

Report: Photography



From Anthony Haughey's series *Home*, featuring a council estate in a tough north Dublin suburb.

Home

In 1990/91 Anthony Haughey took colour pictures of his uncle's family and their neighbours on a council estate in Ballymun, a tough north Dublin suburb.

Home is an estimable body of work for two reasons; unlike most Irish documentary photography, which tends to repeat black and white stereotypes, it is in chaotic colour; and, secondly, it has an intuitive understanding of the spiritual foundation of life and belief among working class Irish. For these are poor people, significantly poorer than their counterparts on mainland Britain.

The first picture is a still-life whose details establish themes which, to varying degrees, inform the following 28 images. Pictorially it is indifferent but necessary in order to nudge the viewer towards intended meanings. The picture, which greatly enlarges the actual objects, focuses on a kitchen corner. On the wall is a small print of the

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Virgin Mary dramatising ecstasy. Beside it stands a souvenir letter rack embossed with shamrocks. It contains a postcard of Big Ben, behind which is a magazine prominently entitled 'Viking'. In front is a can of 3-in-one oil.

So what have we? Religion and the trinity as life's lubricants; the forever green of Irish patriotism; and the history of Hibernian invasion by brigands and savages, as represented by Dark Age colonists in horned helmets and the Mother of Parliaments. More importantly, the equation of religion and oppression is adduced.

It would be wrong to suggest that Haughey implies that religion

and nationalism are constant topics of discussion in ordinary Irish households. They are not, at least not in the part of rural Ireland I live in. Such things are taken as givens. They are part of everyday consciousness. Similar issues are irrelevant to daily existence elsewhere in the British Isles, but in Ireland, the proud symbols of Catholicism and nationhood are all-pervasive, all-intrusive. Silently, they underpin the social fabric. The British with their cartoon view of Irishness – not to mention their shocking ignorance of Ireland's history and geography – characterise Paddies as flagwaving Fenians and zealous mass-goers, but the truth is a

country mile distant from such fanaticism.

Tony Haughey's achievement is that he locates the subtler undercurrents feeding Irish consciousness and then observes them at work. He discovers the old country values fighting a rearguard action. Religion and patriotism are still vital but are being marginalised, squeezed out by new needs in a modern, electronic Euro-state. In a young man's bedroom 'Marilyn' wallpaper swamps the church's even chintzier clutter. During prayers, performed while kneeling on the kitchen floor, tolerant faces go through the motions while the rosary is endured for the umpteenth thousandth time.

I shouldn't give the impression that *Home* is a sensational, axe-grinding account of Irish low life or that it arrives at glib conclusions. The photographer's approach is not one of intrusion and exploitation but more that of affectionate, concerned involvement. What he finds is not looked for and then exaggerated, it is simply there.

The last picture frames the context. In a youth centre a boy ponders a wooden jigsaw map of Ireland watched by a teacher. The room is bare, institutionally impoverished. Though this may be accidental, the child indicates with his finger the rough area of Derry. Beside him are jumbled pieces which, when correctly ordered, will shape a coherent map of Ireland. And on the wall behind the boy's head grins the ubiquitous John Paul II. What will be the post-Haughey identity of Ireland? How will all these segments and factions come together?

Tony Haughey's project – and it remains incomplete in so far as the editing is flabby with six pictures superfluous to the sequence – would be best served by publication. A gallery viewer is not as completely manipulated as is the reader of a book. As a reviewer I rarely encounter work which deserves permanent preservation in book or magazine form. But where are the British or Irish magazines with bold enough editorial policies to dedicate an issue to one corpus of good work? They don't exist. *Home* will disappear after it has toured England. It deserves better. (At *Impressions Gallery, York, June 13 - July 25.*)

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