ESSAY

shifting ground

The 1950s was a time of change in Ireland, as visual artists, writers and designers attempted to forge a new cultural identity against a backdrop of economic hardship and ingrained conservatism. *AIDAN DUNNE* looks the decade when Modernism began to make its mark ...

Brian O'Doherty, who moved to the United States in 1958, rather bleakly described the 1950s as "a dark time" for visual culture in Ireland, an opinion that accords with Roy Foster's view that the country was to a large extent "obdurately pre-modernist" at mid 20th century.

Yet the ground was shifting. The decade was bounded by the rejection of Noel Browne's Mother and Child Scheme at the beginning and the dawning of the Lemass era, with the departure of de Valera to the Phoenix Park, at the other. Browne's attempt to introduce state healthcare in 1950 was vigorously opposed by the Catholic church and the more conservative elements of Irish society, even extending to his fellow ministers in government and his party leader, Seán MacBride, who demanded his resignation.

If the church's victory seemed to reassert de Valera's vision of a conservative, Catholic, united Ireland, that was not quite the case. The Catholic hierarchy's opposition to progressive social legislation engendered doubt and criticism among a growing minority of the congregation. Economic nationalism had failed and cultural nationalism was not tenable. Reunification was pushed down the political agenda by more immediate practical concerns. Approximately one eighth of the population was forced to emigrate in the course of the 1950s, a proportion nudging close to the birth rate. By mid-decade it was widely accepted that inward investment was the only way to ensure economic development. A way forward was strategically formulated by the relatively young Secretary to the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker, and the famous white paper, Programme for Economic Expansion, was published in 1958.

In his book *An Age of Innocence*, Brian Fallon challenges the received opinion that the 1950s can be written off as a stagnant decade in Irish cultural history. As with the shift in economic thinking, and not unrelated to it, the project of cultural modernisation largely has its basis in events during the decade, he argues. Nor was Ireland, or perhaps more precisely Dublin, quite the cultural backwater it is often described as being. It is true that money and employment were scarce. Many artists and writers moved abroad, usually to London, and not purely for economic reasons. Still, as he points out, there was cultural life in Ireland. The Wexford Opera, the Cork Film and the Dublin Theatre festivals were all established during the decade.

Nevill Johnson's photographs of Dublin in 1952 reveal poverty and a striking lack of industrial and commercial activity but also a formidable, relatively unspoiled architectural character. Busaras, a landmark modernist building designed by Michael Scott's firm (largely by Wilfred Cantwell, it is now generally accepted), and a huge undertaking, was completed in 1953, the year in which Scott and Louis le Brocquy founded the Signa Design consultancy, loosely based on the co-operative model of the Magnum photographic agency. The aim was to improve design standards and it was quite effective. Under its auspices, Patrick Scott designed the livery for CIE's rolling stock, for example. Though working as an architect, Pat Scott was developing as a painter would eventually devote himself full-time to painting. The fashion designer Sybil Connolly, who managed to match traditional Irish fabrics with contemporary couture, established her international profile.

Louis le Brocquy was actually based in London, as was William Scott and, after attracting considerable acclaim in Dublin, Patrick Swift, a talented painter whose early work had an affinity with Lucian Freud, followed suit. Throughout the 1950s, le Brocquy's painting, increasingly concentrated on isolated presences, was attuned to the mood of existential anxiety prompted by the nuclear threat associated with the Cold War. William Scott continually refined his minimalist aesthetic.

Patrick Collins and Camille Souter emerged as practitioners of a mode of abstracted landscape painting, lyrical but also tough and, perhaps surprisingly, quite contemporary in feeling. Sean McSweeney, working in a comparable vein, was described, not that accurately, as a successor to Yeats. Barrie Cooke arrived around 1955 and was immediately at home in the dark, wet heart of rural Ireland, just as Tony O'Malley discovered St. Ives in Cornwall and quickly saw it as a way escaping local provincialism. Edward Maguire, whose impeccable, precise realism was influenced by Freud, was the outstanding Irish portrait painter. Patrick Hennessy, also influenced by Freud, remained throughout his career an interesting outsider.

A diverse, generally adventurous group of Northern artists included the stylistic chameleon Colin Middleton, John Luke, Gerard Dillon, Daniel O'Neill, George Campbell (who gravitated towards Spain) and Arthur Armstrong. By the end of the decade the outstanding landscape watercolourist T.P. Flanagan had found his mature style, and Basil Blackshaw was doing impressive work. F.E. McWilliam, who had associations with surrealism, was a remarkably adept sculptor.

Anthony Cronin's *Dead As Doornails* vividly describes the often frenetic, frustrating and frustrated quality of literary Dublin. What is striking is the almost underground – literally in the case of the basement warren of the 'Catacombs' – nature of literary life, as well as the role of alcohol. Even given the paucity of resources of the times, Liam Miller established the Dolmen Press in 1951, paving the way for a generation of poets and artists. If the 1950s were sluggish in terms of theatre, the advent of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot* was staged in Dublin in 1956, shortly after its London premiere) was of major significance.

While the establishment of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Eireann early in the decade did much to preserve and encourage traditional music, Seán Ó Riada's suite for George Morrison's *Mise Éire* auspiciously managed to link old and new in a popular and influential way. Fallon's argument, that much of the cultural credit that we assign to the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland should by right be directed to those who did the groundwork in the 1950s, has a lot going for it. ■

OPPOSITE: Patrick Hennessy, *Boy and Seagull*, c.1954. Oil on canvas. Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art.