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‘We Got Things Going ...’

Seven Ages: The Story of the Irish State

An Araby production for RTÉ in association with BBC Northern Ireland

Director: Seán Ó Mórdha

And then, just as the Angelus rang out from the city churches, the barricades opened. The soldiers filed in with a final cheer or a joke and the gates closed behind them again. I wondered if it really meant that it was all over, that, in fact, it was the end of seven hundred years of occupation ...

Frank O'Connor thus recollects the inauguration of the Irish Free State with the ceremonial British handover of Dublin Castle on 16 January 1922 and, in archival voice-over, thus introduces Seán Ó Mórdha's seven-part historical series on the nation that emerged from that auspicious day. Abetted by our present millenarian obsessions, documentary interest in the principal facets of that nation and its history is currently at an intensity equalled perhaps only during the jubilee year of 1966. Covering, respectively, the topics of emigration, Scottish/Irish interactions, architecture and religion, so far this year we have had such thematic series as *The Irish Empire*, *Erin is Alba*, *Nation Building*, and *On this Rock*; and, if one tires of macro-history, one can alternatively tune in to the more select *after a fashion*, Robert O'Byrne's history of Irish *haute couture* (a series, some might say, revelatory less of what Ireland *was* at than what it now thinks it *should* be at).

Ó Mórdha's series, though it is in itself expansive, differs significantly from these programmes and from various other panoramic histories of Ireland on film in that it has, at least at one extremity, a very precise parameter. Without any preliminary commentary on Ireland in earlier times, and without any attention to the dramatic subject of the 1916 Rising, *Seven Ages* begins with the twenties and subsequently takes the following decades apart one by one. Even though it is accompanied by a soundtrack, composed by Bill Whelan, that is audibly influenced in its militaristic leitmotif by Seán Ó Riada, the series avoids anything like the half-epical feel of *Mise Éire* (1959) or, indeed, *Saoirse?* (1961). There is a calmness here that also contrasts with the anger evident in the first major documentary of the type, Peter Lennon's *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968). Ó Mórdha was particularly cautious in view of the familiar politicisations of Irish history: 'Just look at all the gang that will be lying in wait for me. The patriots on the one hand, who won't be happy with anything that isn't pure hagiography. And on the other hand all the people who aren't in it and think they should be.' He was, from the outset, clear on his remit: 'The challenge for me was - could you tell a story visually and aurally to convey the look, the feel, the personality of the State? There was no point in doing something that didn't work as television ... It had to be for the viewer what it was for those who created the State - a shared experience of Ireland. I had to be able to create something that would be, of course, no more than a contribution to that task, but no less than a contribution either' (*Irish Times*, 19 February 2000).

Ó Mórdha's more familiar contributions to Irish culture are his atmospheric and sympathetic documentary films on our literary dignitaries: Joyce, Beckett, Wilde, Yeats and, most recently, Elizabeth Bowen. Before setting up the independent Araby Productions, however, he had lengthy experience with historical and political programming in RTÉ editing, for instance, *Seven Days* and producing *Féach*. He has

also made programmes on such prime Irish topics as Parnell and the Land League. Considering the numerous documentaries on Irish history made by Jeremy Isaacs, Robert Kee, Peter Taylor and various European and American film-makers and the tendency of these to view the Republic mainly through the lens of the emergent Troubles, Ó Mórdha has pointed out certain elisions: 'They started at the Treaty, they said there was partition and then they took a big jump to the South in relation to the North from 1969 forward ... All of these programmes were commissioned and made to try and explain to their own people in their own countries why the troubles were there in Northern Ireland.' Setting out, then, to devise 'a series that would tell the story of this State since 1921 from the inside', *Seven Ages* is explicitly uncompromising in its primary focus on how we have seen ourselves throughout the twentieth century, and, his obvious professional objectivity notwithstanding, a certain national pride is discernible in Ó Mórdha's summation: 'The State is the subject, the State is the hero ... How young the State is and yet how old the country is - that's the key to it all. The State was made in an old traditional country, and then we had to go and modernise it. I wanted to tell how we made this State from the most unpromising start that a State ever had, as we broke with the great British, Protestant Empire. Everybody wanted it to fail, and everybody thought it would fail, except those who had founded it. Then partition was a body blow. There was a point too, in the 1950s, at which the State didn't seem to be working, where they just say: "This has been a wrong experiment; we made wrong decisions." It's very bleak at times, but there is a resilience, there is a patriotism' (*RTÉ Guide*, 18 February 2000).

The eponymous reference to Shakespeare's seven ages of man is a mnemonic for the fact that the State is yet a mere lifetime old, and perhaps the most engrossing interviews are those from the initial programmes with surviving older figures whose lives span most of the twentieth century. Seán Clancy (aged 97) recalls the event - which he experienced first-hand as an army officer - where, on his arrival to take over Dublin Castle, Michael Collins was scolded by a Crown official for being seven minutes late and Collins famously replied: 'Blast you, sure you people are here for over seven centuries. What bloody difference does seven minutes make now that you're leaving?' The ebulliently accentual R B MacDowell (aged 90) looks back with mild regret on how protestants were disappointed with the break with the Empire and Commonwealth and on how 'startled' they were to suddenly find their royal red postboxes painted green. The first programme serves as a fine advertisement for the series in that, far from lapsing at any point - as some condescending documentaries do - into scenic filler shots, it managed to compact the incendiary events and the psychologically detrimental aftermath of the Civil War while also attending to details. One of the most significant contributions in the series is made here (and in following programmes) by Liam Cosgrave who Ó Mórdha finds in unusually talkative form, and the ex-Taoiseach's recollections stretch back as far as the implications for his family of the assassination in 1927 of Kevin O'Higgins. Covering the matter of Catholic/Protestant interactions and oppositions particularly well, this programme is likely the best yet on the complex and painful first decade of the State, a decade whose retrospective function is summed up by Ernest Blythe: 'The achievement was we got things going.'

Inevitably, the following programmes focus to a considerable degree on the rise and rise of Fianna Fáil. One of the prime strategies of the series, an editing carefully designed to quickly contrast opinions, is deployed to tremendous effect in the second programme where completely opposing views of the new party's eventual entry into

the Dáil are recorded. Moving through such matters as the internecine economic war with Britain and Ireland's presidency of the League of Nations, this programme is particularly good on the emblematic events of the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and the new constitution of 1937. Programme three's initial task is to investigate the Ireland of 'the Emergency' and it precisely acknowledges the period's significance through Charles Haughey who points out that the vestiges of the Civil War were, at that point, displaced by new emergent polarisations. Progressing into colour with pictures of the 'harvest volunteers' of 1946 and, resonantly, remembering Clann na Poblachta's resort to film campaigns, the series does well at this stage to concentrate for a while on the developing intellectual scene in the Ireland of the forties. There was a welcome return to footage of Seán O'Faoláin, Bryan MacMahon and Mervyn Wall who analyse the preoccupation with censorship, and the historian and economist, Patrick Lynch, makes the point, vital to any consideration of the Ireland of this period, that we have yet to do justice to O'Faoláin.

One of the highlights of programme four is some commentary from John McGahern who is back in the Cootehall Garda barracks his father worked in. The famed doldrums of the fifties are devastatingly captured in a phrase he uses when remembering patrols and the daily record in the logbook: 'And nothing ever happened.' Far from catering for the stereotype however, this programme is again particularly fine in its superimposition of contrasting assessments of the decade as it moves from sections on the worsening emigration problem where the most beautiful and effective stills of the series are employed, to the evolution of radio programmes, to the IRA border campaign, rural electrification and the emergence of Seán Lemass. Of all the useful summary conclusions to the individual programmes this has the most notable with archive footage of de Valera's exit from the political frontline with his cavalcade to the Áras in 1959.

Given the reputation of the sixties as a socially explosive period in Ireland programme five's content is inherently interesting. The period's preoccupation with the 'New' is evident: new music, new clothes, new televisions, new and badly planned housing, and the new social classes ironised by O'Faoláin: 'Managers, Capitalists, Entrepreneurs, Speculators, Whizz-Kids, The New Bourgeoisie, Chancers, Industrialists, New Business Types, Men of Property, Money-Makers, and so on ...'. Northern politics dominates the later part of this instalment and one of the more welcome reconsiderations of the series, of Jack Lynch's career, begins here and continues into the next programme. Of all the others, programme six contains, along with reference to the central event of the Pope's visit, the heaviest political emphasis as the IRA assume centre stage and as Haughey's career becomes the nub. Here, as elsewhere when he is included in the series footage, Noel Browne is prescient: 'My fear of Mr Haughey is his obsessional preoccupation with being the leader ... to achieve that, he has done, I believe, some things which are unforgivable in a politician.'

The final episode, principally because it broke with the overall decadal structure, is the only major disappointment of the series. Rather than confine himself to examination of the eighties, Ó Mórdha succumbs to the temptation to bring things up to date: To obey his *seven* ages ordinance, he includes the nineties in his wrap mainly through a pictorial summary composed of notional symbols and poetic images (construction cranes, picture-postcard pubs, Riverdance dancers) which, in comparison to the extensive discursive excavations of the earlier decades, gives the conclusion of the series something of a superficial feel. Thus compressing two

massively divergent decades is tantamount to, say, treating the sixties as a brief afterthought of the fifties and, since the nineties in Ireland are already being considered by commentators as a distinct theorisable period it would surely have been more comprehensive and interesting to give these years their own programme, even if that meant following the series up with a solo episode.

As it was, the coverage of the eighties reaffirms the received idea that it was, above all, a decade of depressions, that Ireland during this time was - as an issue of *The Economist* had it - the 'poorest of the rich countries'. Beginning with a reminder of the Stardust fire of February 1981 (a tragic event certainly but, in the context of the overwhelming emphasis on politics, a somewhat incongruous inclusion), the programme focuses on the stark ideological battles that developed between Haughey and Garret Fitzgerald including, along the way, references to such impactful events as the Anglo-Irish Summit of 1980, the Hunger Strikes and the Ballsbridge riots of 1981, the New Ireland Forum of 1983, the Brighton bomb of 1984, and the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985. Despite or because of the inevitable probings of sleaze in this period, it is Haughey rather than Mary Robinson (who is given, predictably enough, the honour of concluding the series) who emerges as the star of the show: From some footage from his infamous 'we-are-living-way-beyond-our-means' television speech in January 1980 to an almost poignant moment in Ó Mórdha's interview with him where he finally and laconically baulks ('I'm not going into that ...'), he is visibly pleased, given his present embattled state, to be telling us how he saw things. One of the most thought provoking moments of the series occurs here when, mindful of Haughey and others, the consistently frank ex-President, Patrick Hillery, muses: 'The "rising tide" is created by greedy people ... by competitive people who go for success - and that creates wealth. Where every country has failed, where even the EEC has failed, is in the distribution of wealth.'

By the end of this final programme, a final niggler is raised. While the earlier instalments enjoyed a reasonably varied range of interviews, new and archival, the closer Ó Mórdha gets to the present day the more he depends on certain voices which, while not in themselves repetitive, resurface constantly. Undoubtedly, the elocutionary Desmond O'Malley, for instance, as Ó Mórdha has pointed out, is 'straight from the tee to the green' in interview, but his ubiquity in the final stages seems, in terms of discursive balance, somewhat ill-advised. Overall however, Ó Mórdha accesses an impressive range of opinion, from that of intellectuals, academics and commentators like Fintan O'Toole, Dermot Keogh, Tony Garvin and Caitriona Crowe to that of people, political or otherwise, who had direct involvement in the events covered.

Seven Ages, it should be observed, in one sense tells an old-fashioned kind of history where public political life and its notaries are taken to encapsulate the principal story of a state. It should also be realised however that, despite our reputed national obsession with such history, we need constant reminding that, even if we might justifiably suspect the ideologically tainted revisionism of some historicizing, the exploration of the story of the twentieth-century period in this island is still in only its early ages. The question of whether 16 January 1922 meant that 'it was all over' may, in these postcolonialist times, continue to attract a myriad of impassioned answers. Clearly, that day was at least the beginning of a new State. Truly a public service in its conception, production and presentational objectivity, *Seven Ages* efficiently and provocatively identifies the political cataclysms and machinations that, a lifetime later, have produced an Irish Republic sufficiently comfortable to allow its

children to cultivate an increasing disinterest in the history that produced that comfort in the first place.