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THE KENNEDYS OF CASTLEROSS: SOAP OPERA AND SPONSORSHIP ON IRISH RADIO

Stephanie Rains

This article explores the use of advertising and sponsored programming on Irish radio from its inception in 1926 until the arrival of Irish television in the 1960s. It discusses the financial dependence of 2RN (later Radio Éireann) on advertising money and the ways this operated in tension with official concerns about that money's influence on programmes and audiences. There is a particular focus on the hugely popular radio soap opera The Kennedys of Castleross, which was sponsored by chocolate company Fry-Cadbury's and ran for 18 years from 1955. Using production archives, the article discusses the structures and economics of the programme, including the ways in which the sponsor and their advertising agency were directly involved in its writing. It also examines the ways in which, aside from the direct advertising for Cadbury products, The Kennedys of Castleross carried within its storylines values of the industrialisation, consumer culture and new economic models which were beginning to emerge in Ireland of the late 1950s. The discussion concludes by exploring the ways in which the arrival of television broadcasting in Ireland after 1961 changed the political economy of sponsored radio programming such as The Kennedys.

This article is an exploration of Ireland's first soap opera, *The Kennedys of Castleross*. It was broadcast on Radio Éireann from 1955 until 1973, and for its first ten years was sponsored by the chocolate manufacturer Fry-Cadbury.¹ An enormously popular show, this article will place *The Kennedys* in the context of both official unease about such commercial programming as well as the specific production processes which were involved in making a programme which met the varying interests of an advertising agency and its clients as well as a national public service broadcaster and its audience. Although it was and remains a state broadcaster with public

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service responsibilities, Radio Éireann was also always expected to earn commercial income from advertising, a problematic combination of policies which reflected the ambiguous views about this new mass media form by some of the individuals and institutions responsible for its establishment. This article will discuss the degrees of enthusiasm and concern expressed about Irish radio, especially as it referred to radio advertising and sponsorship during its early years, before exploring *The Kennedys of Castleross* as the first long-running and extremely popular sponsored programme.

The Irish Free State, which came into formal existence in December 1922, was the first nation-state of the radio age, and the new technology's importance within individual Irish homes as well as for the new state became clear almost immediately. Irish radio began in January 1926 with the establishment of 2RN (later to become Radio Éireann) as the national broadcaster under the control of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. Potential benefits of radio to the national 'home' were clear to some commentators, such as George Russell who claimed that it would create 'myriad changes in the mentality of the country folk' because of the information it would disseminate on modern farming methods and other improvements to rural economies.² Its particular potential for improving the quality of life in rural Ireland was also highlighted in the report issued by the government-appointed Wireless Committee. One of its members argued that the entertainment it could offer would help ameliorate the 'monotony particularly on winter nights' when there was currently 'no form of amusement in the country homestead'.³

Anxieties about the possible effects of broadcasting in Ireland were more prevalent in official discussions however – anxieties about its political possibilities, but also its cultural and moral potential. The fact that, prior to the establishment of 2RN in January 1926, Irish radios were mainly receiving British broadcasts, raised (not unreasonable) concerns about the impact of foreign culture being received in Irish homes. J.J. Walsh, who would become the first Minister with responsibility for broadcasting, gave this as one of his reasons for supporting the establishment of an Irish service, expressing concern that Irish radio listeners would otherwise hear only 'propaganda in a foreign tongue, to the entire exclusion of our native language', tellingly using the term 'propaganda' as a synonym for any and all broadcast material.⁴ The 1920s were also the decade in which the Free State prioritized legislation to regulate and censor cultural expression in other forms – the 1923 Censorship of Films Act and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act to control all forms of print publications are examples of a broad concern with 'decency' and 'morality' in Irish cultural consumption, especially that imported from Britain and the United States.⁵ Radio was therefore, from some perspectives, an alarming new domestic technology which threatened to undermine these efforts by allowing indecent or at the very least culturally alien broadcasts into Irish family homes.

Outside the corridors of power however, the public response to radio's rapid development in the early years of the Free State was rather different. Radios were enthusiastically embraced as a very popular new form of consumer product – indeed they offered three distinct layers of consumer culture to those who could

afford them. Firstly they were high status consumer goods in their own right, large and distinctively designed pieces of furniture which would occupy prominent positions in living-rooms and kitchens, displaying their owners' taste and spending power. Secondly they brought programmes – another new form of cultural product – into homes, providing a wholly novel form of entertainment as programming expanded to include music, sporting events, plays and comedy sketches. And finally they also brought into Irish living-rooms advertisements for a myriad of other consumer goods as jingles and commercials played between the programmes, some of which were even made directly by their sponsors.

Radios were not cheap, and like the other domestic technologies such as electric cookers, vacuum cleaners and fridges, were a luxury product more prevalent in middle-class homes. However, a considerable market segmentation occurred even in radio's early days as a consumer product, and there was soon a wide range of models and prices. In 1931 a small Telefunken radio was being advertised in *Dublin Opinion* for £12, which still placed it beyond the reach of many people, but was nevertheless half the price of the free standing 'console model' Murphy radio sold through Pim's Department Store in Dublin and advertised for £24 in *Model Housekeeping* in October 1934.⁶ This advertisement shows a sleek art deco style cabinet, which was described as being made of walnut and macassar ebony. By 1937 Philco were advertising 24 different radio models in *Dublin Opinion*, ranging in price from £7 15s to 160 guineas. Sadly no illustration was provided of the extravagant 160 guinea model, but it is noteworthy that the cheapest of the Philco range was the £7 15s 'wet battery' model.⁷ This ran on a large rechargeable battery and was therefore suitable for the many homes in Ireland which did not have mains electricity. Especially in rural Ireland, battery-charged radios rapidly became and long-remained a central feature of domestic and community life as they were the first (and for a long time, only) electrical appliance in otherwise non-electric homes. This made them the only representation of the expanding world of electrical consumer goods their owners would have seen advertised but had no opportunity to experience. Even in Dublin, where electrification was most thorough, the electrical engineer who wrote in 1946 of the 'semi-electric' home which had only minimal wiring and still used gas to cook and heat water, added that 'surprisingly, many consumers use more electricity during the year in their radio sets than for lighting'.⁸ Radio ownership was spread extensively if unevenly across the country by the 1950s. The first market research was carried out by Radio Éireann during this decade, and it was reported that by December 1954 there were 428,000 radio licences in the country, which at the last census had recorded 663,000 households. Even allowing for a percentage of unlicensed sets, the report argued that 'The distribution of wireless licenses is such that although almost every private dwelling in Dublin and Dun Laoghaire has one, there are large areas of the country where the proportion is less than one in three'.⁹

Radio advertising and national culture

The commercial culture which 2RN brought into Irish homes remained a matter of unease, however. While the possibility of uniting Irish households in happy

national unity and domesticity was to be encouraged, the advertising jingles and sponsored programmes which helped to supplement the very meagre income from the sale of licences and central state funding were much less welcome to official Ireland. The early years of 2RN saw only limited advertising, but its tone and culture was felt to be alien to the 'varied and well-balanced programmes of interesting and instructive matter' envisaged by J.J. Walsh in 1925. One of the objections raised was to the advertising of foreign (which in practice meant British) products on Irish airwaves, an objection in keeping with the protectionist economic attitudes of the time. During the Anglo-Irish Trade War from 1934, this policy became even more explicit, and Radio Éireann (as it had become by then) could only take advertisements from companies which manufactured in Ireland, a prohibition which of course did not apply to the print media and which severely hampered the station's ability to earn advertising revenue. By the early 1930s however, the station was broadcasting more sponsored programming – on behalf of brands such as Sweet Afton cigarettes, and Findlaters grocers.¹⁰ The largest programme sponsor for many years however was the Irish Sweep, on such a scale as to make them a genuinely important economic foundation for Irish radio. The Sweep's motivation for this expenditure was the legal ban on their advertising in the United Kingdom, under the Betting and Lotteries Act of 1934, so they were using Irish airwaves to reach British audiences. As Marie Coleman outlines, in 1932 they signed a contract with Radio Éireann to provide an 'hour every weekday, for which it paid £60 and copyright fees of £2 and ten shillings, becoming the principal broadcaster of sponsored programmes and generating considerable revenue for the station. Income from advertising, in effect sponsored programmes, rose from a mere £1350 in 1932 to £35,000 in 1938, by which time it accounted for almost one-third of all Radio Éireann's revenue, second only to license fees'.¹¹ Over the years, other commercial operators also sought to use Ireland's proximity to the large and advertising-free British radio audience. The government received several 'generous' offers to build and operate entirely commercial stations within the Free State, but refused them all, apparently due to distaste at the prospect of Irish airwaves (and by extension Ireland's national radio voice) becoming dominated by advertisements for English laxatives and hair-dye.¹² An exception was made for the Irish Sweep's role in advertising on Radio Éireann due to its own national status and its strong political influence within the corridors of Irish power.

The tendency of sponsored programmes – which were made by the sponsors themselves in many cases and delivered more or less complete for broadcast – to play modern music was also a source of great concern in some quarters. 2RN's first director, Seamus Clandillon, was himself a traditional music revivalist who oversaw a great deal of Irish music programming, even if, as several critics have pointed out, the processes and interventions involved in programming and broadcasting 'traditional' music effectively invented new genres such as the céili bands.¹³ Nevertheless, advertisers (and by extension listeners) demanded other music as well, to the great concern of those who worried about the power of broadcasting to influence cultural tastes. The Anti-Jazz Campaign of 1934, which was a direct influence on the highly restrictive Public Dancehall Act of the following year, was as much focused on broadcast music as it was on local dance halls. One

demonstration of this was when the Secretary of the Gaelic League, one of the organisations most critical of ‘foreign’ influences on radio programming, complained of Sean McEntee during the 1934 Campaign that ‘our Minister for Finance has a soul buried in jazz and is selling the musical soul of the nation for the dividends of sponsored jazz programmes. He is jazzing every night of the week’.¹⁴ This unlikely charge against the former IRA commander did however point towards the extent to which it was mainly sponsored programming which played non-Irish music. More than the complaints made about specific British products or types of American popular music however, most of the concerns about radio commercials seemed to emanate from an anxiety that commodity culture itself was foreign to Ireland, despite the evidence of its lively presence in printed advertisements (among other places) for many decades. The combination of that commodity culture with radio’s new technologies to bring its sounds – jingles, slogans and brand-names – directly into Irish homes was what seemed most alarming to official Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. The new technology hymned by J.J. Walsh in 1925 was intended to be harnessed to the promotion of ‘traditional’ Irish culture to make rural life less dull and home lives happier, but its capacity to carry commercial culture into those same homes was a source of deep concern. Despite this (and in the absence of any other sources of funding), sponsored programming did actually become even more important to Radio Éireann schedules in later decades, including the most successful (and officially approved of) example, *The Kennedys of Castleross*. Not unlike Seamus Clandillon’s céili bands, *The Kennedys of Castleross* was an imported format with Irish content, which mutated over the course of the 18 years it was on air into an internationally-recognisable, hybrid, and yet distinctively Irish programme much loved by audiences.

The Kennedys of Castleross: the ‘golden age’ of sponsored radio

Soap operas were one of the most significant cultural forms created by radio, having originated in American broadcasting during the 1930s, and acquired their name from the soap manufacturing corporations which were some of their initial sponsors. Typically broadcast live during this era, and going out several times a week in short programmes of 15 or 20 minutes, soap operas drew upon the tradition of serial stories in print media, having open-ended plots which featured recurring characters, with the stories usually focused around a community of some kind – whether in a suburb, village or workplace – which gave context and continuity to the narratives and characters. The relationships between the sponsor, producers and network broadcasters varied considerably within this broad outline, however. Some featured clear and unavoidable references to their sponsor and its products within the programme’s title and even the programmes themselves, while others were designed to be a more ‘soft sell’ format which mentioned the sponsor in an introduction or regular jingle, but otherwise allowed the programme to develop separately, relying upon audience fondness for it to promote their brand mainly by association over long periods of time. *The Kennedys of Castleross* drew upon this American tradition in a number of ways, including its format, content, mode of production and broadcast. Another more direct connection to the American soap

opera format was that the originators of *The Kennedys* were Mark Grantham and Bill Nugent, two aspiring young American writers studying in Trinity College Dublin on the GI Bill during the early 1950s, and both looking for ways to make more money. Nugent went back to the United States shortly afterwards, but Grantham became the principal scriptwriter for *The Kennedys* for most of its duration until he left the programme for good in 1967, writing 2 episodes per week and being paid the rather small (by international standards) fee of up to 15 guineas per episode.¹⁵ Grantham and Nugent originally pitched their idea for an Irish radio soap opera to Alan Tate at Arks advertising agency, who held the account for Fry-Cadbury's in Ireland. With some difficulty they convinced Cadbury's to sponsor a pilot of 13 episodes and Radio Éireann (with rather less difficulty) to broadcast them.¹⁶

The Kennedys of Castleross' American connections were formational and remained central to the programme, but it is important to note that its commissioning would also have been influenced even more directly by the style and success of two British radio soap operas. *Mrs Dale's Diary* was first broadcast in 1948 and was the first British experiment with the form, followed a few years later in 1951 by *The Archers* (still on air today and by far the world's longest-running broadcast drama). These BBC soap operas were popular on both sides of the Irish Sea, and it seems likely that the initial decision to broadcast *The Kennedys of Castleross* was at least as driven by the hope of creating an Irish equivalent to *The Archers* as it was by knowledge of the soap opera format's American heritage. Nevertheless, as a sponsored soap opera *The Kennedys* had some formal similarities to its American forebears which the advertising-free BBC programmes did not. It was broadcast on Tuesday and Thursdays at 1 pm, each episode being 15 minutes long and introduced by its signature tune ('The Fair Day' by Hamilton Harty) and the voice of its 'comper', whose preamble included a 30 second advertisement for Fry-Cadbury who were described as 'presenting' the programme. This introductory advertisement was the sponsor's only obtrusive intervention in the broadcast, although as will be discussed below, they did involve themselves very closely with its content. Dairy Milk Chocolate appears to have been the Cadbury product most frequently mentioned in these introductions, but the company did use the spot to promote new products, such as in August 1955 (very early in *The Kennedys'* life) when the programme began with a promotion of '... Tonga, Cadbury's wonderful new coconut bar. Covered with luscious Cadbury's Dairy-Milk Chocolate, Tonga has an enchanting flavour, and gives double value because every bar has two pieces'.¹⁷ Each episode was concluded with another 30 second Cadbury advertisement, ensuring that *The Kennedys* was wrapped in Cadbury promotion even if the brand did not appear within the programme itself. The lack of explicit brand name references within the programme did not mean however that the sponsor's influence was not present there. Mark Grantham later recalled that especially in the programme's early years, several restrictions were placed on scripts and plots not only by the ever-present self-censorship of mid-twentieth-century Irish broadcasting (meaning that no mention could be made of even married women's pregnancies within *The Kennedys*, for example), but also by the more specific requirements of Fry-Cadbury. Recalled Grantham,

Castleross was the only alcohol-free town in Ireland: pub scenes were banned. Because one of the sponsor's touted products was Cadbury's drinking chocolate, so was the word tea. Mrs Kennedy was the only woman in the country who invited people into her kitchen for a cup of chocolate.¹⁸

This recollection is reinforced by surviving scripts from the programme's early years which include introductory sponsor messages promoting Drinking Chocolate as 'the drink that's really different', and even encouraging listeners to offer it to evening guests during the winter.¹⁹

Despite the example set by *The Archers* in Britain as a rural soap opera (and one explicitly used to promote farm safety and modern farming methods), Ireland's first foray into the genre was set in a small town rather than the countryside. A situation outline for the programme from its initial broadcasts in March 1955 describes Castleross as a 'Midlands town' about 70 miles from Dublin with a population of 2500. Although it was not an exact representation of any specific place, the first map of Castleross, drawn by Bill Nugent as part of the original programme outline, was closely based on a medieval map of Carlow.²⁰ The fictional town was dominated by the Viritex factory, which had opened at the end of World War Two to manufacture leather products 'made in Ireland by Irish workers using Irish materials for sale throughout the world'.²¹ The effect of the factory, the outline goes on to explain, had been to double the town's population and create considerable 'social stratification' as the workers and managers live in quite different homes and in different areas. The prosperity created by the factory had also brought shops and a hotel with an 'American-type cocktail lounge', but the town square had also recently acquired a 'new public monument to the local heroes of 1916'. The programme centred upon The Bell, the sweet-shop and news agency run by Mrs Kennedy in the centre of the town. Mrs Kennedy (played for all 18 years of the programme's history by Abbey Theatre actor Marie Kean) was a widow, and the family were respectable but ordinary residents of long-standing in the town, living behind and above the shop.²² All storylines and other characters radiated out from Mrs Kennedy and the shop, including her family, friends and customers, who themselves worked at the Viritex factory, other businesses in the town or owned surrounding farms.

The cast were drawn mainly from members of the Abbey Players, the resident company of the Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland. The actors fitted the recordings around their other rehearsal, performance and travel schedules, meaning that *The Kennedys* writers had to take the actors' availability (or lack of it) into account when devising episodes so that only available performers would appear in the episodes recorded together in blocks, at breakneck speed and with little time for either rehearsal or revision. This strategy was clearly one of the many ways that the Arks agency and its production company reduced the programme's costs in order to keep Fry-Cadbury convinced of its value, while at the same time managing to cast the programme with good actors. At various times over its duration, *The Kennedys of Castleross* featured characters played by TP McKenna, Vincent Dowling, Caroline Fitzgerald, and Jim Norton, as well as Marie Kean's continuous presence as Mrs Kennedy herself. It seems likely that the quality of the acting this cast brought to the *Kennedys* – even given the straitened

recording conditions they worked under – significantly contributed to the programme's popularity with listeners. Its conceptualisation as a family-oriented tale of small-town Irish life may also have been important in this respect. When the programme was finally cancelled in 1973, a retrospective article in the *RTÉ Guide* argued that this was the case, insisting that in order to reflect Irish life in ways which were broadly acceptable to the listening public, *The Kennedys* could not be set in Dublin but nevertheless needed to be 'east of the Shannon' so as not to be too far removed from mainstream post-World War Two everyday life in Ireland. The article claimed that Castleross as a location 'split the difference' very successfully between the urban and rural experience. The highly selective nature of the programme's depiction of that everyday life was also important, however. As the *RTÉ Guide* article perceptively highlighted, life in Castleross during the 1950s and 1960s did not include emigration, while most people in the town had work because the local industry was prosperous and growing, many inhabitants owned cars, and the town still had its train service.²³

None of these features would have been accidental. The lengthy chain of production, broadcast and reception involved in producing each 15 minute episode of *The Kennedys of Castleross* offers a useful insight into the various interlocking interests the programme served. Mark Grantham and the various other writers involved over the years (which at one time also included the playwright Hugh Leonard) were contracted to deliver blocks of episodes to Alan Tate at the Arks Agency approximately three months in advance of their broadcast date, in return for the payment of 15 guineas per programme. Tate would read the scripts and offer comments or questions on their plots and character development, including offering advice on Irish social and cultural norms to his American scriptwriter. Once Arks were happy with the script, they had to seek approval for it from Fry-Cadbury themselves. It is clear from surviving correspondence that each script was read by Cadbury, and that queries and requests for changes were then frequently passed back to the writers via Arks. Wry references in letters between Tate and Grantham refer to this process in ways which make it clear they regarded the client's attitudes to be overly conservative or cautious, and their requests for changes to demonstrate a lack of understanding of either the programme or its audience. The requested changes or nervous responses to certain plotlines usually seem to have been minor, but indicate that Fry-Cadbury took *The Kennedys* very seriously as a public face for their brands. In September 1957 for example, Tate wrote approvingly to Grantham, on receipt of some new scripts, that 'At first glance it seems to me that this will get by the client. I think the racing plot is a very good one; it is just the sort of thing the client suggested we should have, rather than great sicknesses', and the following month even more approvingly assured the scriptwriter that 'the Episodes have been to the client and he approved them subject to two minor points, which must surely be a record'.²⁴ Some years later however, Cadbury proved more intractable about a plot point. Tate wrote to Grantham to request a plot change in some new scripts because 'the client has dug in his heels completely about the land girl... it might have to do with women doing men's work, taking men's employment from them, insidious threats of Communism ... your guess is as good as mine'.²⁵

Once Cadbury's had approved the scripts they were then recorded by a production company in blocks of multiple episodes according to when the cast were available in the required combinations of characters, then edited and submitted to Radio Éireann for final approval. In an interview reminiscing about the approval process for all sponsored programming, Harry Bradshaw (a radio producer who worked for both Radio Éireann and commercial recording studios during this era) recalled that they had to be submitted to the Sponsored Programmes Officer at least two days before broadcast to allow them to be checked for their adherence to the rules for sponsored programming, and for the suitability of content in general.²⁶ Once *The Kennedys of Castleross* had gone through all these stages of production and approval, Radio Éireann broadcast it at 1 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays to its large and unprecedentedly enthusiastic audience. Figures released in 1965 as part of publicity to celebrate the programme's 1000th episode show that the listenership figures were 796,000 for the Tuesday programmes and 777,000 for the Thursday episodes, giving it a proportionately higher percentage of the national listenership than *The Archers* had in the UK. It was also claimed at this time that 'funerals have been delayed' so as not to clash with *The Kennedys*, that several factory lunch-hours had been altered in order to accommodate workers' desire to listen to the programme, and that 'when Irish troops went to the Congo some years ago tapes of the programme were flown out to Africa and broadcast to Irish soldiers'.²⁷ This implication that *The Kennedys* could offer compensation to Irish people missing home was further reflected in a fan letter from 1956, when a listener living in London wrote to the programme to say that the programme 'brings me home at least in spirit two days each week'.²⁸

Sponsorship, programming and audiences

The rapid development of sponsored programming on Irish radio during the 1950s was predicated on a system of interlocking interests between the sponsors, broadcasters and audiences which was analogous to that which had been operating in print media for many decades by that point. Radio's established position in Irish domestic life by the end of World War Two meant that it had a loyal and attentive audience throughout the broadcasting day, making it a very appealing platform for advertisers seeking to promote their products. This was even more true because so many of the regular daily listeners were married women listening as they worked in the home – these women also did the majority of their household's consumer spending, especially on food but also on clothing, toiletries and other household items. In 1953, Radio Éireann began conducting its first serious attempt at audience research, attempting to properly delineate their audience by class, age and gender, as well as asking participants how many hours a day they listened to radio (including Radio Éireann's competitors such as the BBC stations and Radio Luxembourg), and at what times of day they did so. This research was conducted using a national sample of listeners, questionnaires and (in a creative solution to their lack of a proper budget for the research) interviews conducted around the country by specially trained postmen, as an addition to their regular delivery rounds. The results showed that approximately 86 per cent of the overall

population listened to radio on most days, and that although the various overseas stations available to Irish listeners were popular, Irish radio was considerably more so, with almost all radio audiences listening to it daily. The listenership was almost evenly-balanced between men and women, although it seems likely that their listening took place at different times of day. One of the most detailed questions asked of respondents was about the amount of radio they heard on a daily basis and the kind of programming they listened to as a share of that programming. The categories of programming were defined as 'News', 'Sponsored Programmes' and 'Other Programmes'. Average listening times and types of programmes consumed varied considerably according to days of the week (Saturday being the day with the largest audiences and Friday the smallest). But broadly speaking, Irish audiences listened to around 2 hours of radio per day in 1953, of which on weekdays anywhere between 30 and 50 minutes were sponsored programming.²⁹ Most of this sponsored programming occurred in the middle of weekday schedules, when the all-important married female audience might be presumed to be listening, and to be doing so even as they used the very household products such as processed food and cleaning products which were sponsoring the programmes. If soap manufacturers had pioneered modern advertising in print media during the early twentieth century and then again by giving their product name to that new cultural form the 'soap opera' on pre-World War Two American radio, then on Irish radio it was mainly food manufacturers whose sponsorship developed new forms of programming during the 1950s – not only soap operas such as *The Kennedys of Castleross* with its chocolate sponsorship, but also *The Road Around Ireland* comedy travelogue sponsored by Jacobs, the *Milo and Maureen* comic dialogues sponsored by Chivers and the topical magazine programme *What Are They Talking About?* sponsored by Rountrees.³⁰ As a commentator on sponsored programming noted in a 1956 article on the subject, 'Radio advertising in Eire is chiefly for inexpensive consumer goods – soaps, jellies, nylons, chocolates, sausages, to name the chief ones'.³¹

For Radio Éireann, there were several benefits to the increased use of sponsored programming during the 1950s. As Harry Bradshaw describes, it '... had the dual advantage of filling the program space and providing revenue'.³² For a station constantly short of money (in evidence not least in its need to co-opt postmen to do its market research) this was undoubtedly true. Fifteen minutes of sponsored programming not only earned money for the station, but it was fifteen minutes of airtime they didn't have to spend money making programmes to fill. The benefits of sponsored programming for the station went beyond the financial, however. The particular governance structures under which Radio Éireann operated as a public broadcaster brought with it considerable pressures to focus programming on styles and content which were at least perceived to be 'traditional'. As was discussed earlier, this was most obviously true with regard to music, as the station's attempts to play any of the more popular forms of mid-twentieth-century styles – from jazz to showbands and pop music – met with fierce condemnation from influential commentators even as this was clearly the music audiences wanted, and were then inclined to seek out from other stations (the popularity of Radio Luxembourg in Radio Éireann's own market research from 1953 was undoubtedly based upon their playing of international rock and pop hits). The cultural and

political pressure to maintain Radio Éireann programmes as a platform for material perceived to be ‘traditional’ in form extended beyond music however, to include drama, entertainment and the content of programmes reflecting everyday Irish life. Because sponsored programming was made by the sponsors, their advertising agencies and independent production studios, it appears to have been less subject to these pressures – they were not Radio Éireann programmes and their openly commercial nature pre-empted complaints about their failure to promote a more traditional version of Irish culture. Maurice Gorham (who was Director of Radio Éireann when *The Kennedys of Castleross* began) recalled of sponsored programming that ‘it had its uses in providing listeners with some kinds of programme that the station itself did not want to or was not able to do. At one time sponsors provided so much pop music that the station felt no obligation to provide more’.³³ So sponsored programming developed soap operas, popular music programmes, agony aunt shows and many other formats, driven only by the requirement that they be popular with listeners and thereby succeed in promoting the sponsors’ brands. Indeed, a particular kind of creativity appears to have been fostered by the need to produce programmes which appealed to audiences while also contributing in either form or content to the sponsors’ market position. As Harry Bradshaw recalled in a retrospective interview,

There was one program in particular called *Come Fly with Me*... Harry’s [Thuillier] stroke of genius was that he tied in with the local airline, Aer Lingus, and he would fly wherever an Aer Lingus plane was going on a particular day, be it Rome or Paris or Berlin. Harry would take his small tape recorder and he would chat with the passengers and find out who they were and what they were doing. At that time, flying was very exotic. Only a small group of people could afford to do it. Then Harry would take back these tapes and turn them into programs. This was really exotic to the Irish listener at that time, “Here I am in Barcelona ...”³⁴

This ‘golden age’ of sponsored programming during the 1950s and 1960s did more than meet the immediate vested interests of its audiences, sponsors and the broadcaster, however. The programmes were imbued with a degree of consumer culture which went far deeper into the fabric of the broadcasts than the jingles and brand-names which preceded them. Even *The Kennedys of Castleross*, which adopted a ‘soft sell’ approach by not mentioning the sponsor’s product within the programme itself, had embedded within its plots and character arcs the values of industrial production and consumerism. Like all soap operas, *The Kennedys* had a great many interwoven and lengthily-developed plots over the course of its 18 year history, and correspondence between the producers and writers about the actual content of the programme indicates that a wide variety of considerations and concerns affected the way these were developed. One early plot-line however does serve as a revealing example of the ways in which the fictional world of Castleross was deeply imbued with narratives of the consumer culture and capitalist modernity of its era.

The centrality of the Viritex factory to Castleross’ economic and social structures was an important feature of the programme’s narratives, and was part of the

programme's depiction of small-town Irish life from its very beginning. While Castleross could convincingly have been a market-town primarily dependent upon the agricultural economy of the surrounding area (and local farmers and land-owners did appear as characters with significant plot-lines), instead its primary economic focus was a modern factory. The factory's very name was that of its brand, suggesting modern marketing as well as production methods, and its slogan 'made in Ireland by Irish workers using Irish materials for sale throughout the world', emphasised that Castleross with its population of just 2500 was connected to and dependent upon international markets. This was further emphasised only a few months after *The Kennedys* began, with a plot-line in which Viritex ran a competition for a local girl to accompany them to a trade-fair and exhibition New York, as part of a company delegation. This competition took the form of the participants giving speeches about '... themselves and why they think Irish products are as good as you'll get anywhere else in the world'. This format, as one character explains to another, was because as part of the New York event, the winner 'will probably have to make some speeches there. You know, at receptions and banquets and the like. And probably on television too [so she should] be able to know how to talk in public. Of course, the girl will have to be nice looking too'.³⁵

The company's search for a 1950s 'spokesmodel' ended in an episode broadcast in September 1955 in which Pat (a major character and the romantic interest for Brian, one of Mrs Kennedy's sons) wins with a speech in the village hall ending with the statement,

... and so, I believe that all these factors prove that we in Ireland can match the craftsmanship of any country in the world. Slowly, we are finding our place in the markets of the world, a place we have fought hard to obtain ... a place we will never give up easily. We are making the label "Made in Ireland" one respected throughout the world as an assurance that the goods they are attached to cannot be bettered by anyone ... anywhere. Thank you.³⁶

A few months later this storyline re-emerged as an obstacle in Pat and Brian's romantic relationship when Brian noticed in press coverage of the New York exhibition that Pat was not wearing her engagement ring at official events and suspects her of having begun a romance with David Erskine, the Viritex managing director who was leading the delegation. This misunderstanding was eventually resolved when it became clear that there was no such relationship between Pat and Erskine, but that it had been his idea that she remove her engagement ring for public events in America because he argued that,

I know what people expect in exhibitions like those in New York ... it's propaganda. We were trying to sell Irish goods and the gimmick was that we had a fair young colleen to model them. To admit that she was engaged would destroy the illusion ...³⁷

This plotline – from the very first year of *The Kennedys of Castleross* – delivers the generic soap opera narrative of community and workplace drama interwoven with a romantic relationship riven by misunderstanding but which was eventually resolved. However it does so embedded within a situational context which includes industrial production, international trade, modern marketing methods and

advertising strategies (including the very knowing mobilization of myths of Irishness in the service of increasing American sales). The precise timing of this plotline and the initial success of *The Kennedys* is also worth examination in this context. The programme's first episode was broadcast in March 1955, with the New York trade show storyline running intermittently from August to December of that year. The knowing references to the appeal of an 'Irish colleen' to American consumers were therefore being made to an Irish radio audience familiar with the success of the *Quiet Man* in 1951, a film with its own knowing representation of the impact of an Irish colleen upon an American man. More presciently, the use of a competition for a 'good looking' Irish girl in which she has to speak convincingly on stage foreshadowed the first Rose of Tralee pageant in 1959, in which women competed for the right to represent the 'ideal' qualities of Irish womanhood by means of being interviewed on stage.³⁸ And most strikingly, the Viritex factory's slogan 'made in Ireland by Irish workers using Irish materials for sale throughout the world', along with the New York trade fair plotline, took the ideology of earlier decades' emphasis on Irish-made goods and repurposed it from a protectionist national economic policy to that of the free-trade, internationalist strategy which would be echoed in real life three years later by TK Whitaker's First Programme for Economic Expansion in late 1958. This new economic policy, implemented by Sean Lemass's government and largely continued by subsequent governments of all parties, sought to finally end the protectionist policies of De Valera's era by instead opening up the Irish economy to overseas investment and seeking overseas markets for Irish goods. The fictional Viritex of *The Kennedys of Castleross*, with its modern industrial production of fashionable leather goods and clothes, to be sold at home and abroad using modern sales structures and techniques, was a fictionalised foreshadowing of the Whitaker Plan's vision for the post-war Irish economy. This was likely driven in part by the fact that it was itself written in order to promote the industrially-produced products manufactured and sold by international corporation Fry-Cadbury, and doing so by using modern advertising techniques such as programme sponsorship.³⁹

The television age and sponsored programmes

The dominant example of sponsored programming in Ireland for many years, the *Kennedys of Castleross* nevertheless achieved the dubious distinction of having been the victim of television's rise as a platform for advertising not once but twice, and on both sides of the Atlantic. In the programme's very first year, its success emboldened its American writers to explore the possibility of running it simultaneously on Irish and American radio. Correspondence between Mark Grantham and Bill Nugent (who had already returned to the United States) from the autumn of 1955 tracks their negotiations with executives at the NBC radio network to buy *The Kennedys of Castleross* for national syndication. The letters indicate that NBC were enthusiastic about this proposition in principle – so much so in fact that one of their stipulations was that they wanted five days' a week worth of Irish material, which of course was more than *The Kennedys* episodes could provide. Nugent persuaded them to take on another Grantham-scripted programme called *Milo and*

Maureen, a broad comic dialogue programme starring Milo O'Shea and Maureen Toal as a loquacious married couple. In Ireland the fifteen minute programmes were sponsored by Chivers and prefaced with the sponsors' announcement that the 'makers of the famous Jellies, Jams, Marmalades, Jelly Creams and Custard Powder that are made by particular people ... for particular people, present 'Milo and Maureen'. That NBC were enthusiastic to broadcast *Milo and Maureen* as well as *The Kennedys of Castleross* might itself have been a further indication of the post-*Quiet Man* perception of Irish narratives and accents as saleable to American audiences. Questions of sponsorship rapidly complicated the negotiations, however. At different times during the negotiations both Guinness and the Irish Tourism Board in New York were contacted as possible sponsors but neither chose to pursue the opportunity. NBC were prepared to commission 13 weeks of the programme at a 'sustaining price' of \$250 a week on the condition that by the end of that time it would have found sponsorship for longer-term broadcasts. However at that price the cost of producing another copy of each episode and then physically shipping the reels to the United States from Ireland would have cost more per week than the programmes were earning. Grantham and Nugent explained this to the NBC management who were sympathetic but gave a revealing explanation when refusing to increase the fee. As Nugent described it in a letter to Grantham, NBC had explained that,

all the big sponsors are dropping or have dropped. Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger, Lux Radio Theater, US Steel Hour and the countless [sic] other old fixtures of the network have dropped their shows and put their money into television.⁴⁰

This stalemate was where the attempt to syndicate *The Kennedys of Castleross* in the United States ended. While 1955 was evidently a good moment to begin a sponsored radio soap opera in Ireland – where there was as yet no national television service and only a small proportion of the population had access to either a television set or stray television signals from across the Irish Sea – the same was certainly not true in the United States, where commercial television was rapidly becoming the dominant form of broadcasting. As Cynthia B Meyers has pointed out, sponsored network radio in the United States had a long, slow decline, lasting throughout the 1950s and even into the 1960s. However, the major brands began moving their advertising money to television from the late 1940s and continued to do so in greater numbers over the coming decades.⁴¹ In this advertising environment, NBC clearly believed that finding sponsors for a new programme in 1955 would be challenging.

In fact, by the time radio owners across Ireland were listening to *The Kennedys of Castleross* in the late 1950s, many of them were also considering buying a television set – by then the latest broadcasting technology which was superseding radio as the newest way to bring programming directly into Irish homes. Their arrival as new items of consumer technology for Irish homes mirrored radio's arrival thirty years earlier. Firstly, although RTÉ would not begin television broadcasting until New Year's Eve 1961, British television like British radio before it could be picked up on television sets in certain parts of Ireland, especially of course along the east

coast. Secondly, like early radios they were expensive and as such were high-status consumer goods – in 1958 Ekco brand sets were being advertised from 79 guineas to 125 guineas, meaning that even the cheapest models would have been a significant expenditure for even prosperous middle-class households.⁴² Four years earlier an article entitled ‘TV or not TV’ in *Homeplanning* magazine began by stating that ‘if your income is such that you can afford a £1000 motor car, there is no reason why you should not also have a television set’, thereby placing them out of reach of the overwhelming majority of the population.⁴³ Despite these costs, when the Radio and Television Show was held at the Mansion House in Dublin in September 1958, its television show producer estimated that there were already 31,000 television sets in Ireland.⁴⁴ Once RTÉ began their own broadcasts from the start of 1962, this number of course increased rapidly even though televisions remained a relatively expensive consumer item. Even more than radios before them, they operated as multi-layered bearers of consumerism, first as consumer goods themselves, but also as the conduit for television programmes and advertisements for other consumer goods. RTÉ television, far more than the Irish radio service before it, was commercial from its inception. Where radio commercials, jingles and sponsorship had been met with resistance within the station itself and from government officials and ministers until after World War Two, television commercials were integral to RTÉ schedules (and budgets) from the beginning. Although the United States’ history of commercial networks was the international standard for how television programming and product advertisements operated together to create a seamless flow (as Raymond Williams would later describe it), those involved in establishing commercial television at RTÉ would have had before them the much more immediate example of ITV television in the United Kingdom, begun in 1955.⁴⁵ Organised on a regional franchise basis, ITV stations were opened across the United Kingdom on a rolling basis over the following years, including the beginning of Ulster Television in Northern Ireland in late 1959, meaning that commercial television was also available on televisions screens in much of the Republic from that date. This knowledge (and viewing experience) must have been influential in the final decisions about RTÉ television’s use of commercials.

The arrival of commercial television in Ireland created a new landscape of advertising possibilities, especially for larger companies and brands which had the budgets to support making television advertisements. Fry-Cadbury were one such company, and only a few months after the rather triumphal press releases, newspaper profiles and champagne receptions to mark *The Kennedys of Castleross*’ 1000th episode, the company withdrew their sponsorship. It was understood at the time by those involved in making the programme, and repeated in some published articles in later years, that this was in order to divert their advertising budget from radio into television – a repeat of the changing landscape of commercial media platforms which the producers had encountered in America a decade earlier.⁴⁶ More detailed records of Fry-Cadbury’s reasons for ending their sponsorship of *The Kennedys* when they did do not survive, but it may not be a coincidence that it occurred the year after the beginning of RTÉ television’s first soap opera, *Tolka Row* (set in Dublin) and only months after the beginning of *The Riordans*,

which first broadcast in January 1965. Set in a fictional rural location in Co. Kilkenny, *The Riordans* was in many ways an obvious successor to *The Kennedys of Castleross* in terms of Irish soap opera production, and its immediate success may well have been a significant factor in Fry-Cadbury's decision to end its sponsorship of the radio soap.

Conclusion

Very unusually, the loss of sponsorship was not the end of *The Kennedys*, which was bought from its creators by Radio Éireann for 300 guineas and continued on air. At the time, the station's Advertising Sales Manager explained in a memo that '*The Kennedys* is a very expensive programme to mount and the expense must be recouped, in part at least, by way of advertisements. Instead, however, of letting the programme out for sponsorship by another firm, Radio Éireann is arranging to include in it spot advertisements ... This will give a wider range of advertisers the opportunity of participating in the programme. The advertisements will be broadcast in the natural breaks which occur when the action changes from one scene to the next'.⁴⁷ It was an indication of how popular *The Kennedys* still was with listeners that it continued beyond its loss of sponsorship. It eventually ended – largely unmourned – in 1973. By that time it probably seemed rather staid and old-fashioned to many listeners, a rare survival from an earlier era of broadcasting which had (or so it claimed) prioritised the preservation of 'traditional' Irish culture despite the fact that its primary purpose was to increase sales of Cadbury's chocolate. Some of its decline was probably due to the fact that the television soap opera *The Riordans* had developed since its beginning in 1965 into a more adventurous and formally ground-breaking programme, which not only pioneered the use of outside broadcasting equipment for external scenes, but also included storylines about taboo social issues which (as revealed by Fry-Cadbury's nervousness about any contentious topics) had never been allowed in *The Kennedys of Castleross* precisely because of sponsored programming's need to protect its brand from controversy which might affect sales. The combination of *The Riordan's* visual style and its coverage of contemporary Irish social issues would, over several years, have accustomed Irish viewers to soap operas which operated in a very different imaginative and ideological register from that of *The Kennedys of Castleross*. By the 1970s, *The Kennedys of Castleross* may well have seemed an embodiment of an earlier era of Irish broadcasting – slightly quaint, family-orientated and rather reminiscent of de Valera's own 1943 radio speech in which he hymned an Irish people 'satisfied with frugal comfort'.⁴⁸ But its carefully uncontroversial storylines had in fact been a central part of the development of a commercially-popular Irish broadcasting which had carried consumer culture within its deepest structures.

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Notes

1. Fry-Cadbury (Ireland) was established as an Irish company in 1932 in order to avoid the import tariffs already being threatened in advance of the Anglo-Irish trade war which began in 1934. The company built a large manufacturing plant in north Dublin and were significant employers as well as being a major brand. See Mary E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity 1922-1939* (Syracuse, NJ: Syracuse University Press, 1922), 83–4.
2. Richard Pine, *2RN and the Origins of Irish Radio* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 40–1.
3. Pine *Irish Radio*, 104–5.
4. Cited in Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1967), 13.
5. See Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands, 1922-1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) for a detailed examination of the censorship culture of the Free State years.
6. *Dublin Opinion*, 31 August 1931, 193, *Model Housekeeping*, October 1934, 659.
7. *Dublin Opinion*, October 1937, 281.
8. *Irish Housewife*, 1946, 93.
9. KG Forecast, 'Radio Éireann Listener Research Inquiries, 1953-1955', *Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, Vol. XXIX, 1955/1956, 4.
10. Gorham, *Forty Years*, 65.
11. Marie Coleman, *The Irish Sweep: A History of the Irish Hospitals Sweepstake, 1930-87* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009), 39–40.
12. Coleman, *The Irish Sweep*, 41.
13. Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 72–3.
14. *Irish Press*, 2 January 1934, 7.
15. Alan Tate to Mark Grantham, 15 November 1964, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/10 Folder 4.
16. Most of the information about *The Kennedys of Castleross* in this article is drawn from the Mark Grantham Papers held in the National Library of Ireland. These include Grantham's correspondence with Arks Advertising Agency, RTE and several individuals including Bill Nugent. More extensively it consists of every script Grantham wrote for *The Kennedys of Castleross*, as well as some production schedules and other creative materials. These scripts, which remain largely unexplored by researchers, offer the best surviving information on the content of *The Kennedys* over most of its production.
17. *Kennedys of Castleross* Episode 36, 16 August 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4 Folder 9.
18. Mark Grantham, 'The Kennedys of Castleross: A memoir of Irish sponsored radio in the 1950s and 1960s', Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/8, 11.

19. *Kennedys of Castleross* Episode 55, 27 October 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4 Folder 14 and Episode 68, 6 December 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4 Folder 17.
20. Mark Grantham, 'The Kennedys of Castleross', 3.
21. 'The Kennedys of Castleross: A Story of Life in an Irish Midland Town. General Situation Outline', Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/3.
22. Ibid.
23. Nollaig O Gadhra, 'In Search of Castleross', *RTÉ Guide* 3 April 1973, 10.
24. Alan Tate to Mark Grantham 16 September 1957 and 15 October 1957, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/10, Folder 1.
25. Alan Tate to Mark Grantham 15 May 1962, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/10 Folder 2.
26. Harry Bradshaw, Linda Scott, 'Interview with Harry Bradshaw', *Advertising & Society Review*, Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2008.
27. Arks advertising agency press release, 1965, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/6.
28. Rita Dillon to *Kennedys of Castleross* producers, 26 June 1956, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/11, Folder 1.
29. KG Forecast, 'Radio Éireann Listener Research Inquiries, 1953-1955', *Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, XXIX (1955/1956): 1-28.
30. 'Milo and Maureen', Episode 1, 4 February 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/1, Folder 1.
31. Thomas Halton, 'Sponsored Radio and Television', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 45, no. 178 (Summer, 1956): 234.
32. Harry Bradshaw, Linda Scott (2008), 'Interview with Harry Bradshaw', *Advertising & Society Review*, 9, no. 3.
33. Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1967), 56.
34. Bradshaw, 'Interview with Harry Bradshaw'.
35. *Kennedys of Castleross* Episode 33, 4 August 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4, Folder 9.
36. *Kennedys of Castleross* Episode 41, 1 September 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4, Folder 11.
37. *Kennedys of Castleross* Episode 71, 15 December 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/4, Folder 18.
38. See Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture, 1945-2000* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 151-63 for a discussion of the ways that *The Quiet Man* and the Rose of Tralee competition represented ideals of Irish womanhood during the 1950s.
39. See Andy Bielenberg and Raymond Ryan, *An Economic History of Ireland Since Independence* (London: Routledge, 2013) for a full examination of the development of Irish economic policy during this era.
40. Bill Nugent to Mark Grantham, 28 September 1955, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/11, Folder 1.
41. Cynthia B. Meyers, 'Commerce and Culture: Histories of Radio Sponsorship Yet to be Written', *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 23, no. 2 (2016): 377.

42. *Evening Herald*, 23 September 1958, 3.
43. Kevin Collins, 'TV or not TV', *Homeplanning: the magazine of better living*, March 1954, 13,
44. 'Irish Radio and TV Show Opens', *Evening Herald*, 23 September 1958, 5.
45. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2004).
46. Mark Grantham, 'The Kennedys of Castleross: A memoir of Irish sponsored radio in the 1950s and 1960s', Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/8, 15.
47. Memo of RTÉ meeting, 7 March 1966, Mark Grantham Papers, NLI MS49/153/7.
48. Éamon de Valera (1943), 'The Ireland That We Dreamed Of', <https://www.RTE.ie/archives/exhibitions/eamon-de-valera/719124-address-by-mr-de-valera/> (accessed August 13, 2019).

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