

## IN REVIEW

## Irish church loses ability to inspire

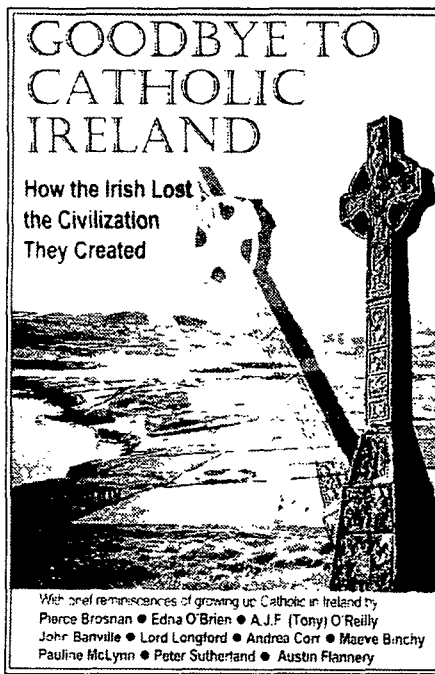
*Goodbye to Catholic Ireland: How the Irish Lost the Civilization They Created*, by Mary Kenny; Templegate Publishers; 376 pages, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewed by E. Leo McMannus  
Guest contributor

Ireland, that storied isle of saints and scholars, romanticized by bards and halloved by preachers, once possessed a stalwart Catholic faith that, even in times of severe impoverishment, resisted conquerors. That faith, which motivated its sons and daughters to carry the message of Christ far beyond its shores, seems no longer able to inspire and energize people. With church attendance down, diocesan seminaries closing for want of vocations, and respect for the institutional church at a new low, the vaunted faith appears torpid and spent.

At the same time, though, Ireland's economy, once the laggard of Europe, is now dynamic. As the Celtic Tiger, aggressive and voracious, nourished by high-tech industrial investment, mainly from the United States, its consumerism is rampant and its prosperity booming.

This dramatic reversal of religion and economy, especially the former, is the sub-



ject of Mary Kenny's fascinating valedictory to Catholic Ireland, an Ireland that now seems to many of its children sectarian, authoritarian, exclusive and irrelevant.

One of Ireland's talented journalists, who has worked on newspapers on both sides of the Irish Sea, in Dublin and London, Kenny writes not as a professional historian, but as a trenchant observer of the passing scene. Accompanying the 15 chapters of her text is a kind of testimonial epilogue of 10 prominent and contemporary Irish men and women who speak in their own words of their memories of Catholic Ireland, followed by a helpful nine-page index of proper names. She also provides an impressive 12-page bibliography that lists sources as eclectic as the American firebrand Paul Blanshard and her own books on abortion (1986) and drugs (1999).

The transformations that she chronicles in Ireland's religious and political life re-

flect some of those in her personal life, except in reverse. At one time, Kenny was known as "Ireland's very own Wild Thing," and even as the "scourge of the Church."

A Dublin friend of mine, very much involved in the Irish scene for the past four decades, has written me: "She was part of the women's liberation movement in the sixties. I heard her on radio telling us that she considered going on heroin but her sons persuaded her not to. Having decried the Catholic Church during her liberal period, she has become a staunch defender."

Kenny's story abounds in exquisite ironies. Modern Ireland, she says, dates "from the fall, and then death, of the great Irish parliamentary leader," the Protestant Charles Stewart Parnell, whom the Catholic bishops rejected for his adultery. The principal writers of the Irish literary renaissance were Protestant, and it was from that rebirth that Irish nationalism was re-energized. The Catholic contribution to nationalism came especially and obliquely from the Gaelic Athletic Association, designed to promote Irish sports.

One who emerged as a nationalist revolutionary, although first suspected as dangerous, was Eamon de Valera, born in New York of a Spanish father and of an Irish mother, who, as a young widow, had Eamon returned to Ireland to be raised there by her family. Years later, remarried, she spent her final days in Rochester, where she is buried in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

"Dev," as he was known informally, tall, ascetic and the icon of joyless rectitude (until the recent revelation of his love letters to his young wife) was a very devout Catholic who forged a partnership between church and state, and from 1932, when he assumed the political leadership of Eire, the state adopted a servile relationship toward the church. It was Catholic Ireland, where, as Dev said in 1943, edifyingly, there were people "who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living," and where people were "satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted to things of the spirit."

But things were to change within a few years. By 1979, when Pope John Paul II made his triumphant visit to Ireland, the days of Catholic Ireland were numbered. It was early in the 1990s that everything collapsed, and Chapter 14, "Decline and Fall," tells the sad tale of ecclesiastical scandals that rocked the nation. By the end of the century "Catholic Ireland" was gone.

"Catholic power has receded," concludes Mary Kenny. "But the faith goes on."

It will go on, too, and the church, of course, will endure. But it will have to be a different kind of Catholic Church in Ireland: more given to truly listening to the people, to responding to their real rather than imagined needs, and to humbling itself rather than humiliating others.

McMannus, a native Rochesterian, is a freelance writer living in Venice, Fla.

## Film reviews

NEW YORK (CNS) - Following are recent capsule reviews issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

## 'Blow Dry'

Bittersweet comedy in which terminally ill hairdresser (Natasha Richardson) persuades embittered ex-husband (Alan Rickman) and son (Josh Hartnett) to join her lover (Rachel Griffiths) in a hairstyling competition to heal their fractured relationships.

Director Paddy Breathnach's upbeat tale of forgiveness and family isn't above emotional manipulation of lovable underdogs by cheating rivals. Implied lesbian relationship with brief kissing, fleeting full nudity, occasional rough language and an instance of profanity. The USCC classification is A-IV - adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R - restricted. (Miramax)

## '15 Minutes'

Convoluted crime thriller about media-savvy police detective (Robert DeNiro) who teams with arson investigator (Edward Burns) on a homicide investigation only to become a murder target by killers seeking their 15 minutes of fame. The dark social commentary by writer-director John Herzfeld about exploitative tabloid TV journalism and the desire for notoriety becomes lost in the nonsensical plot and excessive brutality. Much gory violence, brief nudity and recurring rough language with some profanity. The USCC classification is O - morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R - restricted. (New Line)

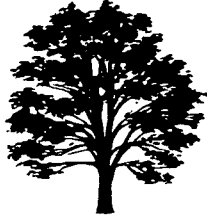
## 'Get Over It'

Teen romance in which high school senior (Ben Foster), crushed when his girlfriend dumps him, gradually springs back thanks to the encouragement of his best friend's younger sister (Kirsten Dunst), who gets him involved in a school production of "A Midsummer Night's Rockin' Eve." Director Tommy O'Haver spins a comic romance of little distinction save for a few sprightly song-and-dance numbers.

Some sexual innuendo, brief comic violence, crude references, fleeting substance abuse and an instance of rough language and profanity. The USCC classification is A-III - adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 - parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. (Miramax)

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