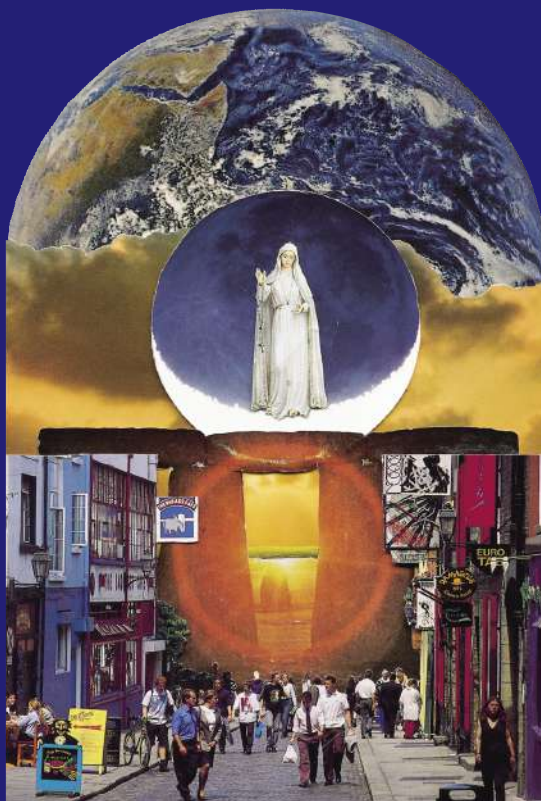Eugene O'Brien

'KICKING BISHOP BRENNAN UP THE ARSE'

NEGOTIATING TEXTS AND CONTEXTS IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH STUDIES

reimagining ireland

'KICKING BISHOP BRENNAN UP THE ARSE'

This collection of essays reconsiders aspects of Irish studies through the medium of literary and cultural theory. The author looks at the negotiations between texts and their contexts and then analyses how the writer both reflects and transforms aspects of his or her cultural milieu. The essays examine literary texts by W. B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, James Joyce and Sean Ó'Faoláin; media texts such as *Father Ted*, *American Beauty* and a series of Guinness advertisements; as well as cultural and political contexts such as globalisation, religion, the Provisional IRA and media treatment of murders in Ireland. The author also looks at aspects of the postcolonial and feminist paradigms and makes use of a theoretical matrix based on the work of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan.

Eugene O'Brien is Head of the Department of English Language and Literature and Director of the Irish Studies Centre at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. His publications include *The Question of Irish Identity in the Writings of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce* (1998), *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind* (2002), *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing* (2003) and *Seamus Heaney Searches for Answers* (2004).

'Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse'

Reimagining Ireland

Volume 1

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght

Eugene O'Brien

'Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse'

Negotiating Texts and Contexts in Contemporary Irish Studies

Cover image: "The Goddess of Temple Bar, Dublin, Irelantis",
collage 1995 by Seán Hillen. www.irelantis.com
Courtesy the artist and Limerick City Art Gallery

Printed in Germany

Contents

Acknowledgements

Negotiating Texts and Contexts

One of the strongest criticisms aimed at the project of Jacques Derrida in particular, and indeed at literary and cultural theory in general, is the relativistic and apolitical nature of its epistemological position. Derrida has been seen as a nihilist and a relativist and as someone for whom anything goes in terms of ethics and politics. One of the most celebrated examples of this was the Cambridge affair where Derrida's putative award of an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University became a point of contestation among the fellows of that college, and later among the wider academic community. In a series of flysheets, supporters and critics set out their arguments and among the reasons offered for the non-awarding of this degree, the following were set out:

> Despite occasional disclaimers, the major preoccupation and effect of his voluminous work has been to deny and to dissolve the standards of evidence and argument on which all academic disciplines are based ... What determines us to oppose this award is not just the absurdity of these doctrines but their dismaying implications for all serious academic subjects ... By denying the distinction between fact and fiction, observation and imagination, evidence and prejudice, they make complete nonsense of science, technology and medicine. In politics they deprive the mind of its defences against dangerously irrational ideologies and regimes. (*Non Placet* Flysheet 1992, 687)

I would counter this assertion and in this book I will use many of Derrida's ideas to demonstrate the power of critique within the socio-political realm to enable the inception of an emancipatory discourse. I will argue that Derrida's work can trace a lineage back to the Enlightenment and that in the field of ethics, culture and politics, he has made significant contributions to the reconception of issues of justice and fairness within culture. However, this is achieved very much on his own terms. The series of concepts, non-

concepts and neologisms associated with Derrida can be seen to partici-
pate in an ongoing epistemological strategy where the individual thought
or concept under discussion is always situated within an ever expanding
contextual framework wherein its meaning can be traced.

One of the main reasons offered for the citation of deconstruction as
a relativist and textualist discourse is Derrida's famous dictum: '*Il n'y a pas
de hors-texte*' (there is nothing outside the text) (Derrida 1976, 158). This
has been taken to mean that all communication is confined to textuality,
that there is no outside reality or that the connection between text and
the real world is non-existent. In fact, what he was suggesting was that
knowledge is a social and linguistic construct and that all such knowledge
could be interpreted as a form of textuality. Six years after this sentence
had appeared in *Of Grammatology*, and after much discussion and argu-
ment, Derrida reconceptualised this dictum in the following phrase: '*Il
n'y a pas de hors contexte*' (there is nothing outside of context) (Derrida
1988, 136). This developed position suggests that all meaning is socially
created, and that every utterance, in every discourse, needs to be located
within a specific context. In other words, he argues that meaning is never
simple or pure but is haunted by an interaction of text and context. Thus
the present discussion of justice will take place in the context of a further
discussion on politics, ethics, the law, religion and the notion of the future
and the role of the other.

In this sense, these phrases are further enunciations of his earlier notion
of *différance*, a neologism whereby the differential and deferred nature of
meaning in language is outlined. This sees every concept as inscribed in a
chain or in a system, within which it refers to the other, to other concepts,
by means of the systematic play of differences. This the meaning of 'high
culture' is necessarily determined by various contrasts and comparisons
to 'low' or 'popular' culture. And while this is true at a synchronic level,
it is also true from a diachronic perspective. For example, the meaning of
a word like 'republican' needs to be situated contextually. In an Irish con-
text, this word needs to be read as part of a specific historical and politi-
cal system of discourse. To attempt to conflate the meaning of this term
with its parallel use in an American political context would be a serious
error – the political ideologies of George W. Bush and Gerry Adams are

very different, though they would both see themselves as 'republicans'. For Derrida, this play of *différance* is not simply a concept 'but rather the possibility of conceptuality' (Derrida 1982, 11). In other words, every text, be it literary, cultural or political, needs to be interpreted with respect to its context, both the contemporary context and the historical one. This is a complicated mode of interpretation, but clearly it is very much related to the real world – indeed, I would argue, *contra* Derrida's detractors, that his mode of thought is very much situated within the mode of intellectual involvement in matters political and ethical.

In a way, this view can be seen as paralleling the rhetorical figure of anastomosis, as cited by J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*, in terms of notions of 'penetration and permeation'. Miller is also speaking about the relationship between text and context, and sees this notion of context as hovering 'uneasily' between 'metonymy in the sense of mere contingent adjacency and synecdoche, part for whole, with an assumption that the part is some way genuinely like the whole' (Miller 1987, 6). It is here that he cites the trope of anastomosis, adverting to Joyce's verbal example 'under-darkneath' as well as to Bakhtin's view of language as a social philosophy which is permeated by a system of values 'inseparable from living practice and class struggle' (Volosinov 1973, 471). One could just as easily see 'context' as a similar case, with one word, 'text' penetrating or permeating the other, 'context'. Here both words intersect and interfuse, but perform the dialectical action of remaining separate as well as blending. For Derrida, and Miller, meaning is intrinsically connected with this permeation and penetration of text and context.

Interpretation, for Miller, in his discussion of anastomosis, necessarily involves a variety of 'crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides' (Miller 1987, 7), and I will argue that such transgressive and transgenerative crossings of frontiers are a central feature in Derrida's work, and I will go on to demonstrate the efficacy of this type of transgressive thinking in my own analyses of different literary, media, political and cultural texts. Indeed, Derrida, in 'Living on: Borderlines', probes the epistemology of the border between text and context in a broadly analogous manner, as he talks about borders

in terms of permeability, noting that no context is 'saturatable any more', and that 'no border is guaranteed, inside or out' (Derrida 1987c, 78). In other words, meaning is always permeable and each instance needs to be analysed critically. In a way, this could be seen as a further definition of Derrida's project. Hillis Miller has made the telling assessment that deconstruction is 'nothing more or less than good reading' (Miller 1987, 10), and Julian Wolfreys goes on to amplify this by suggesting that 'good reading' may well be reading which 'never avoids its responsibility, and which never falls into reading by numbers' (Wolfreys 1998, 16).

I hope that the analysis and interpretation pursued in this book will fall under the rubric of good reading and avoid any hint of reading by numbers. The chapters will look at texts and contexts and their inter-penetration and at the various anastomoses that are to be found between the literary, the political, the cultural and the social. I will proceed to examine the various negotiations that are to be found between texts and their contexts, using this specific method of reading. I will examine the internal dynamics of the chosen texts but will also keep a close eye on the negotiations between these texts and their contexts. I will be looking for the areas of contextual opening in these texts and will be stressing that 'a context is not made up only of what is so trivially called a text, that is, the words of a book or the more or less biodegradable paper document in a library' (Derrida 1989b, 841).

The opening section of this book will address texts from the literary canon of Irish studies. I will be reading the work of Yeats, Joyce, Heaney and O'Connor in terms of how their work opens to the other of language, and I will be probing the negotiations between these texts and their cultural contexts. So in the first chapter, I will examine the nature and development of literary theory as a discipline, tracing the cultural milieu of Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, and will then look at the socio-political anastomosis between the gradual permeation by theory of the Irish symbolic order and will argue that many of the changes in Irish society, in terms of the discourse and power-relations of that society, can be located in the ideas and emancipatory thrust of French literary theory. I will argue that just as these texts were seminal in the movement of students to the barricades in France and parts of the United States in 1968, so, in a belated and delayed

fashion, they have had a similar effect on the cultures of political and religious authority in the Ireland of the end of the twentieth century.

The next two chapters focus on the work of Seamus Heaney, specifically his translations of the Greek tragedies: Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as *The Cure at Troy* and *Antigone* as *The Burial at Thebes*, as well as his translation of the Middle Irish language poem *Buile Shuibhne* as *Sweeney Astray* and his translation of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. While these are literary translations of the highest merit, I will also explore crossings over into their political context – into the ways in which a culture comes to terms with violence through aesthetic representation and mediation. Thus, as well as looking at these translations, I will also look at their relationship to the death of the hunger striker Francis Hughes, and to the hunger strikes in general, as well as looking at the relevance of these translations to the sense of ideological tribal loyalty as opposed to a broader, intersubjective notion of loyalty to a shared sense of being human – the 'all throughother' and what he calls the 'borderline that poetry operates on' (Heaney 1990, 2), as Neoptolemus can express his transgressive crossing of his tribal context in the resonant phrase: 'I'm all throughother. This isn't me. I'm sorry' (Heaney 1990, 48). This sense of negotiation between the text and context is furthered by the act of translation itself and then by the anachronistic signifiers of a 'hunger-striker's father' standing in a graveyard, and a 'police widow in veils' fainting at 'the funeral home' (Heaney 1990, 77), recalling the Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland, and reinforcing the creative connection between Greece and Ireland. In *Beowulf*, there is an anastomosis between the original Anglo-Saxon, the contemporary discourse of modern English and Heaney's own desire to go beyond the ideological binarism into a 'further language' (Heaney 1999, xxv). This further language harks back to Derrida's sense that no border is guaranteed anymore, and beginning a classic of the English canon with a very Irish idiomatic expression – 'So' – is an example of the negotiations that I trace throughout this collection.

In *The Burial at Thebes*, the same clash of loyalties is enacted – a sense of loyalty to one's polis or state, or else a sense of loyalty to the transcendent that is in humans – a loyalty to an intersubjective law of respect for the dead. The object around which this clash is enacted is the dead body of Polyneices, and in my analysis of this text, I will look beyond its borders

to the real dead body of Belfast man Robert McCartney, killed by the
Provisional IRA on 30 January 2005. His dead body became a similar site
of struggle between a sense of communal loyalty and a broader sense of
intersubjective justice, and I will trace the transgression of the borderline
between the literary and the politic in this text. As Derrida has noted:

> An 'internal' reading will always be insufficient. And moreover im- possible. Question
> of context, as everyone knows, there is nothing but context, and therefore: there is
> no outside-the-text [*il n'y a pas de hors- texte*] (used-up formula, yet unusable out of
> context, a formula that, at once used up and unusable, might appear to be impos-
> sible to wear out [*inusable*]. I don't believe that in the least, but the time involved is
> difficult to calculate). (Derrida 1989b, 873)

And in this reading, the voice of Antigone resonates with the voices of con-
temporary women in the political sphere – the sisters and partner of Robert
McCartney: Catherine, Paula, Claire, Donna and Gemma, and Bridgeen.
Their voices demonstrate that the need to listen to the unvoiced and those
without power is as germane today as it was in the time of *Antigone*.

The following two chapters also focus on the voices, and silences, of
women, as I examine the representation of female characters in the writ-
ings of James Joyce. I will trace the representation of female characters in
'The Sisters', 'Araby', 'The Boarding House' and 'The Dead'. I will argue
that these stories, each with two sisters and an emblematic male figure,
act as a framework to the collection and that both stories enact central
themes and motifs of the collection. The sexual politics of the collection
is interesting as the women have no access to money or power apart from
the different men in their lives – the Misses Morkans of 'The Dead' being a
major exception. It is the personae of Molly Ivors in particular, and Gretta
Conroy who demonstrate that even in this strictly patriarchal society,
there is a deconstructive force at work, as these women assume aspects of
control in their symbolic order. They are instances of how contexts can be
deconstructed.

Chapter Five also looks at the representation of women in *Dubliners*,
but it also looks at the collection in terms of postcolonial and psycho-
analytic theory. In the case of 'Eveline' it examines the societally-driven
nature of her desires and her social situation. Through a close reading of the

story, the subjected and subjugated role of women in the family symbolic order of the Ireland of the time is made clear. The role of the church in this construction of a specific female subject position through ideological interpellation and through the iconography of the female form is also examined. The role of the woman as an object of specular and imaginary love and desire is further explored in a reading of 'Araby'. And the very orientalist name of the bazaar gestures towards the particularist nature of each story and by extension towards a critique of the universalist position often used by postcolonial theory. The essay points to the negations suggested by Joyce's texts between the feminist and postcolonial paradigms in terms of any representation of Irish identities.

The subsequent chapter develops the representation of Irish identity in the work of two singular Irish poets, W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney, both Nobel laureates, and both of whom attempt to define Irishness differentially, in contradistinction to the nationalist hegemonic norm. Both writers see Ireland as part of a European system of discourse and culture. Yeats, in his championing of the Hugh Lane Gallery, is invoking traditions that have been validated in a European context, and is thereby suggesting a *hauntological* permeation of Irishness within a broader, modernist, European perspective. Yeats, in his complex responsibilities to the different voices from his past, demonstrates his inclusive and emancipatory sense of Irish identity. Some ninety years later, Heaney invokes the same European ghostly avatars as he inscribes Ireland within a broader European context as well. He also speaks in different voices in *Station Island* as another method of negotiation between the voices of the tribe and the voices of a more plural form of identity. Both writers look to other voices and other perspectives in order to cross over the borderlines of nationalism and to invoke the ghostly differences of a more plural form of Irishness. Hence, both Yeats and Heaney are attempting to further a process of serious engagement with a modern, and even postmodern, sense of Irishness that, while taking account of its past, refuses to be bound by that past.

And it is to the deconstruction of a very strong pillar of Ireland's structural and symbolic past that our discussion turns in the next chapter which gives the book its title. Referring to an iconic image from the iconic and groundbreaking television series *Father Ted*, this chapter explores

the deconstruction of the special position of the Catholic Church in the symbolic order of contemporary Ireland. What is groundbreaking about this programme, however, is a placing of the institutional church in a position as target of satire, however gentle that satire may be. For so long the sacred cow of Irish media coverage, *Father Ted* levels the playing field and the church, like the family, the law, the world of work and politics, becomes subject to a ludic glance. The church is now seen as just another organisation, as part of the way in which society and culture are ordered, and which is subject to the same rules, regulations and expectations as the other societal structures with which it competes. Read across the borders of three other texts, this chapter will probe the postmodern representation of the church in Ireland, and I will compare and contrast the text with the broader context of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland and with aspects of the film *American Beauty* to demonstrate the value of a deconstructive reading across the borders of the literary, the social and the filmic.

In a manner analogous to that of the reading of the text of *Father Ted* against the context of the church in the real socio-political environment of Ireland, Frank O'Connor's short story 'Guests of a Nation' will be read in the context of real-life events, both of the historical context of its composition, and the contemporary context of its current interpretation. Hence there is a crossing over from the literary to the political and from the historical to the contemporary. The two guest of the nation, Hawkins and Belcher, become *Geists* as they are killed but their memory goes on to haunt the consciousness of the nation which has killed them. The chapter goes on to look at how other guests of communities in Ireland have become *Geists* as they have been killed in the name of a specific community and have gone on to haunt that community with the spectre of otherness. I will look at Patrick Pearse's invocation of ghosts to haunt the British empire, the ghostly figures of Jerry McCabe and Robert McCartney which have haunted the Provisional IRA, and the ghosts of Zhao Liu Tao and Brian Murphy which haunt contemporary Irish society.

Having looked at contemporary Irish society and its hauntings, the next chapter looks at a broader picture of a societal haunting of Ireland by its globalised other. Much has been said about globalisation but there has been little enough actual examination of the epistemology of the term and

an analysis of how globalisation has affected specific aspects of Irish life. Consequently I will examine the term and its etymological derivation and also will probe the binary opposition within which all knowledge operates. I will examine the transformation in notions of the local brought about by the technological and epistemological changes that have been made by the global. Examining the interaction of global capital and the local, I will probe how the Ireland of the third millennium has been transformed by globalisation.

One of the most important signifiers of globalisation has been the foregrounding of the image and in the final chapter I will look at how images of Guinness – itself a product synecdochic of Irishness – has been signified through different periods of time. By tracing a number of advertisements, I hope to demonstrate that Guinness as a commodity has followed, paralleled and at times anticipated, socio-cultural trends in contemporary Irish society. This may seem a large claim to make for what is, after all, a brand of beer, but a brief discussion of how cultural codes develop and change will provide the theoretical framework for an exploration of Guinness advertisements as published by the company themselves, in a special celebration of seventy-five years of advertising, published in 2004 (*Guinness Calendar*).

There is no distinction made in this book between the cultural capital that is to be found in the different texts and the crossings and displacements with their contexts. The same micrological and interpretive interaction of text and context will be brought to bear on the writing of Heaney, Yeats and Joyce as it will be on the issues of globalisation and murder or on *Father Ted* or *American Beauty*. In this reading practice, I will be following in the footsteps of Derrida when he makes the point that:

> all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened ... is a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text' ... that is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. (Derrida 1987c, 81)

In the negotiations and crossings from text to context and back again, I hope these readings will highlight new meanings and new relationships between different borders, limits, genres and ideological constructs because it is in the creating of such meanings and such new perspectives that the work of the cultural critic resides.

Ireland in Theory: The Influence of French Theory on Irish Cultural and Societal Development

That contemporary Irish society and culture is in the process of a radical transformation is beyond question. However, what is open to question is the context within which this process has been set in motion. From being a socially and religiously conservative, homogenous culture, Ireland has now begun on the problematic journey towards becoming a European pluralist society. The hegemonic pillars of traditional Irish society – the church, the twin governmental parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and 'republicanism' (however undefined) as a default position within the national psyche – are in the process of undergoing a searching interrogation and critique. The position of church and state as arbiters of opinion and unquestioned sources of wisdom has never been more tenuous.

This chapter will offer a reading of the engine that initiated this change and will suggest that increasing levels of education, specifically in the areas of literary and cultural theory, much of which originated in France, have been the catalyst behind this process. I think that the emancipatory and political force of such critical discourse is often obscured by the arcane terminology and overzealous jargon of some practitioners. In this discussion, only broad strokes will be traced, as the underlying imperative behind the theoretical writings of the last forty years will be examined, and then applied to the Irish situation.

Before looking at the process of change, and its contexts, it is necessary to examine the position from which the national psyche began this journey. It is generally accepted that the nationalist struggle for independence, culminating in the treaty of 1922 which saw the partition of Ireland and the foundation of the Free State, followed the trend of most nationalist movements by defining itself in terms of the departed colonising power.

Despite the shared nomenclature, the republican ethos of the IRA, IRB and Sinn Féin movements of the 1920s was a far cry from that of the American or French republican revolutions. The latter's aim was the achievement of a more emancipatory, more libertarian societal structure where the limits of the governing apparatus of the state were being probed in order to create a new societal and political dispensation. In an Irish context, however, such probing was confined to the eradication of the British presence, and that having been done, the lack of any coherent intellectual strategy meant that there was a glaring *lacuna* in terms of policy or transformation. As George Bernard Shaw acerbically put it:

> Under the feeble and apologetic tyranny of Dublin Castle we Irish were forced to endure a considerable degree of compulsory freedom. The moment we got rid of that tyranny we rushed to enslave ourselves. (Shaw 1928, 206)

Ireland was economically stagnant in the wake of British withdrawal. Much of Irish political and social thinking is 'still clouded by De Valera's vision of a self-sufficient, bucolic, Gaelic utopia' (Lee 1992, 187). However, the point must also be made that in the aftermath of British withdrawal, the Irish government was left in an epistemological quagmire. Having expended energy for, if we are to believe certain narratives of history, some 700 years in attempting to get rid of the colonising presence, it seems odd that their actual departure caused such a shock to the system of the body politic. But shock it seemed to be, as there were no structures ready to be put in place in order to make self-government in any way a transformational process, nor were there any intellectual ones in place to facilitate debate as to the nature and tenor of the society which would develop.

Instead of a debate regarding the future direction of our society in terms of the major issues of land ownership, legal and societal rights and social justice, there ensued a process of adaptation of hierarchical British models of government, judiciary, legislature and civil service, adding the additional layer of the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that both of these institutions were imperial in design, and therefore designed to restrict debate and enforce compliance with the existing structures, was not taken into consideration. The Dáil and Seanad were a carbon copy of

the structures of Westminster, which is somewhat ironical when you think about it. Despite the default position of republicanism, there was little or no effort to emulate the ringing assertions of the American Bill of Rights, or the French declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, 27 August 1789. Instead the imprimatur of the Catholic Church was sought by de Valera in the run up to the drafting of the constitution in 1937.

Much of the legal system of the Free State, later to become the republic, was exactly what had been placed on the statute books during the British administration. One would not expect a clean sweep of the *ancien régime*, in the manner of the French revolution; however, there was not even a process of legal review set in motion. In terms of the structure of the legal system, both the legal theory and practice of the British system, right down to the wigs and archaic forms of address, were retained. To quote Brendan Behan's caustic, but accurate, summary of the effects of independence, in *The Quare Fellow*: 'then the Free State came in we were afraid of our life they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds ... But sure, thanks be to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badges in the warders' caps' (Behan 1960, 21).

Behan's point is that the centres of power, whether under British or Irish jurisdiction, were deemed beyond criticism. In a manner that has become a *locus classicus* of a postcolonial state, British rule was replaced with home rule, but this was a home rule which was unselfconfident and based on non-existent intellectual foundations. All of the social and political thinking was based on Roman Catholic doctrine, and significantly, Catholic political influence was also pervasive in the country. As John A. Costello, leader of the inter-party government, declared: 'I am an Irishman second; I am a Catholic first' (Keogh 1994, 208), and it was this attitude that created a hierarchically driven model of society in which the parallel and coterminous structures of church and state ruled, with comparatively little criticism from those being ruled.

Hence Ireland, that erstwhile Celtic Tiger, was at this stage more in the nature of a Celtic Ostrich, with its head very firmly dug in the ground, and with two hierarchical centres – church and state – happily stepping into the postcolonial void left by the British withdrawal in 1922. These centres organised and directed the development of society through a quite