

Entertainment in independent Ireland: Evolution of Irish parochial versus commercial dance hall culture

Gerard Dooley

Evolving forms of technology and shifting social trends were at times the bane of a conservative Ireland that emerged following the Civil War. As Terence Browne points out, the social and religious homogeneity of the Irish Free State and the nation's predominantly rural complexion which attached itself to the social patterns and attitudes of the latter half of the nineteenth -century were the root causes of the stifling conservatism that dominated the Free State era.¹ It is within this context that this article looks at the evolution of two areas of entertainment in independent Ireland up until the 1970s and the ways in which they contributed toward a huge change in Irish society and culture; music and dance, and the state broadcasting of radio and television. With regards music and dance, the prevalence of house dances and the growth of clerical opposition to set dancing and foreign 'jazz' shall be examined. This article shall propose that a divide in the culture of music and dance occurred following the 1935 Dance Hall Act and it shall look at the evolution of the parochial and

¹ Terence Browne, *Ireland: a social and cultural history, 1922-2002* (London, 2004), p. 8.

dance hall culture up to the 1970s. The development of what would eventually become Raidió Teilifís Éireann shall also be analysed. The goals of the national broadcaster will be discussed, as will the initial failures of radio to meet these goals before greater success from the mid-1930s on. This article concludes by assessing the huge effect Teilifís Éireann had upon Irish culture.

As was the case with most facets of Irish society in the years preceding independence, music and dance were rooted in an agrarian way of life. One of the most important sources of entertainment in rural Ireland at the time was house dances. Some of these events were annual such as 'Biddy Balls'. Helen Brennan, in her history of Irish dance, describes 'Biddy Balls' as nights of music and dance in a local farmer's house funded from the proceeds of a collection by groups of 'Biddies' who went from house to house on the eve of St. Brigid's Day.² In places where dancing was prevalent, such as West Clare, dances were less formalised and more impromptu; oftentimes groups of men out of boredom would begin to dance with each other to pass the night, even using a tongs if there was an odd number of dancers.³ Co-operation between farmers at times of harvest usually ended with occasions of dancing and drinking.

² Helen Brennan, *The story of Irish dance* (Dingle, 1999), p. 104.

³ *Ibid.*

These *meitheal* or 'coor' dances were a vital way of strengthening local bonds within the community. Some families charged a nominal entrance fee to dances in order to pay for everything from funeral expenses to passage across the Atlantic.

Dances also played an important role in the continuation of a community. More often than not, in rural communities, young men and women were totally confined to the family unit. They spent the whole day surrounded by the watchful glare of parents and siblings as they awoke together, worked together, ate together, prayed together and in effect, slept on top of one another in cramped conditions. Dances gave a sense of social freedom to young men and women where they could mingle and begin the 'courting' process, thereby helping to reinforce the community into future generations. Dances became one of the most important arenas of matchmaking. Specific 'hurling' dances in the West were used to make couples and several weddings could trace their origins to these events.⁴

Dances even played an important role during Ireland's bloody transition to independence; being the most informal way of rural neighbours getting together, they were an ideal place to hold IRA battalion meetings under the cover of music

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

and revelry during the War of Independence. The restrictions placed upon fairs and markets under the Defence of the Realm and Restoration of Order in Ireland Acts led to house dances becoming the safest setting in which IRA plans could be discussed. Edward Brennan, O/C of the sixth battalion, Laois Brigade IRA, notes in his witness statement to the Bureau of Military History that a dance was specifically organised in Borris-in-Ossory to cover a meeting of the local IRA.⁵ Dances also played their part in keeping up the morale of the Volunteers. Liam Hoolan says that the North Tipperary flying column, even after a day and nights march, 'would make the kitchens ring with dance and song'.⁶

At house dances people mainly danced forms of quadrille sets which had originated as ballroom dances but had gained a faster tempo and had merged with more traditional Irish jig and reel steps.⁷ What would be recognised today as 'Irish dancing' had its roots in the *céilí* movement which had its genesis in the London Gaelic League branch. Leading London organisers felt that there was a need to add a much needed social dimension to their otherwise very successful activities in the city. They took their example from Scottish *céilithe* they had attended and organised the first ever Irish

⁵ Statement of Edward Brennan, BMH/ WS.1514, p. 1.

⁶ Statement of Liam Hoolan, BMH/ WS.1553, p. 16.

⁷ Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance*, p. 26.

céilí on 30 October 1897.⁸ Following a *céilí* performance by London dancers at the Gaelic League's annual *Oireachtas* in Dublin in 1901 the League began to organise *céilí* dances around Ireland.

In the urban centres and small towns of Ireland, dances and balls were more organised but none the less prevalent. For example, a glance at the Easter week editions of provincial newspapers of 1922 indicates the popularity of dances in urban areas. The *Anglo-Celt* advertised a total of seventeen dances in Cavan.⁹ Nine dances were advertised throughout Meath in the *Meath Chronicle*.¹⁰ The *Nenagh Guardian* and the *Westmeath Examiner* advertised eight dances each.¹¹ The cost of admission for these events varied immensely and can be seen as a reflection of the class of people the evening's entertainment was aimed at. For example an Easter Sunday Dance in Ardamagh Hall, Meath, advertised admission at 2s. 6d. for men and 1s. 6d. for women.¹² In contrast an evening in aid of the nearby Navan Gaels football club charged the much higher sum of 7s 6d. for men and 4s. for women.¹³

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ *Anglo-Celt* (Cavan Edition), 15 Apr. 1922.

¹⁰ *Meath Chronicle*, 15 Apr. 1922.

¹¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 15 Apr. 1922 and *Westmeath Examiner*, 15 Apr. 1922.

¹² *Meath Chronicle*, 15 Apr. 1922.

¹³ *Ibid.*

However, around the time of independence, and in its immediate aftermath, clerical opposition to such dances was mounting.¹⁴ The Church's virulent opposition to dances was linked to their repressive campaign against all forms of 'company-keeping'. And as these 'immoral' dances were the prime arena for 'company-keepers' the Church refocused their efforts in their campaign of condemnation against them. As Bryan MacMahon recollects, priests would actively seek out occasions of set dancing so as to break them up: 'How clearly I recall a band of laughing boys and girls on a fine Sunday afternoon dancing "sets" on the floor of a ball alley by the sea. Suddenly the cry of "The Priest!" is heard. The dancers scattered in terror.'¹⁵ Many of the early baby boomer generation would grow up with little knowledge of the opposite sex; as Frank McCourt succinctly put it 'I [didn't] know anything after growing up in Limerick and listening to priests on Sundays thundering against dancing and walking out the road with girls'.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Church's particular opposition to set-dancing can be seen in a statement from a Cork bishop published in the *Munster Express* in which he states 'One source of danger is the nature itself of a [set-dance] which may be of such a character, sensual, and lascivious as to constitute a direct incitement to sin.'. *Munster Express*, 28 Feb. 1936.

¹⁵ Bryan MacMahon, 'Getting on the high road again' in John O'Brien (ed.), *The vanishing Irish* (London, 1954), pp 202-19.

¹⁶ Frank McCourt, *'Tis, a memoir* (London, 1999), p. 63.

Alongside the immorality of set-dancing, another 'evil' which the Church felt at pains to condemn had begun to creep into the dancing culture of Ireland; the influence of jazz. Dances which had become popular in the roaring-twenties culture of America such as foxtrots, two-steps, shimmy-shakes and the cake walk were an anathema to the Church. The Gaelic League believed these foreign dances had the potential to harm their campaign of cultural nationalism and hinder the development of *céilí* dancing. Jazz was condemned both from the pulpit and through the press.¹⁷ In their Lenten pastorals of 1924, bishops warned of the upsurge in suicides amongst young women in America and how they were caused by a 'jazz spirit' which 'caused physical collapse and nervous breakdown'.¹⁸

Privately owned dance halls began to accommodate the growing popularity of jazz music and dancing. These dance halls were condemned vehemently by the Gaelic League and the Church who both lobbied the government to intervene. Eventually the conservative, repressive mentality of the Free State was brought to bear upon dancing. The 'bourgeois cadre'

¹⁷ Canice Chilsholm, writing for the *Irish Independent* suggested that the Free State, instead of fighting for the arbitrament of war, should fight for the arbitrament of jazz at the League of Nations in Geneva. *Irish Independent*, 26 June 1926.

¹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 22 Apr. 1924.

of merchants and shopkeepers, well-off farmers, clerics, and middle class professionals, who assumed positions of power in the Irish Free State, 'sired a repressive zeitgeist of social and cultural conservatism that was to become an abiding hallmark of independent Ireland until well into the 1960s.'¹⁹ One of their most repressive acts was the introduction of the 'Public Dance Halls Act' in February 1935. Under this act, 'No place, whether licensed or not licensed for the sale of intoxicating liquor, shall be used for public dancing unless a public dancing licence granted under this Act is in force in respect of such place.'²⁰ Anyone in breach of the act was liable to a fine of ten pounds for every day the premises were used illegally.²¹

The act proved to be the catalyst for huge cultural change. First of all, it was the death knell for the house dance. People began to be prosecuted for hosting dances in their homes. The case of William Kelly, which was brought before Longford District Court in November 1935, was typical of the scores of similar cases being brought before the courts. A Garda sergeant entered Kelly's home to find thirty people dancing in the kitchen and a further fifteen playing cards in

¹⁹ Gearóid O'hAllmhurain, 'Dancing on the hobs of hell: rural communities in Clare and the Dance Hall Acts of 1935' in *New hibernia review*, ix, no. 4 (winter, 2005), pp 9-18.

²⁰ Article 10.1 of Dance Halls Act, 1935.

²¹ Article 10.2 of Dance Halls Act, 1935.

another room. Kelly, who admitted charging admission of one shilling, said he did not know he needed a license. He was promptly prosecuted under the first offender's act.²² The exacerbation mutely held by many in rural Ireland towards proceeding such as the Kelly case was given voice by W. T Wolfe, a solicitor in Bantry. He said, whilst defending a man brought before the court for holding an unlicensed dance, 'the traditional hospitality and the time honoured social intercourses of people living in remote country districts were being shattered by pseudo-virtuous Acts of Parliament. Even the homely country dance was made to assume a criminal tinge.'²³

The cultural significance of the Dance Hall Act could also be seen in the accentuation of two different music and dance cultures in Ireland. This divide stems from the passing of the control of dances from the masses to two main groups; the Catholic Church and entrepreneurial dance hall owners. During the 1930s there was a huge rise in the construction of parochial halls all over the country. It was in this setting that the parochial hall music and dance culture emerged. These halls tended to host traditional *céilí* evenings. The parish priest could directly organise and oversee dances. His looming

²² *Leitrim Observer*, 4 Jan. 1936.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28 Mar. 1936.

omnipresence was felt in the halls as young men and women were morally obliged to keep a safe distance from each other. The surveillance of one's own community usually drove the young people to halls outside their locality where they could, in a very limited capacity, 'let their hair down'.²⁴ These larger venues necessitated a change in the way traditional Irish music was played. Greater volume was needed, so the solo fiddler or *bodhrán* player was superseded by large *céilí* bands. Many traditional tunes, handed down from generation to generation, did not transfer well to the new venues and old tunes were soon lost forever. As Joseph Ryan points out, the 1935 Act, which was designed to exclude foreign influences, ironically contributed to the undermining of an Irish folk music tradition.²⁵

The Dance Hall Act, coupled with the continuing popularity of jazz music and dancing, was viewed as an opportunity by entrepreneurs who began to construct ballrooms to accommodate jazz fans. These were more modern facilities which could ensure a more comfortable experience for dancers as opposed to the dark, cold and damp parochial

²⁴ Patrick McNabb, 'Social structure' in Rev. Jeremiah Newman (ed.), *Limerick rural survey: 1958-1964* (Tipperary, 1964), pp 193-242.

²⁵ Joseph Ryan, 'Music in independent Ireland since 1921' in J. R. Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland; VII Ireland, 1921-1984* (Oxford, 2003), pp 621-49.

halls. Also, the absence of an overseeing parish priest appealed to many young dancers who did not wish to be chastised publically.

The divide between the parochial hall ethos and the dance hall ethos widened in the 1940s and 1950s. This was due to the proliferation of musical genres from America which were embraced in the ballrooms but resisted in the parochial hall. The sounds of artists such as Bing Crosby, George Formby, Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland made their way into Irish homes on the increasingly popular medium of radio and on gramophones. Bill Haley and his Comets pioneered the genre of Rock N' Roll music in the mid-1950s and the plethora of musical influences all combined in Ireland to create the showband scene. Groups like Brendan Bowyer's Royal Showband toured between huge, specially constructed ballrooms that could hold up to four thousand people. Two brothers from Roscommon, Jim and a youthful Albert Reynolds, built Ireland's first chain of ballrooms and across the country business men adopted the Reynolds' idea and constructed their own regional chains.²⁶ At the height of the showband craze there were over 450 ballrooms across the

²⁶ Vincent Power, *Send 'em home sweatin': the showband story* (Cork, 1999), p. 14.

country with 10,000 people employed in the industry.²⁷ During the showband years, which lasted until the early 1970s, the whole courting process was changed. At a time when Ireland's marriage rate was by far the lowest in the world, the increased ease of meeting new people from outside one's own community helped, albeit in a small way, Ireland's slow population growth from the mid-1960s on.²⁸

At the other end of Ireland's cultural spectrum the more traditional elements of Irish music and dancing reacted to social changes in Ireland and changed accordingly. In January 1951 a meeting of members of The Piper's Club of Dublin and local musicians in Mullingar resulted in the formation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the first *Fleadh Cheoil* was held in Mullingar later that year attracting a crowd of over 1,500 people.²⁹ The *Fleadh* soon became a cultural phenomenon as attendances mushroomed; 60,000 people attended the 1963 event in Mullingar.³⁰ As emigration rose in

²⁷ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 603.

²⁸ For an analysis of Ireland's low marriage rate see J. A. O'Brien, 'The vanishing Irish' in O'Brien, *The vanishing Irish*, pp 15-45.

²⁹ E. O. Henry, 'Institutions for the promotion of indigenous music: the case for Ireland's comhaltas ceoltoiri Éireann' in *Ethnomusicology*, xxiii, no. 1 (winter, 1989), pp 67-95.

³⁰ Catherine Curran, 'Irish music as world music: changing audiences for traditional Irish music in the twentieth century' in M. H. Prosser and K. S. Sitaram (eds), *Civic discourse: intercultural, international and global media* (Stamford, 1999), pp 229-40.

the 1950s, a new Irish diaspora began to relate to their native culture through folk ballads and as these émigrés returned during the economic growth of the Lemass years an urban folk revival emerged in Ireland in the early 1960s. Some of the roguish ballads of the likes of The Fureys and The Dubliners flew in the face of the more conservative elements of the parochial hall ethos but was reflective of a growing social radicalism in Ireland during the 1960s. The music of these groups was enjoyed by audiences across Europe and served to merge popularity with traditionality.³¹ Alongside the popularisation of ballads, Seán Ó Riada's 'folk orchestra' innovations paved the way for folk 'supergroups' such as Planxty and The Chieftains.³²

By their very nature as inherent forms of expression, forms of music and dance were difficult to control by the state. However as radio emerged as a technology which could effectively propagate a culture which the Free State desired, state control become a matter of priority. The 1926 Wireless Telegraphy Act provided for the establishment of 2RN. The station's main aims were to foster Irish language and culture and protect the country from the perceived harmful influences of foreign broadcasts. The opening transmission, which

³¹ The popularity of The Dubliners on the continent can be seen in their successful tours of Germany. *Irish Independent*, 24 Dec. 1971.

³² Curran, 'Irish music as world music', p. 237.

included a bilingual address by Douglas Hyde, could only be received clearly at a radius of twenty miles due to 2RN's weak 1 kW transmitter in the Phoenix Park.³³ However in the uncongested radio spectrum of the mid 1920s reasonable reception was picked up as far away as Monaghan and Galway.³⁴ Following a brief residency in Little Denmark Street, 2RN's studios moved to a floor in the GPO, the site of the world's first ever radio broadcast during the Easter Rising.³⁵ But as Leon Ó Broin points out in his autobiography, the floor was badly needed for the Post Office's own expanding requirements.³⁶

The cramped quarters with which the station found itself in reflected a stunted schedule. Initially 2RN had limited success in fostering Irish culture and language. Ironically, it was 2BE, the Belfast BBC station, which did more to promote Irish culture than 2RN in the early years. 2BE regularly featured Irish traditional music and full length Abbey Theatre productions. It was not until the mid to late 1930s that radio began to realise its potential as a mass medium. Pivotal to

³³ Desmond Fisher, *Broadcasting in Ireland* (London, 1978), p. 21 and Cathcart and Muldoon, 'The mass media in twentieth century Ireland', p. 679.

³⁴ Paddy Clarke, "Dublin calling": *2RN and the birth of Irish radio* (Dublin, 1986), p. 46.

³⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (London, 1964), p. 304.

³⁶ Leon Ó Broin, *Just like yesterday* (Dublin, 1986), p. 167.

radio's accessibility to the masses was the erection of a new transmitter in Athlone which enabled the station to broadcast nationally. With the appointment of TJ Kiernan as director of the station in 1935, radio truly began to penetrate into the homes of Ireland and have an effect upon Irish culture. Raidió Éireann (RÉ), as the station came to be known as from 1938 on, propagated the cultural nationalism of Fianna Fáil who favoured the nurturing of a hegemonic Gaelic, Catholic state. RÉ began to alter its programming to that end. In terms of music, RÉ unsurprisingly stood on the Parochial Hall side of the music divide. Fans of popular music were largely ignored by RÉ. However, stations such as the American Forces Network, and in particular, Radio Luxembourg specialised in this kind of musical programming. Despite RÉ having a large lead in listener figures, these stations were popular, especially amongst girls aged between fourteen and twenty-four.³⁷ RÉ was also committed to developing classical music and brought together a twenty-four piece orchestra in 1936.³⁸

As resources steadily grew, news reporting was given more coverage. For the first time members of the general

³⁷ KG Forecast, 'Raidió Éireann listener research inquiries, 1953-1955' in *Journal of the statistical and social inquiry society of Ireland*, xix, 1955/6, pp 1-28.

³⁸ Brian Fallon, *An age of innocence: Irish culture 1930-1960* (Dublin, 1998), p. 254.

public could access and experience important historical events live in the comfort of their homes. The inauguration of Douglas Hyde as president, the death of Pope Pius XI and Coronation of Pius XII and the 1938 General Election results all received hours of coverage. Irish language lessons, which were viewed as boring and austere by the public, were dropped in favour of more lively plays, sketches and lectures.³⁹ The most popular programme of all was 'Question Time'; a general knowledge quiz with question-master MJ McManus, succeeded by FJ McCormack and Joe Linnane.⁴⁰ The fact that a programme of this nature was most popular shows how much the public enjoyed interacting with their programming and were not merely passive listeners.

Despite initial disagreements between RÉ and the GAA, coverage of hurling and football came into its own in 1938 with the commentary of Micháel Ó Hehir. Ó Hehir had an unequalled skill in calmly conveying the frenetic events on the pitch to the thousands of listeners in their homes. In many homes in rural Ireland, the voice of Ó Hehir was more than the voice of a radio commentator; it was the voice of a friend. John McGahern describes the excitement of O'Hehir's

³⁹ Cathcart and Muldoon, 'The mass media in twentieth century Ireland', p. 684.

⁴⁰ Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (Dublin, 1967), pp 110-16.

commentary as he listened with a large group of neighbours to the 1944 All-Ireland Football Final:

My father had the only radio in the village, and every Sunday Roscommon played, the barracks was crammed with men, the air thick with cigarette smoke. Small bets were made, and once Michael Ó Hehir's voice crackled from the Cossor, the tension was unbearable: '*Bail O Dhia oraibh go leir a chairde Gael ó Phaire an Chrocaigh.*' (...) Once the men dispersed, there was that sense of absence that can be found in public gardens and by the sea at the end of bank holidays.⁴¹

The Emergency brought unprecedented difficulties to RÉ. The biggest hindrance to radio was a lack of batteries and as a result there was a large fall in licenses issued. The Free State's neutrality manifested itself in ridiculous ways on the airwaves. Reports on the weather were prohibited to the extent that even GAA commentators were not allowed mention the elements.⁴² News broadcasts were scrutinised, sometimes by De Valera himself, to ensure that they were balanced which led to a wearying series of claims and counter-claims and local news being totally forgotten about.⁴³ A rare venture by RÉ over the border caused controversy when Joe Linnane's

⁴¹ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London, 2005), p. 164.

⁴² Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting*, p. 131.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp 132-3.

Question Time was presented in Belfast. The question 'Who is the world's best known teller of fairy tales?' was answered as 'Winston Churchill!' This led to laughter and applause but also to questions in Westminster. As Maurice Gorham points out, 'it was a long time before a Radio Éireann team crossed the border again'.⁴⁴

Once The Emergency was over batteries became more commonplace and following a crackdown on unlicensed radios, 261,321 licenses were issued in 1948.⁴⁵ However, an inexorable momentum toward television was building and it was only a matter of time before a national television station was developed. Television signals were being received on the east coast as early as 1951 and upon the establishment of a Northern Irish BBC service in 1953 signals could be picked up by about half of the Republic's population.⁴⁶

Both the Church and wider public discussed the implications of an Irish television service. It was suggested in *The Furrow* that television 'may yet prove the most powerful influence in a new age of missionary endeavour in the (mission countries) which lie so close to our shores'.⁴⁷ An

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁵ Cathcart and Muldoon, 'The mass media in twentieth century Ireland', p. 692.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 693.

⁴⁷ Ethna Conway, 'Ireland and television' in *The furrow* ix, no. 1 (Jan., 1958), pp 33-8.

Irish Independent editorial sceptically criticised the cost of construction of what would become RTE's headquarters in Donnybrook and hoped that the £2,500,000 granted to Irish television would not damage the output: 'The Irish National Television Service must be popular, but popular with dignity. It would be most regrettable if over-ambitious spending at the beginning made the achievement of that aim impossible, and led to a service that few would value and many would deplore'.⁴⁸

A Broadcasting Authority Bill was passed in 1959 and on 31 December 1961 Teilifís Éireann (TÉ) began broadcasting. TÉ came into being at a time of great economic and social change in Ireland. Seán Lemass' pioneering five year 'Programme for economic expansion' was modernising the Irish economy. The traditional social mores of Catholic Ireland were under attack from the free movement of ideas and international influences. By virtue of its intrusiveness, television had the power to change society in a way that no previous entertainment medium could. The Irish people themselves were represented in a way more faithful than they ever had been in cinema or radio. The openness and spontaneity of Gay Byrne's *The Late Late Show* revealed an Irish people at pains to break from the social repression that

⁴⁸ *Irish Independent*, 7 Oct. 1960.

had typified Irish culture for decades. *The Riordans* accurately reflected rural Irish life and the rapid social changes that were happening there. Summing up the effect television had upon rural Ireland, John Doyle says:

When people saw The Donna Reed Show, I Love Lucy or Jack Benny, they saw people comfortable in their skins, untrammelled by Church expectations and traditional pressures. (...) Eyes had been opened, not only by a light but by a lightness of feeling that came from far away, and it was therein the corner, every evening, after darkness fell (...)⁴⁹

Investigative journalism was championed by the *7 Days* programme team and they infuriated the elites whilst testing the public's desire for the raw truth. Through their investigations they had shown that they were not afraid to upset the three most dominant forces in the country; the men in mohair suits, the Church and Fianna Fáil. Irish journalism would never be the same again. The initial imbalance between urban and rural television consumption began to change in the mid-1960s. Terence Browne identifies television, alongside the motor-car and secondary level schooling as thoroughly altering the patterns of daily life in rural Ireland.⁵⁰ Television

⁴⁹ John Doyle, *A great feast of light: growing up Irish in the television age* (London, 2005), p. 97.

⁵⁰ Browne, *Ireland*, p. 250.

was the prime catalyst for the penetration of urban consumerism into the countryside. Advertisements, based on British ideas of marketing, were beamed into the new bungalows of Ireland promoting everything from 'Extra Mild Calvita Cheese' to the Irish hospital sweepstakes.⁵¹

When the Irish Free State came into being bishops spoke about how those frivolous youngsters who were engaged in set-dancing were inviting 'the wicked one who will come and do the rest'.⁵² The Church's early reactions to television indicated that their attitudes were slow about changing; one bishop's over the top response to the occasion when a woman revealed on the *Late Late Show* that she did not wear a nightie on her wedding night was seen as out of step with a modernising Ireland.⁵³ But by the middle of the 1970s things had begun to change; priests were beginning their sermons with "As I was watching TV last night".⁵⁴ In the space of a generation the most conservative element of Irish society, the Catholic Church, had come from denouncing dancing at the crossroads to reluctantly embracing that great social equaliser, television. This typifies the vast sea change

⁵¹ *Reeling in the years, 1964* and *Reeling in the years, 1966*. Originally aired on RTÉ, Oct. 2004.

⁵² Brennan, *The story of Irish dance*, p. 125.

⁵³ *Irish Press*, 7 Oct. 1972.

⁵⁴ Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to catholic Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), p. 217.

that occurred in Irish society and culture. Economic issues often supersede other influences upon society and certainly the prolonged economic stagnation of the Free State left its mark on Irish society. But it was not economic recovery that changed Irish culture alone. Changing modes of entertainment in Ireland were a pivotal part of this change.