

The Committee on Evil Literature by James Bacon

The Committee on Evil Literature was set up in by the Free State government of Ireland in 1926. Kevin O'Higgins, the Minister for Justice, seemed to think that the existing obscenity laws were good enough in 1925, but in a Free Ireland this was not at all acceptable in some quarters, that the government should not interfere with people's freedoms, and he came under huge pressure.

Sure enough, a committee of two religious and three laymen was formed to consider "whether it is necessary or advisable in the interest of the public morality to extend the existing powers of the State to prohibit or restrict the sale and circulation of printed matter".

This was The Committee on Evil Literature. As one might expect, they decided that the existing laws were substandard and that the state had a duty to enforce controls on "morally corrupting" literature. And so was formed the Censorship Board. They got straight to it, and banned books by Marie Stopes and Aldous Huxley; it didn't stop and Brave New World amongst a raft of others was banned in 1932. Hemingway's Farewell to Arms was banned in 1939 and Brendan Behan's Borstal Boy was banned in 1956.

On the 18th of November 1942, some seventy years ago, in the Irish Upper House, Seanad Éireann, Sir John Keane put forward a motion on the Censorship of Publications, looking for the Censorship Board to be reconstituted due to a loss of confidence on the part of the public. He made much mention of three books which "in my opinion, have been improperly banned."

Hilariously, the senator quoted from the books, and Senator Professor Magennis suggested "to the Chairman that before Senator Sir John Keane reads the remainder of the passage an instruction should be given to the official reporters not to record it. Otherwise, we shall have some of the vilest obscenity in our records, and the Official Reports can be bought for a few pence."

And so, it was recorded thus: [Here the Senator quoted from the book.] Interesting, it being 1942, is the comment from Sir John Keane: "If we are going to be put under what I suggest is a literary Gestapo, we are entitled to know the facts."

And so in 1954, the Irish Censorship of Publications Board banned Live and Let Die under the Censorship of Publications Acts of 1929 and 1946. I asked my dad about the books, as I vividly recall a row of Pan paperbac on his bookshelf in his bedroom, the uniformity of the covers about the books and getting them.

He said: "I loved them. Couldn't put them down. Like many, I started reading them after the first film - Dr No - but am sure I read all the others before the films. One of them (not sure which) was allegedly banned because Fleming described the Irish language announcement at Shannon as rigmarole. At the time there was a heavy 'Irish' thing (like compulsory pass to get in your inter and Leaving Cert) and the suggestion was that some Minister took it very badly."

"Casino Royale was allegedly banned because of the inclusion of sex. Wasn't in any copy I ever read! Always a mystery to me why it was banned. "The Spy who Loved Me was also banned because of sex. (When in University he gave his girlfriend a jab on the floor of a box in the cinema but it wasn't very explicit.)"

"Things were very repressed back then. All that was needed was, as I said some overzealous Catholic to send a book in and it would probably be banne automatically."

"The register of prohibited publications had the same size print as a telephone directory but was bigger."

Now, this led me to make some investigations and *Live and Let Die* was indeed banned. It was published on the 5th of April 1954 and by the 8th of May 1954, it was banned in Ireland. *Diamonds are Forever* did have a few derogatory lines about a layover in Shannon.

“...the Stratocruiser trundled towards the unloading bay. Steak and champagne for dinner, the wonderful goblet of hot coffee laced with Irish Whiskey and topped with half an inch of thick cream”
“A glance at the junk in the airport shops, the ‘Irish Horn Rosaries’, the ‘Bog Irish Harp’. And the ‘Brass Leprechauns’, all at \$1.50, and the ghastly ‘Irish Musical Cottage’ at \$4, the furry, unwearable tweeds and the dainty Irish linen dollies and cocktail napkins. “And the the Irish rigmarole coming over the loudspeaker in which only the words ‘BOAC’ and ‘New York’ were comprehensible.”

The Spy Who Loved Me came into some serious trouble as there were a number of harsh passages, and although Dad mentions that sex may have been the cause, there were also passages about rape and abortion. “All women love semi-rape. They love to be taken. It was his sweet brutality against my bruised body that had made his act of love so piercingly beautiful.”

“The business of my abortion, not to mince words, was good training for my new role...” “...It was as mentally distressing but as physically painless as I expected...”

This would probably have been viewed as extremely obscene, given family planning material, let alone information on abortion was totally unacceptable and banned.

In the course of the 20th century, some 12,491 works were banned in Ireland, and over 1,000 in the bumper year of 1954 alone. Since the 1967 Act, there is a 12-year rule for banning books and so since the last selection of books to be banned was in 1998, in 2010 there were only a handful books left on the banned book list, all of which were exempt from the rule and are still banned, which deal with birth control or abortion.

In 2012, there are some 279 periodicals banned in Ireland, including *True Detective Stories*. In recent times, it is the lack of complaints and submissions rather than the board’s heavy handed approach which has sounded the end, with the last reported book that was referred to the board being *Guantanamo Jihad* by Niall De Souza, and it wasn’t banned. Irish author Frank O’Connor spoke eloquently on the matter to the Trinity College Historical Society during a debate on Censorship on February 14th, 1962.

The *Dubliner* No.2 from March, 1962 reprinted his words thusly;

“But to me the most awful thing about the censorship is the way it perpetuates the negative attitude we oppose to every manifestation of intellect and scholarship. We can find no better employment for two brilliant judges of our High Court than a task that could be adequately performed by a policeman with a bit of intelligence.”

“We have a Censorship Board and a Censorship Appeals Board, but we have no such thing as a Society for the encouragement of Irish literature, over which Mr Justice Haugh or Mr Justice Conroy might preside with honour to himself and honour to his country.”

“We have a Censorship Board but we have no publishers. We have a great literature, published by Englishmen and Americans, and, thanks to our censors, ninety-nine per cent of it is out of print and unobtainable, so that, as I have said before, we have brought up a generation which knows nothing of its own country, or its own literature. Be as moral as you please, have all the censorships

you think necessary, but be positive about it. Don't merely ban books, publish them.”

Some Links;

Senead debate: <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/S/0027/S.0027.194211180006.html>

List of publications banned in Ireland today

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/JELR/Register%20of%20Prohibited%20Publications%202010.pdf/Files/Register%20of%20Prohibited%20Publications%202010.pdf>