

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

44 – *Preventing the Future*
(18 January 2020)

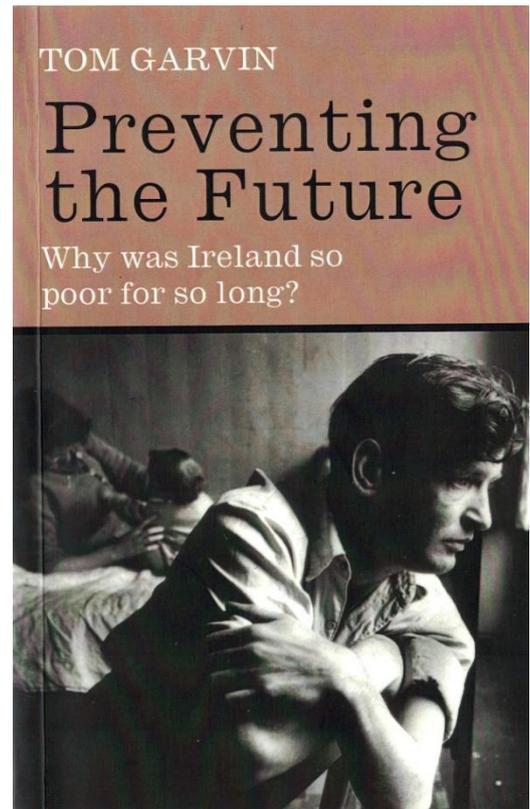
PREVENTING THE FUTURE:
Why was Ireland so Poor so Long?

Author: Tom Garvin

Publisher: [Gill Books](#), 2005
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: Explains why, after independence, Ireland prioritised piety over prosperity, and shows how that caused poverty.

RusRoL relevance: *Illustrates the damage that enforced consensus can do, especially when based on STATUS (the Church and virtue) at the expense of CONTRACT (business and personal freedom)*



Reason to read: Apart from the intrinsic interest of the subject matter—Ireland's catastrophic economic failure as an independent state; it got rich only when ultimate power passed from Dublin to Brussels—this book should be a salutary warning to all the “Little Scotlanders” who think that a country which subordinates free life to “national virtue” can produce wealth and retain the more intelligent and enterprising elements of its population. This book is interesting in its own right, but it is also an excellent scene-setter for review 45: *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* by Clair Wills.

The long shadow cast over the scene is, of course, that of Eamon De Valera. (I wrote about him in review 17: [Ireland, Germany and the Nazis](#) by Mervyn O'Driscoll) Anyone interested in his impact on Irish life will find Professor Garvin's text absorbing, not least as the problem of poverty in states with “a moral mission” is a general one. It certainly applied, though in a very different way, to the Soviet Union; it is threatening to infect Scotland today unless a few important historical lessons are learned very quickly. “The long fella” did to Ireland what “the short madam” will do to this country if she is not stopped soon. The surest way to damage national life is to try to improve it by compulsion. As philosophers from ancient times have argued, and Bertrand Russell more recently emphasised, enforced morality is no morality at all, only obedience. The De Valera-ish obsession with personal righteousness as seen by the Vatican at the expense of almost everything else was, in the end, counterproductive. Ireland is arguably a more “sinful” place (as “Dev” would have seen it) today than it was when he took

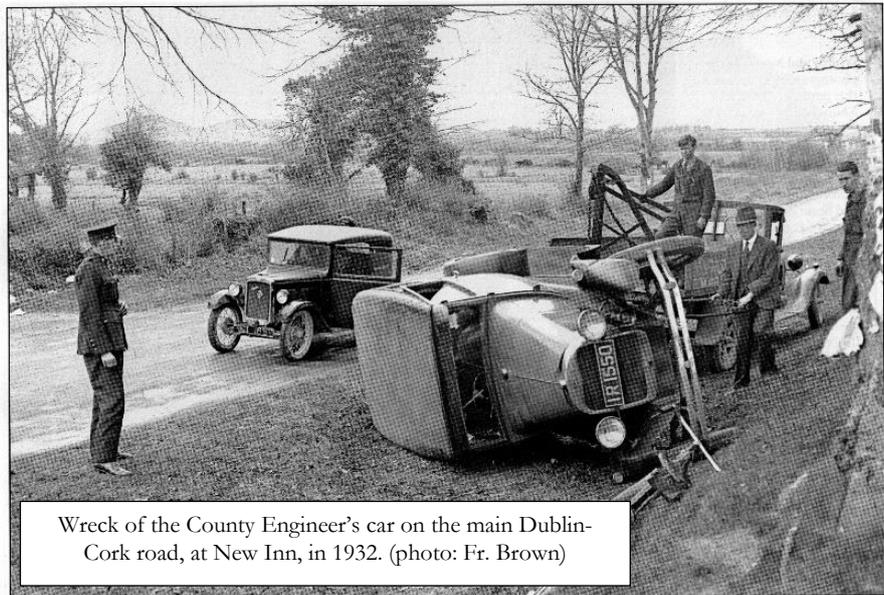
power in 1932. Certainly, it is dismissive, if not in some ways contemptuous, of the values he so piously espoused.

Main talking points:

Here are a few of the more egregious examples of national virtue as cited by Professor Garvin:

1. Corruption: though small-scale and individual, it was nearly ubiquitous. A practical example with day-to-day consequences was the roads: “Road building was massively resisted by a simple and very traditional process of masterly inactivity. Roadworks were seen as outdoor relief for political party workers and local indigents rather than as investment in a modern transport network...

“The price of a quiet life for the County Engineer is to ensure that a given fraction of every annual appropriation for roads is spent in the residential area of each Councillor and that in its spending the maximum amount is laid out in wages payable to the County Councillor’s neighbours.” (p. 103)



Wreck of the County Engineer’s car on the main Dublin-Cork road, at New Inn, in 1932. (photo: Fr. Brown)

2. Negativity: during the War years a new and more rational road network was planned, but immediately after the 1948 election the new Attorney General (and future Taoiseach), John Costello, telephoned the Secretary of the Department of Local Government, John Garvin, “and abruptly announced the cancellation of the programme... ‘Garvin, we’re building no racetracks for plutocrats in this country.’” (p. 120)
3. Class war: the same applied to flying. Immediately after the War, five Lockheed Constellation airliners were ordered from the United States by Aer Lingus in order to take advantage of demand for travel to and from north America. But the question was raised: “Why should the general population finance the luxury travel arrangements of privileged people?” (p. 129) The pilots had been trained, infrastructure organised, and Aer Lingus offices opened in New York and Boston. Then came the 1948 general election after which “the Labour Party refused to join the coalition government until the proposed transatlantic service was cancelled. The reason: ‘Only rich people flew in aeroplanes.’” (p. 130) The machines were then sold off to BOAC (to its great benefit as Britain was short of dollars at the time) and 200 Aer Lingus staff made redundant. “Irish transatlantic aviation did not resume until 1958.” (p. 131)
4. The war on convenience: much the same logic was applied to the telephone service, with similar results. A government memo of 1958 stated: “The proposed encouragement of the extension of

telephone services will mean diversion of capital to something that is *mainly a convenience.*” (emphasis added) The result was that “circa 1960 the Republic had 53 telephones for 1,000 population.” (p. 141) Britain had nearly three times that number, Sweden seven times and the US nearly eight times. Ireland had “a strange but ingrained belief that telephones, like modern roads or air travel, were ‘luxuries’ to be enjoyed by rich people only... Ireland did not get a modern telephone service until the late 1980s.” (p. 142)

5. Enforced incapacity: while employers were crying out for educated school-leavers in the 1940s and 50s, the government refused to invest in human capital. “Education was really about producing priest and patriots.” (p. 125) The result was that “half-educated young Irishmen built Britain’s roads in the ranks of McAlpine’s Fusiliers, while half-educated young women worked as chambermaids and nurses... A huge Irish proletariat accumulated in Britain [while] the Republic’s growth rate was clearly the slowest of the Western European countries.” (p. 133)
6. Narrow horizons: “The idea that government investment should be redistributive rather than developmentalist reflected an essentially static view of Irish society... If I gained, you lost, and if you gained I lost. This political culture resembled amoral familism so well described by Edward Banfield in his classic *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, as existing in mid-1950s southern Italy.” (p. 128)
7. Spite: The same applied to capital. De Valera was so determined to exclude British capital from Ireland that two Control of Manufacturers Acts were passed in the 1930s “one indirect but immediate result of which was the relocation of Arthur Guinness’s famous brewing company [then Ireland’s largest industrial export earner] from Dublin to London and the opening of the Park Lane brewery in London.” (p. 143)
8. Censorship: Professor Garvin quotes a chilling example of the political correctness that Ireland pioneered under De Valera. “A bucolic quietus was to be the solution to Ireland’s incoherent yearnings toward individual freedom, self-realisation, equality, individualism and authenticity as dramatically expressed in the writings of the revolutionaries and poets. There were to be no more rebellious people like Yeats, Joyce, Pearse or Connolly, or, if such people were to appear, Ireland would be well able to do without them.” (p. 171)
9. Many, many other such examples are given in this hair-raisingly fascinating book. Perhaps the most astonishing fact in the whole story is that it was *Northern* Ireland which saved the people from total stagnation. Its economy was successful. “Partition had certain advantages; it possibly prevented sclerosis from becoming total in a right little, tight little all-island republic.” (p. 149)

Thought(s) provoked: Anyone who likes the sporting spirit of the Irish must conclude that one of their worst enemies was Eamon De Valera (even though he was a keen rugby player/supporter). He came close to destroying the economic base of a colourful, talented and enterprising people by infecting it indirectly with gross materialism. His attempt to destroy the root of all evil—love of money—fell foul of Bertrand Russell’s rule and ended up either making people subservient or forcing them into exile. The result of the modern determination to catch up with the English by being as money-grubbing as possible has destroyed so many traditions that the historic character of the country is in danger of receding

forever into the past. A thousand years of history is being progressively washed away by a flood of cheap German money, expensive Japanese cars and huge Dallas-style houses which make fools of the landscape's quiet beauty. Paradoxically, that is what has turned out to be the long-term legacy of De Valera's oppressively negative moralism. It had an interesting parallel in the gross materialism that Russia embraced after the Soviet Union's moral implosion in 1991.

Professor Garvin quotes Sean Lemass, an old IRA man and one of De Valera's henchmen/disciples (Taoiseach 1959-66), who wrote a long position paper in 1930 in which he outlined the ideas behind what we can now see as the impoverishment of Ireland. "For generations we have been subject to a system of government which was based on a denial of our Nationality and the economic consequences of that experience should have convinced us that our material welfare is inextricably bound up with the movement for political freedom... In our efforts to bring prosperity to the country, we will find that the spirit of Irish Nationality will be our first asset, and our surest guarantee of success." (p. 61)

That statement, together with a full account of the 40-year long economic catastrophe which followed, should be tattooed onto the foreheads of Nicola Sturgeon and all who are tempted follow the Pied Piper of Holyrood.

Left Field: Further to my "Left Field" comment in review 43 ([The Great Irish Famine](#) – Enda Delaney) about the luck of the Irish in having the British as colonisers rather than, say Stalin, Professor Garvin quotes an Irish-American academic, J.V. Kelleher from an essay written in 1957 in the important, semi-official Washington quarterly, *Foreign Affairs*, in which he describes Ireland as "a little country living on the memory of real and imagined past wrongs, continually making excuses for itself, while the solution for all her ills lies in her own hands." (p. 187) Kelleher observed that "one can hardly avoid deciding that Irish ills are largely psychosomatic". Garvin comments: "The real problem was that the Irish had had 'an almost fatally easy time of it' in the twentieth century." Kelleher ended his piece by saying: "I can imagine that Ireland may do what no other nation has ever tried, and perish by sudden implosion upon a central vacuity." (p. 188)

That was what happened to the mighty Soviet empire in 1991. "Little Scotland" beware!

Style: Readable

Publishing quality: Adequate, but no pictures.

Smile(s): None—a great opportunity missed, I fear.

Author: Tom Garvin is Professor Emeritus of Politics at University College, Dublin.

Link(s): Prof. Garvin appears in an amusing and watchably Irish discussion of important books that have shaped Ireland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZWu73BCIM0>

Overall recommendation level: VERY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [*Isles of the West*](#) and [*The Justice Factory*](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk.

For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).