# THE LATE LATE SHOW
## "Bard of our Times"

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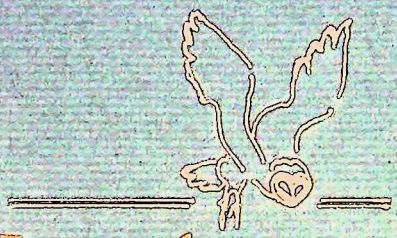

# Introduction

# INTRODUCTION

While settling down, amongst family and friends, to watch a favourite television programme, the average viewer is unlikely to reflect on the proposition that the living-room audience is receiving "consciously constructed messages" composed of raw material of societal life. Ir is just as unlikely that he or she will be directly aware that, while viewing, they are "decoding" these messages to provide them with frameworks of reference for the real world, yet this is what is taking place. Although this communication process usually occurs, for the most part, on an unconscious level, it comprises one of the important functions of television, known as "THE BARDIC FUNCTION"(1).

As explained by John Fiske and Hartley, the term originates from the image of the traditional bard who "rendered the central concerns of his day into verse" (2). Television does this also using its own specialised language systems. The fulfillment of this function has the effect of communicating to members of a culture a "confirming, re-inforcing version of themselves" (3). This is not to say that the emphasis is one maintaining the status quo. The bard can also "expose conversely, any practical inadequecies in the cultures sense of itself" (4). In effect the bard keeps a watchful eye on society, who can in turn refer back to it.

The intention, in choosing the Late Late Show as a subject of study, is to examine an enactment of the Bardic function by a specific television product in an individual culture and hopfully to arrive at some conslusion as to how effective both it and the television media can be in this role.

The reasons for choosing the Late Late Show are probably quite obvious. It has been, over the last three decades, a focus for the goings on in Irish society, not only reflecting, but involving itself in the central concerns of the day. It has become an integral part of Irish life and is now often regarded as being a National Institution.

The study commences with an examination of the structure of the Show itself. It then investigates the role and function of the Show in relation to the evolution of Irish society in the critical areas of, sex, religion and politics. Finally, through a consideration of three specific controversies generated by the show, the bardic aspect of its significance is elucidated.

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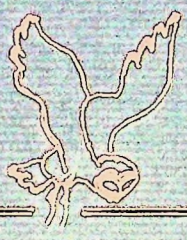

# Content & Format

A particular slot of a Late Late Show is just ending - the title of the latest diet book, or the date of the new rock group's next gig has been announced when Gay Byrne decides spontaneously, flexibly, and unscriptedly to take a comment from the audience. The camera swings to the middle-aged man with the red face and the mortified wife, who proceeds to hold the nation enthralled with a stream of unabashed, homespun and uproarously funny opinions on everything from milk quotas to Mikhail Gorbachev.

Within the format of the Late Late Show this kind of spontaneity is possible, and contributes greatly to the mood of the programme and to the sense of reality it conveys to the viewer. The casual format and informal structure of the Late Late Show has been an important component of it s growth to "Irish Institution', and represents a significant development of television potential.

Since it s first dry run (6th July 1962) there has been considerable development in format. Technological change, increasing professionalism, audience sophistication and expanding range of content have forced format change. It s roots, however, and it s early shape remain clearly apparent.

The genesis, from American television, was the talk show "The Tonight Show" hosted by Jack Parr. The Late Late Show copied the late night time-slot with an eleven p.m. start on Friday night, but was supposed to graft on to the American model a distinctly Irish flavour, reflect Irish hospitality and create the atmosphere of a fireside chat. Invited guests would engage in cosy chat with a young host, aided by three companions.

These were chosen to represent a grandfather figure, a sister figure, and an Irish rascal to liven things up. From its inception, the show was live, unscripted and quite spontaneous.

The fireside motif was not attempted however. The show was a pioneer in explicitly incorporating its television identity into its appearance. It made no attempt to conceal its production equipment such as cables, cameras and microphones. Technical assistants often walked into the set to perform some duty. Other changes evolved. The three-companion panel was dropped, the slot was changed from Friday to Saturday night (1963) and the host became mobile and incorporated instructions, such as the famous "roll it there Colette", to off-screen assistants into his patter. A variety of format styles were devised to facilitate content innovations. The courtroom format for debates, and the soapbox for topical discussions are examples of this development. Changes also emanated from the policy of creating variety, with specials such as the Toy Show, the One Subject Show, Fashion Shows, and Birthday Tributes. Other changes were more subtle, noticed more by contrast then memory. Technical equipment has become less obtrusive, and the Show has taken on a sleeker image.

Within, one might say, the format of variable format, there is a certain constancy. For example, it has always remained 'open' and 'loose', a term coined by P. Schlezinger in "Televising Terrorism" (1). It refers to a format in which a variety of views may be expressed, outcome is open ended and interpretation is a choice for the viewer. This has been a crucial feature of the show when dealing with discussions of topical issues. It allows for democratic participation and inhibits the

manipulation of debate to pre-determined conclusions.

The live transmission, which has been a feature of the Show since its inception, is also central to how the programme works. Events are aired as they occur, safe from editorial interpretation, unlike some shows which claim to be live, while in fact relying on a time delay loop system, to maintain control. There is therefore an enhancement of the sense of realism and objectivity, both in practice and in the minds of the viewers at home. The very lack of editing has itself led to public discussion, arising from impromptu remarks. This kind of incidental event reinforces the principle of free speech.

The presence and notably participatory role of the studio audience is a further constant feature of the format. It contributes greatly to the appeal of the programme. Unlike many studio audiences, cued to laugh, clap and be silent, Late Late Show audiences have been facilitated by the flexible and open agenda to interject, often to such an extent that the presenter and panel have been upstaged. This has been an essential ingredient in creating a democratic discussion situation where topics, often of national importance, have been subject to the views of ordinary citizens and not dominated by a panel of experts. It has also given the viewers at home a feeling that they are being represented and has provided them with a reference framework on which to evaluate public opinion.

The value of audience participation during the course of the Show is recognised by the programme makers, and the activity is not always arbitrary. A system is sometimes implemented whereby, 'plants' (2) are placed in the audience to instigate discussion and encourage audience involvement.

Public access to the Show is enhanced by the use of phone-ins, enabling viewers at home to make comments and contribute to discussions. This is not quite as effective as studio participation, as calls are subject to selection.

In addition to facilitating the democratising effect of audience participation, the flexible agenda has made it possible to accommodate in-show developments. The flexibility is bi-lateral, allowing either the contraction or expansion of nominal time slots as the Show develops. This is a powerful control on items that fail and permits the run-on of really interesting items. The flexibility extended to programme over-run, but was ended by Union embargo on technician overtime. A temporary solution to this problem was tried, in 1986 in which recorded over-run was broadcast on Sunday afternoon under the title "Late, Late Extra" but this device was discontinued shortly after its introduction.

In delightful contrast to the situation in American television where the power of the advertiser is so great that sporting events have pauses to allow commercials, the Late Late Show flexible agenda extends to the three commercial slots broadcast within its time-span, which can be delayed or brought forward if necessary. Further, the sense of interruption is diminished by Gay Byrne's slight delay in noting the return to the Show of the home audience so reinforcing the effect that the Show goes on throughout the commercial break.

The flexible nature of the Show's format is important in that the Show takes on a natural free flowing direction akin to private conversation.

Important discussions are not ended and forgotten just because of time limitation. If discussion is still heated and unresolved, then it is allowed to carry on. The Show's content leads and guides the format, not vice versa. The fact that even the commercial breaks don't intrude, maintains continuity.

As can be seen, the main feature of the Late Late format, despite developments and interchangibility, is that it is informal, open ended and accessible. Its flexibility creates a feeling of natural direction, that things are not preconcieved and planned. The atmosphere is one of interaction and participation. These ingredients contribute to minimalising the extent to which television mediates society. By doing away with a lot of the more restrictive devices of controlled formats, the Late Late Show can reflect more closely the approximated truth of Irish society. Although there is room for development in achieving this objective, it probably lies in the ideal of the Show's producer, Gay Byrne, who comments "I would like to see it being done against bare walls without the audience on formal rows of seats. I would like to have people just driving up to Telefis Eireann, coming into the studio and joining in .... I would like viewers to join in the proceedings by phone .... In short I would like a haphazard weekly gathering of people in a much more informal and less contrived situation than present" (3)

## CONTENT

A quintessential mark of Late Late Show content is diversity . Back to back shows have placed such topics as bereavement and cosmetic surgery in unlikely proximity to each other. Within a single show the viewer can be roller-coastered through the troughs of child abuse or drug abuse, to the comedic crests of a Billy Connolly. Such steep ascent or descents have left some critics short of breath, but with sufficient steam to outrage at the mixing of matters of ponderous gravity with jingles, prize give-aways and bare legged comics.

Undaunted, the programme makers clearly clung to diversity as a precious objective which is now intrinsic to Late Late Show style. The principle is that "people who might not voluntarily tune into a discussion on religion, politics, or farming, would watch and listen with a great deal of enjoyment in the context of a light entertainment programme like the Late Late" (4). The saying that "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down", made such issues as entry into the EEC, contraception, taxation, the Irish language and education palatable, when mixed with doses of comedy, dance, music, celebrity interviews, games and quizzes. The principle of diversity also applies to the representation of minority groups on the programme. As Pan Collins (researcher) observes,

> "in our society there are always people who are part of the community, and yet not"(5).

She cites examples of the army, the gardai, nuns and priests. Apart from featuring members from these minorities, the show has also dealt with itinerants, unmarried mothers, homosexuals, disabled people and ethnic groups. This contributes to the recognition of such groups, and helps integrate them back into society.

The source of all the diverse content is Irish Society itself, with every stone on its rocky landscape overturned to provide most of the entertainment and all of the subject matter. The Late Late Show is local in basis, though not in appeal. It is concerned with national culture not global issues.

The principal conduit for the flow of potential content from Irish Society to the show is the programme researchers. Typically holding degrees in Politics, Law or Sociology and with backgrounds in journalism and reporting, they not only understand the structure and working of society, but have networks of sources and social contacts which provide the first cues to issues and events of social interest. The conduit of course is not an open drain. The programme researchers fulfil a filtering function based on judgements founded on personal experience of Irish life. Other media, publishing houses, public relations firms, literary agents and the like constitute auxiliary sources especially for celebrity or promotional content. Filtering the potential content from this flow may be seen as the first stage of a selection procedure.

The second stage of selection is performed in a more concentrated way at the beginning of the week prior to the show. A meeting of the production team considers a set of proposals from which a draft agenda is formulated. Although the initial stages are democratic, the final decision on details of this draft is made by the producer, Gay Byrne. In this role he performs as " an editor of a magazine around whom eager-beaver reporters hustle to get their stories in"(6). The basis for his decision-making seems subjective, "I operate largely on hunches" (7), and

"I tend to fly by the seat of my pants", (8) are remarks he has made descriptive of his modus operandi. On the other hand, however, he does admit that "experience and knowledge" (9) play a part. He is recognised as having the talent of "knowing how fast the pulse of the country is beating and whose pulse to take". (10)

Apart from Gay's hunches, certain firm criteria condition selection. Myles McWeeney, researcher (1964-1975), refers to "good TV" and "entertainment value" criteria; "of interest to the viewer" and "relevancy" are also mentioned.(11) The main objective is to attract large viewing numbers, and a close watch is kept on TAM ratings. However this concept of "attention gaining" (12) does not represent the sole intentions of the programme makers. Apart from monitoring audience reaction, via phone calls and letters to the station, and press, feedback is also gathered internally, in the form of detailed questionnaires, completed by the 500 members of the Audience Research Television Panel. These detailed comments provide valuable evidence of audience reaction. Public reaction can and does influence the content of the show. As Gay Byrne puts it, "if we get a lot of letters over a number of weeks saying that the show has gone far too serious, I would recognise this as a danger sign and would clamber back into a lighter vein for a couple of weeks". (13)

Across the spectrum of its content in both the light entertainment band and in the more serious public-issues band, the cumulative contribution of the Late Late Show to the development of Irish society has been significant. At the light entertainment end it has traditionally used contributions from established performers and those just emerging. With

its vast national audience it has performed a very important shop window role. A more subtle, but vital, role has been the opportunity to publicise, distinguish and celebrate Irish talent. In many instances the audience and the show have engaged in a kind of self-congratulatory, back-patting exercise which makes a healthy contribution to the growth of National self-esteem. The featuring of Sean Kelly, Stephen Roche and the Irish soccer team, are recent examples of this activity.

Self-esteem has been buttressed also through exposure to foreign celebrities. In the early years of the show, which coincided with the first emergence of Ireland from a period of self-sufficiency and containment, there was often evidence of a sense of inferiority in Irish studio audiences and hence, by inference, National audiences. Anyone from abroad had merely to say how lovely the Irish scenery was to be assured of rousing applause and heartfelt acceptance. Whether through the suave competance of Gay Byrne himself, the honest intellectuality of Fergal O'Connor, or the belligerant bull-headedness of Ulick O'Connor, Irish people were afforded an opportunity to relate and communicate to other cultutes and to discern value in their own Irishness.

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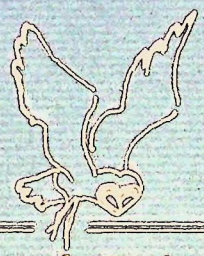

# Central Themes

# SEX

A quote made famous by the late Oliver Flanagan T.D. that "there was no sex in Ireland until Teleís Eireann"(1)describes quite clearly the sexual vacuum in which Irish people had been living prior to the arrival of television. The reality, as Gay Byrne puts it, was that "there was sex, but no discussion of it" (2), the silence or mutness being a feature of Irish life largely stemming from the country's strong Catholic tradition.

Looking out from our island enclave, much of the rest of the world, with America and perhaps Britain in the forefront, seemed headed towards unrestrained, pagan indulgence. Nudity in the media, pre-marital sex, prostitution, were examples of outrageous permissiveness against which the Catholic moral ethos of Ireland would have to be defended. Here sex was the sole and secret preserve of the marriage bed. In thought word and deed it was everywhere else the gravest of sins, whispered about in the confessional, but generally remaining unmentioned in any meaningful public way. Strict censorship laws applying to print and film and "a tradition of acceptance without question" (3), ensured the status quo. Sex was the ultimate taboo.

However, if this was the national stance it was at least experiencing some problems of balance when television arrived. At first it was the trickle of cross channel broadcasts and then the flood of home broadcast T.V. As expressed in Mr. Flannagan's indignant complaint, this prescipitated very rapid changes of attitude. If not the actual cause of change, the advent of television facilitated the Irish nation in the process of secularising it's moral concepts, with the Late Late Show providing exemplary leadship, the sexual taboo slowly being dismantled.

Sexual issues were taken from the pulpit, and the confessional, and placed unavoidably in virtually every living-room in the land.

The effect of television was diffusive, but there were instances of dramatic, sharply focussed effect. The Late Late Show treatment of the issue of contraception, was one such instance. Gay Byrne correlates the impact of television , when its treatment of an issue coincides with the "crest of a wave" (4) in public consciousness. The contraception debate coincided with a wave of desire for sexual liberty in particular, and freedom of conscience in general. The treatment of the contraception issue occurred in two shows which ran consecutively.

The first was broadcast on 13th March 1971. It reflected the traditional position. Appearing on the show to elaborate on his statement that television popularised sex, Oliver J. Flanagan, drawn into the subject of contraception, maintained that if contraception was legalisd "we would *became* a nation of prostitutes" (5). His stance of moralistic outrage was unpopular with the studio audience. The presumption of a public offial adopting the role of guardian of the nation's morals was widely and angerily rejected. In the heated response through the letter columns of the daily press, one woman wrote "to him we must be a nation of mindless, thoughtless, immoral creatures needing the protection of Mr. Flanagan and his followers".(6) Her's was not the lone voice, although the Catholic Ireland brigade was also well represented. However, it was obvious that many people were ready to reach beyond traditional dogma.

The response of the Late Late Show was to remain with the issue for its following broadcast on 20th March 1971. A greater balance of views, both pro-revision and anti-revision were sought on this occassion. Using a panel style format, five politicians and a priest, Fr. Faul from Northern Ireland, assembled to speak from the perspective of a society which did not outlaw contraception. Fr. Faul articulated traditional Catholic fears; contraception would "damage the sacredness of sex among the young"(7). His concern about the "sacredness of life" (8) were met by Justin Keating T.D., who observed that "people who have many more children than they can afford are not cherishing life".(9) Many of the complexities of the contraceptive issue emerged in the discussion ie, disruption of the family , civil rights, morality, abortion and pre-marital sex arose in what was fairly open debate.

Challenges to monopoly of the Catholic Hierarchy on public morality, were also given voice, when the show provided a platform for alternative groups such as The Women's Liberation Movement, Divorce Action Group, and the Gay Rights Movement. It was when tackling issues such as divorce, abortion and contraception which.. called for consensus shifts, personal choice and practical action (votes on reforms), that the show played the role of informing and educating the public, and allowing people the freedom and responsibility of making up their own minds.

As Irish Society became less reactive when confronted with discussions of sexual matters in the context of civil rights issues, the way was clear for more specific attempts to investigate the meaning of sexuality. The Late Late Show did this quite comprehensively in a special on Sex, 14 February 1976. The ramifications of sexuality, physical, biological,

emotional, cognitive and effective, were discussed by a panel with audience participation. Although discussion was quite sober and scientific so that "somehow sex never came into it",(70) it was an example of the show guiding society into a more rational and mature attitude towards sex, thereby helping to overcome the connotations of evil , immorality and sinfulness that surrounded it.

The mediation of the host, Gay Byrne, was an important factor in the taboo-breaking effect of the Late Late Show. Charming, sophisticated and wordly-wise, he remained manifestly part of the establishment. Describable as a 'good Catholic', many would have regarded his personal views as conservative. With his own manner and attitudes seeming to belie the content of his program, he effected an articulation of many issues shrouded in silence in the sixties. Sex, nighties and contraceptives became part of our public language as Gay spoke about matters we all wanted to talk about, but did not, in public, dare. In the face of our dread that unGodly influences were about to leap the various channels and oceans, that had so far enabled us to remain faced towards God and salvation, The Late Late Show probed behind our veneer of Catholic morality and exposed the dark and hidden issues lurking there. So from a situation in which the very word "sex" hovered on the fringes of bad language, we were led through those public debates of the early years; to discussions on unmarried mothers, child abuse, lesbianism, homosexuality and sexually transmitted diseases. Of course they did not occur without outrage - such things were not part of Irish life! However the television sets remained switched on, the TAM ratings high. Over the years the show has managed to acclimatise people to hearing about aspects of life they

would rather pretend do not exist.

In a recent programme that dealt with the transmission and prevention of Aids, Gay Byrne demonstrated the use of a condom with the help of a plastic phallus. It was probably the first time that an Irish programme had shown these items and demonstrated their use. The growing maturity of Irish people in accepting frank discussions about sex was evident both in the reaction of the audience, which was attentive and good-humoured, and the absence of outrage subsequent to the show. Colin Tobin speculates in an article in the Crane Bag that "if the Late Late Show had not existed, it is highly possible that many people would have lived their lives in Ireland in the twentieth century, without ever having heard anyone talking about sex".(11)

It would be wrongheaded to claim that the Late Late Show had of itself altered national attitudes to sex and sexually related matters, or indeed that such changes of attitude that have occurred are universal. There exists still, deep pockets of conservatism, noticable in the outcome of the divorce and abortion referenda. What it has done is made it easier for people to say publically where they stand on such issues. Sex is part of life. Finally and, hopefully, forever it is NOT a sin. As Gay puts it, "I think that the main changes in attitudes have been that at last people accept that discussion of subjects such as those that come within the ambit of Sexual mores, is actually possible without too much danger to our sainted society".(12)

## RELIGION

The place of the Catholic Church in Irish Society has undergone considerable change in the past several decades and the Late Late Show has been inextricably involved in the process. Exactly what role it played has been the subject of various interpretations. Some regard it as having had a destructive effect, while others see its role as having been, on the whole, a positive one. It would be wrong to take the view that television and the Late Late Show in particular, were initiators of change, rather their role seems to have been one of facilitator and prompter, functioning as an integral part of society in a period of radical reappraisal.

As Irish society began to modernise and progress, some religious intellectuals began to question whether the principal features of Irish Catholism, anti-intellectualism, dogmaticism, and authoritarianism, would serve in a New Ireland, one that was beginning to have a wider contact with a more secular world. These thoughts were reflected in New Catholic, periodicals such as The Furrow (1950) and Doctrine and Life (1951). The matter was put rather bluntly by Jesuit John Kelly, "too many people in Ireland to-day are trying to make do with a peasant religion when they are no longer peasants". (12)

This realisation on the part of clerics, that the Catholic Church would have to progress, to keep in step with an increasingly modern society, was reflective of the actions of Pope John XXIII, who initiated great changes in the Catholic Church through the

Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council examined all doctrines that were characteristic of the rigid and dogmatic church and attempted to define its place in the modern world. The process lead to practical innovations such as the change from Latin to the vernacular in Mass, the involvement of the laity in the liturgy, and in changes of attitude where the emphasis was on ecumenism, growth, renewal and open discussion. The objective was to humanise the church and replace the mantle of authority that had been its main characteristic.

The effects of Vatican II were slow to emerge and it did not result in instant liberalisation. There was still deeply rooted, conservative thought that was resistant to change, and the laity had yet to feel its effect, or know what the implications were. This was the religious millieu in which the Late Late Show operated in the late 1960's.

Gradually it began testing how far the boundaries could be pushed. It first did this on a show, (3rd March 1967), which looked to what practical changes could be made in the light of the principle of ecumenism. It centered on the subject of the T.C.D.ban, which was an annually repeated ban imposed by the hierarchy, on Catholics attending Trinity College without special dispensation. Those taking part in the discussion were two Catholic lecturers, two informed Catholic laymen, and a priest, Fr. Patrick Brophy. The discussion was frank and controlled. It quickly emerged that there was a general consensus, embracing both audience and panel, (and later the general public), that the ban was outmoded an anachromistic impediment to the objectives of the New Church, and that it should

be abolished. Fr. Brophy's alignment with this position was indicative of the emergence in Ireland of a no-nonsence, rationally minded, approachable and humanistic clergy.

This was made even clearer on a show labeled "The Black and White Minister Show", (13th May 1967). The idea for this show was to give priests an opportunity to express their views of the laity. There was a panel of speakers consisting of Fr. Patrick Brophy, whose honest disposition in the T.C.D. ban discussion had been impressive, Fr. Fergal O'Connor, Fr. Eamon Gaynor, Fr. Frank Moriarity and Dr. Eugene McDermott. The audience was composed of laity and clergy in roughly equal numbers. Priests from the Holy Ghose Fathers, The Jesuits and the Dominicans were present, and slmost every shade of opinion, held by the Churchmen in Ireland, was represented. The show took on a lively atmosphere. Discussion ranged from the subject of Bosses, planned donations, and lay people to the theatrical ban (priests were not allowed to go to theatres), the sometimes lonliness of clerical life and the meagerneaa of their earnings. Fr. Brophy talked about "an embarrassing respect and reverence in the laity's attitude".(13) The conversation was frank, sincere and witty, and at one stage three of the priests obliged with a song.

The reaction to the show, from both the public and critics, was very favourable. "The Irish Catholic" observed that the priests "gave a personal rather than official reaction to points raised. The lay folk in the audience seemed also to enjoy the necessary liberty and

were ready to speak freely and criticise honestly".(14) Peter Clery, writing for the Irish Independent commented, "the interest which this programme arroused may indicate the weakness of the communication link between clergy and laity".(15) Tom O'Dea, in his Irish Press column, noted that, although the show was a pleasant surprise, "events of various kinds have led up to it, and both the telvision people, and those who were invited, apparently judged that the time was now ripe for it".(16)

In general, the Show was regarded as a major breakthrough in lay-clerical relationships. It certainly contributed to the humanising of the clergy, who were shown to have problems and uncertainties just like anyone else; a far cry from the sainted perfection traditionally demanded of them. Occurring as it did on such a central public platform, it communicated to the laity a sense that the Church could indeed respond to their needs for greater understanding of an alignment with daily practical problems. It also cleared the way for members of the clergy, who might previously have been fearful to express their true attitudes in the emerging situation. The same idea was applied successfully a few years later to a show on Nuns, although by 1970 the novelty had worn off slightly. Although shows of this nature made an important contribution to the integration of the Church and Society, they were done in a light-hearted manner, and still retained an element of reserve and respect.

More serious attempts on the part of the Show and its host to expose the human side of the Church, were not received so well. One show,

on 17th March 1970, features guest Fr. Desmond O'Donnell who frankly discussed clerical celebacy. At one stage, Gay Byrne, in his sometimes probing manner, asked him whether he had ever consummated his love for a woman in a physical way. Fr. O'Donnell answered honestly that, although sometimes tempted, and after a period of deliberation, he had always maintained his vow of celibacy. Despite the fact that he took no offence to the question public reaction was one of outrage and criticism of the host.The fact is that it was probably a question that most people had always wanted to ask, but were afraid to. With Gay Byrne taking the risk on their behalf, the public had an opportunity to hear what was a candid and reassuring answer, which could only have contributed to a more sympathetic relationship between clergy and laity. The growing acceptance of discussions on sexuality outside the Church, did not extend to questions on sexuality and celibacy within the Church. As recently as 1985, a scheduled appearance on the show of two American lesbians, who had previously been nuns, caused a storm of protest. The feeling was so strong that a twenty four hour vigil of prayer took place outside the RTE studios before the show took place.

In some shows critical challenges to the Church were made. The first incident which generated much controversy was in 1965 when a young student, Brian Travaskis, made strong, important criticism of the Church and Clergy. (Chpt.3) The outrage that followed could be seen to be in reaction to disrespectful remarks he made but, with a

show whose format was conducive to impromptu comments and which transmitted live, occurrances like this were always a possibility, indeed the very raison d'etre. Subsequently and memorably, student John Feeny in 1969 claimed that the Archbishop of Dublin had shares in a DUREX company, and Bob Geldof scandalised everyone with criticism of his Catholic upbringing, specifically at Blackrock College Dublin.

In relation to the John Feeny incident, it is interesting to note that, although the Late Late Show and Gay Byrne were often accused of bias against the Church, on this occassion Gay Byrne attacked John Feeney for his remark. He, in turn, was attacked both by the audience and, more surprisingly, by a priest on the panel. These were but minor incidents, however heated the contemporary reaction was, in comparison to the deeper process, whereby society re-examined the nature and basis of its moral disposition, and the Church adjusted to the need to speak old truths in a new voice.

The Late Late Show became part of this process by providing a forum in which the stance on social and political affairs of the post Vatican II Church could be investigated. The clergy was involved in discussions on the Northern divide, contraception, abortion, marriage, and family planning. In this way, valuable evidence of Church response to such issues could be heard, discussed and challenged. Further, the Church was down from the pulpit. The penchant to dogmatise was diluted. Allowing that there was a real movement to involve the laity, a real shift to freedom of conscience, the very

nature of the medium worked against dogmatism. Some priests, slow to adjust to the new situation and to the requirements of the electronic pulpit, seemed simply rude and inept.

In the context of topical discussion, an emerging liberalism in the Church was expressed. Increasingly, in the late 1960's the voice was that of a new type of theological, intellectual priest. This was largely due to changes in the seminary training process which did away with ferocious discipline and the authoritarian and scrupulously orthodox teaching. Instead it encouraged students to read avidly and study works of advanced theology. Out of this emerged priests who were young, more liberally minded than their older brothers and who could adjust to the requirements of the modern media. Fr. O'Connor especially became a regular guest on the Late Late Show in the seventies. He became associated with fortright views on social and political affairs, and liberal views on sex. He promoted sex in marriage as a powerful positive component of a relationship; on one occassion describing how a couple might creat an atmosphere conducive to intimacy. In 1970, a show on marriage guidance, broadcast on 12th December included his view that there was no valid reason why the Roman Church should object to divorce. Such a view, held by a priest and communicated instantly and nationally, constituted a powerful new element on how Irish attitudes were formed, and it was the Late Late Show which brought this to national attention.

This is not to say that the Show only featured liberal religous

views. A new feature of the changing face of the Church was the diffusion of its unanimity as in society in general. Within the Church there were conflicting opinions. The Late Late Show highlighted this, both in individual shows, where panels of priests gave different points of view to issues, and over the years, where conservative disciplinarians, like Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who was known for giving straight answers whether they were popular or not, could still voice the view that "civil divorce is evil and contraception is evil".(17)

The fact that the priests appeared on the Show at all was an indication of the Church's realisation that, in order to communicate effectively with the people, they would have to become familiar with the television medium. In 1967, a communications centre was established in Booterstown, Co. Dublin, under the auspices of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland. It was used to teach a whole new generation of priests the skills of successful media projection. Training in television techniques had a deep influence on the preaching methods of younger priests. It created a new style; the word of brotherly advice, the projection of self as a fellow sinner rather than a stainless judge was its characteristic.

It could be said that the Late Late Show became the most effective testing ground for this new approach. It was the ultimate in access to the people. Not only were the clergy brought into close contact with the people via the audience, but they were also guarenteed the attention of a nationwide audience. Father Patrick Brophy, one

of the most effective of the new clerical television performers and a regular guest on the Late Late Show, while addressing a seminar of the Knights of Columbanus in1967, acknowledged the vital contribution of the media in the formation of public opinion on religious matters. He expressed the view that the Bishops, instead of being hostile to the media, should have "some words of encouragement for the genuinely apostolic achievements of Irish Radio, Television, and Press".(18)

The Late Late Show, although being accused of being anti-Church, anti-Catholic, and anti-Religion, played an important part in the transformation of the position of the Church from one that resided above society to one that became a part of society. Without the Show, the new ideal would have been carried out less effectively and probably much less rapidly. If the Show and television in general could be accused of weakening the faith of people, it would be in the fact that as an agent of modernisation, television, unless consciously attempting not to, can be seen to break down tradition as an obstacle to modernity", (19) and it could be said that the Church, along with the Irish language, has been the most conspicious pillar of traditional Iraland. The Church has not faded out of Irish life to the extent that the Irish language has. A survey quoted in 1980 by John H. Whyte in Church and State in modern Ireland, indicated that approximately 90% of people attended Mass at least once a week; and 75% in the eighteen to thirty group was the estimation of Terence Brown in Ireland: A Social and Cultural

History (1981. Although these estimations could be subject to change, in the meantime it can be assumed that there is still a strong Catholic faith in Ireland. What has changed is that this faith does not hinge on the total and absolute acceptance of Church doctrine. Instead of seeing the Late Late Show as being an agent of Religious decline, it could be seen to have helped retain the preserve of religion in Irish society by involving it in the participation of social development, and providing it with an opportunity to find its place in a progressive society.

One of the outstanding criticisms of the Late Late Show has been that, as a "light entertainment" programme, it is not a suitable place for the discussion of serious issues. Instances of this attitude arise from time to time, the most recent example being the "Madam Sin" episode (Chpt.3). The irony that since its inception the Late Late Show has been a consistant initiator of debate on matters of public importance in Ireland. It has dealt with a number of extremely sensitive issues, not only on a sociological bases, but also in an explicitly political sense. examples being, the legislative issue of contraception, the referendum on divorce, and the proposed entry into the E.E.C. It has also kept a watchful eye on the performanence of Government and the effect of Government politics, with programmes on such issues as Taxation, the Budget, Education, the Economy, the Foreign Deficit, the Rates System, Income Tax and the proposals to provide nuclear powered generation of electricity.

The critical position that the Late Late Show is an unsuitable forum for serious debate seems to derive from a particular conception of how television ought to work, namely in neat parcels of definable content such as sport, current affairs soaps and so on. Since the Late Late Show was conceived as Ireland's answer to the American talk show and persists in being 'entertaining', it is perceived to be disqualified from the domain of serious content. Whatever about the viability of such notions of media function, the success of the show in dealing with serious issues over almost thirty years of operation, would seem to undermine the argument.

When or how the Late Late Show made the transition from superficiality

to topicality is hard to identify. As Ken Gray, television critic observes,

> "it is difficult to pinpoint the moment when audiences ceased to look upon it as a mish mash of light entertainment and inconsequential gossip and see it as a reflection, in microcosm of the changes that were sweeping the country".(19)

Some would say that it was the attention that arose out of the "Bishop and the Nightie" and the "Brian Trevaskis" controversies in 1966. Gay Byrne himself maintains that it was the first one-subject show on the Irish language, (16 January 1965) that "marked the turning point in the show's history".(20) Certainly, that particular programme broke new ground. Basing the discussion on a white paper on the Irish language due to be published that day, it was the first time that a Government owned organisation was used as an instrument to allow anti-language lobbyists to strike out against the most sacred of sacred cows.

However, it was in the late sixties that the show really took on mainstream political debate, when it dealt with the Northern issue at the very start of the civil rights movement. It was in respect of this issue that politicians first started to appear on the show when Bernadette Devlin, Justin Keating, John Hume, Garrett Fitzgerald (Senator), Ivan Cooper and John Taylor regularly peopled the guest list. Although the Northern issue dominated the subject matter of the show from about 1968 to 1972, it was usually treated as only part of a general content format. It was on the 3rd June 1972 that the issue was dealt with exclusively in a one-subject show. The format was unusual in that two studios, one in Dublin and one in Belfast, were linked. The panel guests included Northern politicians, Robert Babbington MP, Ian Paisley MP, John Hume MP

and Southern politicians Neil Blaney TD, Sen J.M.Kelly, Michael O'Kennedy TD and Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien TD. There were also representatives from both Protestant and Catholic clergy and a couple of political journalists. The discussion that took place was heated as conflicting opinions on the way the country should be run highlighted the complexities that were causing the divide in the first place. A noteworthy feature of the event was the unobtrusive role of the host. His restraint allowed a lot more interaction between the speakers. There was room for responses, interjection and spontaneous reaction to comments that were being made. The effect of discussing such an issue in this type of format was noted by Tom O'Dea. He speculated that it was the "free and easy atmosphere that is generated by the show which lulled people into revealing themselves so clearly".(21)

The discussion was honest and realistic, more so perhaps than could have been possible in a more controlled format. A complex web of issues arising out of divisions of religious, political and historical opinion was revealed and the programme conveyed potently the real root of the problem, which was, that a solution could not be achieved as long as there existed such strong divisions of opinion. Referring to the fact that the discussion was open ended, Tom O'Dea noted the realisation that the talk could go on forever, that "after all the talk all these years, political action is the only thing that matters".(22) He noted too that "by providing an open forum for so many politicians from North and South, the Late Late Show may have made an important contribution towards killing the topic of Irish Unity or Disunity as a matter for TV debate".(23)

In relation to the Northern problem it is true to say that the media in general has played a crucial role in its slow evolution since 1969.

Without digressing to an analysis of this, there has been a perceptible shift of public attitude in the twenty-six counties, en easing of passion, a sufficient emergence of neutrality, the cynic might say apathy, to allow the Southern Government room to adopt a more conscilliatory posture. Shifts of this kind follow exposure to information. The special value of the Late Late Show in this process is that it brings political issues to the notice of the population in the form of a palatable, entertaining programme. An audience which might studiously avoid the dull debate of serious programmes, is ambushed in mid-laugh, as it were. This is a vital function within the democratic process. It facilitates consensus shift and so creates opportunity for change. A case in point was the issue of contraception, which required a consensus view to provide pressure on the voting politicians for a swing one way or the other.

After the discussion on contraception that took place on the show (20 March 1971) Tom O'Dea made the observation that -

> "It is unquestionably a good thing that television should enter into the debate when matters of such public importance and such profound significance are the subject of controversy".(24)

and observed that the public and members of the Oireachtas "will have their minds clarified for them by arguments of television panellists and audiences".(25)

Much of the effectiveness and suitability of the Late Late Show in presenting to people a broad range of views on an issue, derives from its open format, discussed in chapter 1. The show facilitated free speech. It was not edited, it was not scheduled to a forgone conclusion, it did

not sum up at the end and, most importantly, it did not give the 'official version'. Gay Byrne points out that on the Late Late Show the public got a truer verions of things, that "in a more formal and more 'serious' program .... viewers would have heard set (b) of opinions for public discussion, whereas on the Late Late Show they got (a) and they more nearly approximated to the truth".(26) True representation was the ideal then for the most part and the show came closer to achieving it than many other programmes. Sometimes however the ideal was not achieved for a number of reasons.

There is little doubt that the host, Gay Byrne, sometimes breaks the rules of impartiality and interferes with discussion by word, gesture or even expression. The danger for him derives from the status he has acquired as a national figure of some significance. Many people would look to him for indicators of 'right thinking'. In his role as host he can alternate between being ——— self-effacing and being quite participatory. It has been said that his opinions show transparently through his presentation and interviewing style. As he says himself,

> "I try to be open-minded when interviewing people, but the choice and type of questions I ask will betray certain feelings".(27).

Attributing this to his performing style,

> "A lot of indignation and crabbiness and thunderstruck apoplexy is feigned, it comes out of something genuine but the manner in which it is delivered is performance"(28)

It is perhaps impossible that a host such as Gay Byrne, on a programme

such as the Late Late Show, could refrain totally from contributing, by either reaction or deed, some of his own feelings on an issue. In certain instances, this might have minimal repercussions. In others it might seriously effect the balance of the show and constitute a breach of the principle of impartiality.

Following the 'State of the Nation' show on 19th January 1985, the Broadcasting Complaints Committee upheld a complaint regarding lack of balance and impartiality by the host on the show. The programmes intention was to deal with the state of the nation and to that end three panel members, economist Des Peelo, Ivor Kenny and Tom Murphy were asked to express their views. They were then joined by three politicians, Michael D. Higgins, Bertie Aherne and Richard Bruton. The complaint, brought by Senator Brendan Ryan alleged that " there had been imbalance and that the presenter Gay Byrne, had been dismissive of the alternative views of the economy presented once the politicians joined the panel".(29) The commission agreed that the second hald of the programme was imbalanced because "the presenter permitted continuous interruptions of the three politicians by the three members of the panel with whose views he clearly aligned himself.(30) Senator Ryan was not alone in his complaint. Another viewer, Dubliner Tom Carew, also placed an objection. A statement issued by the Deputy Controller of Programmes for Television, Bob Collins, announced that "a programme to balance the January 19th edition would be broadcast soon", (31) indicating in effect agreement with the accusation.

It is probably because imbalance like this would be a clear breach of

the Broadcasting Act on impartiality and objectivity on matters of public controversy that the show used a more controlled format when dealing with referenda such as the one relating to entry to the EEC, 11th March 1972. This issue was treated in an extremely formal 'courtroom manner'. A special set, imitating a courtroom scene, was built and a retired Judge, Kingsmill-Moore, presided over the proceedings. There were two Senior Counsel, Junior Counsel, and witnesses, who could be called upon to be questioned on the issue of whether or not Ireland should join the EEC. The jury was the general public who in theory would show their verdict by the way they voted in the National Referendum, scheduled a few weeks ahead. The format was calculated to communicate as much information as possible in a controlled manner. The Judge interjected when the proceedings were getting out of hand and both sides of the argument were given equal attention. Of the summing up by Judge, Kingsmill-Moore, one journalist commented,

> "here the most strenuous exercise in impartiality was demanded and I think was achieved as nearly as a mortal can achieve".(32)

It was in devising a format such as this that the producer and programme makers showed a responsible attitude towards the power of the show to sway public opinion. It was intended that the same format would be used for a show on the Abortion Referendum, but they were banned from doing this,

Although a formal style of presentation, with expert guests, was thought to be the most appropriate for referendum debates, other political

matters were treated in a more flexible way. Issues deriving from such matters as the Budget and Taxation, were often presented from the viewpoint of the average person. For a Budget edition, one device used was to film interviews with ordinary people about their pre-budget tax situation. This was followed up with post-Budget studio enquiries into how their standard of living had been affected. In this way political action is brought to a personal level and people who are affected are allowed to publically vocalise their opinions. This democratisation is also achieved by audience participation in discussions either in a contributory way where they are allowed to ask questions, or in a responsive way where they can interfer and disagree with what the invited guest or other audience members are saying. Another device for securing public participation was based on the idea of soap-box oratory. An informed or interested member of the public is allowed to rant and rave on an issue for an alloted time and then the points he or she has made are refuted by a panel holding opposing views. These, in turn, are argued against by an equal number of support members for the orator. This is called the 'soap-box' format and has been used in discussing the issues of Irish Language, Irish Economy, National Government Corporal Punishment.

The Soap-Box orations are often directed to Government or Government policy. This is an area in which the show could be seen to be taking risks. Although the Broadcasting Act, 1960 allows for reasons of objectivity and impartiality , challenges to Government, and their policies, efforts have been made to curb or prevent this freedom. On occasion this has related directly to the Late Late Show. In "Sit

Down and be Counted",(33) cases are cited when items on the programme were changed or excised by the Director General, allegedly in anticipation of Government dissapproval. Amongst the instances of this kind of interference were a ban on a proposed discussion on Eamon DeValera, a ban on a discussion on a Referendum a week after the results were declared, the change of a proposed panel to a safe panel of lawyers for a discussion on the Criminal Justice Bill, a prohibition on politicians appearing on a show and a ban on an item on the Rates System. This last item, under pressure from the producer and programme heads, was subsequently reinstated on condition that politicians did not participate. This would seem to indicate that the show was subject to restrictions when dealing with matters of political nature.

Intervention of this nature happened quite rarely, which is evident in the range of discussions that did take place. Myles McSweeney, researcher on the show 1965-1974, maintains that the shows producer worked in a relatively free environment and that there was no formal procedure for monitoring the programmes content. The station heads were informed about potentially sensitive items by word of mouth rather than by a formal memorandum. Some of this freedom of action may be attributable to a policy of not announcing intended topics and to a 'non-threatening' feel emanating from its light entertainment categorisation.

An aspect of the Late Late Show bearing upon political developments and action concerns the matter of the appearance of politicians on the Show. Its impromptu nature with the probability of unrehearsed questions and comments from host, panel, studio audience and phone-in, is more than many officials can handle.

Against that, the lure of publicity is a potent enticement fo participate. There is the fact that to come across effectively on a programme like the Late Late Show requires a certain skill, a kind of television persona, which many politicians lack. Television is a medium which lingers on expression and exposes mercilessly any faltering in tone of voice. It values honesty and magnifies bluffs and untruths. Few situations could test this more fully than an unscripted, potentially challenging question from an audience member. It is probably in consideration of this that the Show, requiring the appearance of a party member, must have approval of the party leader, who, in Gay Byrne's words "keeps off the box the less worthy members of the organisation - those who would tend to bring discredit to the party. It may also have had much to do with a Cabinet decision, made in the early years of the programme by a Fianna Fail Government, not to allow Ministers of Government to appear on the Show. The decision was rationalised on the basis that it was a "light entertainment show", but it remained operative even when serious issues were treated and other politicians from home and abroad began to make appearances.

The first appearance on the Show of Government Ministers occured during a period of Coalition Government in the early 1970's. Garrett Fitzgerald, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Dick Burke, (who participated in a special on education), and Michael O'Leary were among them. Garret Fitzgerald made an impromptu appearance during a discussion on Womens Liberation, (3rd March 1972). It was in response to accusations being levelled at legislators on the Womens Rights issue. He was treated with considerable hostility, being shouted down by

audience and panellists alike with dries of "th is is not a Fine Gael platform".

It was around this time that there was a rush of politicians onto the show. Tom O'Dea, commenting on this shift, referred to the time when members of the Oireachtas refused to appear on the show and noted that,

> "Nowadays it would seem that all the Late Late Show has to do is ring up a politician and ask "what colour shirt will I wear?."" (34)

Although there was still an absence of Cabinet and shadow Ministers, it would seem that many politicians were recognising the inroads being made on anti-establishment thought in the minds of the viewers and that the ascendancy of consensus politics was being threatened on programms like the Late Late Show. It was therefore necessary for them to make a shift from dry party political broadcasts to participation in what could be termed a "peoples forum".

If the Late Late Show brought the politicians to the people, then it also brought the people to politics. It has contributed to the interaction of two elements that can sometimes be so far removed from each other that neither knows what is going on in the others mind. Although RTE has always had a good body of investigative, probing, politically-minded programmes over the years such as 7 Days. The Political Programme, Report, Next Stop, P.M., To-day To-night and Questions and Answers, the problem remains that programmes of this type do not attract the numbers of viewers that the Late Late Show does. In managing the vital function of communicating on important

issues to an audience which would be otherwise hostile or apathetic perhaps resides the essence of the Show's contribution to Irish political life.

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# Controversy

## CONTROVERSY

In light of issues which have been discussed and debated on the Late Late Show over the years, it is perhaps not surprising that it has often been controversial. It has broken the rules and dealt with subjects which had previously been considered unsuitable for public discussion and has consistently provided a forum for liberal and sometimes unpopular points of view. Not infrequently the heated debates on the Show have spilled over into private and public discussions. However, there is a distinction to be made between the Late Late Show, agent of controversy and the Late Late Show, object of controversy, th e latter implying that it is the programme itself which lies at the centre of dispute.

Over the years, the programme has many times been a target for criticism, usually generated by something that was said or done in the course of the Show. However, the trend has been that the criticism quickly veers from the content and focuses instead on the show itself, RTE or television in general. It could be said that it is this tendancy which betrays the real issues that lie behind the criticisms and sometimes controversy of the Show.

The problem originates in the confrontation between the dynamic, modernising force of television and an inherently tradional culture. That television was an extremely powerful medium was clearly understood, that it was a conduit of foreign culture was feared and that is was virtually uncensorable was unthinkable. The establishment was deeply suspicious of it. Churchmen, politicians and county councillers were

ever prepared to spring to attack whenever it seemed to be threatening the status quo.

The Late Late Show with its modern style and liberal nature represented all the qualities of television that the traditionalists were so suspicious of and hostile to. It became a scapegoat for the general desire by some members of society to undermine television as a whole, and the occassions when it became embroiled in controversy could be described as manifestations of this.

Three controversies which stand out in the history of the show are "the Bishop and the Nightie" incident, the "Brian Trevaskis" affair and the "Madame Sin" episode. This is probably because they received such national attention. The first two controversies occured in the mid-sixties and the last one in the early eighties, but the underlying theme is similar.

## BISHOP AND THE NIGHTIE

This controversy, which might seem farcical by today's standards, stemmed from a Late Late Show (12th February 1966). It involved a light relief section of the show, where, in the context of a simple quiz, a married woman, Mrs.Fox, was asked the colour of her honeymoon nightdress, to which she replied that she had probably worn none at all. Even for Ireland in the sixties, this represented a harmless bit of fun, which was evident in the good humoured reaction of the studio audience and the absence of irate phonecalls to the station.

The controversy was generated by the reactions, or rather, actions of one viewer, the Bishop of Clonfert, Dr. Thomas Ryan, who immediately informed the Press that he was " absolutely furious about this"(1) and that his protest was being made "in fairness to Christian morals".(2) This public announcement illustrates the confidence with which Church leaders like the Bishop determined what was moral or immoral. This assurance was further exemplified in a sermon he gave on the subject at Sunday Mass the following day, addressing the congregation with "I know you will agree with me when I describe it as most objectionable".(3) He also implicated the entire broadcasting system in his condemnation, stating that the Show was "unworthy of Irish television, unworthy of Irish producers, unworthy of Irish audiences for whom the Show was destined, unworthy of a public service which is being maintained by public monies contributed in taxes by Irish people".(4)

It was quite a mouthful, the inference being that the incident was an example of television lowering the standard of the "Irish" nation.

This was expressed more blatantly in some of the supportive protests made by various public officials. The Meath Vocational Committee obviously thought the incident illustrated only one of the Show's faults, which were "mediocrity, anti-national tone and recently low moral tone".(5) The Loughrea Town Commissioners agreed, in kind, and suggested that it was "a dirty programme that should be abolished altogether".(6) These reactions, based on thinly disguised hostility towards the Show, were tempered by more rational comments. One letter writer, while agreeing that the incident was "a little vulgar" pointed out that,

> "in the context of Irish amusements it is normal and far less gross than what we see and hear in the picture houses and in the theatre. In other words, Dr. Ryan is out of touch with ordinary everyday Irish life".(7)

As the controversy progressed, it emerged that this was a view held by many, and that the Bishop had over-reacted. The Irish Times summed up the general consensus in an article which said,

> "His Lordship was killing a fly with a sledge hammer.... a lapse of taste has been treated as if it were an outrage to morals".(8)

It is perhaps counter-productive to speculate on the sincerity of the Bishop's reaction, to the original episode; he might have seen it as a hint of things to come or he might have just resented honeymoon nightgowns being talked about in a light hearted context. Whatever the reason he must have learned the lesson that there was no use in attacking something just for the sake of it, that eventually, in the calm after the storm, people will wonder what it was all about.

Another show which followed on the heels of the previous controversy, again saw the Late Late Show dominating the letters pages of the Press, and the agenda of County Council meetings. However, this time there was some justification for the basis of outraged reaction. The contraversy arose out of comments made by student playwrite Brian Trevaskis on a Late Late Show (26th March 1966) about the hypocrisy of Irish Society. He expressed the view that, instead of sending missionaries abroad, it was "about time we applied Christianity to our own country".(9). He also criticised the sacking of schoolteacher John McGahern by a parish priest who didn't approve of a book he had written. The views which caused most of the outrage were that the Bishop of Galway was a 'moron' and that the new Galway cathedral was a 'monstrosity'. Reaction in the studio at the time echoed the public reaction that followed. There were heated interjections from the audience and at one stage a spectator said, "I think it is up to you Mr Byrne to stop characters coming up here to slag the clergy", to which Gay Byrne replied - "I do not bring people in here to slag the clergy, we have a programme and we are proud of it as a programme on which you are allowed to say what you want".(11)

Again it was the reactionaries who blew up the incident into a major controversy. Robert Lahiffe of the Galway County Council urged the taxpayers to "emphatically protest against the use of this public organ to purvey filth of every discription ".(12) Stephen Coughlan of the Limerick County Council held the view that programmes like this were "disgusting and nauseating to the Irish people".(13) Again the incident was judged unsuitable for Irish television. The Bishop of Galway,

Dr Brown, in response to the comments made about him, issued what was quite a reasonable statement, but expressed his surprise at "a means of national communication, paid for by the people, being made available for abuse which is heard all over the nation".(14)

The message that was comming across in more structured arguments was that a powerful medium such as national television, should not allow anti-establishment views to be expressed on air. Although it was agreed that free speech should be allowed, this was somewhat invalidated when it became clear that free speech really meant "responsible expressions of views".(15) One suggestion as to how this could be achieved was to use a structured debate format where "the rules of impartiality could be insisted on and only people of standing and competence would be heard"(16) The intention was to ensure that national television would conform like the rest of society to the paternalistic control of the hierarchy.

The problem was that the Late Late Show team had no intentions of doing that. The formula was to provide a forum for democratic opinion. It could not guarantee that guests would conform to establishment views or remain controlled and reasonable because it invited them on to talk freely and openly. The intentions of the television heads to support the Late Late Show in doing this is evident in a statement issued by Director General Kevin McCourt in response to the controversy. In it he emphasised that -

> "The Late Late Show is unscripted and unrehearsed. In any other form it would fail in its purpose as a spontaneous programme of discussion and entertainment"(17)

and of the people who were invited to speak, that "their opinions do not

necessarily have to be popular opinions".(18) It was important that this kind of policy was maintained and carried out; as an article in The Irish Times observed - "more harm is likely to result to the community if the lid is screwed down than if, on occassions, an excess of steam gets blown off in unguarded moments".(19)

The general public, contrary to the assumptions of public officials, tended to agree. The Evening Press informed its readers that 40% of the letters it received were in support of Brian Trevaskis and 60% dissapproved. As was pointed out in the article, people tend to write to a newspaper when they disagree with something so the estimation might be modified somewhat in favour of the minority figure, which "approved of the speaker's right to air his views even if it was felt that there was reason to disagree with some of those views".(20)

The controversy highlighted the division between the desire of establishment figures to block the potential for challenges to the status quo and society's desire to allow the emergence of progressive opinion. In the process the Late Late Show made firmer enemies but gained stronger support.

MADAME SIN

For those of us who would like to believe that the controversies of the sixties are a thing of the past, we have only to step back to the early eighties to realise that they are not. Despite the fact that Ireland has progressed to a considerable extent over the last three decades, there is still an element of "superior morality" in our national identity and elements of deeply rooted conservatism. Also there is still a strong traditionalist lobby hostile to open discussion on the media.

One of the things that highlighted this was a controversy arising out of a Late Late Show (6 November 1982). The show featured two British female guests. The first one, a married journalist, Anna Raeburn, during the course of the interview admitted having had an abortion and defended it as an alternative, that women had a right to choose. The other guest, Cynthia Payne, was a retired brothel keeper who filled her interview with anecdotes about life in an English brothel. What can be seen to lie at the center of the controversy was that, at the end of the show, Gay Byrne announced that the Late Late Show intended doing a Special on the proposed Abortion Referendum in the coming season.

The controversy that ensued, although using the Late Late Show as a focus centered on the issue of the right to free speech on the media. At first the criticisms were targeted at the guests. Emphasis was placed on their nationality. There was still the suspician of 'lesser morals' from abroad infiltrating the Irish Community via the medium of television, as one County Counciller declared - "we saw the scum of Britain on our T.V. screens. The institute of marriage was prostituted and sex was portrayed

at an animal level".(21) But quite soon the emphasis shifted onto the abortion issue and the pro-abortion comments made by guest Anna Raeburn. The Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act - 1976 (sect.31) which, forbids the broadcasting of anything that might be used to incite crime, supplied the back up for this letter writer's query, as to whether

> "RTE are in order in broadcasting any programme on abortion except programmes which condemn such acts"(22).

The events took a surprising turn when, in mid-December, Chairman of the Broadcasting Authority, Mr. Fred O'Donovan, banned the Late Late Show from doing its proposed Special on the abortion referendum. The reason was given that, "Abortion is too serious a subject to be aired on a light entertainment programme like the Late Late Show"(23). The Authority made its decision in consideration of the Statutory requirement that, "in the treatment of current affairs, including matters of public controversy, RTE must be fair to all interests concerned and must ensure that the broadcast is presented in an objective and impartial way"(24). The fact was that the Late Late Show had long since proven itself capable of handling current affairs and controversial issues in a responsible manner. It had used the highly objective courtroom format for the Divorce and EEC debate and was planning on doing the same for the Abortion debate.

Why the Authority, who usually kept such a low profile, came out so strongly on this issue can perhaps be explained by two factors. One is that the Chairman, Fred O'Donovan, far from having an impartial view on the matter, made his anti-abortion opinions quite clear, describing the issue as "death on demand" (25). Another is that there was incredible pressure put

on the Authority, both from members of the public and anti-Abortion lobbyists. Of the letters received, Fred O'Donovan commented that it was the "largest correspondance ever".(26) Also, groups like the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) and the Pro-Life Ammendment Campaign (PLAC) organised protests and campaigns against the Late Late Show and RTE and increased pressure through statements in the press.

Conor Cruise O'Brien probably best summed up most of the complexities surrounding both this and other Late Late Show controversies when he commented "the Late Late Show reaches a very large audience and there are influential people - including, I believe, most of the Bishops - who don't want sensitive subjects discussed before a very large audience except by themselves, or in terms approved by them. "Not before the people", is the general principle involved. Free speech is fine, before small audiences".(27)

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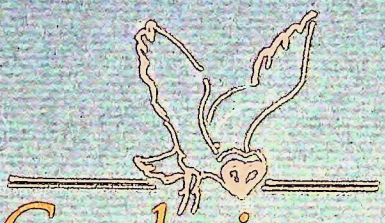

# Conclusion»»

## CONCLUSION

As quoted in 'Reading Television', " the responsibility for an narrative is never assumed by a person, but by a mediator, Shaman or Relator whose "performance" - The mastery of the narrative code. may possibly be admired but never his "geniuus".(1). It is not in the nature of the Show, or for that matter television, to "defamiliarise"(2) it is rather, to be commended for the skill and effectiveness with which it conveyed to society a realistic representation of itself. It achieved this with a mixture of innovative production procedure and the highly tuned instincts of its producer and team of researchers. It minimised the mediation process,using real people and communicating its message in real time.

The show became a stage, on which the drama of a rapidly changing society was played out. Largely dealing with the central concerns of Irish life in matters relating to Sex, Politics and Religion, it facilitated the process of "Ritual Condensation"(3). It converted what were quite abstract ideas emanating from society into manifest and solid form, thereby affording Irish society an opportunity to evaluate its stand on any issue that arose. It also exposed the inadequacies of unmodified traditional values in confrontation with an increasingly modernising culture, reflecting and exposing "pressure within the culture for a re-orientation in favour of a new ideological stance"(4). Meanwhile it reassured an essentially conservative society by transmitting a sense of cultural membership in the face of all this change.

The criticisms and controversies surrounding the Show could be seen as manifestations of the uneasy introduction of a popular modern medium

into an inherently traditional culture. The hostility originating from entrenched traditionalists, who consider television and the Late Late Show in particular as inappropriate for the role of Bard. The light-weight label of the Show symbolising the lightweight image of television Also there was the fact that the Late Late Show was communicating a liberal modernising image to society. This ran contrary to the desire of many to see the traditional image being promoted.

The vitality of the Shows' central position in the flux and flow of Irish Society has diffused somewhat. We are certaintly a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated culture with more independence of attitude, less sensitive to change and less inclined to take television so seriously. However, the Late Late Show still represents in the minds of many, Ireland epitomised in television form. When channel 4 decided to introduce British audiences to the programme in 1987, it was to expose them to the "Irish point of view"(5), and the Late Late Show was considered "the "most appropriate vehicle" (6) for doing this. It also represents to those abroad, a slice of Ireland. As Gay Byrne discovered on a recent trip to America "there are tapes of the Late Late Show in circulation all over the Bronx, Queens and Manhatten, 24 hours after transmission at home" (7). They are played largely in pubs!

The means by which a nation, forms, expresses and modifies its cultural identity are multi-various and complex. It would be an oversimplification to see the Late Late Show as dominating this process. However, in the flicker of its electronic images, perhaps it was possible to discern what we were and what we could become.

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