CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	'The best banned in the land': censorship and Irish writing since 1950
Authors	Ó Drisceoil, Donal
Publication date	2005
Original Citation	O Drisceoil, Donal; (2005) ''The best banned in the land': Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950'. The Yearbook of English Studies, 35 :146-160.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.jstor.org/stable/3509330
Rights	© 2005, Modern Humanities Research Association
Download date	2026-11-07 04:38:47
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/733



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

'The best banned in the land': Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950

DONAL Ó DRISCEOIL
University College Cork

The cloud of state censorship that had cast a shadow over the Irish literary landscape since 1930 eventually began to lift in the late 1960s. The appeals mechanism introduced in 1946 had undone some of the worst excesses of the early years of censorship (to largely symbolic effect, as most of the titles were out of print), but the first signs of liberalization did not appear until the late 1950s, when control of the Censorship Board was wrested from the Catholic Action cabal that had run it since the beginning. The improvement was limited and Irish writers continued to regard the censorship of their work as an occupational hazard; indeed, as the list of banned writers contained the majority of the greatest contemporary writers in the English language, inclusion on the register was seen by some as an inverted badge of honour. The controversies generated by the banning of works by John McGahern and Edna O'Brien in the 1960s helped fuel the movement for reform, and in 1967 the censorship legislation was overhauled. This resulted in the gradual unbanning of the Irish books on the list over the next twelve years, and also marked the end of the censorship of Irish writers, with the sole exception of Lee Dunne, who carried the flag into the 1970s.[1]

The passage of the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929 had been the result of a sustained campaign by Catholic Action groups after independence, part of a general process of 'Catholicization' that became the primary element in the forging of a separate Irish identity.[2] The demands for censorship focused on the need to control the availability of imported birth control literature, together with popular British periodicals and newspapers with salacious content. The problem of 'sex novels' and 'drainpipe fiction' was alluded to, but not foregrounded in the push for a state censorship system that would replace the inherited British controls, based on the courts, which were deemed inadequate.[3] Because of the hostility to modern literature

[1] Julia Carlson (*Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990)) states that Maurice Leitch's *Liberty Lad* (1965) and *Poor Lazurus* (1969) were banned. However, I have been unable to locate a listing of these prohibitions in the *Register of Prohibited Publications*.

[2] The Irish Free State came into official existence in 1922. The subsequent drive to create a Catholic nation in Ireland was fuelled by Irish circumstances, but coincided with the international interwar movement to assert Catholic cultural and social influence, sparked by the pope's 1922 call for Catholic Action. Catholic Action involved harnessing popular power through lay organizations under clerical control to defend and assert Catholic interests.

[3] *The Problem of Undesirable Printed Matter — Suggested Remedies: Evidence of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland presented to Departmental Committee of Enquiry, 1926* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, 1926).

(as part of a general hostility to modernism) that permeated the ideology and discourse of the groups and individuals at the forefront of the censorship movement, many in the literary community feared that books rather than periodicals, and serious literature rather than pornography, would become the focus of control; their fears were well-founded.

Under the terms of the act, a censorship board of five, appointed every three years by the minister for justice, recommended to the minister the permanent prohibition of any book or periodical if it was deemed to be in its 'general tendency indecent or obscene', or if it advocated contraception or abortion. *Indecent* was defined as 'suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave', while *obscene* was not defined. The composition of the successive boards, from the first in 1930 until 1957, remained consistent: a member of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) and/or the Knights of St Columbanus as chairman, together with three other Catholics (usually CTSI and/or Knights of Columbanus members), and a token Protestant, represented by a Trinity College Dublin academic. As a four-to-one majority was sufficient to ban a book, the Trinity representative was, in the words of banned writer Francis Hackett, a 'decoy ... a hostage Protestant. His could be the Diary of a Superfluous Man'.[4] According to the secretary of the Board, this in-built majority was an unstated but understood arrangement with successive ministers for justice.[5] The requirement to take the general tendency and overall merit of a book into account was ignored from the outset as the censors waged war on modern literature, backed up by the customs authorities and organized groups who scoured books for objectionable passages, marked them, and sent them on to the board. Most of the leading writers of modern fiction from Britain, America, and continental Europe (English translations only) — Proust, Nabokov, Böll, Huxley, Zola, Mann, Greene, Malraux, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway, H. G. Wells, Dylan Thomas, to name a random selection — were included, leading cynics to dub the *Register of Prohibited Publications* an 'Everyman's Guide to the Modern Classics'. Irish books featured increasingly, but never amounted to much more than one per cent of the total — a reflection of the relatively smaller number of Irish books on the market rather than preferential treatment. In fact, the evidence seems to support the arguments of opponents of censorship that Irish writers were often singled out. The Department of Justice itself, in an internal memo, later admitted that the Board in its first three decades was 'especially prone to ban books by Irish authors'.[6]

[4] Francis Hackett, 'A Muzzle Made in Ireland', *Dublin Magazine* (October–December 1936), 8–17 (p. 15).

[5] Quoted in Gerald Whelan, *Spiked: Church-State Intrigue and the Rose Tattoo* (Dublin: New Island, 2002), p. 257.

[6] Memorandum for Government, 1 September 1966, Department of An Taoiseach (D/T) 98/6/826, National Archives of Ireland (NAI).

The list of banned Irish authors in the 1930s and 1940s reads like a 'Who's Who' of Irish literature. It includes James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O Faolain, Frank O'Connor, Francis Stuart, Austin Clarke, George Moore, Kate O'Brien, Norah Hoult, Oliver St John Gogarty, Maura Laverty, and Walter Macken. Among the select few prominent and accomplished authors who avoided censorship were Flann O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen, Michael McLaverty, Mervyn Wall, and Peadar O'Donnell. In 1932 nineteen writers formed an Academy of Irish Letters. The letter of invitation from Yeats and Shaw put the case starkly: 'There is in Ireland an official censorship possessing, and actively exercising, powers of suppression which may at any moment confine an Irish author to the British and American market, and thereby make it impossible for him to live by distinctive Irish literature.'[7] The point was reiterated by Frank O'Connor, himself banned five times and a consistent critic of the system, when, following the prohibition of Sean O Faolain's *Bird Alone* in 1936, he wrote that the censorship was 'obviously not intended to protect the Irish people against evil literature, but to destroy the character and prospects of Irish writers in their own country'.[8] Liam O'Flaherty highlighted the problem of stigmatization and how censorship was unofficially extended so that a ban on one work led to a type of boycott whereby unprohibited books by the same author were not displayed in bookshops or libraries or reviewed in the Irish press.[9]

The sporadic protests of the 1930s made no impact on the operation of the censorship in relation to either Irish or international literature. The onset of war in 1939 created the context for more organized resistance to the operations of the Act. Among the side effects of wartime restrictions and exigencies was the severe restriction of the staple Anglo-American markets for Irish books. This revealed the limitations of the Irish market and highlighted the issue of censorship, which became an obvious battleground. The *Bell*, founded in 1940 by Peadar O'Donnell and Sean O Faolain, facilitated reflection, debate, and opposition, and a Council of Action, with representatives from nine literary and civil liberties organizations was formed in November 1942 to campaign for the administration of censorship 'in accordance with provisions of Act', in other words, taking general tendency and merit into account.[10] This required breaking the stranglehold of the Catholic Actionists, something that was not achieved for another fifteen years. An ensuing Senate debate on the operations of the Act revealed the mentality of the censors who held the reins until 1957, mainly through the contributions

[7] *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Allen Wade (London: Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 801–02.
[8] *Irish Times*, 21 September 1936.
[9] Liam O'Flaherty, 'The Irish Censorship' (1932), in *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, ed. by Julia Carlson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 139–41 (p. 140).
[10] Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Alabama, GA: University of Alabama Press, 1968), p. 95.

of senator and Censorship Board chairman, William Magennis. He believed the battle over censorship was part of the 'a fight between Christianity, on the one hand, and the forces of paganism on the other', and had no doubt about which side Irish writers had chosen to take, padding out their books with 'sex and smut' for the benefit of their non-Irish readers.[11] The pressure for reform continued, and the Minister for Justice, privately uncomfortable with many of the prohibitions, introduced an appeal board in 1946 to deal with the more outrageous decisions, while allowing the censorship process to remain in the hands of the zealots.

The author, publisher, or five parliamentarians could lodge appeals. Authors refused to partake in this process (with the sole exception of Kate O'Brien, who successfully appealed the ban on her *Land of Spices*), believing that to lodge an appeal would be to acknowledge a system they despised. Two senators organized a collective appeal for over a hundred and thirty books, including the majority of Irish titles on the register and internationally acclaimed books by the likes of Graham Greene, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Aldous Huxley, Marcel Proust, and Somerset Maugham. (Appeals on behalf of books banned since 1930 had to be lodged within one year of the act coming into force.) The majority of the Irish books were held over for consideration due to unavailability of copies, but 1947 saw O'Casey's *Pictures in the Hallway* and *I Knock at the Door*, O Faolain's *Bird Alone*, Austin Clarke's *Singing Men at Cashel*, and O'Flaherty's *The Puritan* released from bondage. Many of the most ridiculous and controversial bans of the previous two decades followed in subsequent years as copies were made available: Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*, Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty*, Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (banned on the basis of the line: 'She saw her father and Etienne, in the embrace of love', which earned it the description 'the sodomy book' by the Board chairman),[12] Paddy Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* (banned and unbanned within a month), *Stephen Hero*, Francis Hackett's *The Green Lion*, O'Flaherty's *Hollywood Cemetery*, Frank O'Connor's *Dutch Interior*, Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks*, and Maura Laverty's *Alone We Embark* (see also Appendix). Among the dismissed appeals were O'Flaherty's *The House of Gold* (the first Irish book to be banned, in 1930), O Faolain's *Midsummer Night's Madness*, Gogarty's *Going Native*, and *Mr Petunia*, O'Casey's *Windfalls*, George Moore's *A Story-Teller's Holiday*, Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*, and Austin Clarke's *The Bright Temptation* and *The Sun Dances at Easter*.[13] The successful appeal of non-Irish books was based, in the formulation of Paul Blanshard, on their age, dignity, and international approval, which released the likes of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Grapes of*

[11] *Seanad Debates*, 27, col. 172 (2 December 1942) and col. 69 (18 November 1942).
[12] *Seanad Debates*, 27, col. 162 (2 December 1942).
[13] This information comes from the annual published reports of the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board, and the *Register of Prohibited Publications (Books)* held at the Censorship of Publications Board offices in Dublin.

Wrath, I, Claudius, and *How Green was My Valley*.[14] Despite the unbanning of these titles, the majority, particularly of the Irish ones, was out of print and unavailable, even in libraries, making the action primarily symbolic.

In July 1949 J. D. Smyth, the Trinity representative, resigned from the board after four months, citing his colleagues' reliance on marked passages and ignoring of the 'merit' clause. The board responded with a public statement, denying the accusations and pointing out that, in any case, 'very few works of real merit have come before us'(!).[15] The minister was unable to find a Trinity representative to replace Smyth, and appointed a Catholic judge instead. For the first time, the board was completely Catholic (and, as always, until 1957, all male), and remained so until 1956. Magennis had died in 1946, and for the next decade the board was chaired by Fr Joseph Deery, who was of the opinion that 'one page of a book could be more dangerous than fifty in another if it took the form of an attack on the Catholic faith'.[16] The period after Smyth's resignation saw a dramatic upsurge in prohibitions; this was the storm before the calm. An average of 157 books was banned annually in 1946–49, compared with 589 on average in the following four years. 1954 was a record year, with 1034 prohibitions. The background to this extraordinary purge lay in pressure applied on the government by the Catholic hierarchy, speaking through Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, to clamp down on the importation of bulk consignments of 'objectionable' paperbacks, mainly from the US.[17] While these titles accounted for the vast majority of prohibitions, Irish and international literature continued to be targeted. Books by Francis Stuart, Benedict Kiely, Walter Macken, Joyce Cary, Sam Hanna Bell, Brian Moore, Brian Cleeve, Samuel Beckett, Frank O'Connor, Austin Clarke, and L. A. G. Strong were all added to the register during this period, along with leading international Catholic writers such as Graham Greene. *The End of the Affair*, recipient of the Catholic Literary Award in the USA, was banned in late 1951, prompting a Department of Justice official to question the severity of the censorship and argue that it would be 'better that a number of doubtful books should be allowed to circulate, in order to ensure that no book will be banned except on the solidest grounds'.[18] The departmental secretary, Thomas J. Coyne, scribbled 'I agree with all you say' in the margin of this internal letter, and over the following years he patiently awaited his chance to liberalize the system through wresting control from the Catholic Actionists.

The death of a board member in March 1956, followed by the resignation of Deery to take up a new post in June, provided the opportunity. Against a

[14] Paul Blanshard, *The Irish and Catholic Power: An American Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 88.
[15] *Irish Independent*, 7 July 1949 and 14 July 1949.
[16] *Irish Times*, 25 February 1956.
[17] 'Censorship of Publications — Miscellaneous resolutions and Representations', D/T S 2321A, NAI.
[18] Costigan to Coyne, 11 March 1952, Department of Justice (D/J) 102/323, NAI.

background of agitation by the Irish Association of Civil Liberty (chaired by Sean O Faolain) for reform of the Act and its operations, Coyne persuaded the minister to delay the appointment of replacements and then to appoint two 'liberals' (i.e. not Catholic Actionists) to the board, which was sufficient to veto the activities of the other three. The chairman, Piggot, suspended meetings because of the attitude of the new members, and the minister then asked for his resignation. He resigned along with the two other original members (all were members of the Knights of St Columbanus), and a totally new board was appointed in October 1957. One measure of the more liberal approach of the new boards is that almost double the number of Irish books were banned between 1950 and 1956 as met the same fate over the succeeding two decades. Despite its relative liberalism, this board and its replacements were still severe by international standards. Among their international victims were Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* and *The Naked and the Dead*, Nicholas Monserrat's *The Tribe that Lost its Head*, Muriel Spark's *The Bachelors*, and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run.* They also continued their predecessors' work in relation to a new generation of Irish authors. Since the 1940s, veterans like Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Francis Stuart, Norah Hoult, John Brophy, Vivian Connell, Rearden Conner, and Jim Phelan continued to be targeted, and were joined as repeat offenders by Oliver St John Gogarty, L. A. G. Strong, Maura Laverty, Walter Macken, Benedict Kiely, and Brian Moore. Significant individual works prohibited included Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* and Sam Hanna Bell's *December Bride.* Anthony West added to the Northern Irish representation in the 1960s, while John Broderick and J. P. Donleavy joined the club in that decade also. The banning of two of the most significant new voices to emerge in Irish fiction in the post-war period, Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, would, as we shall see, contribute to the overhaul of the system.

Unofficial censorship continued to restrict access to work that had escaped the official net. In 1957 Sean O'Casey wrote to the press complaining that consignments of his book *The Green Crow*, which was not prohibited, had been repeatedly held up by the Post Office and Customs authorities without explanation and returned to the publishers, who eventually stopped sending them. (He went on to bemoan that 'obscenity in Ireland seems to be exclusively connected with sex. But sex laughs at the cleric and censor. When it comes, a physiological upsurge, the robin sports a redder breast, the lapwing gets himself another crest, a livelier iris changes on the dove, and dodging into secret places go the lover and his lass.')[19] The Post Office and Customs authorities also played an official role in the censorship process, as we shall see, but their unofficial activities were omitted by Sean O Faolain in his 1956 list of the 'seven censorships' that existed in Ireland: censorship by fear, the bookseller, librarians, library users, library committees, the Censorship

[19] *Irish Times*, 18 April 1957.

Board, and the public, especially clergymen, particularly through pressure exercised on booksellers.[20]

The Customs authorities had always been at the front line of the censorship process, both before and after the passage of the 1929 Act. In 1946 this role was legally recognized. In his *de facto* official history of the censorship, published in 1968, Michael Adams describes the *modus operandi* of the system (pp. 171–75). In Parnell Square in Dublin a joint Customs and Post Office department called the 'Bookscale' operated, where books entering the country by parcel post (ranging from a minimum of 200 parcels per day to a maximum of 600) were examined. Parcels from religious and other 'reliable' publishers were left unmolested, while those from companies known to publish 'risqué' titles were thoroughly examined. Some books were examined on site and others were brought home by officials to be read 'at greater leisure'. According to Adams, another advantage of this arrangement was that an official could 'ask his wife for an opinion in a particularly doubtful case'. Notes were attached to those books forwarded to the Revenue Commissioners and on to the Board, indicating the offending passages or chapters. Larger consignments (fifteen to twenty per cent of the total) arrived in crates by sea and were checked by Customs and Post Office officials at the ports.[21] Doubtful books, along with those already on the *Register*, were sought out. The latter were either returned to the publisher or burnt. Only already banned books were taken from travellers into the state; border customs officials were particularly vigilant in this regard. There was, of course, a healthy cross-border trade in many items that evaded the vigilance of these officials, and Ben Kiely recalls that following the prohibition of *Borstal Boy*, Brendan Behan was approached by a man in a pub (where he was raging against the censors) and asked for a rough measurement of the book. The man then made a quick calculation and offered to bring 2000 copies across the border in lieu of his usual cargo of smuggled butter.[22]

The banning of *Borstal Boy* in 1958 was the first major own-goal by the reconstituted Board and provoked the type of ridicule and scorn that would subsequently accompany the wholesale banning of Edna O'Brien. As one writer has observed, 'In Ireland, ridicule kills more painfully than moral denunciation', a point borne out by Ciaran Carty's successful campaign against the excesses of Irish film censorship in the early 1970s.[23] Behan was by this time a well-known public figure; the book was already being hailed as a modern classic and was selling well in Ireland when the censors stepped in. Behan was indignant, but characteristically took refuge and revenge in

[20] Adams, *Censorship*, p. 150.

[21] The Knights of Saint Columbanus were probably an influential factor in this area as they had, since their foundation in 1922, maintained 'vigilantes' at ports and postal depots (Evelyn Bolster, *The Knights of Saint Columbanus* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), p. 50).

[22] Kiely interview in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 21–35 (p. 31).

[23] Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), p. 203; see Ciaran Carty, *Confessions of a Sewer Rat: A Personal History of Censorship and the Irish Cinema* (Dublin: New Island, 1995).

humour, composing the following ditty that he sang around Dublin to the tune of *McNamara's Band*:

> My name is Brendan Behan, I'm the latest of the banned,
> Although we're small in numbers we're the best banned in the land,
> We're read at wakes an weddin's and in every parish hall,
> And under library counters sure you'll have no trouble at all.[24]

Banned books had always been obtainable by the well off and well connected. (Frank O'Connor wrote of the censorship as 'class legislation because it militated against the working class while the well-to-do Catholics and the pale primrose Protestants make their own arrangements'. He was here referring to their ability to secure not only banned books through travel abroad and so on, but also contraceptive information, and, indeed, contraceptives themselves.)[25] From the beginning, there was often a significant time lag between a book's publication and its prohibition. Discerning readers anticipated bans and purchased quickly while those who travelled abroad, or across the border, could risk bringing back individual copies, as the vast majority of banned literature was available in the UK and US. It was open to individuals to apply to the minister for a licence to import copies of prohibited titles, while banned Irish books could be read for 'research' purposes in the National Library. From the mid-1950s, according to Brian Fallon, the censorship net became 'particularly porous, and it was not uncommon to find banned books openly on sale, while newspapers and magazines often reviewed them regardless of officialdom' (p. 205).

The sloppiness and stupidity of the Board was highlighted in 1961 when it banned Frank O'Connor's critically acclaimed collection of translations of Gaelic poetry, *Kings, Lords and Commons*. According to the board, the book banned itself because it included extracts from O'Connor's translation of Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mhean-Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), controversially prohibited in 1946. In fact, as became clear in the heated press correspondence that followed, the version in *Kings, Lords and Commons* was a revised translation and differed from the banned version. This revised translation had already appeared in David Greene's edited *Anthology of Irish Literature* (1954), which was never banned and sold freely in Ireland; indeed, O'Connor's revised translation was also recorded by Siobhan McKenna and was freely available in this form also.[26] The appeal board moved quickly to lift the ban, thus fulfilling its function by sparing more blushes. In the course of the *Kings, Lords and Commons* correspondence, a writer to the *Irish Times* suggested a plan to defeat the censors and popularize the Irish language at the same time: 'All we would have to do is translate *Lady Chatterley's Lover* into Irish'.[27] (No Irish-language book was ever placed on the register; however, a

[24] Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997), p. 243.
[25] 'Frank O'Connor on Censorship' (1962), in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 151–57 (p. 154).
[26] *Irish Times*, 14–29 July 1961.
[27] *Irish Times*, 19 July 1961.

strict pre-publication control was maintained over the small number of Irish language publications, most of which were published by the state publishing scheme, An Gúm.) In his 1962 article, O'Connor himself referred to the *Chatterley* obscenity trial of the previous year as part of his argument against the censorship process in Ireland. While he rejected censorship on principle (unlike O Faolain, for example, who opposed the practice), he highlighted the fact that the court-based systems elsewhere at least offered writers the same rights as criminals to defend themselves against the charges levelled against them: they at least had the protection of the courts and constitution like any other citizen. 'However absurd it may have been, the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was an honest attempt by serious people to define what they meant by evil literature. No one in his senses could pretend this has ever been the aim of the Irish Censorship' (which he saw as 'the determination to get at sex by hook or by crook. Sex is bad, books encourage sex, babies deter it, so keep the books out and give them lots of babies' (pp. 153–54)).

The young Edna O'Brien's frank, honest, and accessible portrayal of female sexuality led to the banning of her first five novels (see Appendix). She spoke out against the censorship, flouted it by publicly bringing her books across the border, and exposed it to ridicule. (In 1965 the crumbling of the old citadel was signalled when a Dublin magazine serialized *The Country Girls*, banned in 1960, having privately cleared the way with the minister for justice.)[28] At a packed public meeting in Limerick in 1966 O'Brien asked for a show of hands as to how many had read her banned books: she was met with a sea of hands and much laughter.[29] That meeting was also addressed by Fr Peter Connolly, Professor of English Language and Literature at Maynooth, who defended O'Brien against her detractors. Connolly had, since the late 1950s, been nurturing 'a gradual growth in the climate of Catholic opinion which would make a juvenile standard of censorship — though not all censorship — untenable'. His charge against the censorship was that it was based on uncontextual and quantitative principles in its assessment of obscenity. He argued for an appreciation of authorial intention in determining the difference between serious and pornographic fiction.[30] The committee of enquiry which paved the way for the 1929 act had specifically warned against censorship based on the *virginibus puerisque* principle: allowing for all only what was deemed suitable for 'the youth and the maiden'.[31] This became a guiding principle of Irish censorship long after it was abandoned elsewhere; the landmark moment was the 1933 US court decision on *Ulysses*, which centred on authorial intention and the necessity of

[28] Adams, *Censorship*, p. 252.
[29] Sean McMahon, 'A Sex by Themselves: An Interim Report on the Novels of Edna O'Brien', *Eire-Ireland*, 2.1 (1967), 79–87 (p. 80).
[30] James H. Murphy, introduction to Peter Connolly, *No Bland Facility: Selected Writings on Literature, Religion and Censorship*, ed. by James H. Murphy (Gerrard's Cross, Bucks: Smythe, 1991), pp. 4 and 7.
[31] *Report of the Committee on Evil Literature* (Dublin: Stationery Office, n.d. [1926]), pp. 16–17.

seeing a book in its entirety, and shifted the focus from the impressionable to the 'average' reader.

The banning of O'Brien's *Casualties of Peace* at the end of 1966 led to the formation of a Censorship Reform Society, which Bruce Arnold argued should consider a constitutional case against the censorship on the basis of its denial of means of livelihood to Irish authors.[32] Another *cause célèbre* of 1966 was related precisely to this issue. John McGahern's second novel, *The Dark*, was banned in June 1965. The book's use of the word 'fuck', together with its frank descriptions of masturbation and sexual frustration, had caused a stir in Ireland. McGahern was on leave from his teaching job in Dublin at the time, and on his return was told by the school manager, a priest acting on instructions from Archbishop McQuaid, that he had lost his job. The scandal was made public in February 1966 when veteran anti-censorship campaigner Owen Sheehy-Skeffington raised it in the Seanad.[33] Later in the year the minister for justice, Brian Lenihan, submitted a memo to cabinet outlining proposed amendments to the censorship laws; this was withdrawn without explanation, but re-presented in March 1967.

The memo argued for the introduction of a limit (twenty years) on the duration of prohibitions on books banned for being indecent and obscene, due to changes in 'standards of probity' with the passage of time and the assumption that a book still available after such time must have some literary merit. (It was felt that no such changes would occur in relation to birth control, 'at least until the moral problems in relation to contraception are clarified for Catholics').[34] Lenihan was authorized to draft a bill, and at its second reading in the Dáil there was all-party agreement that the time limit be reduced; in the final act, passed in June 1967, books prohibited for being indecent and obscene became automatically unbanned after twelve years. This immediately released over five thousand titles, and about four hundred per year thereafter. Subsequent to the passage of the act, only four more Irish books were banned: Lee Dunne's *Paddy Maguire is Dead* together with three of his *Cabbie* books, one of which, *The Midnight Cabbie* (1976), earned its only distinction by being the final Irish book to be banned by the board. Dunne was unconcerned with the not unexpected prohibitions on these hack works, but resented the banning of his gritty portrait of an alcoholic, *Paddy Maguire is Dead*. He stood on Grafton Street giving away free copies, wearing a placard bearing the legend, 'Paddy Maguire is Alive and Well and Living in Dublin'.[35] Following the expiry of the *Midnight Cabbie* ban in 1988, only one book by an Irish author remained on the register: Shaw Desmond's

[32] Bruce Arnold, 'Censorship and Edna O'Brien — A Special Case', *Irish Times*, 21 November 1966.
[33] See Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, 'The McGahern Affair', *Censorship*, 2.2 (Spring 1966), 27–30, and McGahern interview in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 53–67 (pp. 53–57).
[34] Memorandum for government: 'Censorship of Publications Act, 1946', 1 September 1966; memorandum for government: 'Censorship of Publications Act, 1946', 1 March 1967; cabinet minutes, 8 March and 23 May 1967; D/J memorandum, 15 May 1967, in D/T 98/6/826, NAI.
[35] Dunne interview in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 81–95 (p. 88).

Adam and Eve: A Guide to Sex and Marriage, which had been banned in 1954 for advocating contraception. This provision of the act was amended in 1979 because of the legalization of contraception, followed by the section on abortion when information on this topic was legalized in 1992. However, the anomaly remained that books prohibited under these provisions before those dates remained banned. A parliamentary initiative to rectify this anomaly led to a blanket lifting by the appeal board of all books banned for this reason in November 1999, including the last Irish book on the register. The censorship system remained in place, however, and serious international literature continued to get caught in a net now primarily aimed at catching pornography: books by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Angela Carter, among others, were banned in the 1980s.

Seamus Deane has argued that because of the pervasive influence of religion in Irish society after independence, especially in relation to sexual matters, 'the heroism of the individual life tended to be expressed [in Irish fiction] in an increasingly secular idiom, with sexuality celebrated as the deepest form of liberation [...] to challenge the status quo, writers felt an obligation to do so with a certain directness'.[36] The extent to which censorship consciously and unconsciously influenced the work of Irish writers is interesting. While it, and the dominant mentality it symbolized, may have led some to reactively or provocatively overemphasize sexual elements in their work, it also had other effects. John Broderick claimed that Francis MacManus, a state employee with a disabled child, deliberately avoided and suppressed 'certain things' in his novels to avoid being banned, branded, and possibly sacked. Broderick admitted that had he himself been a schoolteacher or librarian in his native Athlone, he could not possibly have written *The Pilgrimage*, with its frank treatment of homosexuality, which was banned in 1961. It was his comfortable family background that allowed him to pursue his art; he mentioned by contrast the fate of McGahern.[37] The smallness and intimacy of Irish society was a crucial aid to the broad effectiveness of censorship in this regard; Irish writers in exile were to some extent freed from such restrictions. Edna O'Brien left Ireland 'because something in me worries that I might stop if I lived there'; she had been vilified in her home village and copies of her books had been publicly burned. Michael Adams suggested that the growing 'permissiveness' of her books in the 1960s was possibly influenced by the censorship. Her own reflection on the effects of censorship on her work was that it added to the fear factor that all writers face.[38]

Brian Moore felt that censorship deprived him of his literary nationality, which he regarded as a positive thing; paradoxically, Irish censorship had a

[36] Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp. 217–18.
[37] Broderick interview in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 42–43.
[38] Julia Carlson, 'Edna O'Brien', in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia, Volume 3*, ed. by Derek Jones (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), p. 1749; O'Brien interview in Carlson, *Banned*, p. 74; Adams, *Censorship*, p. 252.

liberating effect on him: 'I said to myself, I've written my Irish books; I must move on. It freed me. I think it freed me and I think it helped me.' For him, like many of his generation of Irish writers, censorship became an inverted badge of honour, a sign that you had arrived — 'I thought it meant I must be OK'.[39] Benedict Kiely remarked cynically that a ban was 'the only laurel wreath that Ireland was offering to writers in that particular period'. Yet, censorship still hurt. McGahern remembers English writer Joe Ackerley saying the prohibition of *The Dark* was 'great news' because of the publicity and sales it would generate, but 'Odd enough, that's not the way I felt because, in that sense, one has a family in Ireland, and it was quite a social disgrace.' He could not write for three or four years after 'the business' with *The Dark*, upset by the association of prurience with his writing and uncomfortable with the unwanted role of liberal *cause célèbre*.[40] Like Moore and others, he just wanted to get on with his work and not become embroiled in the 'censorship wars'. Others, such as the veteran campaigners O Faolain and O'Connor, and later Edna O'Brien, felt compelled to fight censoriousness and repression not only creatively but also politically, and their efforts contributed to the removal of the monkey of censorship from the backs of Irish writers, to the benefit of themselves, their readers, and Irish culture.

APPENDIX

Books by Irish authors: Prohibitions since 1950 under the Censorship of Publications Acts, 1929–67

1950

Benedict Kiely, *In a Harbour Green*
Joyce Cary, *A Fearful Joy*
Walter Macken, *I Am Alone*
George Buchanan, *Rose Forbes*
Francis Stuart, *The Flowering Cross*
Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*
Anthony West, *On a Dark Night*
Rearden Conner, *Hunger of the Heart*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Benedict Kiely, *In a Harbour Green*
Anthony West, *On a Dark Night*
Rearden Conner, *Hunger of the Heart*

1951

Frank O'Connor, *Traveller's Samples*
Vivian Connell, *The Hounds of Cloneen*
John Brophy, *Windfall*
Jim Phelan, *Vagabond Country*

[39] Moore interview in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 109–21 (pp. 113, 119).
[40] Kiely and McGahern interviews in Carlson, *Banned*, pp. 34, 55 and 61–62.

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Francis Hackett, *The Green Lion* (banned in 1936)
James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (banned in 1944)
Frank O'Connor, *Dutch Interior* (banned in 1940)
Liam O'Flaherty, *Hollywood Cemetery* (banned in 1937)

1952

Francis Stuart, *Goodfriday's Daughter*
Anthony West, *Another Kind*
John Brophy, *Turn the Key Softly*
Sam Hanna Bell, *December Bride*
Walter Macken, *The Bogman*
Vivian Connell, *September in Quinze*
George Buchanan, *A Place to Live*
Austin Clarke, *The Sun Dances at Easter*
Brian Moore, *Wreath for a Redhead*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Samuel Beckett, More Pricks than Kicks (banned in 1934)

1953

Vivian Connell, *A Man of Parts*
Brian Cleeve, *Portrait of My City* and *The Night Winds*
L. A. G. Strong, *The Hill of Howth*
Francis Stuart, *The Chariot*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Maura Laverty, Alone we Embark (banned in 1943)

1954

John Brophy, *The Prime of Life*
Benedict Kiely, *Honey Seems Bitter*
Samuel Beckett, *Watt*
Shaw Desmond, *Adam and Eve*
Norah Hoult, *Journey into Print*
Rearden Conner, *The Singing Stove*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Austin Clarke, The Bright Temptation (banned in 1932)

1955

Joyce Cary, *Not Honour More*
Brian Moore, *Judith Hearne*
Benedict Kiely, *There Was an Ancient House*
Francis Stuart, *The Pilgrimage*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Brian Moore, *Judith Hearne*
Benedict Kiely, *There Was an Ancient House*
Francis Stuart, *The Pilgrimage*

1956

J. P. Donleavy, *The Ginger Man*
John Brophy, *The City of Scandals* and *The Nimble Rabbit*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*
James Hanley, *Levine*
Iris Murdoch, *The Flight from the Enchanter*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

James Hanley, Levine

1957

Rearden Conner, *The House of Cain*
John Brophy, *Soldier of the Queen*

1958

Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*
Eugene O'Brien, *He Swung and He Missed*

1960

Edna O'Brien, *The Country Girls*

1961

John Broderick, *The Pilgrimage*
Frank O'Connor, *Kings, Lords and Commons*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Frank O'Connor, Kings, Lords and Commons

1962

Edna O'Brien, *The Lonely Girl*
Anthony West, *The Trend is Up*
Irish Murdoch, *A Severed Head*

1963

Brian Moore, *An Answer from Limbo*

Prohibitions revoked by the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board:

Brian Moore, *An Answer from Limbo*

1964

J. P. Donleavy, *A Singular Man*
Edna O'Brien, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*

1965

John McGahern, *The Dark*
Edna O'Brien, *August is a Wicked Month*
(Maurice Leitch, *Liberty Lad*? – see note 1)

1966

Edna O'Brien, *Casualties of Peace*
Anthony West, *The Ferret Fancier* and *The Native Moment*

1969

(Maurice Leitch, *Poor Lazarus*? — see note 1)

1972

Lee Dunne, *Paddy Maguire is Dead*

1974

Lee Dunne, *Midnight Cabbie*

1975

Lee Dunne, *The Cabbie Who Came in from the Cold*

1976

Lee Dunne, *The Cabfather*