Social History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshi20

Youth and Popular Culture in 1950s Ireland

by Eleanor O'Leary, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, x + 240 pp., £59.50 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350015890

Jennifer Redmond

To cite this article: Jennifer Redmond (2020) Youth and Popular Culture in 1950s Ireland, Social History, 45:3, 398-400, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2020.1774194

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1774194

Published online: 06 Aug 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 41

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rshi20

In the context of Cold War tensions, folk also functioned as a sign of opposition to American cultural power. Ewan MacColl was a key figure here. His views on contemporary US folk were summed up by his appraisal of Dylan, who he dismissed as a mediocre singer of 'tenth-rate drivel'. Strong distaste for US cultural imports was an orthodox stance among a New Left that had read Hoggart and Williams. Yet as Mitchell shows, defending home-grown cultural traditions eventually morphed into MacColl's more troubling 'sing your own national music policy', which split the folk scene. In MacColl's club in the Princess Louise pub in Holborn, British performers were told that they had to sing British songs. Against the wishes of those who saw folk song as a global musical form, other clubs went further and only permitted the performance of English or British folk songs by anyone at all. Together with the fact that the English folk revival was almost exclusively white – and that performers were more comfortable singing about race discrimination in the US or South Africa rather than racism at home – the 'all-British' policy suggested that folk was struggling to position itself in post-imperial times.

The second part of Mitchell's project is to show that the folk revival significantly contributed to those developments that are currently seen as constituting English postwar history. This strand of the book does not always fully convince. In contrast to its rich and distinctive analysis of folk music culture, the book's broader treatment of postwar developments sounds rather more familiar (to this reader, anyway). It is not easy to see how examining postwar English folk music generates fresh insights into the contexts in which it was situated. This is less a criticism of the author than it is a general comment about historiography. Historical readings of the long postwar period have been working with the same themes, thinkers and source texts for decades now. So, it is understandable that this book takes us back to them. Perhaps including a more theoretically informed account of the way in which discourses act as modes of address that create publics (and counterpublics) would have strengthened the argument that folk was constitutive of processes, not just a symptom of them. These are academic issues, however. As Mitchell argues convincingly, folk music is worth thinking about on its own terms. For anyone who wants a deep understanding of the interplay of similarity and difference that connected folk music to the commercial pop of the 1950s and 1960s, this book has much to offer.

Mark Donnelly
St Mary's University

mark.donnelly@stmarys.ac.uk

© 2020 Mark Donnelly
https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1774193

Youth and Popular Culture in 1950s Ireland, by Eleanor O'Leary, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, x + 240 pp., £59.50 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350015890

O'Leary's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the experiences of young people in post-independence Ireland and is part of a trend in research in which the lives of children and young people are being foregrounded. Part of a wider turn towards social history in Ireland in recent years, this book provides valuable information on the work, leisure and family lives of young people in Ireland in the 1950s. This decade, often

seen as one of stagnation, economic depression, high unemployment and migration (a bleak picture), has not captured the attention of researchers to the same extent as other decades. O'Leary therefore provides a timely account of this period, using a wide variety of sources and perspectives.

O'Leary convincingly illustrates that teenagers did exist in Ireland in the 1950s, although they were hidden (or denied) in previous accounts. The idea that Ireland was immune to trends in popular culture seen in other countries is perhaps due to an over-emphasis on the traditional nature of Irish society in the past, with strict censorship of literature and frequent exhortations from the pulpit on appropriate behaviour, particularly of young people. When childhood ends is a fascinating question with historically and geographically specific answers, and O'Leary's analysis captures this perfectly in her chapter on employment and emigration when she examines the 'social limbo' teenagers in Ireland were in: expected to obtain jobs at the age of 14, but still within their parents' households and subject to their rules, they were neither fully autonomous nor carefree children. For those working not for pay but for subsistence on the family farm, it is easy to see why emigration was the preferred option.

O'Leary's introduction ably discusses the contradictions between depictions of this era in modern films and the reality of people's lives. This is a difficult issue to fully understand at this moment as we currently await the findings of a Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, established in 2015 by the government to determine what happened to women who entered such institutions, designed to house women who became pregnant outside of marriage. Oral histories and documentary evidence suggest an often harsh routine, false information given to women on their rights to their children, punitive familial and societal attitudes towards women (but not men) who experimented sexually outside of marriage and darker histories of improper burial practices for illegitimate infants who died. O'Leary's evidence goes somewhat against the grain of what people have come to believe about 1950s Ireland and what is continuing to emerge from investigations. Nonetheless, she presents a convincing case for complexity and for examining multiple forms of evidence, from the popularity of dances and the cinema to the reading and employment habits of youth, to present a counter-narrative to the prevailing one of misery and deprivation.

The affordability of engaging in popular culture pursuits is a fantastic perspective included in this book. O'Leary brings to life the many popular pursuits available to young people that depicts a liveliness to social life not often associated with the period. Trends in international music and youth style are considered, which O'Leary partially uses as a way to chart social change in Ireland.

It is rich in detail also about the education and training opportunities that existed for young people in the era before free second-level education that was to come in the following decade. A notable aspect of this discussion is O'Leary's examination of the discourses on appropriate roles for women in the context of the promotion of domestic science as a school subject. Here we see the interplay between traditional notions of home-identified women with knowledge of domestic skills that some would use in the workplace, arguably before marriage in roles as domestic servants. The reluctance of women to take up these opportunities in Ireland speaks to the reality of the poor pay, conditions and status of this work that saw women flee from it in large numbers. There are a number of thought-provoking assertions in this book: considering not just gender but class and where one was born in the family (youngest or oldest) could determine much about one's opportunities and life trajectory.

The book contains an impressive amount of detail in the appendices, in a number of tables that cover types of work, films oriented towards young people (including details

of whether they had been censored or not), the register of prohibited periodicals (between 1950 and 1955), letters of complaint about the importation of foreign literature received by different government departments (including, crucially, who wrote them) and an order sheet from 1956 for Eason and Son (Belfast), one of the major newsagents in the country, giving a detailed picture of what magazines were being popularly consumed by Irish readers.

Jennifer Redmond
Maynooth University

jennifer.redmond@mu.ie

© 2020 Jennifer Redmond
https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1774194

The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Toubles, 1968–1998, by Margaret M. Scull, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, xii + 236 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN: 97801988432104

This new book by Margaret M. Scull sets out to trace the history of the activities of the Roman Catholic Church during the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, and specifically the efforts of the Church as an institution, and of individual priests and women religious, to 'mediate conflict'. It provides a valuable contribution, focusing as it does on religious leaders in a conflict with undeniable religious dimensions. Certainly, the Troubles were often seen from outside – and from not too far outside – as an atavistic Catholic–Protestant quarrel of the type that the rest of Europe had long since grown out of. There was an old joke which ran: 'We are now arriving at Belfast airport. Please put your watches back 300 years'. As Scull points out, Catholic Church leaders were often subject to scathing criticism from letter writers, journalists and cartoonists in Great Britain for not doing enough to denounce the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or even to excommunicate its members. However, those with more knowledge of Irish history can point to the long-term mutual antagonism between the Catholic Church and physical-force republicanism. In 1861, Archbishop Cullen refused to allow a Catholic funeral for the Young Irelander Terence Bellew McManus, but a vast crowd followed his remains to Glasnevin Cemetery. 'No priests in politics', said the Fenians, and the Church responded by excommunicating them *en masse* in 1870. When the civil rights struggle in Northern Ireland was subsumed into the latest campaign of Fenian-style violence by the Provisional IRA exactly a hundred years later, the Catholic Church was no more capable of controlling them than it could control the 'irregulars' in the Irish Civil War.

Scull traces the responses of the Church to many of the tragic, horrible episodes from the Troubles, from the first Derry civil rights march in 1968, through internment in 1971, Bloody Sunday in 1972, the bombing campaigns of the IRA and the hideous sectarian murders committed by the loyalist paramilitaries. She devotes substantial space to the role of the Church, notably Cardinal Ó Fiaich and Father Denis Faul in trying to prevent and then break the 1980–1981 IRA hunger strikes, and points to the animosity this generated towards the Church from the IRA. Ó Fiaich was distrusted by unionists and the British for his unashamed nationalism, and he caused trouble for himself by ascribing the rise in support for Sinn Fein to a protest vote rather than a vote for violence. Ó Fiaich's successor as head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Cathal