

# Censorship in Eire

BY HANNAH SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON

**A**mericans, I found, during a recent visit to U. S. A., were much puzzled by the vagaries of our Irish censorship board and its odd manner of behaving. So, when I got back, I gathered up a number of facts concerning it, in the hope of being able to clarify the situation.

Under the British régime, that is, before the setting up of the Free State (now rechristened "Eire," but still covering only twenty-six out of thirty-two counties of Ireland) we came under the British censor's rule as far as books went. We never had in Ireland, by some curious oversight, a censorship of the stage—nor have we one now, though we have a specially appointed Irish censor of films, who in turn may be appealed against to a higher tribunal. Shaw's "Blanco Posnet," banned by the English Lord Chancellor, was proudly produced by the Abbey Theatre. Under the British censorship came Joyce's "Ulysses," for instance, and Radclyffe Hall's "Well of Loneliness"—this was a matter in the domain of morals and therefore a police affair. In Northern Ireland still (that is the Six-County area) this is what prevails and there they show visitors proudly in shop windows books "banned in the Free State." Our Censor Board consists of five men—of whom four are Catholics—two from the National University, one from the Dublin, i.e., T.C.D., with a Catholic clergyman for chairman. It is curious to find the Protestant University (founded by Queen Elizabeth) lending itself to what is virtually a Catholic censorship. The formula governing these censors is to prohibit books "whose general tendency is indecent." Books on sex, dealing with marriage problems or with birth control, are similarly banned, while weeklies like the *New Leader* that merely carry birth control advertisements or even announcements of birth control discussions are also banned.

How are books banned? First, a public informer reports to the Board that a certain book is objectionable. The book has to be purchased by the informer and sent to the Board. But, before it reaches the members, a Civil Servant, immune against corruption presumably, is expected to note and blue pencil certain offending passages. Then the Board has to read and report—probably the members divide up the books for reading, otherwise their task would be too onerous. (The members act in a purely honorary capacity, by the way.) Then a majority decision decides the fate of the book in question, and there is no appeal against their decision. It will be seen that the process is lengthy, slow, and extremely inefficient. The Board is entirely in the hands of these picked persons with a nose for the unpleasant. It often takes two or three years for a book to be pounced on—in many recent cases the volumes had actually been issued in the Penguin 6d. edition before being discovered. ("Fontamara" is

a case in point.) It also means that often high-brow books are marked down because a particular "informer" reads these rather than popular novels. A case in point is Aldous Huxley's "Point Counter Point." Hervey Allen's "Anthony Adverse" was likewise marked down, but later, to complicate matters, the motion picture version successfully passed the film censor, and was shown widely.

We are quite international in our banning; Mikhail Sholokhov's "And Quiet Flows the Don," Stefan Zweig's "Amok," Erskine Caldwell's "American Earth," Sinclair Lewis's "Ann Vickers," Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," Somerset Maugham's "Cakes and Ale," Colette's "Chéri," Ethel Mannin's "Common Sense and the Child," Mae West's "Constant Sinner," Signe Toksvig's "Eve's Doctor," Francis Hackett's "Green Lion," Vera Brittain's "Honourable Estate," Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms," are a fairly typical list. The unusual, the daring, any criticism of the Catholic Church generally, or of individual clerics, indictment of marriage, sex, hygiene, medical views on birth control, sex education for the young, all these are marked down, Marie Stopes, stock, lock and barrel, and writers like Bertrand Russell ("Marriage and Morals") and Havelock Ellis ("Essays of Love and Virtue") as well as Jules Romains's "Men of Good Will" are lumped together under the absurd formula "in general tendency indecent." Another strange feature is the fact that only *English* versions are banned—you may apparently read with impunity the original German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian.

Irish writers suffer heavily—Sean O'Faoláin, Liam O'Flaherty, Kate O'Brien, Austin Clarke, have had one or more books censored on a principle that would certainly ban Shakespeare, the Bible, Goethe's "Faust," and Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables," were these writers alive today. Dead masterpieces have not come in under the ban, for some unknown reason. Recently more and more American books are being "discovered" by the common informer, as his reading widens—some of these very poor stuff, some masterpieces. And we, the general readers, have usually read any that are worth while long before the ban falls.

Among the most recent books banned are Eric Linklater's "Impregnable Women," Elmer Rice's "Imperial City," Fannie Hurst's "Back Street," Louis Paul's "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," George Schwarz's "Almost Forgotten Germany," "The Way to Happy Marriage" (by a Workaday Mother). About one thousand books have been censored since the setting up of the Board under the Censorship Act, in 1929, nearly ten years ago.

Lately the machinery has, however, slowed down. Of course, there is "book-legging," as A. E. predicted there would be. Most readers belonging to circulating libraries and *au courant* with reviews, have already anticipated the censors and are rarely caught napping. Then, if you

have acquired a book before the axe falls, you pass it dutifully on to your friends and go up in their esteem. Or you get it when you are next in London or Belfast or Paris or New York. And there are other ways still of circumventing our Comstocks that I may not tell, lest I, too, play an informer's thankless role. Many are the yarns told of how censors are fooled. After all, we Irish have a long and honorable tradition in law-breaking and law-flouting. For all that, the Censorship Board is a blot on the vaunted freedom Eire has won, an ironic development, illustrating man's proneness to chain up freedom. But the censors answer no criticism and, short of bringing them into court, there would seem to be no way of bringing them to book. And it is highly doubtful that any court in Eire would have the nerve to find their ban unjustified. And so the vicious circle is complete—and only a martyr can break it by openly breaking the law and defying the consequence. We have had many martyrs for many causes in Ireland, but none, so far, for literature.

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## In the White Navy

**SURVIVAL: THROUGH WAR AND REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA.** By D. Fedotoff White. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by VERA MICHELES DEAN

**M**R. WHITE, now associated with the Cunard Steamship Company in Philadelphia, served in the Russian navy before and during the war—when he came on a special mission to the United States—and voluntarily returned from England to Siberia to fight in the ranks of Kolchak's White army against the Bolsheviks. Imprisoned by the Reds for his participation in guerrilla warfare, he was eventually released, worked for a while in a government department in Moscow, and in 1921, feeling he could not strike roots in the Soviet state, made his escape into Finland.

Mr. White's memoirs are interesting chiefly for the picture they give of a professional officer, unswervingly loyal to his code of duty and patriotism, and reluctant to yield to the pressure of revolutionary masses in March, 1917, when he was stationed at the port of Reval. The author appears to have had genuine affection for the sailors who served under his orders, and who dramatically came to his aid on his release from a Siberian prison. Nor did he, like so many other White sympathizers, have any illusions regarding the possibility of organizing effective resistance to the Bolsheviks, who drew their strength from the desire of the masses for land, bread, and peace. But he contends that the young officers and university students who, like himself, "bore the brunt of fighting against Trotzki's legions," were united by "the desire to overthrow a government which they did not consider representative of the nation, which was subservient to Germany, and was working against the best interests and the historic national ideals of the country."

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