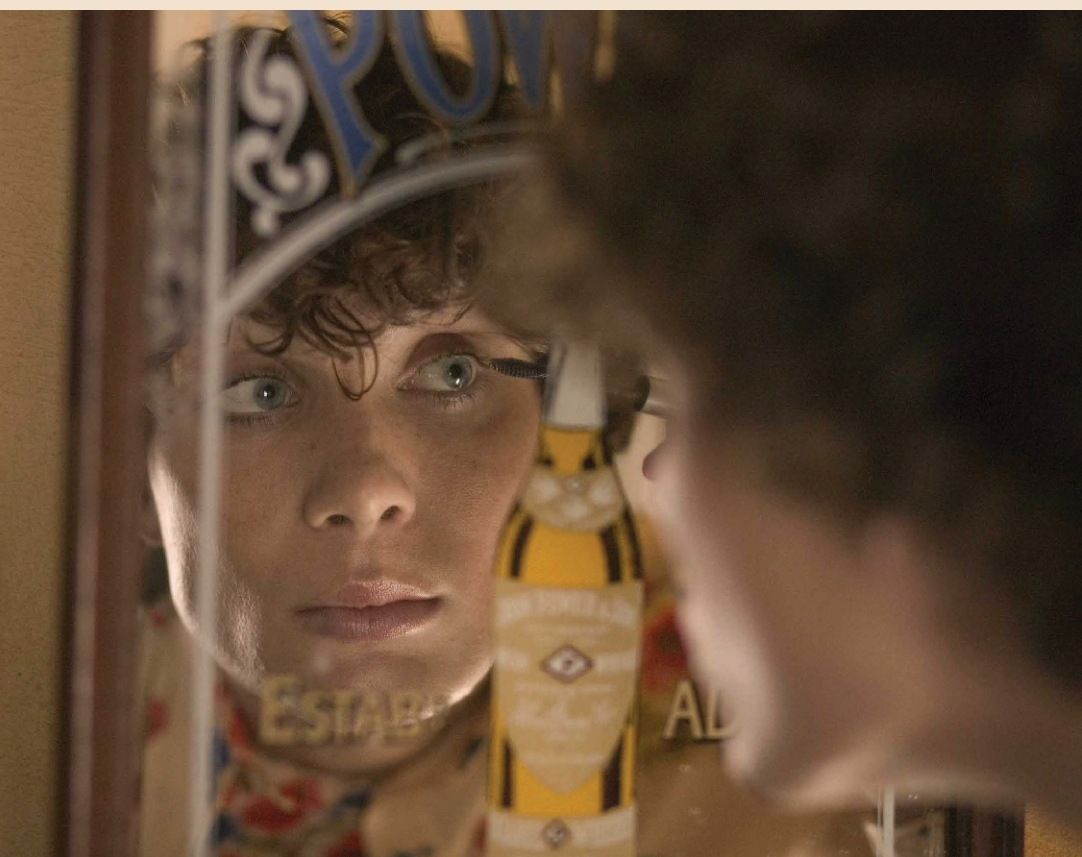




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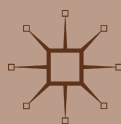
AND IRISH POPULAR CULTURE

TIGER'S TALES

EDITED BY

CONN HOLOHAN

TONY TRACY



Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture

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Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture

Tiger's Tales

Edited by

Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy

NUI Galway, Ireland

palgrave
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Introduction, selection and editorial matter © Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy 2014

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Introduction

Tony Tracy and Conn Holohan

In September 2011 – as an interdisciplinary group of scholars gathered at NUI Galway to consider shifting representations of masculinity within Irish culture over the preceding, momentous, decade – the country was in the final phases of an eventful presidential election. While political campaigns are, by their nature, topical, this one was remarkable in several respects, but particularly for the way that it revealed the uncertain state of Irish manhood. The context for the election was one in which gender was unusually prominent for Irish politics since the office of President had been successively held (and subsequently shaped) for the previous 21 years by two remarkable women – Mary Robinson (1990–7) and Mary McAleese (1997–2011). Robinson was a highly regarded lawyer, scholar and feminist who later became the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; McAleese an equally brilliant academic, lawyer and journalist with a common touch who worked tirelessly and with great success for building relationships across the ‘peace divide’ in her native Northern Ireland, and whose presidency would culminate in the historic and unprecedented visit of a British monarch to the Irish Republic.

While Mary Robinson’s surprise election in 1990 was widely understood (and celebrated) as the displacement of the established political patriarchy and a watershed moment for the ‘Mná na hÉireann’ (Women of Ireland) who she addressed in her acceptance speech (and by extension, all those excluded from normative, highly gendered understandings of Irishness), the tenure of Mary McAleese was viewed as so successful a continuation of this political mode of inclusiveness that no party put up a candidate after her first term of office in 2002, and she was elected, unopposed, for a second. Taken together, both presidencies reflected and effected a significant redrawing of Official Ireland in their commitment to minority causes across political, social and gender issues.

Between 1990 and 2011 – and alongside these more inclusive presidential tenures – Ireland had gone through a period of dramatic social change that included a near-collapse in the moral authority of the Catholic church (resulting from a succession of paedophile priest scandals and the uncovering of a history of abuse in institutions run by Catholic orders), a substantial increase in immigrants settling in Ireland ('non-nationals' as they were repeatedly referred to), and an exceptional economic and, later, property boom with a concomitant rise in a culture of consumerism in a rapidly secularized Irish society. Since 2008, with the sudden collapse of the 'Tiger' economy, the return of widespread emigration, the (literally) overnight imposition of catastrophic national debt and the subsequent takeover of the country's finances by the 'Troika' (EC, IMF and ECB) the Irish have engaged in an extensive and ongoing period of soul-searching on the present and future character and values of their postcolonial, post-Catholic, postmodern, neoliberal island nation. Unsurprisingly in a country closely identified with conservative patriarchal Catholic values, gender and sexuality have been central to these changes and debates and, as several recent studies reflect, Irish masculinity has been a central focus of scrutiny and consideration. The chapters in this collection form part of that wider process and discourse.

Writing a year in advance of the 2011 election, journalist Noel Whelan noted that 'recent presidential elections have become occasions for a more philosophical debate about where Ireland is at, how it sees itself, and how it wants to be perceived ... [But] In these volatile political times it is difficult to assess the precise context for a late 2011 presidential campaign.'¹ Volatility remained a key feature of a campaign that reflected political uncertainty in offering the Irish public the largest group of candidates in history. Seeking the ceremonial but highly symbolic office, a field of five men and two women ranging from a former Eurovision winner to a former senior IRA member (with several shades of green in between) symbolized the contested nature of contemporary Irish identity. Moreover, the gender balance of this group – and opinion polls throughout the campaign – suggested that, in the aftermath of an extended period of social change and at this time of national crisis, a male president was what the electorate desired. If this seemed evident, the question remained: what kind of man? Striking was the degree to which, with the notable exception of race, the candidates offered peculiarly vivid embodiments of a key tenet of masculinity studies over the past 20 years; R. W. Connell's influential insight that while masculinity tends to be hierarchically organized in a given society there exists, alongside a hegemonic ideal, a multiplicity of lived masculinities. Thus,

in a culture characterized by centre-right consensus politics, the male candidates offered the electorate uncommonly varied performances of Irish masculinity in ideological outlook and geographical origins (and their attendant, symbolic associations): Michael D. Higgins, a highly respected west-of-Ireland poet, Ireland's first Minister for Culture and a long-time activist on social issues; Martin McGuinness from Derry, Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, former member of the IRA and a key figure in the peace process; Senator David Norris from central Dublin, a cosmopolitan and colourful Joycean, one of Ireland's longest-openly-gay public figures and a long-time activist for gay and human rights; Sean Gallagher from the border county of Cavan, a 'self-made' businessman who, as a member of the TV show *Dragon's Den* and in his election campaign, communicated a neoliberal agenda of entrepreneurship and self-determination ('Sean learned from an early age that hard work was the only way to overcome life's difficulties'),² and Gay Mitchell, a working-class Dublin politician, who rose to become an MEP with staunchly conservative political and religious affiliations. As the unpredictable campaign progressed, various members of this eclectic group vied for contention at one time or another. But for a late and unanticipated spoiler, Sean Gallagher's entrepreneur 'success story' seemed the likely winner,³ but in the end, and in less than unanimous circumstances, the public elected the politically radical west-of-Ireland poet. A year on from Noel Whelan's remarks, the 'precise context' of the campaign remained stubbornly obscure but a largely unacknowledged anxiety about 'national manhood' formed a central, if subtextual, backdrop.

In a recent review Sean Brady has remarked that, 'In a society dominated profoundly by men and religion, social conservatism, sectarianism, violent conflict, and troubled relationships with Britain (historically and contemporaneously), it is remarkable that [Irish] masculinities as sites of critical enquiry barely exist in this scholarly context.'⁴ Since 2010 however, this 'scholarly context' has caught up dramatically to rapidly constitute a burgeoning field of new Irish masculinity studies.⁵ Key recent texts in this developing discourse include Debbie Ging's *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (2012); Brian Singleton's *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (2011); Fintan Walsh's *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (2010) and Caroline Magennis' and Raymond Mullen's edited collection *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture* (2011). That the present interdisciplinary collection coincides with the publication of contiguous monographs and collections attests to the vitality and timeliness of this project – its individual chapters overlapping with and extending concerns from

such works in fortuitous and revealing ways. Indeed many of the essays here display a kinship with Ging and Singleton's texts in particular, in their attention to the relationship between sociopolitical currents and the construction of gender within contemporary Irish popular art forms. Like them, many contributors to this collection, some explicitly and some implicitly, draw on R. W. Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity and share Connell's understanding of gender as a socio-cultural, and therefore mutable, construct.

The chapters that follow offer a collective interrogation of the various modes of masculinity that have recurred within Irish cultural texts of the past 20 years. Whilst the majority of the chapters focus on the texts and context of Celtic Tiger Ireland discussed above, a number of the contributors also address the implications of the Northern Irish peace process for conceptions of Irish masculinity. The diversity of cultural arenas which these chapters explore gives in itself a vivid illustration of Connell's insistence that masculinities are always multiple. For some considerable time the dominant critical paradigm through which Irish masculinity has historically been constructed has been the legacy of colonial relations across a range of cultural forms including literature, theatre and indeed film. The contributors to this collection complicate and contest prevailing analytical frameworks both through considering masculinity and its functions in under-explored cultural fields and texts (such as popular music) and by drawing on the insights into gender and sexuality provided by disciplines such as queer studies. In such a way they offer a provocative, though necessarily partial, overview of the myriad ways in which Irish masculinity has been imagined and reimagined into being within cultural texts. By extension, these chapters teach us something of the way that Irish society has imagined and reimagined itself through the gendered bodies that populate the culture we produce and consume.

The opening section offers three chapters that interrogate the social, cultural and economic forces which determine our understanding of masculinity and its functions within contemporary Irish society. Exploring those most-mythologized of Irish sporting activities, Gaelic football and hurling, Michael G. Cronin goes beyond the cultural nationalist framework that has so often dominated understandings of the GAA. In a complex and wide-ranging analysis, he focuses on two individual narratives, the coming-out of Cork hurler Dónal Óg Cusack and the media profile of Kerry footballer Paul Galvin, to consider the functioning of sport as a regulatory regime that produces normative modes of masculinity. Within Cronin's reading, Cusack's revelation of his homosexuality and Galvin's unashamed interest in fashion appear

less as disruptions to hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality than as neoliberal celebrations of the self. Cronin's admonition against any easy celebration of non-normative gender and sexual identities is echoed by Jeannine Woods in her analysis of the representation of trans identities across a range of media from the early 1990s until 2011. The first half of her chapter focuses on two films by Neil Jordan, *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), before moving on to discuss the drag performances of the Alternative Miss Ireland pageant. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque as well as a queer-theory-inflected discussion of gender as performance, she analyses the historical conflation of gender and nation within Irish cultural discourse in the light of these contemporary texts. Whilst Jordan's films largely displace non-traditional gender roles beyond the borders of a hegemonic Irish identity, she claims, the Alternative Miss Ireland pageant situates queer performance at the heart of contemporary political and economic debates. The spatial terms in which these issues are conceptualized here become central to Allison MacLeod's analysis of urban spaces in Irish cinema of the last 20 years. Focusing particularly on two films from the early 2000s, *Cowboys and Angels* (David Gleeson, 2003) and *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 2002), she argues that these films draw on a utopian urban discourse that associates the city with sexual liberalism and an absence of prejudice. Despite the increased visibility which these films offer to non-hetero sexual identities, however, MacLeod argues that their representational strategies are structured around spatial systems of exclusion and belonging which ultimately fail to challenge the overwhelming heteronormativity of Irish public discourse.

Noel McLoughlin and Martin McLoone's study of the Irish boy band emphasizes that challenges to dominant discourses around gender and sexuality can come from the most unlikely of sources, including the often critically derided genre of manufactured pop. Their chapter is the first of three that examine the very differing functionings of Irish masculinity within a variety of musical contexts. McLaughlin and McLoone, extending the analysis in their own recent monograph on rock and popular music in Ireland,⁶ argue that the deliberately derivative music and performance styles of bands such as Boyzone challenges the 'organic' masculinity of the Irish rock group. Although careful not to establish a reductive dichotomy which posits the boy band as the progressive alternative to rock's unreconstructed males, they argue that the culture of commercial pop within Ireland has offered alternatives to long-standing ideas of authentic musical masculinity. Their analysis offers an intriguing counterpoint to that of Sean Campbell, whose

discussion of second-generation Irish musicians in England reminds us of the lingering cultural and commercial value of an unreconstructed Irish masculinity. Campbell traces the shift from musicians of Irish descent such as Boy George and Morrissey, whose pop personas were inherently bound up with a playful androgyny, to the emergence of a more traditional Irish-infused musical masculinity in the 1990s through bands such as Oasis. He connects the particular mode of Irish ethnicity that these bands drew upon in their public pronouncements to the wider phenomenon of 'lad culture' which became prevalent in Britain at that time. Unlike the earlier performers he discusses, the Irishness of Oasis was repeatedly foregrounded in the media, thereby reaffirming a highly conventional image of Irish masculinity. Finally, Méabh Ní Fhuartháin examines the complex gender and cultural iconography surrounding singer Joe Dolan – a hugely popular figure within Ireland, though largely unknown beyond it before his death. As one of the few remaining figures of the showband era in Irish popular music, Dolan embodied memories of more innocent (as well as repressed) attitudes to sexuality in Irish life and, through a successful self-reinvention in the 1990s, managed to capitalize on such ambivalences to remain an enduring and unique figure in Irish popular culture, whose career in total would span over 50 years.

Contemporary fiction and drama have long been touchstones of Irish cultural identity and central features in the development of Irish studies. Annabel Sheehan's analysis of Patrick McCabe's dark and complex 2006 novel *Winterwood* focuses on the 'dark and ravaged masculinity' of its central shape-shifting characters, who have great difficulty in reconciling their past with their present situations. For Sheehan, McCabe's novel is distinguished by a postmodern collapse in narrative (including gender) arising from the trauma of sexual abuse. The narrative's fractured form replicates a return of the repressed that results in the novel being not only among the most significant in McCabe's *oeuvre* (and a worthy companion to *The Butcher Boy*), but also one which builds on his earlier work in excavating a deep wound within the Irish psyche. In her discussion of the 2005 novel *Watermark* by Sean O'Reilly, Fiona McCann offers a reading of this lesser-known novel and writer informed by the theoretical concepts of *écriture féminine* and gynandricity. Foregoing a culture studies approach to gender, McCann's close reading of the text interrogates the credibility and point of view of this first-person narrative, arguing that in spite of its foregrounding of a feminine sexual voice by a contemporary male Irish author, the novel slips between erotic and pornographic modes of writing, thereby undermining any progressive reading.

Cormac O'Brien's wide-ranging discussion of the construction of masculinity in recent Irish theatre proceeds from a critique of a neoliberalist, post-feminist framing of gender which argues that 'The fantasy of "real" manhood is only ever one more purchase or one more misdemeanour away.' Summarizing recent critical discourses surrounding the contemporary 'crises of masculinity' within and beyond Ireland, O'Brien surveys recent Irish theatre's preoccupation with what he describes as 'new lad monologues' and suggests that for all their pretence to disruption of hegemonic practices, such monologues can be read as mechanisms of negotiation seeking to attain positions of domination. In his close reading of Marina Carr's *Marble* (2009), O'Brien develops the logic of the first part of his chapter in a discussion of the play's exploration of 'corporate warrior' crisis masculinity. He argues that, while this shares with the 'new lad' a Darwinian neoliberal attitude to the accumulation of wealth, the corporate warrior is sanctioned by society and therefore not only defines the terms in which crisis is understood but ensures the continuation of his own hegemonic power. Finally, one of the more exciting and indeed radical approaches to the performance of gender and identity in recent Irish 'theatre' is considered by Miriam Haughton in her discussion of the site-specific performance *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012), devised by Anu Productions as part of their 'Monto Cycle.' Haughton describes the deeply unsettling experience of audience participation in this performance, developed from workshops within Dublin's inner city, and draws attention to the social critique it offers with an emphasis on the enduring marginality and exclusion suffered by the eponymous 'boys' of the title.

The five chapters in the final section address the representations of masculinity in film and television and reveal the multiple ways in which gendered bodies function to work through social shifts and tensions. Two chapters return to the complex functioning of maleness as a signifier for terrorism within films and television productions that address the history of violence in Northern Ireland. Both Emilie Pine and Sarah Edge point to the increased association of Northern Irish masculinity with victimhood in post-conflict film and television, with both writers connecting this to the needs of the peace process. Pine's chapter offers a detailed textual analysis of *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), which depicts the 1981 hunger strike through a highly stylized depiction of Bobby Sands' time in the Maze H-Blocks. Through the film's focus on images of bodily sacrifice, Pine argues, the director Steve McQueen undertakes 'a filmic version of decommissioning' which shifts attention from nationalist politics to the contemporary need for appropriate models

of male identity. Edge traces a similar need to offer a unifying model of redeemed masculinity in a series of advertisements encouraging the peace process which aired on Northern Irish television in the 1990s. Looking back from an era of power-sharing defined by the reconstructed masculinities of Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley, she tempers her earlier feminist critique of these male-focused advertisements with an acknowledgement of the work which they were doing to forge a viable masculinity for a post-conflict Northern Ireland. The focus of filmmakers south of the border, meanwhile, frequently mirrored this association of masculinity with victimhood, although here it was immigration, femininity, or simply the rigours of modern life that marginalized Irish men. Zélie Asava traces the attempts of male characters to assert their agency across three Irish feature films released in 2009 and marked by a sense of topicality and corresponding crises: *Trafficked*, *Savage* and *Ondine*. The first two are set in contemporary Dublin, while Neil Jordan's *Ondine* takes place in a quasi-mythical west Cork. Despite differences in theme and setting, all three films display a preoccupation with masculinities in states of indecision and instability within a newly multicultural Ireland, with each seeking various methods of remasculinization and expressing both regressive and utopian gender fantasies.

It is particularly pleasing to be able to include a chapter dealing with the fitful but frequently interesting drama output of Irish television, as Barry Monahan does in his examination of the 2005 RTÉ mini-series *Pure Mule*. Written by Eugene O'Brien (whose play *Eden* is itself a key masculinity text of the period), *Pure Mule* was a distinctive achievement in several regards which would be impossible to imagine in any other medium. The generally ignored space of its Irish midlands setting stood in contrast to the shiny metropolitan spaces of films like *About Adam*, but seemed entirely appropriate in a layered and largely damning portrait of rural Ireland emerging from the repressions of the Catholic Church into the repressions of Celtic Tiger orthodoxies of consumption and excess. Monahan's chapter pays particular attention to the central symbolic function of the housing estate under construction throughout the series, arguing that while it draws on the cinematic Western trope of a town under construction it also speaks of a pathologically unsettled masculinity caught between modes of commitment and escape.

The collection closes with a timely discussion by Diane Negra of the gendered terms in which responses to the recent economic crisis have been articulated. She argues that media responses to the economic collapse have overwhelmingly emphasized its impact on men, repeatedly conceptualizing it in terms of a crisis in masculinity. Thus while

the economic boom saw the media celebration of male risk-takers as the engine of the Irish economy, recession has seen this replaced by a concern that Irish men have become overly passive, feminized consumers. For Negra, this is consistent with a more widespread reassertion of traditional gender roles which she traces across a range of media, focusing in particular on the tropes of male mobility, and of an abiding femininity which provides succour to the anxious Irish male. As she states in her chapter, her analysis 'rests on a sense of urgency for critical studies in the humanities to generate theoretical and social accounts that keep pace with the rapid economic and social changes brought on by the recession.' By foregrounding the functioning of gender within economic and political discourse she reminds us to constantly be wary of apparently 'transparent' and 'common sense' discussions of the ways in which our society is structured.

Notes

1. Noel Whelan, 'What you'll need to be the next president: do you have it all? Style substance and empathy? Then you could be in the running to be Ireland's next First Citizen,' *Irish Times*, 4 September 2010, p. 12.
2. Gallagher's *Dragon's Den* profile: <http://www.rte.ie/tv/dragonsden/profile_sean.html>.
3. This was the infamous 'Twittergate' episode that took place on RTÉ's *Frontline* programme during the final presidential debate in October 2011. A tweet claimed that a man who had allegedly given Sean Gallagher a cheque worth €5000 for a Fianna Fáil fundraiser would appear at a Sinn Féin press conference the following day. At the time of the incident Gallagher had gone from being an outsider to frontrunner in the race, but the apparently covert association with Fianna Fáil entirely scuppered his campaign. The tweet later turned out to be from a bogus account.
4. Sean Brady, 'Review of Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen (eds), *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture*', in *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality*, 6 (2) (June 2012), 109–11.
5. Key texts include, Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen (eds), *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011).
6. Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone, *Rock and Popular Music in Ireland: Before and After U2* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), 231–52.

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Part I

Queering Irish Masculinity

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1

Clubs, Closets and Catwalks: GAA Stars and the Politics of Contemporary Irish Masculinity

Michael G. Cronin

In October 2009 Dónal Óg Cusack published his autobiography, *Come What May*. In the following weeks this event received exponentially greater coverage in the Irish media than would usually be accorded to a sports memoir. There were several salient reasons for this. Since 1999 Cusack had been goalkeeper with the Cork hurling team, one of the few teams considered capable of challenging the dominance of Kilkenny in the national championship; they had won the All-Ireland Final in Cusack's inaugural year and again in 2004 and 2005. But along with their success his team had also become noteworthy for their disputes with the governing board of the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) in Cork. The team had twice gone on strike to demand better conditions for players and to protest at what they saw as ineffective management. The second of these strikes, in the winter of 2008–9, had been particularly protracted and bitter, and Cusack, along with his colleague Seán Óg Ó hAilpin, emerged as the chief spokesperson for the players. This role augmented his ongoing advocacy for GAA players on a national level through the Gaelic Players Association (GPA), of which he is Chair. Hence Cusack had an unusually high profile, not only as a leading player, but also for his engagement in GAA politics. Nevertheless the publication of his book mainly generated such widespread interest, far beyond the usual confines of sports coverage, because he spoke publicly for the first time about being gay.

In December 2010 RTÉ broadcast an hour-long documentary charting a year in the life of Paul Galvin. Like Cusack, Galvin was a long-standing member of a highly successful GAA team; he made his first appearance as a county footballer with Kerry in 2003 and when the documentary was broadcast he had played in six successive All-Ireland Finals, of which Kerry had won four. Nevertheless his reputation was mixed.

Generally considered one of the outstanding footballers of his generation, his performances were integral to the success of this Kerry team; that was acknowledged by his elevation to captain for the 2008 season. However, Galvin was unable to actually lead his team onto the field of play for most of the championship that year as he was suspended for three months by the GAA disciplinary authorities following an incident where he knocked a notebook out of a referee's hand. These extremes of virtuosity and ignominy were captured by the documentary, *Galvinised*, which begins with Galvin being named Player of the Year in October 2009 and then receiving two lengthy suspensions for violently attacking opposing players during the 2010 season.¹ His aggression and volatility on the football field, along with the subsequent disruptions to his playing career, partly explain why the interest of the Irish media in Galvin exceeds that accorded to most other GAA players.² Strikingly, *Galvinised* takes this excessive media interest in Galvin as one of its main themes, while also being yet another instance of the same phenomenon. Likewise, in the documentary Galvin expressed his dismay at the media intrusion into his life while simultaneously demonstrating that he was actively expanding his media profile, modelling in fashion shoots and presenting a music programme on local radio. He also spoke at length about his interest in men's fashion, and about leaving his job as a schoolteacher to return to college as a student of fashion. In January 2011 Galvin began writing a weekly column on men's fashion for the *Irish Independent* newspaper.

There are clear similarities here: two works of life narrative by virtuosos but controversial GAA stars. However, the media response varied sharply in tone – heroic for Cusack, comic for Galvin – and offered quite different interpretations. For commentators, the meaning of Galvin's story resided solely in what it told us, or failed to tell us, about his life and was not seen to have any broader significance beyond that. This was an entirely individual drama, in which Galvin was either a flawed tragic hero struggling to control those psychic forces constantly threatening to undermine his talent, or a vain and foolish dandy, distracted from the real business of football by the vacuous glamour of media and fashion.³ By contrast, Cusack's story was seen to have powerful reverberations beyond his own life. He was an exemplary figure, whose honesty and courage offered inspiration to other sportspeople and encouragement to queer youth. His coming-out raised challenges for institutions like the GAA, while encouraging reflection on the condition of contemporary Ireland.⁴ Journalists repeatedly cited two incidents from the book to illustrate the persistence of homophobic attitudes: the response

of Dónal Cusack senior to hearing his son was gay and a quite shocking incident where a spectator had used a megaphone to hurl abuse at Cusack during a game. The reiterated use of these two figures identified homophobia with minorities (older people struggling with new cultural norms; dysfunctional and disturbed individuals) and as a problem that needed to be managed – while also helpfully locating homophobia elsewhere, far from the worldview of the writer. Moreover, in this view, while Cusack's story demonstrated the challenges that confronted lesbians and gay men in Ireland and in sport, the *publication* of his story demonstrated the degree to which questions of gender and sexual identity had been progressively sorted out in Irish society over the last few decades. Thus, for Terry Prone, writing in the *Evening Herald*, the generally positive response to Cusack's coming-out demonstrated the successful transformation in attitudes towards sexuality that had taken place in Ireland in the last decades of the twentieth century. Prone implies that this was a process entirely driven by the media and she makes no mention of social movements – unsurprising perhaps given her profession as a PR consultant. She concludes that the proof of this progressive transformation is that Irish people are now 'unshockable' by such revelations and are focused instead on economic matters.⁵ This progressive narrative also took on a geo-temporal dimension, in which Ireland was moving from a position of backwardness closer to the norm; in a further variant on this, rural Ireland, and the cultural complex for which 'GAA' stands as a metonym, was also slowly moving closer to a metropolitan norm of civility.⁶

Clearly one should not underestimate the positive significance of Cusack's story; the narrative of personal integrity and communal solidarity, as well as the performative effect of Cusack's public persona as an openly gay GAA star – offering others the possibility to reimagine their lives, expanding the scope for freedom and challenging received ideas. Cusack's willingness to deploy that public persona for progressive political ends was demonstrated by his participation in a campaign against homophobic bullying in schools in April 2012.⁷ Nevertheless, as this chapter will argue, Cusack's memoir demonstrates the degree to which the modern sex-gender system in early twenty-first-century Ireland is far from settled, but remains deeply unstable and contradictory. This is inevitable, since that sex-gender system is part of the structure of capitalism – and we can hardly believe that contemporary Ireland has 'progressed' beyond capitalism and its periodic crises. Reading them together, we can approach Cusack's memoir and Galvin's film as narratives mapping the individual subject's negotiation of hegemonic