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Book Review: *Taoisigh and the Arts* (Kevin Rafter: Martello, 2022)

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Abstract

Kevin Rafter's short book is an entertaining taste of the use and abuse of the arts in Ireland by successive Taoisigh (the plural form of the title of the Irish elected head of state, 'Taoiseach'). It covers a century of cultural policy juxtaposed with artistic responses of the times, to reveal a story of official neglect and the privileging of economic concerns. Until the establishment of the Department of Arts in 1993 only one Taoiseach truly embraced his responsibilities to the arts and Charles J. Haughey would do so in a way that emphasised grand gestures to support his image all the while continuing the underfunding of the sector. Though the powers of the role have largely transferred to the Departmental Minister, the role of Taoiseach retains a certain symbolic and diplomatic significance when it comes to the arts.

Keywords: arts policy; Ireland; Taoiseach; Charles J. Haughey.

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Perhaps due to their limited number (only fifteen so far), and uneven duration (Éamon de Valera held the position for over twenty-one years and Micheál Martin for less than two and a half), Taoisigh are rarely a defined object of study. In contrast, in America for example, there is a long-established study of presidential character (Barber, 1972), and even the types of First Ladies (Burns, 2008). While that research can fall into the trap of psychological reductionism, it is useful for its emphasis on leadership style and the assessment of performance. As such it raises the question; does a typology of Taoisigh develop? In the context of the arts in Ireland specifically, where Cooke (2022) has recently outlined how policy is largely personality-driven, are there, for example, types such as creators, collectors, censors, muses, etc.? Until the appointment of Michael D. Higgins as the first Minister for Arts and Culture in 1993 it was the Taoiseach who held direct responsibility for arts policy. In the first seventy years of the state, all Taoisigh when it comes to the arts can be best described as absent fathers. The sole notable exception is Charles J. Haughey who dominates this book.

Kevin Rafter, appointed Chair of the Arts Council in 2019, does not give a complete account of a century of arts policy in independent Ireland. As the topic does not lend itself to straightforward periodisation, Rafter is right to proceed in terms of a rough chronology and thematically. In this short, entertaining and somewhat personal book, he considers "the place of the arts in [each Taoiseach's] personal and governmental world, and […] how artists responded to them." (p.xiii). In

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the often-dry world of the unreadable and unread grey literature of legislation (Auger, 1975), it is this latter perspective that makes the book engaging.

Given the silence of certain Taoisigh on the arts and the absence of explicit policies formally institutionalised, it is worth recalling that cultural policy can be implicit. Jeremy Ahearne has located implicit cultural policies in any "effective impact on the nation's culture […], including educational, media, industrial, foreign policy" (2009, p.144) and the (hidden) work and algorithms of digital technologies, but we could also consider public health (lockdowns) and housing policy (gentrification) for example.

The 1920s template of limited attention set by the first Taoiseach, W.T. Cosgrave,'s own limited attention was to regard the arts as a mere garnish that can promote the state abroad and patronage was at best tokenistic. This austerity and neglect were far from benign as they were accompanied by significant church-inspired censorship on topics such as divorce, contraception, and infidelity (Lynch, 2000, Rockett 2004). Given the institution's centrality to the Irish Literary Revival, Cosgrave's apparent claim to have never attended a performance at the Abbey Theatre (the National Theatre Society of Ireland) and De Valera's similar but incorrect claim in 1934 are both remarkable and revealing of the gaping chasm between the arts and the centre of political power from the State's inception. When he was a maths teacher in Blackrock College, De Valera had performed on the Abbey stage in November 1905 as Dr Kelly in *A Christmas Hamper* and would attend in later years. Nonetheless, the almost prideful ignorance is a testament to the virtually total abdication of the cultural role of the office in the early decades of the state. This left a vacuum that would be filled by a host of more engaged political figures. Notable examples here are Ernest Blythe and Patrick Little. Blythe as Minister for Finance (1923 – 32) introduced an annual subsidy for the Abbey Theatre in 1925, the first in the English-speaking world. Little, as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs (1939-1948), and later the first chairman of the Arts Council (1951-1956), encouraged Radio Éireann's (renamed Radio Telefís Éireann in 1966 and later renamed Raidió Teilifís Éireann in 2009, Ireland's national broadcaster) programming for classical music and the professionalisation of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra all the while championing unsuccessfully for the establishment of a national concert hall.

Compared to Cosgrave, De Valera's approach entailed a more explicit inculcation of native and Catholic traditions. This was a viewpoint, in the words of Rafter, that maintained that 'the arts were a luxury which the country could not afford' (p.17). Instead, artists and poets were to be heralded only in the imagined backward-looking Irish-speaking rustic utopia of Ireland, and not engagement with the real state that Fianna Fáil (De Valera's leading political party at the time) and the Catholic hierarchy governed and controlled. This conservative climate has been explained in the following way:

> Painters were accepted [only] when they painted Irish subject matter. The arts were used in a restrictive but calculated manner to establish independence. Gaelic script, landscape scenery, peasant life, marching tunes were employed along with an array of motifs shamrock, round tower, high cross, wolfhound, metalwork interlace and filigree, St Brigid's cross

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> and the harp to proclaim that Ireland was an independent nation once again. (Kennedy, 1992, p.17)

In this setting of political absenteeism and religious-led control, it is not surprising that the arts and the lives of artists in Ireland were characterised by anxiety and issues of self-esteem. This was especially the case as 'the years from 1922 to the mid-1960s were marked by an absence of a coherent government policy on the arts and paltry levels of State funding' (p.75). Most revealing here is that these anxieties are felt also by the absent fathers themselves, as witnessed in the fixation of Seán Lemass (Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil from 1959 – 1966) on the economic cost of supporting the arts and his criticisms of representations of 'the stage-Irishman' (p.69) as derogatory.

The personal interest of John A. Costello (leader of Fine Gael and by turns Leader of the Opposition and Taoiseach from 1948 – 1959) led to the establishment of, underfunding of, and political interference in, the Arts Council (An Chomhairle Ealaíon). This contrasts with Seán Lemass' general 'indifference' to the arts and subservience to economic considerations. Yet there is no clear ideological difference that emerges between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Taoisigh. Instead, there is an impressive continuity of neglect. When Jack Lynch (Fianna Fáil leader 1966 – 1979; twice holding role of Taoiseach) 'essentially ceded responsibility [of the arts] to Charles Haughey [then Minister of Finance]' (p.83) in the late 1960s, the ambitious post-revolution and business-orientated generation of politicians, popularly known as 'the men in the mohair suits' effectively took control of arts policy. This would mark a significant break with the romantic nationalism and religious-inspired repression that had hitherto dominated the state's approach to the arts. No longer would arts policy be so firmly driven by a fear of the foreign, the artist, and the modern. Yet, the governmental approach would remain informal, money-focused, and elitist.

Despite Rafter's impressive cataloguing of the artistic representations of all Taoisigh what is clear is that it is really only De Valera and Haughey who 'captivated' artists and writers in any sustained or significant way. Just as the disconnect between the ideal of a rural Ireland fantasised by De Valera and the oppressive reality he led for so long understandably made him the primary punchbag of writers and poets, Haughey's patrician approach as both collector and benefactor would make him a muse of artists thirty years later. Where Paul Durcan (Durcan, 1978), for example, imagined De Valera as an ogre from on high, denying carnal pleasure in the Phoenix Park; Haughey was often uncritically represented as a mix of High King and Medici patron in the following decade. Durcan would even describe him as a religious saviour in a poem specifically commissioned by Haughey for the opening of Knock Airport (Durcan, 1986 in Rafter, 2022, pp.116-118) while the poet Brendan Kennelly would describe him in 1991 as a 'genius' who 'follows genius' laws' (Kennelly, 1991 in Rafter, 2022, p.123).

This was, of course, an image that Haughey had himself also cultivated in part through numerous portraits by artists such as Edward McGuire, Patrick Hennessy, and Louis le Brocquy. Unsurprisingly it is Tim Rollins' 1988 portrait *From the Animal Farm, Charles J. Haughey* which adorns the cover of Rafter's book as it encapsulates the uneasy relationship between Haughey and artists. Central to Haughey's approach was the development of explicit state support for artists which would buy the admiration of many artists. Developments such as the artists' exemption from income tax (1969), the establishment of Aosdána, a nationally supported honours society for Irish

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artists (1981), and ‘grand gestures’ such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art at Kilmainham (1991) were the realisation of the philosophy of his close friend and specially appointed cultural advisor Anthony Cronin. The charisma and benevolence of Haughey served to mask the cronyism and mark these symbolic and limited achievements as monuments to Haughey’s own personal fiefdom and not the result of public or transparent democratic consultation. Damningly, Rafter (p.109) notes; ‘Haughey never made good on […] funding promises […] Haughey was no different from his predecessors’, and the arts sector remained an orphan, without strategic and professional planning from the Taoiseach’s office.

This approach could not last, and Rafter identifies the seeds of change in governance in the decision by Garett FitzGerald (Fine Gael Leader 1977 – 1987; twice Taoiseach in that time), operating in the orbit of Haughey, to assign Ted Nealon as a Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach with responsibility for Arts and Culture in 1982. This formal arrangement, later abolished by Haughey, but reinstated by Albert Reynolds (Fianna Fáil, Taoiseach 1992 – 1994). This signaled the end of the Taoiseach’s direct control and the establishment of the Department with its senior minister. In the intervening thirty years the role of Taoiseach has rarely, if ever, sought to employ its prestige and influence on the arts as a priority.

While a useful introduction to the topic, Rafter’s book is too short for typologies of Taoisigh to be developed. The singular focus on the arts means that a general theory of the role is absent. Furthermore, it would certainly be worth reflecting on the role of other cultural domains in the context of the role. Jack Lynch is an obvious example to consider here, insofar as he successfully leveraged the ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1984) of his sporting career throughout his political career (McMorrow, 2010).

With the advent of a dedicated Department, though one with an ever-amended remit (originally called the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, it is currently titled the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media), the focus hereafter on the Taoiseach inevitably loses much of its significance. Given the devolution of cabinet responsibility to a named ministerial portfolio, it will be interesting to see in future research if there are significant differences in the approaches that the twelve ministers with responsibility for the arts so far (seven men and five women) have taken in terms of the key cultural policy debates such as cultural rights (Ivey, 2008), the use and abuse of heritage, media quotas, cultural democracy vs the democratisation of culture (Hadley, 2021), etc.

The six men, and this is an overwhelmingly male story, that would occupy the role of Taoiseach after Reynolds, ‘demonstrated varying degrees of personal interest in the arts’ (p.163) but none would seek to control or capitalise on the arts in the mode of De Valera or Haughey. Likewise, none would be the significant focus of sustained attention of artists, though it is perhaps too early to judge some of the later figures in this regard.

The role of Taoisigh in relation to the arts is increasingly now curtailed to attending safe celebratory occasions such as openings and awards, and maybe the occasional nomination of someone from the arts to Seanad Éireann (the Irish Senate or upper house). The closest we see artists and their work occupying the vision of political leaders is when some lines are added for

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clichéd ‘rhetorical flourishes’ (p.175) especially from William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney, and cringe-inducing pop-culture references for speeches.

Ireland is arguably the posterchild for the expedient mining of culture and the arts (Yúdice, 2003) in service of soft power goals (Nye, 2004). The main power that the role of Taoiseach retains is in terms of the symbolic commanding heights in the use of art in the context of diplomacy and state properties and Rafter details how the role continues to be a key focus in selling “Brand Ireland” abroad. Unlike other political figures such as the minister for the arts, historically, official portraits of Taoisigh, and presidents for that matter, have been commissioned and traditionally first exhibited in the annual RHA exhibition. Some of these are included here and it is still the Taoiseach who decides the artist. As the recent back and forth between Micheál Martin (Fianna Fáil) and Leo Varadkar (Fine Gael) over the hanging of portraits of Michael Collins and De Valera in the Taoiseach’s office reveal (Barry, 2020); even if the absent fathers have ceded their guardianship for the most part, the arts continue to be an implicit and symbolic avenue of party politics for the highest office in the state.

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