



Book Review – *Powering the Nation:*

***Images of the Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of Ireland*, by Sorcha O’Brien.**

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In his book *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams refers to the relationship between cultural experience and the recording of that experience as “the culture of the selective tradition”, which commences when those living the experience of culture select certain artistic expressions, documentary and archival evidence that embody the overall collective experiences of that time (pp. 69–71). Whenever one attempts to determine the experience of culture at a particular period and time, one’s distance from the lived experience means that any analysis of that culture engages in this process of “selective tradition” (pp. 71–72). In *Powering the Nation*, Sorcha O’Brien engages in this process through her presentation and analysis of the Irish state’s utilisation of Celtic imagery and ideology in its portrayal of the Shannon Scheme as both modern and yet in line with the pre-industrial tradition of Irish life. O’Brien situates the development of the Shannon Scheme firmly in the context of the nineteen-twenties free market Irish Society, embracing modernisation as it rebuilt itself following the struggle for independence. Her useful application of the work of Clifford Geertz (2000), among others, suggests that the roots of social change and modernisation in Ireland are found long before the nineteen-sixties, the decade with which it is traditionally associated. In that context, the developments narrated in this book appear as a critical stage on the continuum of Irish modernisation.

O’Brien makes good use of primary documents to illustrate both the technical and cultural story of the electrification of Ireland. The author’s expertise in design history is evident through clear and captivating writing that explores its subject from the perspective of theory, technical graphics, photography, advertising, painting, philately and the popular imagery of postcards and cigarette cards. Through this exploration, O’Brien offers both the academic and general reader a snapshot of a developing nation that was open to international influence in its pursuit to cultivate infrastructure consistent with its European trade partners. This dynamic is visible in O’Brien’s discussion of the tension between “Technik” and

“Kultur”, which brings to life a variety of historical examples of the application of German architecture to the design of the Ardnacrusha power plant (pp. 41–62).

The skilful use of primary documents throughout includes technical drawings which serve to outline the power structure, disagreements and debates that engulfed those working on the scheme, thus providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of the obstacles faced by its designers, builders and backers. O’Brien’s discussion of the influence of Gaspard Monge on the techniques utilised by both sets of engineers and architects illustrates the ideological power struggle between Professor Frank Sharman Rishworth, on behalf of the Shannon scheme, and the Siemens architects (pp. 64–81). These professional tensions emerge in the author’s account of negotiations around local contextual issues relating to rooves and building structure, the detailing of which brings what could have been an esoteric technical discussion about building plans into a fuller exploration of the professional dynamics within the international design team overseeing the project.

A topic that O’Brien continually revisits is the government’s presentation of the Shannon scheme as a wholly Irish project, despite its dependence on German expertise and labour. This elision is quite evident in the discussion of the marketing strategies employed by the newly founded ESB in the late nineteen-twenties. Directed at farming, industry and the home and combining “Neo-Celtic imagery” with the progression of industrial development, this marketing campaign aimed to attract all sectors of Irish society as customers of the first Irish semi-state company (pp. 133–140). One such image features 90,000 horses driven by a Graeco-Roman styled charioteer, which, O’Brien suggests, combines the horsepower of electricity with “allegorical heroes” to evoke an image of a state that was progressively modern yet grounded in tradition (pp. 146–147).

Such imagery provides an interesting locus for O’Brien’s exploration of the wider conversations around the Shannon Scheme. She connects this imagery to the fear of unemployment that may have emerged from the perception that the industrial benefits of electricity had the potential to replace unskilled workers. Adverts which sought to allay such fears depicted, for example, the American labourer at the Ford motor factory whose life was radically and positively changed by the introduction of electricity into the workplace (pp. 134–140). The exploration of the ESB advertisements demonstrates not only the gradual transition taking place in the traditionally rural nation, but the means by which this transition was directed and the fears which the prospect of an industrialising state provoked. O’Brien notes that the Shannon scheme itself employed not only large numbers of semi-skilled workers but up to 5,000 unskilled workers on the construction of the infrastructure alone (pp. 145–147).

One of the most fascinating aspects of O'Brien's book is how photographs are used to tell the story of the Shannon scheme. Chapters four, five and seven discuss the use of photography in recording the official and unofficial account of the development of the Ardnacrusha power station and its societal impact. These photographs detail the living conditions and social bonds that Irish and German workers, living on site, experienced and formed. Photographs taken by Otto Rampf, a German worker, enabled his family in Germany to share his experience of working on the Shannon Scheme and allow us a glimpse of a worksite decidedly 'messier' than its depiction in the official imager (p. 118). In O'Brien's opinion, these photographs provided "texture and depth to the Shannon Scheme, personalising it and allowing to play a background role in the personal narrative of a life, something that an official photograph is unable to do" (p. 119).

The promotion by the Irish Tourist Board of the Shannon Scheme construction site as a tourist destination is an intriguing part of the story. As well as the official photographs used to advertise the site, O'Brien explores the use of photography by general visitors at various stages of its construction. The normalisation of this tourism trend led to the Shannon scheme becoming "a national monument, a place to which it was worthwhile making a pilgrimage, like the Rock of Cashel, the lakes of Killarney or other spots on the tourist trail of Ireland" (p. 151). The exploration of the use of photography at the Shannon scheme doubles as an account of the popularity of "amateur photography... in Ireland during the early twentieth century" (p. 158).

O'Brien explores the 'legitimation' of the Shannon scheme through the work of Sean Keating, George Atkinson and Brigid O'Brien Ganly, who painted the construction of the power plant throughout the nineteen-twenties. The context of each artist's work on the scheme is the "variety of styles and priorities of the Irish art world of the time" and the issues that surrounded them (p. 193). Their allegories, landscapes, prints and watercolours of the construction process, with the focus moving from the workers to the mechanisation of their work, illustrate the modernisation process underway within Irish society.

As an early act of the nascent Free State, the Shannon Scheme stands out as an important instance of cultural collaboration and national exchange. The images examined in O'Brien's book are examples of the lived and recorded culture of modernisation that eventually became part of the selective tradition of both the Siemens and ESB companies (pp. 113–126). This process of selective tradition is expressive of a society's "contemporary system of interests and values" which is dynamically engaged in "continual selection and interpretation" (Williams 1961, p.72). Culture, it appears, is an intrinsic union of the contemporary and the historical. Consequently, the documents, letters,

photographs, paintings and plans discussed in this book remind the reader that, in the experience of contemporary culture, the past is always present.

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