither being quite sure who was in control, or even who ought to be in control. All this was going on behind closed doors, and the general public merely heard incoherent noises and shouts and were not consulted about issues that did, after all, concern their collective future’.<sup>1</sup> Even in contemporary Catholicism, there were moments of frustration, or at least puzzlement. Manus O’Neill, a columnist in the somewhat erratic Catholic weekly, *The Standard*, wrote in May 1954 that he could ‘never remember any period that was more subdued, grey, unexciting and empty of promise’.<sup>2</sup> Post-war emigration was, of course, a major factor in accounting for such quiescence. In the 1950s, approximately half-a-million people left the Irish Republic. Considering the country’s population then stood at less than three million, to lose approximately sixteen per cent of its population – most of whom were very young and left to gain employment abroad – in one decade was astonishing. Indeed, Ireland shared the ignominy of being the only country in Europe, along with East Germany, to see its population decline in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

Roughly three out of every five children who grew up in 1950s Ireland left the country at some stage,<sup>4</sup> many of them ending up as labourers – and Labour voters – in Britain. Politically, the 1948 election in Ireland was only a blip in the thirty-two-year grip on power exercised by the ageing survivors of the revolutionary generation who had brought Fianna Fáil to power in the early 1930s. Although power alternated as a result of that election, culture remained unchanged: the new taoiseach, John A. Costello, at a function in Dublin in July 1950, joined Ireland and Spain together as fellow warriors against ‘materialistic and pagan ideologies’.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> T. Garvin, *News from a new republic: Ireland in the 1950s* (Dublin, 2011), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Standard*, 28 May 1954, cited in Garvin, *News*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> M. Daly, *Slow failure: population decline and independent Ireland, 1920–1973* (Wisconsin, 2006), p. 58. See <http://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/history/>

<sup>4</sup> E. Delaney, *The Irish in post-war Britain* (Oxford, 2007), pp 12–3

<sup>5</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 July 1950.

Irish Catholicism in that era managed to be, at the same time, both dominant and recumbent. One of the few visible sources of new energy was the archbishop of Dublin, Dr John Charles McQuaid, who had been appointed in 1940 at the age of only 45 and was rapidly living up to his reputation as a man in a hurry, a moderniser, and in many ways a contrast to the staid figure of Cardinal D’Alton, Archbishop of Armagh, who was aged over 60 when he was appointed to succeed Cardinal McRory in 1946. McQuaid, it seemed, was everywhere: solving a bus strike in Dublin in January 1951<sup>6</sup> and addressing 10,000 railwaymen (in French, English and Italian) in Lourdes later the same year.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Year celebrated in Rome in 1950, and the Marian Year in 1954, provided evidence – if such were needed – of an Irish Catholicism that had been little troubled by European wars or by the social and political movements that had grown out of them. No fewer than 30,000 Irish Catholics travelled to Rome in 1951, a year in which the Irish Catholic Church also celebrated what it, and the newspapers, described without any sense of exaggeration as the twelfth anniversary of the ‘coronation’ of Pope Pius XII.<sup>8</sup> There were no fewer than forty organisations comprising the Catholic Social Services Conference, and the members of one of them, the Knights of St Columbanus, were explicitly praised by a bishop as the ‘commandos’ of lay Catholic Action.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the very solidity of Irish Catholic culture, allied to the Cold War propaganda then in vogue, was also responsible for a continuing exaggeration of the dangers of Communism. A preacher gave 8,000 pilgrims at Knock Shrine in April 1950 a ‘strong warning’ against Communism, coupling it, perhaps more realistically, with an expression of his regret that Catholic home life in Ireland was in danger of being killed by ‘an unending round of music and entertainments’.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, there were stirrings in the undergrowth. Although much of the energy that would ordinarily have been channelled through the younger generation had been leached away by emigration, the traditional forms of social stasis were attracting criticism. A number of women’s groups, comprising some 28,000 members in all, were united in demanding more rights for ‘homemakers’ from the Commission on Vocational Organisation in 1940, an impertinence for which they were criticised in the Catholic journal *Christus Rex*.<sup>11</sup> In the more rarefied air breathed by the Dublin middle-class, the *Irish Times* promulgated a lively

---

<sup>6</sup> *Irish Times*, 26 Jan. 1951.

<sup>7</sup> *Irish Times*, 14 Sept. 1951.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Times*, 13 Mar. 1951.

<sup>9</sup> M. Curtis, *A challenge to democracy: militant Catholicism in modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> *Irish Independent*, 18 Apr. 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Curtis, *A challenge*, pp 195–6.

correspondence about liberalism, censorship, and Article 44 of the Constitution, in the early part of 1950, republished later that year in booklet form as ‘The Liberal Ethic’.

The *Irish Times*, however, was a minnow in circulation terms, selling about 40,000 copies a day as against the 200,000 or thereabouts sold by each the two leviathans of Irish print journalism, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Press*.<sup>12</sup> Each of the latter was at best respectful, at worst craven, in its attitude to official Catholicism. Nor were Catholic journals much better: the high fliers were the narrowly focused missionary magazines – such as the *Far East*, published by the Columban Fathers – that were a significant part of the missionary orders’ fund-raising activities, and homespun devotional literature such as the Jesuit *Messenger of The Sacred Heart*, huge overseas sales of which contributed to a circulation that was 9,000 in its first year (1888) and in 2014 was still 120,000. Intellectual Catholic life was on short commons: the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* was the oldest living inhabitant, having been in existence since 1865, and was regarded by a correspondent to Fr J.G. McGarry, editor of *The Furrow*,<sup>13</sup> as ‘one of the most boring publications of its kind’. Could not *The Furrow*, he inquired hopefully, ‘possibly swallow it up by some kind of *coup d’état*?<sup>14</sup> This proved to be unnecessary: it expired in 1968.

The *Irish Theological Quarterly*, which had been founded in 1906, vanished from the scene during the civil war in 1923, and reappeared – whether by coincidence or otherwise it is not possible to say – in the same year as that in which *The Furrow* was founded. One way or another, however, it was hardly of the same stable as *The Furrow*, although in later years the same names would occasionally appear in both.

This chapter focuses on the twenty-seven years of the editorship of J.G. McGarry, partly because it set the scene for so much that followed, partly because it is now possible to demonstrate with some clarity the way in which the journal and its editor navigated the sometimes turbulent waters of the immediately pre-Conciliar and post-Conciliar Catholic Church in Ireland. That period in the history of the journal has already been memorialised to some extent.<sup>15</sup> However, new material made available to the present author both amplifies – particularly with significant detail – and to some extent qualifies the earlier verdicts. The

---

<sup>12</sup> A. Aughey & J. Oakland, *Irish civilisation: an introduction* (London, 2013), p. 313.

<sup>13</sup> Dr J.G. McGarry (1904–77) was professor of pastoral theology at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, the major Catholic seminary, and founder and first editor of *The Furrow*. I have been greatly assisted in this project by the generosity of the current editor, Fr Ronan Drury, who gave me access to Dr McGarry’s editorial correspondence (*Furrow* Correspondence Archive, hereafter FCA).

<sup>14</sup> Dermot Walsh SVD to McGarry, 15 Aug. 1957, FCA.

<sup>15</sup> E. McDonagh, ‘J.G. McGarry, editor of *The Furrow* 1950–77’, *The Furrow*, 28:12 (Dec. 1977), 739–46; L. Fuller, ‘To drive a new furrow’, chapter 6 in *Irish Catholicism since 1950: the undoing of a culture* (Dublin, 2002), pp 82–97.

choice of topics in this chapter also inevitably reflects the predilections of the author, who reported extensively on religious affairs in Ireland between 1965 and 1975. In particular, it evokes with great clarity the cultural context within which McGarry worked, and with many aspects of which he had to contend.

That McGarry was a child of the new century – he was born in 1904 – was probably relevant in two senses. Ireland achieved its independence at roughly the same time as he achieved his personal maturity, and those of that generation who escaped emigration would undoubtedly have been impelled by a sense of energy and purpose that, by 1950, might have been all but extinguished in an older, more tired breed of patriots. He had a link, too – in a country where localism runs like veins of gold through basalt – with Archbishop D’Alton, a fellow Mayoman who had been appointed archbishop of Armagh some four years earlier, and many bishops replied warmly, with subscriptions, to the letters in which McGarry informed them of his project in 1949.

A journal like *The Furrow* is always the work of many hands, but the characteristics of its founder are far from irrelevant. He personally drew together the original nucleus of his contributors, and set up a trust to manage it – a trust whose members would be ordinary priests drawn from the four ecclesiastical provinces of Ireland, rather than from the ranks of the hierarchy. Continuity was, and remained, important. One of his first two assistant editors, Ronan Drury, took over the editorial chair when McGarry died tragically in a car accident in 1977, and is – in 2014 – still fulfilling that function. There can be few journals of any stripe that can boast as much, and yet neither was content to rest on their laurels: his successor has continued to publish ground-breaking articles on many topics. The present author once asked McGarry how he had, in demotic terms, ‘got away with’ publishing so much intrinsically controversial material in *The Furrow*. ‘John,’ he said after a moment’s deliberation, ‘the thing is, you can say almost anything you want, as long as you say it with style’. Style he had in abundance; it was a quality both he and his successor cultivated assiduously in all their contributors.

There were times when the journal had a quietly subversive effect that escaped all but the most vigilant – as for instance when, at the beginning of its second year of publication, he dropped the ecclesiastical honorifics with which careful editors, lay and religious, commonly announced the presence of important personages. Almost two decades after its foundation, this policy could still generate ripples. Fr Robert Nash, SJ, a doughty controversialist whose columns on religious and secular topics appeared for many years in the *Sunday Press*, wrote

in 1968 to thank McGarry for the ‘high standard’ of *The Furrow*, but could not resist a Parthian shot:

BUT ... I was somewhat surprised to find our Cardinal referred to as William Conway. In fact, before I read his article I turned to the last page to check if it was really he. I have to add that I distinctly dislike, also Colm O’Grady, David Regan etc. and fail to see why we should encourage the laity so to refer to us.<sup>16</sup>

McGarry himself could have passed, at first glance, for a run-of-the mill rural parish priest. But behind a craggy exterior, which could well have fitted into a vacant slot on Mount Rushmore, there lurked a keen intelligence, a highly developed sense of strategy, a gift for language, and an utterly authentic humility which operated, at times, to surprise and even disarm his critics. The theologian Enda McDonagh, a stalwart of *The Furrow* then and since, remarked of him that he ‘retained the countryman’s innocence of and disinterest in the personal or academic infighting of his academic or clerical colleagues. This occasionally led him into errors of judgment but innocence is not naiveté and he often showed surprising country shrewdness in assessing people and situations’.<sup>17</sup>

Two aspects of *The Furrow*’s general approach in those first three-and-a-half decades, and indeed since, are worthy of notice. The first, dealt with in some detail by McDonagh and Fuller – and for that reason not re-visited to the same extent in this chapter – is the way in which the firepower of the editor and his team was concentrated to great effect on the seismic changes that were taking place in the Catholic Church, from the luminous despatches of the Redemptorist Sean O’Riordan on the Second Vatican Council to the thoughtful explorations of these changes and their implications by some of the best Irish, European and American theologians of the era. *The Furrow* was continually putting down markers for the future, all the time imbued with a respect for the past. All this was buttressed by the regular supplements to the magazine, on liturgy, books, catechetics and the Bible, which effectively gave subscribers two issues for the price of one. The same is true of the special issues, especially during the 1960s, on the Vatican Council, on emigration, on the training of priests, and on other subjects.

The second was the sense in which, as the editor’s archive indicates with great clarity, *The Furrow* and its writers formed the nerve centre of a communications system that was, by

---

<sup>16</sup> Nash to McGarry, 16 Aug. 1968, FCA.

<sup>17</sup> McDonagh, ‘J.G. McGarry’, 740.

twenty-first century standards, primitive and slow but which was, by the parameters of its own era, supple and productive to the highest degree. At its height, McGarry claimed for the journal a circulation of 9,000 and a readership of 25,000.<sup>18</sup> Although no detailed records of its circulation survive, there is no reason to doubt McGarry's figures. His estimate of its readership was, however, if anything possibly on the low side. So many single copies went into isolated communities – many of them missionary outposts – that multiple readership must have been the norm rather than the exception. McGarry's correspondence files demonstrate that his subscribers were living in almost fifty countries on every continent of the globe – a trend which is still evident today – and one can assume that the occasional appeals for free subscriptions from impoverished third world priests and nuns – and one impoverished third world cardinal<sup>19</sup> – met a generous response.

Notable too, reading between the lines of this voluminous correspondence, is something more than a simple sense of connection. Some of McGarry's correspondents were not physically isolated, as were the missionaries in Africa or Latin America. But they felt themselves to be theologically, pastorally or intellectually isolated, and saw *The Furrow* as a sort of beacon, a distant semaphore that told them that they were not entirely alone – that there were others who shared their commitment to renewal in the Church, and who knew that they could speak to McGarry privately and share confidences that would be respected. The English Jesuit, Clifford Howell, lamented the fact that 'things liturgical here [in Britain] are so stagnant'<sup>20</sup> and, closer to home, a Cork priest lamented: 'Forgive me again for unloading myself on you. There are so few one can do it to, and no-one down here'.<sup>21</sup> As late as 1971, a congratulatory letter from McGarry to G.B. Newe on the latter's appointment as the first Catholic member of the Northern Ireland cabinet evoked a response despairing of the lack of what Newe called 'honest leadership'. He added: 'Many priests are behaving as if they had never heard of the Gospel! We are giving grave scandal and seem to have lost our way. Can one blame some of the sheep when some of the shepherds seem lost in the fog of a phony nationalism?'.<sup>22</sup>

The broad swath of McGarry's interests encompassed themes – and personnel – some of whose names were to become much better known in later years, such as Cardinals Montini and (then) Professor Ratzinger, as well as theologians of the stature of Karl Rahner and

---

<sup>18</sup> McGarry to Bishop Lachmonde, 5 Aug. 1970, FCA.

<sup>19</sup> Cardinal Gracias, from India, to McGarry, 5 Feb. 1959, FCA.

<sup>20</sup> Howell to McGarry, 4 Dec. 1967, FCA.

<sup>21</sup> Jerome Kiely, Farranferris, to McGarry, 5 Oct. 1955, FCA.

<sup>22</sup> Newe to McGarry, 29 Nov. 1971, FCA.

Gregory Baum. The seamless quality of his editing meant that these names did not look out of place beside those of more home-grown contributors, not a few of whom were, like Charles Gray-Stack, of the Anglican or other Christian traditions, and others of whom quite a few (a real breakthrough this, in journalistic terms) were women, either lay (Alice Curtayne, Aine McEvoy, Patricia Marshall) or religious (Sister Benevenuta Mac Curtain, OP). The launch of *The Furrow* was followed, and paralleled, to some extent, by the Dominican publication *Doctrine and Life*, founded in 1951 under the inspired editorship of Austin Flannery, OP – so that, more than a decade before the Second Vatican Council had been summoned by Pope John XXIII, there was already evidence that the spirit of religious renewal had significant local, as well as international roots.

At the same time, one of the other influences of those early years, about which Enda McDonagh surmised in his perceptive, warm-hearted article following McGarry's death in 1977, was the fact that 'the whole political dimension of life seemed for the most part to pass it by'.<sup>23</sup> McGarry was barely twenty years-of-age when the civil war ended, and it is altogether possible that the bitterness of that conflict, and of the decade which succeeded it, encouraged McGarry to veer away from politics understood as *party* politics – although he had no hesitation in addressing some of the key manifestations of current politics and economics in Ireland's failure to stem the haemorrhage of emigration, and its human cost.

If this was a lacuna, another area in which *The Furrow* broke new ground has been less commented upon. This was in relation to culture and the media, traditional and modern. *The Furrow* carried, almost as a matter of course, important reviews of films and of the theatre – the latter written by a layman, Patrick O'Connor, until 1968, because until the end of that year there was an episcopal ban on priests attending live theatre performances. It was also an area in which McGarry's deft handling of editorial problems – and his courage – were to be particularly tested, particularly in the late 1960s, when the intersection between civil and religious affairs, and associated issues of public and private morality, began to become matters of public controversy. That these issues figure more prominently in this essay than the broad approach of the magazine in the years concerned is simply a reflection of the fact that the editor's correspondence archive throws important new light in the difficulties of a priest-editor in a period of acute and sometimes painful transition.

Before dealing with these issues, however, it is useful to examine the question of ecclesiastical censorship and how it operated in the years in which *The Furrow* was

---

<sup>23</sup> McDonagh, 'J.G. McGarry', 745.

developing. Church law stipulated that anything that was published within the Catholic Church had to have an *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* – effectively formal permission. This permission, however, could be obtained either from the bishop of the diocese within which the publication was printed, or from the bishop in whose diocese the publication was edited. McGarry therefore had options. Maynooth was geographically in the archdiocese of Dublin; but it was printed by the *Leinster Leader* newspaper, which was in the diocese of Kildare. Kildare, evidently, was more relaxed about such matters than would have been the case in the highly centralised power structure of the Dublin archdiocese; and yet there is no evidence that McGarry’s decision to opt for Kildare was unduly Machiavellian. In fact, when McGarry wrote to McQuaid in 1949 to inform him of his plans, he also informed him that the *imprimatur* would be that of the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Dr. Keogh. McQuaid not only raised no objection, but replied that ‘the best way open to me at the moment of furthering your project is to enclose a subscription, with good wishes for the success of the enterprise which Maynooth College is undertaking’.<sup>24</sup> Not long afterwards, McGarry wrote to McQuaid again, this time to ask him for an article from his own pen, and also to inquire whether some of the Dublin diocesan priests might contribute. McQuaid replied that because he was very busy himself, for him to contribute an article would be a ‘grievous burden’ but added that he was ‘very willing that some of the young men should write, and I shall see about it’. He added: ‘You ought to know that I greatly approve of your work and will assist you’.<sup>25</sup> Two years later he wrote again enclosing ‘an offering to help your work’, and he wrote similarly in 1959.<sup>26</sup>

McGarry did not explore the issue of whether or to what extent the episcopal *imprimatur* was a *sine qua non* until much later. He had, in fact, a very easy relationship with Bishop Lennon, who succeeded Bishop Keogh in 1967, and with Mgr James Conway, who acted as Lennon’s censor for *The Furrow*. When Francis X. Carty, an *Irish Press* journalist, asked him for a paragraph to explain his relationship with Church censorship to accompany an article that was being reprinted in that newspaper, McGarry suggested: ‘Fr J.G. McGarry, editor of *The Furrow*, has published several critical and controversial articles in the last eighteen years without having any trouble from his censor or being corrected’.<sup>27</sup> The only disagreement of which there is any evidence in *The Furrow* files is in connection with an

---

<sup>24</sup> McQuaid to McGarry, 9 Dec. 1949, FCA. McQuaid seems to have been, at this stage, under a misapprehension that *The Furrow* was an official Maynooth enterprise, rather than, as it effectively was, a personal venture of McGarry and his collaborators.

<sup>25</sup> McQuaid to McGarry, 30 May 1950, FCA.

<sup>26</sup> McQuaid to McGarry, 30 June 1952 & 31 Oct. 1959, FCA.

<sup>27</sup> McGarry to Carty, 2 Nov. 1967, FCA.



article that McGarry proposed to publish on the Catholic Church's historical attitude to Judaism, which Conway thought was perhaps over-critical of the Church in parts. McGarry defended his position energetically, and no changes were made. Lennon, possibly reflecting some pressure from his episcopal colleagues during the tumultuous period of the late 1960s, wrote to McGarry to ask him to have a statement printed in *The Furrow* that clarified that while the *nihil obstat* was a declaration that the periodical was considered to be free of doctrinal or moral error, it 'does not imply approval of, or agreement with the contents, opinions or statements expressed'.<sup>28</sup> It was a clarification that McGarry had no problem in accepting.

*The Furrow* archive makes it very clear that censorship problems, such as they were, were related primarily to the difficulties experienced by his priest-contributors with their own internal censorship structures, over which McGarry as editor had no control, rather than to episcopal sanctions as such. A Jesuit contributor from Galway wrote to him in 1954 to tell him that he was 'distressed to tell you that the Censors disapprove of my comment, and so you will have to do without it'.<sup>29</sup> In 1961, there was an exchange between McGarry and Archbishop McQuaid that provided fascinating evidence both of the fact that McQuaid's 'young men' were not always as biddable as the prelate had imagined they might be, and of McGarry's fearlessness in defending his editorial standards and policy. Fr Desmond Forristal had been one of McQuaid's 'young men' who had been handpicked by him, along with Joe Dunne, to form the nucleus of what eventually became the gifted 'Radharc' television documentary company. Forristal was now a curate in Dublin, and the author of the television column in *The Furrow*. In November 1960 he had already evoked private criticism from McQuaid when, in an article on the centenary of the Clonliffe seminary, he had referred to one of McQuaid's predecessors, Cardinal Cullen, as someone who possessed 'the defects of his qualities, his lack of human warmth, his tendency to inflexibility and intolerance, and his curious foreignness, fruit of his long years in Rome'.<sup>30</sup> Forristal's reference to Cullen, McQuaid told McGarry, was 'lamentably unjust', but he softened the criticism by enclosing another 'offering' for the magazine.<sup>31</sup> Within a few months, Forristal had again crossed the line, but this time the reproof was to be more pointed. Forristal had, in his television column, sharply criticised programmes involving the representatives of different religious

---

<sup>28</sup> Lennon to McGarry, 9 May 1968, FCA.

<sup>29</sup> L. Sheil, SJ, to McGarry, 10 Mar. 1954, FCA. The proposed comment was apparently in relation to an article about church art.

<sup>30</sup> D. Forristal, 'Clonliffe College Centenary', *The Furrow*, 11:11 (Nov. 1960), 744-46, at 746.

<sup>31</sup> McQuaid to McGarry, 31 Dec. 1960, FCA.

denominations that were, he thought, ‘conducted in an atmosphere of rather sticky geniality which might without unfairness be called chumminess [and] must have given the casual viewer the idea that there was really no difference worth speaking of between their views’.<sup>32</sup>

Looked at from the perspective of more than half a century later, it is difficult to see what, if anything, McQuaid would have found to disagree with in this criticism of slack thinking and of unwillingness to face up to real difficulties in the debate about Christian unity. He wrote to McGarry, however, taking grave exception to what he described as Forristal’s second offence in giving ‘slapstick treatment of a very serious dogmatic issue’ and noting: ‘I shall see to it that he will not repeat these offences’.<sup>33</sup> McGarry was quick to the defence both of his contributor and of his own editorial decision. Forristal, he accepted, expressed himself ‘in a vigorous and lively style that is not unwelcome generally in a critic. It is a manner of writing which requires indeed the bit and bridle. In this instance, however, I did not observe in it any lack of charity or of discretion considering the context ... I hope it will not be improper to suggest that in the light of the circumstances I have indicated the description of Father Forristal’s article as slapstick is excessively severe and less than just to both of us’.<sup>34</sup> The archive does not contain a response from McQuaid, but it is likely that there was one, and that it fitted the description of a letter McGarry subsequently showed to a colleague which began with the sentence ‘I am not, and can never be, unjust ...’.<sup>35</sup>

Theatre, paradoxically, proved less contentious. When the journal’s first theatre critic, Patrick O’Connor, wrote a thoughtful and broadly positive column about the contribution of Sean O’Casey to the Irish theatre in 1964,<sup>36</sup> McGarry sent a copy to the playwright at his home in Devon, expressing his personal thanks for the pleasure and inspiration ‘Juno’, ‘The Plough and the Stars’, and ‘Shadow of a Gunman’ had given many in Ireland.<sup>37</sup> O’Casey, whose legendary contempt for Maynooth had been frequently expressed, most tellingly in his defence of Walter McDonald, a Maynooth professor who had been unfairly disciplined by the bishops half a century earlier, referred to Ireland as ‘Spireland’, a lightly coded reference to the spire of the Maynooth College chapel, which, he pointedly remarked, had been built by the bishops before they thought it necessary to fund a library.<sup>38</sup> O’Casey replied, evidently delighted:

---

<sup>32</sup> D. Forristal, ‘Television’, *The Furrow*, 12:5 (May 1961), 313–16, at 315.

<sup>33</sup> McQuaid to McGarry, 7 May 1961, FCA.

<sup>34</sup> McGarry to McQuaid, 19 May 1961, FCA.

<sup>35</sup> M. Meehan, ‘J.G. McGarry: a reminiscence’, *The Furrow*, 32:8 (Aug. 1981), 531–33, at 532.

<sup>36</sup> P. O’Connor, ‘Chronicle: Theatre’, *The Furrow*, 15:4 (Apr. 1964), 242–45.

<sup>37</sup> McGarry to O’Casey, 31 Mar. 1964, FCA.

<sup>38</sup> S. O’Casey, *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* (New York, 1949), p. 145.

A rare gift, this, coming as it did from the Editor who is a Priest in St Patrick's College, Maynooth. You may imagine my surprise when I saw the magazine and read your letter. I pondered these things in my heart, and wondered why there was so much thundering, so any lightning flashes, and so great a smell of sulfur (sic) about when my plays were done ... So you can see why I welcome this ray of sunlight coming into my room from faraway Maynooth.<sup>39</sup>

Peter Connolly, professor of English at Maynooth, whose sensitive and thoughtful criticism of films was a remarkable feature of *The Furrow* between 1957 and 1960, was, eventually, probably the most significant casualty. A sophisticated and challenging writer on censorship, morality and obscenity, he courageously went so far as to deliver a measured and largely positive critique of the writer Edna O'Brien at a public meeting in Limerick in April 1966 at a time when one of her novels had been publicly burned by a parish priest in her native Co. Clare.<sup>40</sup> The private episcopal reaction to his later writings on censorship and obscenity was equally incandescent. Bishop Browne of Galway told Archbishop McQuaid that 'it should be made clear to Dr Lennon that he should not allow his diocese to be an escape vent for heretics'.<sup>41</sup> This episode, which is dealt with *in extenso* in Fuller's account and is therefore not discussed in detail here, is nonetheless notable. In all probability it reflected the fact that, post-*Humanae Vitae* (when Browne uttered this criticism), the power of bishops to sanction was at a high point from which it would subsequently decline. But it is also generally assumed that Connolly's probably involuntary withdrawal from much criticism and serious writing thereafter was in response to episcopal pressure following not only the Edna O'Brien meeting, but an article he had contributed to the *Irish Theological Quarterly* in 1965 on censorship and obscenity, which compared the writings of Harold Robbins and William Faulkner to the disadvantage of the former.<sup>42</sup> This article included some colourful quotations of a kind not normally published in that journal, and Connolly's offence was probably exacerbated in the opinion of his episcopal critics by his willingness also to contribute on these topics to secular journals such as *Hibernia*. Although he continued as an occasional

---

<sup>39</sup> O'Casey to McGarry, 2 June 1964, FCA.

<sup>40</sup> The present author attended the meeting in Limerick – organised by the discussion group Tuairim – in 1966 at which Connolly spoke. He unsuccessfully investigated the book-burning allegation at the same time as a reporter for the *Irish Times*; the details were subsequently confirmed for him by Edna O'Brien personally.

<sup>41</sup> Browne to McQuaid, 14 Mar. 1968, Dublin Diocesan Archive, AB8/B/XV.

<sup>42</sup> P.R. Connolly, 'The Moralists and the Obscene', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 32:2 (June 1965), 116–28.

contributor to *The Furrow* thereafter,<sup>43</sup> the Irish Catholic Church was from that point deprived of any more detailed exposition of his thoughts on such matters.

J.C. Kelly, SJ, who succeeded Peter Connolly as film critic, had similar preoccupations, but was luckier. Sending McGarry a commissioned article on ‘The Council and the University Student’ in January 1963, he told his editor: ‘I spent a week on tenterhooks while it was with the Jesuit censors. Honestly I was paralysed with apprehension because times are bad. I was unable to do anything else until it came back: a bit bloody but unbowed. I was fortunate in drawing a liberal-conservative censor who was helpful. I am really grateful to him. He was slightly terrified but I am amazed at what he let me say – although I wanted to say more’.<sup>44</sup>

More than a decade later, there were serious issues about an article written for *The Furrow* by a Columban missionary priest, Fergus Duffy. Fr Duffy’s article<sup>45</sup> was a report on a continental initiative designed to centralise a number of missionary magazines – a development that would, if replicated in Ireland, have had serious financial implications for a magazine like the Columban fathers’ *Far East*. Michael O’Neill, another Columban priest who was a frequent correspondent of McGarry’s, and a controversialist of some substance himself, wrote to McGarry in barely disguised exasperation about the reception that Duffy’s article had got from ‘our dinosaurs’, adding that ‘the stupid and useless furore over Fergus’s article has shown [that] we are effectively muzzled unless we choose to disregard the rules that constrain us’.<sup>46</sup> Following the Columban censor’s approval of an edited version of the article, O’Neill wrote again to tell McGarry that Duffy’s reward had been to be ‘appointed to Fiji – 11,000 miles from Ireland’ and asked: ‘How many lesser men will be destroyed and broken by such ruthless exercise of “authority”?’<sup>47</sup>

Another serious episode involved the noted ecumenist Fr Michael Hurley, SJ, who contributed an article on mixed marriages to *The Furrow* in 1966.<sup>48</sup> Hurley’s article, on a topic of considerable societal significance which had excited public interest in Ireland intermittently for many decades, was trenchant in its identification of the obstacles to progress on this vexed issue, and on the relationship between mixed marriages and the ecumenical issues of the day. The *Irish Times* asked *The Furrow* for permission to reprint the

---

<sup>43</sup> His final contribution was the text of a talk he had given on ‘The Church in Ireland since Vatican I’, *The Furrow*, 30:12 (Dec. 1979), 755–6.

<sup>44</sup> J.C. Kelly to McGarry, 5 Jan. 1963, FCA.

<sup>45</sup> F. Duffy, ‘Uniting European missionary magazines’, *The Furrow*, 19:3 (Mar. 1968), 131–7.

<sup>46</sup> O’Neill to McGarry, 13 Dec. 1967, FCA.

<sup>47</sup> O’Neill to McGarry, 19 Feb. 1968, FCA.

<sup>48</sup> M. Hurley, ‘Mixed marriages’, *The Furrow*, 17:5 (May 1966), 279–87.

article, which was given. It then emerged that the promised publication had to be withdrawn and, although this was stated to be at the personal wish of its author, it was clear to McGarry that a higher authority had intervened. McGarry would have been well aware that Michael Hurley had been targeted before. Following an earlier article by him, Bishop Browne of Galway – a former professor of theology at Maynooth – had written to McGarry arguing that Hurley’s view of the Catholic Church was ‘not in conformity with the decrees of the First Vatican Council’ and that this was a topic on which ‘Fr. Hurley is obviously not a reliable guide’.<sup>49</sup> McGarry replied – on the basis of an unsigned briefing on the topic which is filed with the correspondence and which, it has to be assumed, had also been written for him by Hurley – arguing that there was no real conflict between the article and the teaching of the first Vatican Council, in that the meaning of Vatican Two was that the Catholic Church ‘as it is is not good enough to lead all men to Christ and the Gospel’.<sup>50</sup>

Following the withdrawal of Hurley’s 1966 article from the *Irish Times*, McGarry wrote to the Jesuit provincial a ‘distressed and miserable’ letter in which he argued forcefully that ‘it would be a disaster if the standing and influence of Fr Hurley were diminished in any way and it would be particularly regrettable if your great Society, which has done so much in favouring unpopular intellectual causes, should hold back, or worse still, impede this great movement at this particular time’.<sup>51</sup> The Jesuit provincial wrote back immediately, but briefly, to say that he did not know how to respond, and suggested that they meet to discuss the matter. There is no record of what transpired but, at the end of the day, Fr Hurley’s article did not appear in the *Irish Times*, although that paper did carry a much shorter article by him shortly afterwards on an evidently more innocuous topic.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most severe tests for McGarry’s editorship was undoubtedly the publication in 1968 of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which Pope Paul VI rejected the views of the majority of the members of a Papal Commission that the traditional teaching rejecting artificial contraception might be changed. The publication of the encyclical, in July 1968, was greeted, in Ireland as elsewhere, with considerable surprise, and even antagonism. In Dublin, it was the occasion for a display of astonishing ecclesiastical triumphalism in the course of which Mgr P.F. Cremin, also a Maynooth theology professor, delivered a forty-

---

<sup>49</sup> Browne to McGarry, 27 Jan. 1964, FCA.

<sup>50</sup> McGarry to Browne, 24 Feb. 1964, FCA.

<sup>51</sup> McGarry to Brendan Barry, SJ, 1 June 1966, FCA.

<sup>52</sup> M. Hurley, SJ, ‘Methodism and Ecumenism’, *The Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1966.

minute lecture in praise of the encyclical at what was misleadingly described as a ‘press conference’ presided over by Archbishop McQuaid.<sup>53</sup>

Here, McGarry’s level-headedness was of paramount importance. Writing privately to Tom Burns, editor of the British Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, he described the encyclical as a ‘bombshell’, but added: ‘The intransigence of the “official” presentation of the Encyclical here has paradoxically prepared the way for a more moderate interpretation of the Encyclical which I feel will emerge before long’.<sup>54</sup> He published two long articles by Denis O’Callaghan and James Mackey, each of which analysed the encyclical from different points of view, and managed to contextualise it – without contesting it directly – in a way that undoubtedly moved the debate onto a different plane.<sup>55</sup> He declined to publish an article in 1969 on the same topic by the Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash, which would undoubtedly have been more confrontational, and, no doubt for similar reasons, refused to allow contributors to join the hue and cry that developed when Bishop Lucey of Cork disciplined James Good ecclesiastically for publicly expressing his theological opposition to the encyclical. It was a balancing act, certainly; one which, at the time, might have seemed inadequate to the more committed on either side of that argument but which, in retrospect, can reasonably be described as judicious and even creative.

By the early 1970s, *The Furrow* had survived these several battles and was firmly established. In 1972 McGarry asked his Maynooth colleague, the sociologist Liam Ryan, for advice on the need for episcopal approval. Ryan suggested that, while Bishop Lennon of Kildare and Leighlin was ‘open enough’ on the matter, it might be a good idea if McGarry wrote to other priest-editors to find out how they coped.<sup>56</sup> In due course McGarry contacted Herbert McCabe, OP, the editor of *New Blackfriars* in Oxford, Michael Richards, editor of the *Clergy Review*, and Peter Hebblethwaite, SJ, editor of *The Month*. McCabe told him that *New Blackfriars* was published without any episcopal oversight,<sup>57</sup> and Michael Richards told him that the magazine had ‘no censorship strictly so-called’ but was published *Permissu Superiorum*, which implied a kind of watching brief by those in authority.<sup>58</sup> Hebblethwaite was more detailed, and more relaxed: ‘Theoretically we have Jesuit censorship. This used to be done by two old men, but as they died off they have not been replaced. If more than two

---

<sup>53</sup> The present writer was present at, and reported on, this ‘press conference’ for the *Irish Times*.

<sup>54</sup> McGarry to Burns, 20 Aug. 1968, FCA.

<sup>55</sup> D. O’Callaghan, ‘After the Encyclical’, *The Furrow*, 19:11 (Nov. 1968), 633–41; J. Mackey, ‘Faith and Morals’, *The Furrow*, 19:12 (Dec. 1968), 699–710.

<sup>56</sup> L. Ryan to McGarry, 29 June 1972, FCA.

<sup>57</sup> McCabe to McGarry, undated (but 1972), FCA.

<sup>58</sup> Richards to McGarry, 31 June 1972, FCA.

members of the editorial board have read an article and decide that it is all right, we publish'.<sup>59</sup> By agreement, tacit or otherwise, *The Furrow* appeared for the first time without the official imprimatur in February 1976.

The times had in fact already begun to change. By 1970 Desmond Forristal could write: 'I can well remember those days before Vatican Two when writing for *The Furrow* was not an exercise in prudence. It was an exercise in survival. But those days are long gone'.<sup>60</sup> Thereafter, the episcopal or other clerical critiques became less frequent, and more moderate. If the times had changed – and indeed they had – this was due in no small measure to the pioneering work of the preceding three decades, and to the combination of courage, subtlety and style that had informed the editorship of McGarry and the contributions of his collaborators, which helped to create the consciousness of a new age and, by doing this, to make that new age possible.

---

<sup>59</sup> Hebblethwaite to McGarry, 1 July 1972 FCA.

<sup>60</sup> D. Forristal, 'Handing on the faith', *The Furrow*, 21:9 (Sept. 1970), 582–9, at 588.