

**IRELAND AND THE IRISH:  
PORTRAIT OF A CHANGING SOCIETY, John Ardagh  
(London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994, 445 pp, Bib., Index).**

John Ardagh has tried to convey the atmosphere of contemporary Ireland in his book, and I feel he has succeeded. His book is not free of errors, but in fairness to Ardagh, it should be said that he more than makes up for minor mistakes by his trenchant insights into the true condition of the Ireland of the 1990's. Ardagh points out many of the paradoxes of this sparsely populated (under 4 million) and impoverished isle which missed the industrial revolution and is now home to a mixture of farming, tourism and high-tech computer related industries.

Ardagh is ambitious in attempting an encyclopedic coverage of modern Ireland in anecdotal form. He is opinionated but, unfortunately, gets a few things wrong. Ardagh acknowledges that some of the chapters were read in draft by Irish specialists, but the book would have benefitted from a final review/edit/proof by someone familiar with everyday life, culture and politics in Ireland. Such a review might have prevented the occurrence of some small, though annoying mistakes, such as describing the buses in the Republic (Southern Ireland) as orange when they are green. Ardagh seems to have particular trouble with Irish popular culture. He says that the folk-rock band The Pogues (gaelic for the "kisses") are Irish, but they are English. He often quotes, but continually misspells musician Christy Moore's name. He also tells us that Moore doesn't sing political songs, when, actually, he used to sing pro-IRA ballads and recorded songs supporting the IRA hunger strikers of the early 1980's, but he no longer gives overt support to the IRA cause.

The research effort required for the book seems to have been substantial. Ardagh has undertaken to interview a political and cultural "who's who" in modern Ireland, including Irish President Mary Robinson, whom he admires. He also interviewed the controversial former Taoiseach (Prime Minister and pronounced T-Shock) Charles Haughey (pronounced Haw-E). Haughey was in power during the early years of Margaret Thatcher's leadership in Britain. He was simultaneously lionized and vilified by the Irish. Changing one's mind seems to be a sacred prerogative in Ireland, and the Irish have a capacity to divorce a politician from his or her policies, liking the individual and abhorring the policies or vice versa.

The problem with Ardagh is that his work reflects his cultural biases. Ardagh's relatives were members of the ascendancy (the Anglo-Irish landed classes), and he is an Oxford educated member of the English conservative media establishment. He worked at *The Times* (of London) and has written similar books about the French and German peoples. He specializes in European affairs and supports the European Union, but he seems to concentrate on the upper strata of Irish life. I have a hard time imagining him getting "down and dirty" among the poor of Ireland and being able to relate to them on a meaningful investigative level. He seems inordinately impressed by the titled and those whose qualifications were obtained from 'Oxbridge' or "Ivy League class" schools. He generally appears to have spent his interview time in the company of the Irish elite.

Although a comprehensive objectivity eludes Ardagh, he does seem to be trying. As an Englishman (though unusually pro-European), and despite wide European continental experience and a habit of writing books about countries with which he is familiar, he writes about Ireland as an outsider. In some ways, this is an advantage, and the book would make a useful primer for those outside Ireland who

have outdated notions about Ireland or what such people might prefer to call "de oul' sod." I am thinking especially of those who, using the excuse of Irish ancestry, maintain strong and misguided opinions about Northern Ireland, which sometimes lead to their financially supporting a "cause" which they know little about. Such people should be made aware that the attitude of the majority of the mainland Irish toward terrorist activity and the possibility of a united Ireland is very mixed, fluctuating between neglect, ambiguity, support and condemnation, but in the main, the Irish are against violence. If this mainlander attitude is in stark contrast to the feelings of the descendants of the Irish abroad, then the education afforded by this book is overdue.

The book represents a sincere attempt at analyzing a people once defamed as simple, beer guzzling, brawling bogtrotters. Ardagh tells us about their incredible generosity and humanity and but then explains that there is a price for such selflessness. The Irish have a tragic inability to succeed as well at home as they do abroad. Ardagh fails to find a reason for this but seems to hint at an innate laziness, an exceptionally offensive view. In fact, the single most crucial aspect one should examine is the lack of opportunity. However, some Irish have had a tendency to exacerbate the lack of sufficient economic opportunity by belittling the achievements of their own people. The Irish call this inclination "begrudgery." There is also the even more pernicious habit of feeling good when enterprising compatriots fail in their endeavours.

Ardagh tells us the "Troubles" (the low intensity war in the north east of the island) do not stem primarily from religious differences. He says that it is mainly about nationality. But that is not so. The starting point of the current "Troubles," which date from 1969, was a situation of economic and educational inequality of opportunity, characterized by job discrimination against Catholics and a lack of political empowerment brought on by gerrymandering, with the Catholics again the victims.

Ardagh maintains that there is no racial difference between the opposing sides in the north of Ireland. Though the difference may seem small, it is my understanding that the nationalists (practicing and non-practicing Catholics), are of predominantly Celtic/Norse (Viking) origin, while the Unionists (practicing or non-practicing Protestants) are of Anglo-Saxon/Celtic/Norse/Norman (French-Scandinavian) mixed origin. More important, however, is the differing approach to life among the Protestants who have been deeply influenced by the Anglo-Saxon approach to life, and the Catholics' Celtic attitude which I have found to be more tolerant and individualistic, as well as less xenophobic and martial in comparison. The descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, after all, brought us the jingoistic leaders of the Victorian era, and on the lighter side, continue their thirst for conquest through the excesses of football hooliganism. The very word "hooligan" is an example of entrenched anti-Irishism, and is indicative of negative attitudes toward the Irish among some unenlightened English people. Ardagh does not dwell on the hot subject of biased or misinformed opinion about the Irish.

Ardagh's research is impressive in the area of social change and he explicates the complex political situation in the six counties (Northern Ireland) and in the Republic (the remaining and independent 26 counties) in an admirably clear manner. I wish to reiterate that such information could profitably be passed on to many people who think they know all about modern Ireland. They probably do not.

My quibbles with Ardagh's book are minor and for a person who was not raised

in an Irish milieu he does a remarkable job. The book is educational in its clarifications and its attempt to get behind the issues and identify underlying causes for all the phenomena he examines. More books such as Ardagh's are needed which attempt an overview of the Irish people as they are today, both inside Ireland and abroad. Ardagh's book is an erudite, relatively objective, easily readable and educational look at contemporary Ireland.

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