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Sex and socialism: the class politics of immorality in pre-First-World-War Ireland

Donal Ó Drisceoil

*‘Already the movement to shape opinion and to grasp at power
in the altering condition of society is upon us.’*

John Rochford, Hon. Sec.,
Catholic Truth Society of Ireland conference, 1903

The class dimension to the Irish moral censorship legislation that emerged after independence was explicit. The 1929 Censorship of Publications Act specifically refers to ‘the likely class of reader’, which refers to category rather than social class, but has strong social implications. Non-English language books were frequently not censored, while the translation was banned: the assumption was that the educated i.e. middle- and upper-class people, such as those who could read in French and other non-English languages, had an in-built immunity to moral corruption, unlike the ‘humbler classes’, ‘too ignorant’, in the words of the *Catholic Bulletin*, to repel the poison of ‘evil literature.’¹ Expensive hardbacks were often passed by the Censorship of Publications Board, while the cheaper paperback version was banned; popular cinema was heavily censored while elitist theatre was free from official censorship. The ban on information on contraception and abortion under the same legislation was also highly classed, as well as gendered. As the writer Frank O’Connor pointed out, ‘It is class legislation because it militated against the working class while the well-to-do Catholics and the pale primrose Protestants make their own arrangements . . .’. Here he was referring to both the ability of the well-off and well-connected to secure not only banned books (through travel abroad and networks), but also contraceptive information, and indeed contraceptives themselves. Even an elitist like W.B. Yeats recognised the implications: he predicted in advance of the 1929 act that ‘the practice of the well-to-do class [in relation to contraception] will not be affected by this legislation. It is the poor who are to be condemned to continue in virtuous ignorance and to suffer accordingly.’²

It was in the early years of the twentieth century that Irish censorialism first emerged in organised form. The blueprint of future Irish state moral/cultural censorship was established: its ideological approach took shape, its targets were defined, its advocates found their voices, and a number of its eventual operatives cut their teeth in a series of direct-action censorial campaigns. Although the latter functioned as dry runs for later state-centred controls, they were not just that; together with occasional prosecutions for obscenity and increased regulating tendencies in the commercial and civic realms, they also had a directly limiting impact on the content and range of literature and media available to an expanding Irish readership. The growing power of the Irish Catholic Church, allied to ‘Irish-Irelandism’, nourished a developing Irish censorship mentality. This was a Hibernian version of an international phenomenon arising from the demotic challenges that modernity posed to elite power. In an era of transition and intensified ideological competition, the discourse of immorality in Ireland was bound up with the political dynamics of the era, especially the class conflict that climaxed with the lockout of 1913. Its primary focus was sex, but the discourse segued easily into other realms of the ‘undesirable.’ Key amongst the latter was ‘socialism’, which was characterised

as an imported moral threat to an emergent Catholic Ireland. As Home Rule beckoned and conflict between workers and employers intensified, the class politics of immorality became increasingly evident and explicit.

Social control and Catholic Action

The expansion of literacy amongst the working class in Britain and Ireland and the resultant mass market in reading materials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was perceived as socio-morally dangerous by elites. In Britain, middle-class Victorians, many of them Protestant evangelists, attempted to counter working-class and female deviance from bourgeois norms of 'respectability' and 'decency' via morality, purity and vigilance campaigns. 'Immorality' signified 'practices that fostered ungovernable behaviour', primarily, though not confined to, sexual impropriety.³ 'The proletariat may strangle us', declared the co-founder of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Samuel Smith, 'unless we teach it the same virtues which have elevated the other classes in society'. In the discourse of social reform, immorality was closely associated with the working class, and in particular with the overcrowded and insanitary conditions it was forced to inhabit.⁴ Like other Victorian reform movements, these vigilance campaigns around literature were primarily about social, and by extension, political control. When adapted to an Irish context, classed and gendered approaches were overlaid with more pointed religious and 'national' concerns. The Irish campaigns packed a more potent socio-cultural and political punch, primarily because they were championed by the increasingly powerful Catholic Church - its hierarchy, led by Cardinal Logue, its clergy, and the growing network of lay Catholic confraternities, sodalities and societies that formed what would become known as the Catholic Action movement.

Catholic Action – which harnessed popular power through lay organisations under clerical control to defend and assert Catholic interests - was arguably the most powerful social movement (albeit one led from above) in twentieth-century Ireland. It became a strong and influential presence before the First World War and would eventually emerge triumphant following the establishment of the Irish Free State. A key organisation was the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI), whose annual conferences became the 'the forge in which the Catholic identity of the Irish Free State was hammered out and its moral and social values articulated.'⁵ In the pre-war period it campaigned against imported popular media and literature while offering an 'antidote' in the form of cheap, devotional reading materials. This Catholic agenda overlapped with and was reinforced by the influential Irish-Ireland movement and key elements within the Gaelic revival. A significant element of the campaign rhetoric was its elision and occlusion of the existence of widespread sexual immorality, as they would have seen it, within Ireland, epitomised by the prevalence of prostitution, for example, or sex crimes against women and the abuse of children. Irish moral degeneracy was always presented as a 'danger', an outcome unless action was taken, a potentiality. The sources of danger were external and imported, mainly from Britain. (This was not unusual: for British puritans, for example, France was the main culprit). Likewise, socialism – in the form of radical or revolutionary literature or the militant trade unionism personified as 'Larkinism' – was a contaminated, alien import. It was this underlying attitude that encouraged James Connolly's attempts to identify native historical roots for Irish socialism in *Labour in Irish History*, as well as his and Larkin's repeated professions of Catholic faith and assertions of the compatibility of socialism and Catholicism.

A key organisation in the development and enforcement of the censorial dimension of the increasingly powerful Catholic-nationalist nexus was the Ancient Order of Hibernians - Board of Erin (AOH), a Catholic sectarian organisation that was wedded to the United Irish League/Irish Parliamentary Party. The AOH had been organised in the US since 1836 as a 'sort of Irish Catholic freemasonry', and emerged as a force in Irish life in the first decade of the twentieth century, fighting

for 'faith and fatherland.'⁶ In 1904, its cause having been championed by the Bishop Patrick O'Donnell of Raphoe, the Irish bishops lifted the Irish Church's 'toleration ban' on the AOH and recognised it as a Catholic organisation. From 1905 (following a split with the IRB-influenced AOH-Irish-American Alliance) it was re-organised under Belfast's Joe Devlin, the Irish Party MP, and spread rapidly from its Ulster base to become a significant force in Irish life. Its membership expanded from 10,000 in 1905 to at least 60,000 in 1909, and under Devlin's leadership it grew politically powerful through its increasing dominance within the Home Rule movement. It was further strengthened in 1911 when it was recognised as an approved society under the National Insurance Act. In 1907-8 the AOH had run a campaign against 'dirty' postcards. These sexually suggestive cards had become increasingly visible in Dublin, echoing the situation in Britain and the continent. They represented most visibly the encroachment of what the AOH called 'the filth introduced by our hereditary foe', which was, according to the *Irish Rosary*, being 'eagerly devoured by our working classes.'⁷ Following modest success in securing prosecutions and intimidating newsagents, the campaign, which the AOH attempted to expand to include all 'indecent literature', petered out. One reason why an AOH-led campaign did not proceed at this stage may have been the public condemnation of the organisation by Cardinal Logue in early 1909, when he decried not only the use of bullying and intimidation by the group in certain districts of Ulster, but also, and ironically in the context, for allowing its ubiquitous halls to be used as 'dance-houses, where young people of both sexes are kept away from parental control' representing 'a serious danger to their innocence and virtue.'⁸ The Hibernians only grew in power and influence, however, and were key players in the next wave of the campaign, when their special skills of intimidation were extremely useful.

Vigilance committees and the Good Literature Crusade

'Molly Malone', writing in the *Catholic Bulletin* in April 1911, noted the growing taste for pernicious literature - 'the penny dreadful, the novelette' - amongst the 'humbler classes.' 'Molly' informed employers that 'it is the spread of such literature which is accountable for the unsatisfactoriness of their employes.' In December 1911 the President of the Society of St Vincent de Paul charity had suggested to a meeting of its volunteers in Dublin that in visits to the homes of the poor, 'they might aid the crusade against immoral literature by counselling poor people, whenever they found bad publications with them, to destroy them and not to admit them into their homes again.'⁹ As well as the sensuous passions of the novelettes and the divorce cases and birth control advertisements in the Sunday press, the poverty-stricken Dublin tenement-dwellers were being exposed to another 'moral danger' at this time, according to the William Martin Murphy-owned *Irish Catholic*, via 'some of the worst theories of the atheistic, blasphemous and anti-patriotic Continental Socialists' contained in 'the columns of the gutter press', as well as in the pages of the new weekly *Irish Worker*, edited by Irish Transport & General Workers' Union (ITGWU) leader and communist bogeyman Jim Larkin, which had begun in May 1911.¹⁰ In October 1911 Fr J. Morgan of Castlebar had warned against Larkin as a dangerous preacher of the new 'religion' of socialism, which was imported from England and aimed at the destruction of the Catholic Church. Its teachings were disseminated under the 'innocent title of Labour News' by the 'London Sunday newspapers', which, conveniently, also teemed with 'news of every immoral incident in the Kingdom.'¹¹

The 1911 annual congress of the CTSI opened on 11 October at Dublin's Mansion House, with Cardinal Logue and most of the hierarchy on the platform, along with the Lord Mayor of Dublin. Logue's welcoming speech referred to the need for a countrywide vigilance campaign to eliminate 'foul literature.' The *Irish Catholic* welcomed the call for a campaign, trusting that it would include within its scope 'pernicious Socialist teachings now so common', which were responsible for 'evils more serious in material extent and consequences, though not more hideous from the moral point of view, than those created by English pornographic titles.'¹² A member of the Limerick Board of

Guardians believed, in fact, that it was the Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, ‘where the curriculum was socialistic and atheistic’, that were the source of most of the immoral literature flooding into Ireland.¹³ The initial focus was on popular English Sunday newspapers such as the *News of the World*, *Sunday Chronicle*, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, *Thompson’s Weekly News* and *Lloyds Weekly News*. Their primary sins were sensationalism connected to crime, especially with a sexual dimension; the prominence given to the salacious details of divorce cases; and the carrying of advertisements for contraceptives/abortifacients and for erotic/pornographic literature. However, as Fr Morgan had pointed out, the objectionability of content was exacerbated by the ‘labour news’ aimed at a predominantly working-class readership. This point was elaborated upon later in the campaign by Michael Comyn KC, who became prominent in later years as a defender of republicans during the war of independence and civil war, as a legal advisor to Eamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil, and as a senator in the Free State from 1928-36. At a demonstration in 1913 he spoke of the British popular press appealing to a working-class audience by advocating the cause of labour, and then bombarding its readers with ‘filthy reports of filthy cases’ and advertisements for contraception. ‘Another class of literature which was distinctly evil’, continued Comyn, was socialist literature from the continent. If Irish workers created ‘a Celtic organisation with Celtic ideals run by Irishmen for Irishmen’, then the ‘evil introduced by the suckers of the rotten stem of French and German Socialism’ could be defeated.¹⁴

Weeks before Logue’s call for a vigilance campaign, it had already begun in Limerick, where the first targets were the local newsboys who, according to one of the organisers, had ‘pushed the sale’ of the immoral papers ‘as only newsboys can.’ They were ‘induced’ to become a guild of the Men’s Confraternity, whose adult members were told to buy their papers only from the Newsboys’ Guild. ‘Good clothing’ in the form of ‘cast-offs’ from the wardrobes of middle-class Limerick were supplied to the youngsters, who were miraculously transformed within weeks from ‘mere human flotsam and jetsam’ to ‘sober and respectable citizens.’¹⁵ The Dublin Vigilance Committee (DVC) was formed on 5 November, and over the following months vigilance committees sprang up all over the country - ‘like measles’, in the words of the sceptical *Irish Worker* - following the tactics of Limerick and Dublin. Pledges were extracted from newsagents not to stock listed titles, and pickets and boycotts resulted for those who resisted. All the Catholic Action groups were involved, but the AOH was a significant driving force. It openly initiated committees in Galway and Newcastlewest and took ‘the key local role’ in towns like Sligo, Athlone and Longford. In general, it claimed ‘a foremost place in the campaign’ across the country.¹⁶ Arthur Griffith of Sinn Féin welcomed the new movement to ‘stem the poisoned flood that is pouring into this country’ and ‘however crude its methods, we desire its success.’ Presiding over the founding meeting of the vigilance committee in the James’s Street area in December 1912 was Sinn Féin city councillor William T. Cosgrave, who would later oversee the introduction of censorship of film and publications as President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State. In Cork and elsewhere decidedly non-socialist trades councils and other labour bodies with a Catholic-nationalist bent were brought on board the bandwagon.¹⁷

‘Why oppose Socialism?’

The effectiveness of the Catholic Action crusade against socialism, and its (con)fusion with questions of morality, was demonstrated clearly in the campaign against the distribution of left-wing literature in the dockyards at Haulbowline, near Cobh (Queenstown), in County Cork in 1912-13. The naval dockyard was a major employer in east Cork. It underwent expansion in the first decade of the twentieth century, with the workforce increasing from 100 at the end of the nineteenth century to 1,200 in 1910. Wages were lower than the UK dockyard average and agitation for increases grew in intensity in 1912-13. Catholic Actionists who claimed to be workers at the yard began writing to the local newspapers warning that ‘one of the main props of Queenstown’s prosperity . . . should not be

permitted to develop in an inverse ratio to faith and morals.’ They revealed that ‘papers (which local newsagents refuse to stock) containing Socialistic doctrines were being circulated covertly amongst the Catholic boys’ and ‘a tubercular microbe [was] beginning its ravages at Haulbowline. Social as well as religious tuberculosis is setting in.’ Industrial unrest continued in the dockyards in first half of 1913, and on 28 July the *Cork Examiner*, a paper that supported John Redmond’s Irish Parliamentary Party, reported that ‘Socialism as it has been known at Haulbowline, got a well-deserved check . . . last week by the issue and posting of an Admiralty notice in the dockyard, cautioning workmen and all others that the distribution of unauthorised literature in the dockyard is a serious breach of Admiralty regulations, and would be dealt with accordingly.’ The paper applauded this ‘highly prudent step . . . against that Socialism which was sought to be, and was propagated at Haulbowline by the dissemination of literature, some of which was vile in its teaching.’¹⁸

The deeper political significance of this campaign emerged most clearly in Dublin, where Larkinism was at the height of its power in 1911-13. Sympathetic strikes, a bedrock tactic of Larkinism, were greatly feared by employers, and naturally found to be ‘immoral’ by Catholic spokesmen. Following a year of unprecedented countrywide industrial action in 1911, which included a major rail strike and numerous sympathetic and generalised actions, clerical spokespersons and their media cheerleaders railed against the immorality of the strikes and Larkinism in general. In October 1911 the *Connacht Tribune* editorialised on the fact that ITGWU members were ‘paying for an organ [the *Irish Worker*] that not alone is aiming at the complete ruin of Irish industries but also the undermining and overthrow of the Catholic religion and the setting up of Socialism in its stead.’ The ‘chief vehicles of dissemination’ for socialist heresy, according to the paper, were the English Sundays, which were poisoning Irish homes: ‘The evil must be stopped before it becomes more widespread and we appeal to the people to shun the literature Jim Larkin and his class would have them read.’¹⁹ ‘Why oppose socialism?’ asked a correspondent in William Martin Murphy’s *Irish Independent*, quoting an American Christian trade unionist: because socialism ‘would destroy the sanctity of the family and the home, for which the Catholic Church has always stood; because socialism stands for free love and derides marriage; because socialism justifies abortion, child murder, regulation of reproduction, prevention of conception.’²⁰

‘The Vigilance Society for exposing the inhumanity of sending starved children to school.’

The pages of Larkin’s *Irish Worker* bristle with moral outrage at the appalling living and working conditions of the Dublin working class in contrast to the wealth and privilege of the few, and the role of leading employer and press baron William Martin Murphy and his allies in the Church in maintaining this state of affairs. Larkinism’s threat to the emerging Irish establishment was obvious. It endangered the profits and power of Murphy and his fellow employers (presented as a threat to industrial efficiency and, thus, an economically viable Home Rule Ireland) through his organisation of unskilled workers and militant tactics; it challenged the conservative Irish Catholic Church on class grounds to confront issues of social immorality in a grotesquely unequal society, and highlighted the material interests of that powerful institution; and, crucially, Larkin and Connolly’s role in the politicisation of labour was seen by the AOH as a threat to the hegemony of the Irish Party in a future Home Rule Ireland, and especially the role of the AOH itself in securing the allegiance of the urban working class in that context. The anti-Larkin labour paper *The Toiler* specifically identified AOH leader Joe Devlin as the man to lead Irish labour in a Home Rule Ireland. According to Devlin’s sympathetic biographer A.C. Hepburn, the AOH opposed Larkin ‘because they saw Larkinism primarily as a dangerous challenge to Party authority.’²¹ (Devlin’s association with labour issues arose from his representing the West Belfast constituency in Westminster - at least the Catholic part of it - which was one of the few areas in Ireland with a strong industrial working-class macro-community.) Any perceived challenge to AOH/Irish Party authority - Sinn

Féin, Labour, William O'Brien and his All-for-Ireland League, and suffragists - were met with aggressive physical attacks by the proto-fascistic Hibernians in this period.

The *Irish Worker*, which dubbed the AOH 'the Ancient Order of Hypocrites', was quick to point to the hypocrisy of the vigilance campaign in general: its mono-focus on sexual, to the exclusion of social, immorality; the selectivity of its Anglophobia; and the morally objectionable content of Larkin's arch-enemy William Martin Murphy's own titles, especially the *Evening Herald*, which was as prone as any English Sunday to give prominence to salacious details of divorce cases. 'For ourselves', wrote 'Treaty Stone' in the issue of 4 November 1911, 'we would much prefer to see a copy of the worst English Sunday paper in the hands of our sons and daughters than a copy of the *Evening Herald*.' In the 16 December 1911 issue 'Anti-Humbug' reported 'with disgust and indignation' on the presentation of the 'colours' of a British army regiment to the Catholic Church in Renmore, County Galway: 'Oh, the shame of it - to read of these bloodstained rags, dripping with the blood of the Boers, the Afghan, the Hindoo - of every people "rightly struggling to be free", being placed on each side of the altar . . . Small wonder our misguided people take to dirty English Sunday papers. They are shown that the altar of God is the fit resting place for England's "bloody" rags.' He/she also mentioned the attempts by Galway UDC to induce the British war office to send a battalion to the city, 'to promote the cause of PURITY AND MORALITY amongst Galway girls, no doubt?' With pointed sarcasm 'Anti-Humbug' suggested the formation of a vigilance committee for 'The Prevention of Desecration of Irish Catholic Churches by the placing in them of British Military Colours, which to the mind of any thinking Irishman symbolises only Rapine, Rape, Robbery, and Plunder.' Another 'suggestion' was 'The Vigilance Society for exposing the inhumanity of sending starved children to school.'

In the same issue 'O'F' wrote that poor couples could not afford to have eight or ten children, and that underpaid workers 'should not bring children in to the world knowing that we cannot support ourselves.' Murphy's *Irish Independent* seized on the article - which was presented as advocating birth control - to attack Larkin, who was a candidate in the upcoming local elections, on the basis of the 'immoral tendencies' of 'Larkin's teachings', which were 'far more objectionable and morally injurious than anything that has appeared in some of the most objectionable English Sunday newspapers . . . they afford a plain indication of the character of the Socialistic campaign inaugurated and carried on in this country under the auspices of Mr Larkin.' The *Worker* responded to this and other criticisms of the article with a denial that it advocated 'limitation of families by illegal and immoral methods' and subsequently with a scathing attack on 'Murphy's Hypocrisy.' It pointed to the record of his *Evening Herald*, 'which littered the streets of Dublin with contents bills full of headings of all the filthy divorce cases', and the *Independent*, whose advertisements section - which regularly featured notices for products such as 'Therapion' (a cure-all remedy with known abortifacient effects) and ambiguous 'Female pills' - was 'regulated not by morality or religion, but by rate per inch.' Furthermore, the Murphy-owned *Irish Catholic* had published an article in August 1911, during a general strike in Dublin, complaining that troops had not fired 'low' at strikers, i.e. shot to kill. 'One of the greatest evils in Ireland', according to the *Worker*, 'is that a man like Murphy is allowed to use the names of morality and religion to strike at a political or social opponent and this without protest from the heads of the Church to which Murphy nominally belongs.'²²

'The business of religion and the religion of business'

Murphy's campaign against Larkin and the ITGWU culminated in the great Lockout that began in August 1913, when Murphy led some 400 Dublin employers in locking out over 25,000 workers for refusing to leave Larkin's union. Following Murphy's sacking of sixty union members from *Independent Newspapers* on 19 August, Larkin published a 'Manifesto to the Citizens & Workers of Dublin', calling for a boycott of 'Murphy's immoral literature' (the *Irish Independent* and *Evening*

Herald) and Eason's, as well as others that sold them; Eason, wrote Larkin, 'like other religious hypocrites . . . do the devil's work.'²³ The dispute was protracted, and ended in effective defeat for the union in February 1914. The AOH in Dublin quickly emerged as a key ally of Murphy's; it organised strike breakers, published anti-Larkin leaflets, and had seemed to have had some involvement in the crude anti-Larkin propaganda papers the *Liberator* and the *Toiler*. It was also at the forefront of the successful campaign to physically block the sending of locked-out workers' children to trade-unionist families in England on the trumped-up basis of the danger it posed to their religion. One of those singled out by Jim Larkin during a speech about the aggressive tactics of the AOH in blocking the departure of five children from Amiens Street railway station in late October 1913 was a namesake and supposed 'pillar of the Church', William J. Larkin. This was the same William Larkin who, along with his twin brother Francis, had been fined earlier in 1913 for obstructing access to a newsagent's shop on Dorset Street in Dublin as part of an aggressive Dublin Vigilance Campaign picket. The crowd had plastered the window of the shop with vigilance posters and threw mud at the papers inside, as well as jostling potential customers. During the First World War, William Larkin would make a name for himself for disrupting theatre and cinema performances to which he objected on moral grounds.²⁴

As the dispute dragged on into the autumn and winter of 1913, theologically-minded clerics joined the propaganda war (some, like leading light of the Dublin Vigilance Campaign Fr M.J. MacInerney, were featured in a 'Roll of Honour: Irish Priests who have Spoken Against Socialism' in the *Liberator*).²⁵ One 'Dublin Priest' stated in the *Irish Independent* that strikes were always immoral because of their disruptive effects, and also because of the impact on the morals of strikers: 'enforced idleness breeds a multitude of mischiefs among the men who take part in a strike. They frequently give way to drunkenness and immorality.' Threatening and abusing strike-breakers was also, needless to say, sinful. In another contribution the anonymous priest declared that according to the moral test of strikes devised by the Jesuit moral theologian Hieronymous Noldin, Larkinite industrial actions were 'flagrantly unjust and immoral' and asked how 'any man who claims to be a Catholic can remain a member of Larkin's union despite the grossly immoral principles and the equally immoral practice of that union.'²⁶

The references to the immoral nature of the Murphy titles in the *Irish Worker* were not merely debating points. Larkin, in fact, was a professed Catholic, like the vast majority of ITGWU members, and shared the moral outrage articulated by the Church and Irish-Irelanders like D.P. Moran about various social ills such as drunkenness, gambling and sexuality immorality. Clerical hostility was politically damaging, certainly, but his paper portrays an authentic outrage at the Church siding with Murphy and Mammon against the union's efforts to achieve social justice, and especially at the hypocrisy underlying it, epitomised by the extensive shareholdings of clerics in some of the major companies lined up against the ITGWU. Responding to a priest who had recently repeated that 'a man cannot be a Larkinite and a Catholic – at least not a good Catholic', 'Marcus' in the *Worker* wondered what a 'good Catholic' was:

Have we not hundreds, nay thousands, of self-styled "good Catholics" making religion a stepping-stone to roguery? Who will attempt to deny the multitude of pious sweaters, slum-owners, liars, rogues and reprobates that live and thrive on this small island? . . . I have no doubt each and every rogue in the country could produce a clergyman's reference and a Sodality card, if called upon to do so.

A Larkinite, on the other hand, was committed to

helping the poor to fight for a little more of the wealth they produce; giving them an ideal and a weapon to fight with; in short, putting decent bodies on the souls of the people and giving them decent food and shelter. I know of no law, human or divine, that brands this ambition as unholy. Yet the crawl-thumping crew, who pray for happiness in the next world, while they make a hell of this for the poor, call themselves "good Christians" and dine with the clergy . . . The "good Catholics" or Christians, like the good Pharisees, are mostly hypocrites.²⁷

The political meat in the sandwich of the moralistic rhetoric of the ‘Good Literature’ campaigners - wherein the ‘evils of modernity’ included not only British immoral literature and the associated dangers of drinking, dance-halls, motor cars, immodest fashions, company-keeping, gambling, and so on, but also secularism, rationalism, liberalism and, worst of all, socialism - was explicitly demonstrated when the DVC hosted a public lecture in Dublin’s Mansion House on ‘The Catholic Church and the Working Classes’ by staunch Catholic, anti-socialist and anti-Larkin trade unionist George Milligan from Liverpool in December 1913. This was Milligan’s second visit in 1913; he had previously addressed the CTSI annual conference. The *Irish Worker* responded to his talk in a lengthy article that began by pointing out that its sponsors ‘vigorously resent any importation but those they make themselves.’ According to the paper, Milligan was wrong in saying that bitter enmity was directed by modern trade unionists against Christianity; while that might be true of some individuals, ‘in the mass the criticisms are levelled against the degradation of Christianity by those who have collared the Church, and used it as an instrument of class-government, against the business of religion and the religion of business, against the blind conservatism that supports the “status quo”, no matter what horrors it may cover.’ It questioned Milligan’s characterisation of socialism as ‘materialist’ and his implication that

the alternative offered by Socialism to the patchwork of Vincent de Paul Societies and the charity organisations that represent here at least the only social policy of the Catholic Church was, of all others, materialism; the grovelling in material pleasures to the neglect of all duty to one’s fellow man. But that is precisely the accusation that Socialism hurls, and with evident truth, at the capitalist class and all who support them. We are here up against a question of fact. On which side is the materialism?²⁸

‘The hollowness of their pretence at morality’

The underlying political dynamics at play were clearly recognised and identified at the outset of the vigilance campaign by socialist writer Fred Ryan. In an article of January 1912, he wrote of the ‘latest crusade’ as ‘an attempt to establish an intellectual censorship masquerad[ing] as a campaign for cleanliness.’ Ryan dismissed the campaign’s deliberate exaggerations of the dangers posed by the sensationalist Sunday papers, identifying ‘a much deeper and sinister motive.’ He quoted the DVC’s Fr M.J. MacInerney’s statement that papers ‘which generated hatred between class and class’ were ‘just as bad’ as immoral literature. This reference, as Ryan points out, was to labour papers, particularly, one assumes, the *Irish Worker*, ‘which tended to fill working men with dangerous aspirations after better conditions and higher wages; he did not mean the powerful and wide-spread capitalist press’ which attacked trade unions and ‘preaches in dulcet terms the love of social order to the often sweated victims of social injustice.’ He quoted the bishop of Kildare Dr Foley’s attack on ‘Rationalistic literature’ and the bishop of Elphin Dr Clancy’s open letter to the Sligo vigilance committee, which declared imported newspapers to be reeking with the ‘social heresy’ of socialism. The training received by these Irish priests and bishops, concluded Ryan,

has unfitted them to discriminate between actual immorality or indecency and any rational dissent from the views they favour in religion and politics . . . The case against the censorship is the case against all despotic government . . . every censorship ends like the present one in the minds of Father McEnerney [sic] and Bishop Foley and Bishop Clancy – it becomes an engine of political or theological tyranny. A nation that would submit to have its reading prescribed for it by self-elected committees of ignorant busybodies, acting under such inspiration as this, would have surrendered a definite and vital safeguard of its moral and political health.²⁹

Unfortunately, Ryan would not live to continue the struggle against this tyranny. This brilliant libertarian, crowned ‘the Saint of Irish Rationalism’ by Francis Sheehy Skeffington, died the following year, aged thirty-nine.³⁰

Sheehy Skeffington was joint editor of the feminist paper the *Irish Citizen*, to which Ryan was a

regular contributor. In his editorial notes he highlighted particularly the exclusion of women from the vigilance committees, and how the ‘male puritans’ get on

the wrong track once they attempt to solve these problems without the help of women; they fail to get at the roots of immorality, which lie in the degradation, socially and economically, of women; they strike at symptoms, and even among these they cannot choose prudently; while an inverted pruriency often runs through their so-called “moral” tirades. Those who are interested in genuine and firm-based morality had better devote their attention to freeing women; when they are free, they will make surprising changes in the moral tone of the community.³¹

In another piece in September 1912, the *Citizen* noted how the ‘absurd “Vigilance” Committees’ had excited themselves recently over a theatrical poster, but were silent when a woman convicted of ‘procuring two young girls for immoral purposes’ was let off with a seven-month sentence and a man involved in the case escaped sentence altogether: ‘no protest of any kind emanated from the “Vigilance” puritans, who are tinkering clumsily with the symptoms, or alleged symptoms, of sexual viciousness while ignoring or rejecting the one means to an effective purification of society’: the granting of equal citizenship to women, ‘who understand the root of the evil [and] would set themselves in a different spirit to the work of reform’ once they were granted the vote.³²

Francis Sheehy Skeffington was also the Irish correspondent of the British labour paper the *Daily Herald*, a prominent supporter of Larkin and the ITGWU, whose assistant editor was Irish socialist W.P. Ryan. In February 1914, echoing Fred Ryan, Sheehy Skeffington penned an attack on the DVC in the *Herald*; it was, he wrote,

an absurd body . . . clerically bossed, existing nominally for the suppression of “immoral literature”, but in reality directed at establishing a clerical censorship over the reading of the people. Under the pretence of a “purity” campaign, the aim is to dictate to the workers exactly what they shall not read and thus to keep out of Ireland all dangerously “Socialistic” and revolutionary literature.

He revealed that at a recent meeting this ‘clerical and Hibernian body’ had proposed adding the *Daily Herald* to its list of banned papers, but he doubted they would have the courage to do so, as ‘nothing could better reveal the hollowness of their pretence at morality.’³³ Another Ryan, Desmond, son of W.P., recalled in his memoir the ‘frothy, grey-faced and squinting patrols’ inspired by the clergy to picket newsagents ‘in the interests not so much of morals, though of that the talk was loudest, but of faith and anti-Socialism.’³⁴

A new era

Women *were* invited to join the vigilance campaign for the first time in late 1913 and a ‘Ladies Committee’ was formed at the end of the year.³⁵ Rather than indicating a sudden conversion to inclusiveness and gender equality in this era of first-wave feminism, however, the formation of this committee indicated, rather more mundanely, the need for a dedicated fundraising body. The campaign had entered a lull in Dublin and this was replicated around the country, even in Limerick. Earlier in the year the *Leader* reported that the only active committees were those in Dublin, Limerick and Queenstown (Cobh), County Cork.³⁶ Despite the efforts of the committees and the continuing, if sporadic, intimidation of newsagents, sales of the blacklisted British papers continued, though circulation was seriously reduced. According to Michael Comyn KC in December 1913, sales through newsagents and newsboys in Dublin had been reduced from 40,000 weekly to 10,000; these figures, however, did not include the increased supply through the post.³⁷ Eason’s promised the publishers of the *News of the World* that no matter how many newsagents joined the boycott, ‘in towns where we have bookstands the sale of your paper cannot be stopped.’³⁸ As with most censorships, this one appears to have resulted in a shift to less visible trade - fewer posters, reduced displays, under-the-counter, plain-wrapped and postal provision, and so on - rather than a fundamental change in patterns of demand and supply. As one of its instigators, Fr Richard Devane

put it later, ‘this campaign was only partially successful, for the lure of gain overcame their [newsagents’] sense of righteousness and the “dirty” papers were sold *sub rosa*.’³⁹

Prior to the outbreak of war in August 1914, the DVC was focusing particular attention on the need for legislation, backed by legal heavyweights such as the aforementioned Michael Comyn and James O’Connor KC, who was appointed State Solicitor in July 1914 and Attorney General in 1917. In June the DVC’s Fr M.J. MacInerney backed the call for government action, citing the recent censorship regulations introduced in Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁰ The outbreak of war two months later put not only Home Rule on the back burner, however, but also hopes of new censorship legislation in the immediate future. The vigilance campaign continued following the outbreak of the war, but in a less prominent, popular form. Its focus was increasingly on Dublin and on the more controllable new medium of cinema. The ‘problem’ of immoral literature decreased as total war changed the priorities of British press and publishing, while the spectre of communism/syndicalism had retreated following the defeat of the ITGWU, the departure of Larkin to the USA, the mass enlistment of the Irish working class into the British armed forces, and the death of Connolly in 1916. Many of the vigilance campaigners ‘joined up’ also, as the IPP/AOH and their National Volunteers came out in support of Britain’s war.

The politics of immorality became less classed and more entwined with intra-nationalist political competition in Ireland during the war. In all belligerent countries, as Lutz D.H. Sauerteig shows, ‘the sexual behaviour of both the military and the civilian populations became a matter of primary national concern’, given the mass population displacements and disruption of socio-moral codes that total war entailed, and ‘sexuality became a central subject of public discourses that were closely linked with nationalism.’⁴¹ This gained added currency in the context of the political competition that developed within Irish nationalism in the war years. Venereal disease amongst British troops and the link to prostitution, for example, was an obvious weapon to use in a propaganda war aimed at undermining British power in Ireland, and by extension the Home Rulers who were increasingly identified with it. Sinn Féin’s P.S. O’Hegarty described the ‘quarrel between Sinn Féin and the Irish Parliamentary Party’ as essentially ‘the quarrel between the historic Irish Nation and the artificial English garrison State; the quarrel between de-Anglicisation and Anglicisation.’⁴² Irish radical nationalists were able to use the IPP’s disastrous support for the British war effort, including its encouragement of recruitment to the British army, to help shove it off the moral high-ground and supplant it in terms of clerical and popular support. If the IPP was the party of the garrison, it was by extension the party of VD, prostitution, drunkenness, music hall vulgarities and the rest. In the words of the editor of republican journal *The Spark*, ‘Redmondism, West-Britonism, Hibernianism, vulgarity and immorality are synonymous terms.’⁴³ Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers, by contrast, were presented as custodians of Irish virtue and morality, the political personification of de-Anglicisation, which included the battle against British-sourced immorality in all its forms.⁴⁴

In December 1915 the DVC re-named itself the Irish Vigilance Association (IVA) and declared its intention to spread nationwide, though it appears to have remained very much a Dublin-based campaign.⁴⁵ It succeeded in having a moral censorship of films introduced by Dublin Corporation in 1916, and in July 1919 revived its campaign against ‘evil’ publications with the launch of a new ‘Good Literature Crusade’: this would eventually culminate in the passage of the notorious Censorship of Publications Act, 1929. On 20 November 1919 the IVA held a large demonstration in Dublin against ‘indecent theatrical performances.’ The platform presence of the now much-weakened AOH hinted at the political roots of the IVA; but what is most striking about the demonstration was the prominence of the new leading political forces in Ireland: representatives of Sinn Féin and of the resurgent Irish labour movement, including a reborn union under a new leadership that had once been a target for these very vigilance campaigners - the ITGWU.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 *Catholic Bulletin*, April 1911.
- 2 'Frank O'Connor on Censorship' (from *The Dubliner*, March 1962), reproduced in Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London, 1990), p. 154; Yeats quoted in *Irish Times*, 23 Aug. 1928.
- 3 Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 36.
- 4 Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The cruelty man: Child welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889-1956* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 51 and 154.
- 5 Maurice Curtis, *A Challenge to Democracy: Militant Catholicism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), p. 46.
- 6 A.C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 92.
- 7 *Hibernian Journal*, May 1908.
- 8 *Freeman's Journal* [henceforth, *FJ*], 22 February 1909.
- 9 *Irish Times*, 12 December 1911.
- 10 *Irish Catholic*, 21 October 1911.
- 11 *Connacht Tribune*, 7 October 1911.
- 12 *Irish Catholic*, 21 October 1911.
- 13 *Irish Independent* [henceforth, *II*], 1 January 1912.
- 14 *Cork Examiner* [henceforth, *CE*], 2 December 1913
- 15 T.A. Murphy, *The Literature Crusade in Ireland* (Limerick, 1912), p. 33.
- 16 *Irish Worker* [henceforth, *IW*], 16 Dec. 1911; Michael Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910-1916* (Oxford, 2005), p. 92; 'Hibernian Notes', *Southern Star*, 8 August 1914.
- 17 *Sinn Féin*, 11 November 1911; *II*, 16 December 1912; *CE*, 2 December 1912.
- 18 *FJ*, 17 March and 17 July 1912; *CE*, 27 November and 2,3 December 1912, 12 April and 28 July 1913.
- 19 7 October 1911.
- 20 *II*, 15 January 1912.
- 21 *Toiler*, 6 June 1914; Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast*, p. 156. The ITGWU's Thomas Farren, standing for Labour, was defeated in a by-election in Dublin's College Green ward by the AOH second-in-command, John D. Nugent in June 1915. Nugent lost his seat in 1918 to Sinn Féin's Michael Staines.
- 22 *II*, 6 January 1912; *IW*, 6 and 13 January 1912.
- 23 *IW*, 27 August 1913.
- 24 *II*, 4 February 1913. William J. Larkin emerged into the public eye later in the war as spokesman for the Dublin Town Tenants' Association. He ran as an independent candidate in Limerick in the 1923 general election, when he lost his deposit, and, again unsuccessfully, as a Town Tenants' candidate against Jim Larkin in Dublin's North Ward constituency in September 1927.
- 25 See, for example, 20 September 1913.
- 26 *II*, 3 and 6 November 1913.
- 27 *IW*, 9 May 1914.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 20 December 1913.
- 29 Frederick Ryan, 'The Latest Crusade', *Irish Review*, vol. 1, no. 11 (Jan. 1912), pp. 521-6.
- 30 *Irish Review*, vol. 3, no. 27 (May 1913), p. 119.
- 31 *Irish Citizen*, 13 July 1912.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 14 September 1912.
- 33 Quoted in *II*, 11 February 1914.
- 34 Desmond Ryan, *Remembering Sion* (London, 1934), p. 76.
- 35 DVC 'Report for the Year 1913', *FJ*, 17 January 1914.
- 36 *Leader*, 8 February 1913.
- 37 *Limerick Leader*, 1 December 1913.
- 38 L.M. Cullen, *Eason and Son: A History* (Dublin, 1989), pp. 258-9.
- 39 Evidence to Committee on Evil Literature, 1926, JUS 7/2/14, National Archives of Ireland.
- 40 *FJ*, 14 June 1914.
- 41 Lutz D.H. Sauerteig, 'Sex, medicine and morality during the First World War' in Roger Cooter et al (eds.), *War, Medicine and Modernity* (Gloucestershire, 1998), pp. 168 and 180.
- 42 P.S. O'Hegarty, *Sinn Féin: An Illumination* (Dublin and London, 1919), p. vi.
- 43 *The Spark*, 7 March 1915.
- 44 The point is made and numerous examples provided by Ben Novick, *Conceiving Revolution: Irish Nationalist Propaganda during the First World War* (Dublin, 2001), Chapter 4.
- 45 *II*, 6 December 1915.
- 46 *II* and *FJ*, 21 November 1919.