

Tales of Times Not So Past

When the current recession first loomed just over two years ago, the general consensus by those of a certain age was that it was nothing compared to the dark days of the 70s and 80s. Whether this consensus still holds credence or not is somewhat irrelevant but it does point to the fact that emigration, unemployment, ineffective public services, inept politicians and difficult times have been with us before and will be again, and whether the recession suffered by the country between 1974 and 1990 was tougher than what we are undergoing today is a moot point.

It is nonetheless helpful and interesting to revisit those years as it allows one, especially those of us who lived through them, a useful perspective that helps to think outside the box. The television series 'Reeling in the Years' gave us a flavour of them but it is a necessarily fleeting visit. Eamonn Sweeney's new book *Down Down Deeper and Down: Ireland in the 70s and 80s* published by Gill and Macmillan allows us an extended visit to an Ireland that had just become part of what was then The Common Market, an Ireland that found itself in the global spotlight for the first time and an Ireland that was finally being dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th Century. Curiously, the structure of the book vaguely replicates that of the *Reeling in the Years* programmes in that each chapter focuses on one year, the first being entitled 'A boot up the transom: 1973', the last 'Live at the witch trials: 1985' and each one starting in January and finishing in December. The first sentence of the book marks what was possibly – certainly in terms of the present crisis – the most important act of the Irish State since Independence: 'On New Year's Day 1973, Seán Keenan, Ireland's Permanent Representative of the European Economic Community in Brussels, handed over a letter assenting to the changes in the Treaty of Rome that brought the country into the Common market to André Dubois, Director of Foreign Affairs at the EEC's Secretariat-General.' Some 350 pages later we are told in the final paragraph of the book that the year 1985 closed with 'an act of political creativity that heralded the end of an era. On 21 December, Desmond O'Malley took the plunge and, accompanied by his former Fianna Fáil colleague, Mary Harney, a former member of Fine Gael, Michael McDowell, Paul Mackay and Brigid Teefy, announced the formation of a new political party, The Progressive Democrats. Irish politics would never be quite the same again.' Between these two sentences is a fascinating narrative that is as intriguing as it is absorbing. Sweeney brings us down the corridors of power with ease and equanimity and although the reader is always conscious of his empathy towards the victims of the many tragedies that happened and were allowed to happen during the turbulent period, one cannot help noticing the gleam of humour as he describes the anomalies of many leading politicians of the time from Red Ritchie to Garret the Good to the Gubu Roi as they struggled to deal with the nascent subcultures that changing the country's ethos. Eamonn Sweeney's 'Down Down and Deeper Down' is a fascinating account of one of the more turbulent periods of modern Irish history and is well worth a visit.