



stitching up the tailor

The background to Eric Cross's controversial book *The Tailor and Ansty*, in which the local Garda played a cameo role, is sketched here by GERARD LOVETT



In the first half of the 20th century, in the townland of Garrynapeaka near picturesque Gougane Barra, about three miles west of the village of Ballygeary in West Cork, lived a quiet and harmless couple called Timothy Buckley (known to all as ‘The Tailor’) and his wife Anastasia (known as ‘Ansty’). They had two sons Paddy and Jackie. Their simple rural lifestyle was unremarkable for the time and no different from thousands of other couples eking out an existence in wartime rural Ireland. However their lives were changed forever and their names went down in history following the publication in 1942 of a book about them, called *The Tailor and Ansty*. The book written by Eric Cross was the subject of a three-day debate in the Seanad and was banned in 1943, but more on that later.

The Tailor had been apprenticed as a tailor in his younger days hence his nickname, and had one withered leg and moved around with the aid of a walking stick. Born in 1862, he was a native of Kilgarvan in Co. Kerry just over the mountains from Gougane Barra. He was the seventh son of a seventh son, although he never claimed to possess any magical powers. He had a modicum of education and was able to read and write, but his wife Ansty was completely illiterate. They lived in a small ‘two-up, two-down’ house on an acre of land in Garrynapeaka. In those days before radio and television, their home was an ‘open house’. There was always a welcome for visitors who called in the

evenings and those assembled there entertained each other with song and story, while Ansty kept them refreshed with ‘a hate of the tay’ or occasionally something stronger - though perhaps not always quite legal.

While the Tailor had travelled quite a bit throughout Ireland and Scotland in his younger days, Ansty had rarely left home and had little understanding of the world outside. To quote from the book: “Ansty’s world is very limited and personal. Bantry and Macroom come within the compass of it. Cork is a strain upon her imagination. Beyond Cork lie the rest of the world, and Heaven and Hell.” Fluent in both English and Irish, their English vocabulary was frequently peppered with Irish words and expressions, as is often the case with native Irish speakers.

A frequent visitor to their home during the war years was the writer Eric Cross who lived in a caravan in nearby Gougane Barra during the war years [1]. Though born in Newry, Co. Down, he was raised and educated in England and became a chemical engineer and an inventor. Cross was fascinated by the Tailor and his wife and began making notes of their conversations and sayings with the intention of writing a book about them. The Tailor and Ansty’s conversation was often crude and earthy with frequent ribald comments about sexual relations that no doubt were offensive to those of a sensitive disposition, but Cross thought their conversation was hilarious. The

1. According to local lore he was there to avoid the draft in wartime UK.



Ansty

Cork writer Frank O'Connor, in his introduction to the book, explains that this earthiness was quite normal in the Irish-speaking Ireland of previous centuries and that it was only when English became widely spoken and we became more 'respectable' that we became more puritanical in outlook. Cross did not speak Irish and as a result he felt he was missing out on some of the best of the Tailor's sayings. [2]

Ansty's comments about her husband could be withering, though he took little notice of them. For example "Wisha! When I got up this morning, very early entirely, to let out the cow, and himself still shno-o-o-ring away in the bed like an ould pig, or a gentleman." Or another example – "Hmph! You – sitting there with your bottom in the ashes discussing 'feelosophy' and the rain slashin' in at the door!"

On meeting a stranger, Ansty lost no time in establishing whether he was married and if so how many children he had. If the figure did not come up to scratch Ansty would quickly offer him 'the loan of my *stahl's* [3] breeches'. When a passer by was invited in for 'a hate of the tay', which was always refused by those who knew her she would always retort: "Well scratch your bottom then!"

On another occasion they had an exchange on the subject of marriage. The Tailor offered his opinion on the subject as follows:

"Marriage is a strange thing when you come to look at it rightly. First off a man is clean mad to get married, and then when he is married he wonders what the hell happened to him."

"How well you got married yourself," asserts Ansty.

At last the Tailor pays attention to her. "*Thon amon dieul!* [4]. Was there ever a day since that I didn't regret it..."

A frequent visitor to the house and a very good friend of theirs was Garda Patrick Hoare who was stationed in nearby Ballingeary [5]. The couple were friendly with the local forces of law and order as is evident from the following passage from the book: "The Tailor is on as good terms with the local civic guards as he is with everyone else. You will often find one of them having 'a hate of the tea', or drying his clothes on a wet day before the Tailor's fire and rousing Ansty."

However, they were not averse from offering a tippie of poteen to particular friends, as Cross recorded: "*So if you are a particular friend you may be offered some day 'a sup from the bottle'. It is an involved procedure. The question is mooted and discussed with becks and nods between Ansty and the Tailor. Ansty plays the role of Hebe on this occasion. She goes out first to inspect the lay of the land, and returns to report.*"

"*Then she journeys out again and wanders round from place to place with the art of*

a cornercrake in a tour of deception. For the bottle is hidden somewhere within the acre or on the bounds of the acre. It is in some secret place in a hole in the wall, or the fence, or a crevice in the rocks, or between the drills of the potatoes. The mountains, which surround, are full of eyes and one can never be circumspect enough.

In another conversation with the author the Tailor related how when he "was standing to the cow" and a strange lady passed by when:

"I declare to God didn't she ask me if it was a bull or a cow..."

"A bull or a cow! Glory be! Asked if it was a bull or a cow!" echoes the chorus. [Ansty]

"And she wasn't a young woman either, and she was married by the ring on her finger..."

"Married – and asked "Was it a bull or a cow?" Ansty is stunned with amazement."

The lady's ignorance of the animal's gender left the Tailor aghast: "*Thon amon dieul!* But I swear that the world's gone to alabastery. It's queerer it's getting every day. Would you believe it that there are people nowadays who don't know wheat from barley and yet eat bread, and can't tell the difference between a



The Tailor's house now greatly modernised

2. For example in the book Cross frequently quotes Ansty as exclaiming "Ring-a-dora" when excited or exasperated. What she was actually saying was "*Ri na Glóire*" i.e. King of Heaven or lit. King of Glory.

3. i.e. '*stail*' – Irish word for stallion.

4. Should read "*D'anam don diabhal*" Lit. "Your soul to the devil.

5. Garda Patrick Hoare, Reg. No. 5030, native of Annascaul, Co. Kerry. Joined Civic Guards on 11 August 1923. Had service in Old IRA from 1917-1921. Retired on 14 March 1949.



“The learned Senators in Seanad Éireann became very animated about the book during a debate on the Censorship of Publications Bill in November and December 1942. War might have been raging in Europe with thousands dying daily, but the ladies and gentlemen in the Senate had weightier matters to consider. They were concerned about the morals of the Irish race and the untold damage that would be caused if this book were not banned.”

cock and a hen and eat eggs like this one, and her – ‘Is it a cow or a bull?’

“Ansty meantime goes about her chores and returns after a few minutes saying: ‘Wisha! A married woman who didn’t know the difference between a bull and a cow! No wonder the world is queer!’”

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morals of the Irish race and the untold damage that would be caused if this book were not banned. They succeeded in having the quotations from the book struck from the official record of the house in case they were used by pornographers, or as Frank O’Connor said in the introduction: “*And that prize collection of half-wits ordered the quotations to be struck from the record.*”

Here are a few examples of the exchanges in the Senate [6].

Mr. Kehoe: “And a finer collection of ‘smut’ than *The Tailor and Ansty*, I have never read... Again, I say, that anyone who reads *The Tailor and Ansty* will come away profoundly saddened that such filth should be imposed on an unsuspecting people... If books of the type of *The Tailor and Ansty* are allowed to go through the country unchecked, the result will certainly be deleterious – I do not say disastrous.” Professor Magennis: “The *Tailor and Ansty*, a low, vulgar, blasphemous work... This sex-ridden, sex-besotted *Tailor* speaks of no subject whatsoever without spewing the foulness of his mind concerning sexual relations.”

So what were these foul passages that so threatened to corrupt the morals of the Irish race? Perhaps this paragraph concerning the *Tailor’s* observations on a film he was brought to see in the Astoria Cinema in Cork: “Very soon the hero and the heroine were engaged in a shy love scene. ‘Hould her! Hould her! You’d think by the shaping of her that she did not like it, but I tell you that they are all that way in the beginning. It is a way they have of letting on that they don’t like it, when all the time they like it as a donkey likes strawberries.’

“The hero disappointed the *Tailor*. He was altogether too shy and diffident, and the *Tailor* lost patience with him. ‘Thon amon dieul! Man, if I was 20 years younger, I’d come up there and give you lessons.’”

Then again perhaps the *Tailor’s* musings about King Solomon and his ten thousand wives offended the sensibilities of the learned Senators. Ansty retorts: “‘Ten thousand wives! Hould you ould divil! It’s your beads you ought to be telling instead of your jokes.

‘I’ve reckoned it up, and no matter how frolicsome a man might be it would take him nearly on thirty years of nights, without having any holiday at all, to get his conjugal rights from the lot of them.’

“‘Thirty years of nights? Without a holiday? Glory be!’ Ansty ponders, bewildered by the powers of reckoning. ‘Thirty years of nights, and he a king?King!’ she spits with contempt. ‘King, *am bostha!* That wasn’t a king. He must have been an ould tomcat!’” Comparisons between women and cattle must have left the Senators apoplectic with fury. The *Tailor* again: “‘I tell you that it is a queer business altogether. There are those who want small lads can’t have them, and those who do not want them have them. Women are like cattle. There are some of them will breed for you if you only look at them, and some of them go to the ‘pusher’ [7] time and time again and won’t have any calf.’

“‘If you only look at them?’ repeats Ansty incredulously. ‘Yerra. There’s not much fun in that!’”

Be that as it may, the Censorship Board banned the book in 1943 and it remained banned for 10 years. The *Tailor’s* incisive reaction when informed by Cross that the book had been banned deserves to be quoted in full. He was sitting by his own hearth and gazing into the fire as he spoke: “‘Tis a funny state of affairs when you think of it.....The book is nothing but the talk and the fun and the laughter which has gone on for years round this fireside.....Not alone this fireside but every fireside in Ireland for hundreds of years past and it took our own Irish government to discover that it was ‘sexual immoralitee’.....our own



Tailor and Ansty



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elected Minister for Justice and his board of ould hairpins.....Did none of them, or the Minister himself, never sit at an Irish fireside at night and listen to and join the talk.....or are they all but a pack of Dublin jackeens, aping the English.”

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Local Church at Gougane Barra

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Epilogue

Coincidentally, many years later, one of the curates, Fr Jack Murphy, returned to the area in the 1980s as a greatly respected parish priest. He recounted that one of the greatest regrets of his life was his involvement in the book-burning episode, but that they were acting ‘under orders’. [8]

It was inaccurately claimed that following the banning of the book, the Tailor and his wife were boycotted by the locals and subject to petty harassment. This is completely incorrect. All I have spoken to locally insist that there was no boycott and that the locals were fully supportive of them at all times.

All quotations (apart from Senate

debates) are from *The Tailor and Ansty*, by Eric Cross, 1970 edition, 2nd reprint 1975, The Mercier Press.

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Stage Play

The New Theatre is currently staging P. J. O’Connor’s 1968 stage version of the Tailor and Ansty in theatres countrywide, with Ronan Wilmot as the tailor and Nuala Hayes as Ansty. You can see it at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire (Mar 1-4); Briery Gap, Macroom, Co. Cork (Mar 7-12); Belltable, Limerick (Mar 27 to Apr 1); St. John’s Theatre, Listowel, Co. Kerry (April 11 and 12); Dunamais Theatre, Portlaoise (April 13 and 14); Town Hall Theatre, Galway (May 29 to June 3) and Gougane Barra Hotel, West Cork (Jul 4 to Sep 3).

7. Slang for a bull.

8. In conversation with Mrs. Breda Lucey of the Gougane Barra Hotel who related it to author.