

BOOK REVIEW

# Making the Emerald Isle modern

An intimate history of a changing Ireland

By **Michael Patrick Brady** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 17, 2022, 6:21 p.m.



KLAWE RZECZY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

When the people of Ireland overwhelmingly voted to repeal the country's constitutional amendment banning abortion in May 2018, it represented a reckoning with a shameful

system that had unfairly burdened Irish women for decades. Coming just three years after a similarly lopsided vote to legalize gay marriage, it also further demonstrated the waning influence of the Catholic Church, once the dominant force in Irish society. Prime minister Leo Varadkar succinctly summed up the moment: “We voted to look reality in the eye and we did not blink.”

It sounds so simple. But for a long time, it wasn't. For much of his life, writes Fintan O'Toole, “Reality could continue on its own sweet way, so long as it was not reflected in what the state said about itself. ... What should be must always outweigh what was. This was the Irish way.”

In his engrossing new book, [“We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland”](#), O'Toole charts his country's long transformation from a cloistered backwater to a more modern society over the course of his lifetime. With deep research, a journalistic eye for detail, and a series of revealing personal anecdotes, he paints a vivid and affecting portrait of Irish life, touching on politics, religion, economics, and pop culture. The result is a comprehensive work of social criticism that tells the story of a country that was once so fixated on maintaining an idealized vision of its past that it almost gave up on the prospect of a better future.

When O'Toole was born in 1958, Ireland's future looked bleak. Its primary export was people — tens of thousands fled every year to England and the United States, looking for something better. As the rest of the world industrialized and moved toward greater economic integration, the Irish government was focused on preserving an anachronistic society of piously Catholic farmers living in quaint thatched cottages. But faced with what O'Toole characterizes as a “slow, relentless demographic disaster,” the traditionalists had little choice but to begin opening up to the wider world. Not that they would admit it. Eamon de Valera, then the president of Ireland, “did not confront the failure of his version of the Irish state. Rather brilliantly, he absorbed the shock of the new by pretending that nothing new was happening.”

Fear of an uncertain future and insecurity about Ireland's status in the world led the country to cloak itself in a false exceptionalism. On the surface, Ireland would remain static, ever deferential to its traditions and to the Church while pursuing greater economic growth; in reality, transgressions would be overlooked as long as they didn't upset the proper order of things, and corruption and abuse would be tolerated so long as the national self-image was maintained. "This was a way of functioning —" says O'Toole, "through silence, evasion, creative ambiguity — that could be normal only in a society in which power seems permanent while ordinarily life is changing."

This hypocrisy manifested itself in shocking ways. Every year, thousands of women were forced to travel to England to obtain discreet abortions, while many unwed mothers were locked up in the notorious Church-run Magdalene laundries, their children literally sold to Americans or buried in mass graves after dying from neglect. Pedophile priests, operating in plain sight, fulminated against the "immorality" of cohabitation, contraception, and divorce. Government leaders grew fat off graft, openly indulging in the very vices they often inveighed against. None of this was hidden, and yet all of it was secret. "Ours was a society that had ... a genius for knowing and not knowing at the same time."

But the tentative steps toward economic and cultural openness taken in the late-1950s planted the seeds for future change. They sparked a slow revolution that brought about rising standards of living and greater expectations. And when the enormity of the behavior of the Church and government finally became too brazen to ignore, it emboldened the Irish people to speak their truths. They discovered, according to O'Toole, "that they were in fact much holier than their preachers, that they had a clearer sense of right and wrong, a more honest and intimate sense of love and compassion and decency."

"What's possible now," he writes, "and was entirely impossible when I was born is this: to accept the unknown without being so terrified of it that you have to take refuge in fabrications of absolute conviction."

“We Don’t Know Ourselves” is a powerful book, not just for what it says about Ireland, but for what it has to teach us about national identity in general. It’s a lesson that feels particularly relevant in the United States today. It was the 1973 US Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* that inspired the campaign to constitutionally ban abortion in Ireland. It’s ironic, then, that as Ireland is leaving this sordid past behind, the United States seems poised to return to it, a symptom of a larger trend of ignoring realities that do not conform to one’s own preferred view of the world. In Ireland, the traditionalists believed that the country “was so unbearably fragile that without a hyper-exaggerated self-image, it would vanish.” It wasn’t true there. It doesn’t have to be here, either.

## **WE DON’T KNOW OURSELVES: A Personal History of Modern Ireland**

By Fintan O’Toole

Liveright, 672 pages, \$32

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