

The shock of the old

Seán Kissane

'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, It's with O'Leary in the grave', wrote William Butler Yeats in *September 1913*, a poem about exile and sacrifice, about those heroes of the past who gave their lives for a country that has forgotten them in its rush for material wealth. 'Romantic Ireland' is the country as envisioned by Éamonn de Valera, the first Taoiseach of the new State:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit — a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.¹

This Ireland is an empty landscape, a misty, foggy place, as encountered in the paintings of Paul Henry, the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, or movies like *The Quiet Man* (1952). It is an island of folklore and fairies, saints and scholars. But it is also a construct. It is a vision of Ireland which exists in people's minds, both at home and abroad. So pervasive is this concept that, of the images of Ireland found in the David Kronn collection, those that do not reference the Troubles in some way reference this Romantic Ireland and its visual tropes.

In many ways, de Valera succeeded in his endeavour of creating an image of an Ideal Ireland. Despite the experimentation occurring in the arts in the 1910s and 1920s such as Cubism or Futurism, the new government of Ireland patronised artists such as Seán Keating who contributed greatly to official myth building. Keating monumentalised fishermen from the Aran Islands, farmers and labourers. Here was the template of the 'real' Irishman and woman, derived from some golden age of the past: indigenous people who had been geographically unaffected by the polluting influences of English rule. Of course this agenda necessitated a bypassing of modernity. These images hark back to a preindustrial age. Traces of the industrial age such as the motor car are entirely absent — something repeated by photographers visiting decades later. In the exhibition *Out of the Dark Room*,

we see the Irish landscape and people through the eyes of photographers such as Pentti Sammallahti, Harry Callahan, Martine Franck, Jock Sturges and Rosalind Solomon. These visitors turn their ethnographic lens onto the Irish with curiosity, but as a visual archive what do these images tell us about the country and the social and cultural changes it has undergone in recent decades?

Harry Callahan's images *Ireland* (1979) depict the eerie emptiness of small rural towns. Unlike his iconic portraits of his wife Eleanor or the organic abstractions rendered in black and white also to be seen in this collection, these portrayals of Irish vernacular architecture manage to convey a sense of the peculiarly vivid colouring of this style, as well as communicating some of the bleakness of that same environment in the late 1970s. At a time of 18% unemployment, an entire generation emigrated, leaving towns and villages such as these devoid of youth, vibrancy and colour. Callahan here presents us with visual oxymora: using a permanently overcast sky as his ally, turquoises and pinks become various shades of grey, roads become glacially black. All the while, the ubiquitous net curtains suggest the watchful gossip of a small community in which keeping up appearances is everything.

In hindsight, we know that, behind those carefully maintained appearances, collusion between the religious orders and government led to systematic abuse of the most vulnerable in Irish society. The last twenty years have seen an enormous change in the public face of Irish 'morality'. The idea of Roman Catholicism as a dominant force in the State has now become abhorrent to many. While not suggesting that Harry Callahan is making a statement about moral rectitude, perhaps one can identify an unconscious desire on his part to communicate that all might not be what it seems. As an outsider observing an inward-looking society, he could not have hoped to be privy to Ireland's darkest secrets; yet he chose to represent it as a society over which the clouds hung oppressively and low.

Finnish photographer Pentti Sammallahti's image of *Achill Island (Keel Bay)* (1978) has an almost supernatural quality. The cloud is so dense on the mountainside that the sailor arriving on this shore is uncertain what he will find. Sammallahti's images of pilgrims on Croagh Patrick also taken in 1978 have the ring of cliché to the Irish viewer, but their value as cultural documentation cannot be questioned. Such has been the speed of socio-religious change in Ireland that many of the scenes presented are now anachronisms. The sheer numbers of pilgrims evident would now be much reduced, while the pretty, fresh-faced nun would be retired by now — the last of her generation to enter the convents amid the fervent religious vocations of the 1950s.

While the ascetic pilgrim tradition can be found all over the world, there is something particularly pagan about Irish traditions, suffused as they are with holy wells, relics and icons. Such customs, which are embedded in Ireland's psyche, are both familiar and peculiar to us, but are revealed in all of their fascinating strangeness when

presented to us by a foreign photographer. Although it might not be immediately evident, Sammallahti is clearly hinting at an otherworldliness and heightened sense of spirituality in these scenes in which the central figure is strongly silhouetted against a background softly suffused with mist. With both the nun's open, joyful demeanour and the crouching figure's contemplation, we are made to understand that something special is happening on this mountaintop.

It is unsurprising that images of religious ritual should have formed central subjects for artists, writers and photographers, but such ancient customs have also been divisive. Since the late 12th century, a separation between 'Irish' and 'English' and later Catholic and Protestant would define much of the country's socio-political history from colonisation and plantation through to rebellion and independence. The manner in which the political landscape north and south of the border has been treated by photographers in some ways reflects this context of occupation and independence, although they rarely attempt to convey the nuances of such a deeply contested history.

American photographer Rosalind Solomon's, *Another Day of Action, Belfast, Northern Ireland* (1989) shows where the effects of sectarianism can be clearly seen – in the faces of the children caught up in the Troubles. *The Sunday World*, whose headline is seen on the hoarding, is a tabloid newspaper from the Republic. The headline is clearly antithetical to the loyalists planning the 'Day of Action' and as a perceived medium of Catholic or Republican propaganda, it is unlikely that this paper would be available in one of the loyalist strongholds of Belfast. In such a way the scene can be located – not just geographically, but also politically – by the subtle signs (such as the availability of a newspaper) that allow it to be read as being on one side or the other of the sectarian divide. As any political commentator will point out, the Troubles were always more about power and economics than any religious difference – the variations in these branches of Christianity being so slight as to be immaterial. The discount 'priced to clear' storefronts would suggest this photograph was not taken in one of the affluent middle-class neighbourhoods of the city but in one of the working-class areas which are divided along religious lines, West Belfast being 90% Catholic while East Belfast is 90% Protestant. This little man, dwarfed by that emblem of happy childhood, a giant plastic ice-cream cone, looks fierce enough to plan another Day of Action all by himself. One imagines that the photographer caught his expression at a serendipitous moment – it certainly does not seem staged – but what is certain is that, like all little boys, this one wants to be just like his daddy when he grows up, his father possibly being the man whose tattooed arm we can see just at the edge of the shot. 1989 was possibly the nadir of this period in the history of Northern Ireland, with ongoing violence marring daily existence in the province. As a guerrilla war fought on the streets of its cities and played outside chivalrous rules of engagement, the Troubles destroyed the lives of civilians in a

creeping and insidious way. Events (post-Agreement) at the Holy Cross school in Ardoyne, North Belfast in 2001-2002², when a dispute arose over a route used by children to access a Catholic primary school, showed how some of the parents saw children not as passively affected by these events, but as active participants and even sectarian soldiers of the future.

The stunningly composed photograph *The Troubles, West Belfast, Northern Ireland* (1990) evokes a powerful sympathy for its subject, the young boy who stands in sharp focus in the foreground. In the background, like a range of misty mountains, are the gables of rows of working-class, government-assisted housing. So engaging are the eyes of this child that one might miss the middle-ground in which boulders or rubble suggestive of a pile of burnt-out cars form an unlikely playground. Much more a classical portrait of an individual than a documentary photograph, this boy's unkempt hair, tired eyes and scraped chin give the viewer an insight into his psychological state. The boy could, of course, just have fallen off his bike, but the backdrop against which he is presented leads the viewer to imagine more troubling scenarios. Despite the child's dishevelled appearance, the stillness of the image and the beautiful, serpentine twist of his body calls to mind classical antecedents like *Parmigianino's Madonna With the Long Neck* [c. 1535] – a testament to the photographer's skill.

Solomon's *Flag Wavers, Neshoba County, Mississippi* (1990) provides a useful counterpoint to her images of Ireland. Three charming, blond, sun-kissed, children in cowboy boots stage an impromptu performance for their friends or relations, who are seen in the background. It is clear from the mirrored poses of the older girls that this is a rehearsed routine, possibly for a patriotic song of some kind. Displaying a simple form of 'loyalist' patriotism, one supposes that in Mississippi, Rousseau's social contract has been worked out advantageously. Such a scene, transposed to West Belfast, would immediately lose its sense of childhood play. Flag-waving children would seem instead to be the progeny of sectarian agitators, or even possible terrorists of the future. Solomon's work is often concerned with simple rituals, and the contrast between the *Flag Wavers* and *Another Day of Action* throws into focus the disparity of rituals experienced by these children. While neither photograph displays affluence, the poverty of the Irish scene seems so much keener when a ritual of 'action' or violence is being planned. Here is a salutary lesson for the viewer: an image's setting – whether geographic or political – can overwhelm the evidence provided by the photograph. Even small shifts in contextual appreciation can dramatically alter perceptions, causing viewers to cease empathising with the subject and to project their prejudices onto them.

Belgian photographer Martine Franck is particularly well known for her images of people, which are distinguished by an empathy and human engagement that goes beyond the journalistic. Her photographs of children on Tory Island, focusing as

they do on these somewhat unruly subjects, have a distinct lightness of touch. Tory Island is an isolated community off the northwest coast of Ireland, which, with a population of 133 in 2002, is one of the few remaining Gaeltacht communities in the country. One of the peculiar relics of ancient practices to be found on the island is the election of the *Rí Thoraí* – the King of Tory – a unique role that involves symbolic duties such as greeting visitors, rather than any formal powers. The current king is Patsy Dan Rodgers – so the surnames of Franck's subjects have a particular resonance. Are we in fact looking at Tory Island's Royal Family? Are the girls in the photographs Tory princesses? With this in mind the clothes of the girl in *A Tory Island Child on Her Rocking Horse* start to look decidedly stagey, almost like Sunday best. The rocking horse – with its associations with horsey entitlement – and the girl's hard stare give her a petulant, princessy air. Franck's character study *Anne-Marie Rodgers* stands in complete contrast: Anne-Marie's wild blond curls, inquisitive eyes and open face give this girl an enquiring, intelligent appearance, so unlike the rather distant-seeming subject of the previous image.

These images from Tory Island are contemporary with the two portraits by US photographer Jock Sturges taken in a school in County Galway. The annual, formal school portrait is familiar to many people. Children are herded in one by one, or in family groups into a studio set up with a plain background. The professional photographer, keen to get through his day's work, makes a cursory attempt to get a smile from his sitters before saying 'Next!' These portraits by Sturges break this convention by situating the children among their peers. As is typical of prepubescent youth, their peer groups are rigidly separated along gender lines. And while these are clearly portraits of individuals, it is the group dynamic which is most compelling in these images. The girl with her prim smile and tidy appearance is framed by her four friends, each carefully mirroring the pose of the other while one looks shyly at the photographer. There is a studied quiet among these 'good girls'. The bedlam evident in the boy's portrait could not be more different. As with Roger Mayne's Dublin street scene taken some 50 years earlier (also in this collection), one can almost hear the sounds of the boys' teasing laughter as they mock their friend who poses for Sturges. With his arms folded and with a sweet smile, he rises above their jibes. Alongside the noise in the photograph is the movement; as none of the other boys will sit still, their blurred faces bring a dynamism to the image, and, more importantly, refocus attention on the central subject, making his calm expression even more striking. It is apparent that there is also a simplicity and conservatism apparent in these images from Ireland quite unlike Sturges's other works perhaps due to the conservatism he felt there.

In the cases of Martine Franck and Jock Sturges it is perhaps irrelevant that they were visiting photographers. Their engagement is so focused on the individuals they meet that it is possible to see these children apart from their social context.

While these images have their own cultural peculiarities, there are also universally recognisable themes evident in them — boys will be boys, girls will hate them and play separately.

It is somewhat ironic that the only Irish photographer in the exhibition, Amelia Stein, has chosen to portray Ethiopian women and their children in her series *Solomon's Children* (1991). These photographs have some of the sense of ethnographic documentation displayed by Irving Penn in his *Dahomey Children* (1967) or *Enga Warrior* (1970) photographs — in both cases, one sees a white, western photographer going to a foreign land and capturing images of the 'natives'. Both Penn and Stein have posed individuals against a plain background — removed them from their normal social backdrop. The man from New Guinea with the feathered headdress in Penn's portrait would look less strange if photographed in his forest home, where he would blend in with the environment from which he derived his attire, where he would seem part of something. By placing them in a sterile setting both Stein and Penn could be accused of depersonalising their sitters, making them an 'example' of a type rather than an individual. From a distance, the photographers could be mistaken for Victorian collectors amassing specimens for display.

However, viewed in greater detail, the reality is different, more complicated. Amelia Stein's background is in Ireland's very small Jewish community. In 1991 she travelled to Israel to photograph the Beta Israel (Falashas), a tribe of Jews from northern Ethiopia who had fled their homeland under pressure from a government that was against the practice of Judaism and who refused to allow them to leave their country during a time of civil unrest. At the time of these portraits, more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel under Operation Solomon. In Israel, while they were now safe, they had to begin the process of assimilation — learning Hebrew, being trained for industrial work and learning to live in a modern society. 'Absorption centres' were set up in empty hotels, and this is where Stein made her portraits. The empty background of a hotel room is the perfect setting for these people who have been absolutely and permanently removed from their context. Their geography, customs, and even foods, are all utterly changed — they are now people with no homeland.

Stein's portraits ask many troubling questions about the nature of cultural identity, about the experience of diaspora and race. But these photographs also interrogate traditional paradigms of Irishness: Stein's identification with the Beta Israel (Falashas) counters the rigid, de Valera definition of what it means to be Irish. Although the Irish were never subject to the same pogroms as the Jews, as communities they can relate to the experience of immigration and diaspora. De Valera's 'Romantic Ireland' was, by contrast, about a homogenous experience and a specific geographic location: it did not embrace those who identified with the country, but who, due to accidents of birth, were excluded from it. As Irish people left behind a country whose economy was unable to support them, the Irish experience eventually became one

of broadened horizons and cultural diversity, antithetical to the old romantic ideal. *Out of the Dark Room* articulates some of these binarisms. From the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, to the separation of Church and State, this society is evolving. The work of these photographers is not just of archival value, a visual record of a society at a specific moment in time, it also bears witness to how, over time, Ireland has truly changed.

Seán Kissane

- ¹ Eamonn de Valera. 'The Ireland that we Dreamed of.' St. Patrick's Day Speech. Radio Éireann. March 17, 1943.
- ² See CAIN Web Service, University of Ulster, Chronology of the Conflict 2001 and Chronology of the Conflict 2002. Available from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch01.htm> and <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch02.htm>