

Book Review

by Roslyn Fuller

Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland

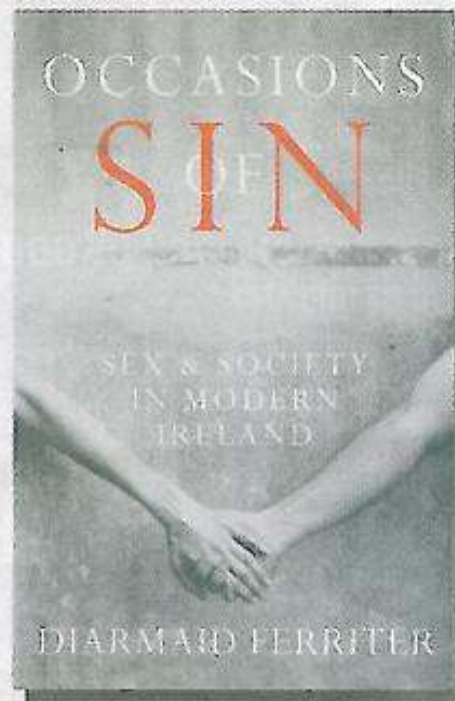
By Diarmaid Ferriter
(*Serpent's Tail*)

If Irish attitudes towards all things sexual make you feel like you're groping in the dark – pun most definitely intended – then this book is for you. And though it may not completely dissipate your confusion, it will at least convince you that your bewilderment is founded on well-researched hard facts.

Much of the book, which covers the island of Ireland over an impressive 160 years of history, revolves around five main themes: sexual abuse (clerical and otherwise), paternalism/feminism, family planning, venereal disease and gay/lesbian life and activism – although sub-themes such as emigration (particularly to England) and State censorship also make regular appearances.

The author takes an academic approach to these difficult subjects with a commendable detachment, presenting just the facts and never falling into lurid sensationalism.

But *Occasions of Sin* is still accessibly written and an effortless read, packing context and statistics around the original testimony from primary



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sources.

Even so, the accuracy of the work's main premise – that sexuality in Ireland has always been more varied and less controlled than the powers that were would have had us believe – is difficult for me to assess.

For those coming to it from a more liberal background, the defiance intrinsic to smuggling condoms into Ireland, for example, might escape one all too easily.

But as a 'new arrival', I'm happy to say that, thanks to this book, my days of sitting clueless at dinner parties while Irish friends discuss Archbishop McQuaid, the abortion and divorce referenda, 'Irish guilt' and any number of other issues are well and truly over.

At the same time, the generous level of first-hand testimony and official correspondence included on issues such as illegitimate children, marriage and extramarital affairs has given me a better understanding of general attitudes among Irish society.

While it seems mildly inappropriate to describe a book that deals with such dark themes as fascinating, *Occasions of Sin* is absolutely fascinating and an excellently executed resource shedding light on what are often shrouded issues.



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller *ISAK*.

More information about the Canadian, her work and the

Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com