CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Silent screen: book review.
Authors	Ó Drisceoil, Donal
Publication date	2007
Original Citation	Ó Drisceoil, D. (2007) 'Silent screen: review: Kevin Rockett, Irish film censorship: a cultural journey from silent cinema to internet pornography (Dublin, 2004) and Mary Corcoran and Mark O'Brien (eds), Political censorship and the democratic state: the Irish broadcasting ban (Dublin, 2005)', Irish Review, 36-37, pp. 150-152.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://theirishreview.com/, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29736355
Rights	© 2007 The Irish Review and Contributor
Download date	2026-11-07 09:01:41
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3088



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

it did cause alarm among some activists who were concerned with the lack of interest in Irish amongst Catholic bishops and priests.

With the revival of Irish in late nineteenth-century Ireland, some of its promoters argued the case that politics and culture should be kept separate from one another. In a chapter on language and revolution, Crowley focuses on advocates who wished to promote Irish as the cultural capital of the community, which should be restored before it was too late. One of its best-known promoters was Douglas Hyde, who called for the de-Anglicization of Ireland in 1892. Hyde was a strong proponent of non-violence and advocated cultural revival rather than political independence. He protested that people had diverged from their true path by ceasing to be Irish without successfully becoming English. The Irish had acquired the language of the colonizer at the expense of their native tongue. His non-violent approach jarred with those who felt that the cause of the language and the cause of political independence were one and the same.

A chapter on the languages of Ireland 1922–2004 examines the role of Irish in a divided Island. A discourse of de-colonization made a strong association between the revival of Irish and independence from Britain. Among its proponents was the republican leader Michael Collins. He argued that the realization of Irish independence was dependent on three factors. People should seek to revive their native customs, speak their own language and govern themselves. This chapter comprehensively explores the role of education in the promotion of the language and the significance of Irish in the Constitution. The Commission on the Restoration of the Language also receives careful scrutiny. Of particular interest here is Crowley's exploration of the unprecedented Irish language revival that has occurred in Northern Ireland in the past three decades.

The final chapter (a postscript) explores language questions among prominent contemporary Irish writers such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Tom Paulin. Their concerns are hardly confined to Irish and extend to Hiberno–English, Ulster–English and Ulster–Scots. Overall this book offers some fascinating insights into one of the major issues in Ireland's history north and south of the border. Tony Crowley has an established publications record on the history of the Irish language and has already produced much important work on language and cultural theory in Ireland. This book is yet another significant contribution to our understanding of the complexity of language decline and revival.

MÁIRÉAD NIC CRAITH

Silent Screen

Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: a Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004. ISBN 1-85182-845-1. €29.95 pbk.

Mary Corcoran and Mark O'Brien (eds), *Political Censorship and the Democratic State: the Irish Broadcasting Ban*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005. ISBN 1-85182-869-9. €24.95 pbk.

The literature on Irish censorship (in sharp contrast to the Irish censorship of literature) is surprisingly sparse, given the enduring interest in the topic and the dark shadows it threw across the Irish cultural and political landscape for much of the twentieth century. In this limited context, literary censorship has been relatively better served than the censorship of film and broadcasting. These two fine publications go some way towards remedying this situation.

It is appropriate that Kevin Rockett, a pioneering figure in Irish film studies, has produced the first, and surely definitive, study of this dominant aspect of our film history. Weighing in at just under 500 pages, this is a substantial volume in every sense of the word. It is based primarily on exhaustive research on the newly available (thanks in no small way to the efforts of Rockett himself) records of the Film Censor's office. Over 50,000 censors' decisions have been made since 1923; about 2,500 films were banned and a further 11,000 cut, and Rockett has examined about 18,000 of the decisions. He limits, if that is the word, his discussion to a representative sample of over 1,000 commercially or critically significant titles, while making passing reference to about the same number again. The picture that emerges is predictably 'dispiriting', as he says, though at times grimly amusing also, as pathologically zealous censorship like this often tends to be, especially now that it is largely a thing of the past.

Ireland's first film censors were appointed by the Public Health Committee of Dublin Corporation in the fateful year of 1916. This relatively benign system was succeeded by the regime established under the Censorship of Films Act, 1923, introduced after pressure from moral vigilantes in one of the first acts passed by the new Free State parliament. The first five Censors (1923–72) had no connection with film or the cinema and were chosen for their conservative Catholic reliability. Four of them, incidentally, were medical doctors. Anything to do with sex or which deviated from traditional Christian morality was targeted, but so too were multiple other reflections of modern, urban life: crime, materialism, consumerism and 'decadence' in general. The main issue was not so much the danger of Anglicization, but in the words of the first Censor, James Montgomery, 'Los Angelesation'. There was never a stated film censorship policy or code of practice (Montgomery declared his code to be the Ten Commandments), which meant the whole procedure was arbitrary, subjective and thus, frequently perverse. The first public statement on a decision by a censor was in 1994, in relation to the banning of *Natural Born Killers*. The introduction of age classification and the appointment of a more liberal appeal board in 1965 marked the beginning of an era of relative liberalization. Der Breen (1972–78) and Frank Hall (1978–86) represented a transition from the extreme zealotry of the past to the liberalism of Sheamus Smith (1986–2003), who preferred to see himself as a classifier rather than a censor, while John Kelleher (2003–) sees the Censor as a type of 'consumer guide'. Technological developments in the form of satellite television, video, DVD, and the Internet have all altered the picture profoundly and leave the old censorship model looking increasingly anachronistic and irrelevant.

Rockett concludes his study with a lucid and concise summary of the history of broadcasting censorship, culminating in the subject of Mary Corcoran and Mark O'Brien's edited collection, Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act. This timely

publication maintains its focus on Ireland, but presents itself credibly as a case-study with universal lessons in the area of media and democracy. In his foreword, Roy Greenslade brings us immediately into those censorious and McCarthyesque days when to oppose Section 31 was to be branded an apologist for murder and a fellow traveller of the pariah Provos. That prevailing repressive atmosphere is well-captured in a number of the contributions: in broad social terms by Mark O'Brien (on the 'silencing project' of which this censorship was a part) and in relation to journalistic practice in particular by Desmond Fisher, Colum Kenny, Farrel Corcoran, Ed Moloney and Helen Shaw. Kenny is explicit in identifying the importance of the 'Stickie' (Workers' Party) factor in maintaining this atmosphere within RTÉ and undermining journalistic resistance. Section 31 was used between 1972 and 1994 to ban loyalists and republicans of named organizations from the airwaves. It was supposedly a security measure but, as a number of the contributions here make clear, this was de facto political censorship aimed primarily against Sinn Féin and the IRA. As well as the aforementioned, the collection includes Conor Cruise O'Brien's 1976 case for the censorship, a clear and concise legal summary, 'Ministerial orders and court challenges', by Alex White, and essays on 'News management and the threat to the public sphere' by Mary Corcoran, and 'Culture, democracy and public service broadcasting' by Michael D. Higgins, under whose ministerial watch twenty-two years of Section 31 censorship ended. Corcoran puts the focus on the audience, in a welcome shift of emphasis from the excess of journalistic perspectives. She challenges the assumptions on which the broadcasting ban was predicated, namely, that 'censorship is necessary to protect the body politic, that journalists must therefore be restrained in carrying out their work, and that what the audience don't know won't hurt them'. In the concluding essay, Higgins offers his 'sense of the issues' of censorship and democracy from 'a politician's perspective', and urges the defence of public service broadcasting in the cause of democracy in the context of the commercialized global 'communications order'.

Both of these books are welcome additions to the literature of Irish censorship, but much remains to be done. The Irish experience needs to be placed more firmly in an international context, while the interrelationship between so-called 'moral' and political censorship in Ireland remains under-analyzed. Lenny Bruce (the subject of Bob Fosse's biopic *Lenny*, banned in Ireland in 1979) may offer a starting point with his characteristically obscene and brilliant observation: 'Take away the right to say "fuck" and you take away the right to say "fuck the government"'.

DONAL Ó DRISCEOIL

Images and Interiors

Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. ISBN: 00300107323. £40 hbk.

Irish Rural Interiors in Art by Claudia Kinmonth investigates and analyzes the daily lives and rituals of the lower classes in Ireland using evidence gleaned from paintings,