

The Formation,  
Existence, and  
Deconstruction  
of the Catholic Stage  
Guild of Ireland



# The Formation, Existence, and Deconstruction of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland

By

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For Tom, Fionnúala and Hugo  
And for my parents, with all my love



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## PREFACE

### **The Artist's Prayer<sup>1</sup>**

*We pray to unveil unto Thy servants,  
in all the radiance of Thy heavenly grace,  
Truth in all its holiness and Good in all its splendour.  
Cast aside, put to flight,  
the shadows and mists that menace our heart and head,  
so that no earthly timid may waylay that urge  
unto the Beautiful by which we are drawn unto Thee.*

*Thou who didst divide the land from the sea,  
and breathing on the slime didst bring forth man;  
who didst clothe the lilies of the field  
and endow with song the creatures of the sky,  
deign ever to be mindful of these  
Thy servants who over the joyous countenance of creation  
ever seek through the expression of their craft  
the imprint of Thy divine presence and Thy human sojourn.*

*Grant that in word and work  
We may of a truth hold up the mirror to goodness,  
And so be a means unto grace,  
That thereby men may live their lives  
In the glory of Thy sonship and in the bond of brotherly love.  
And as Thou didst show favour to the gifts of the Magi  
And the tears of their suffering,  
So now look down in favour on our daily effort and toil,  
Which we lovingly offer in the hope of one day  
finding rest and joy in Thee.*



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# INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland occurred by mistake. I was conducting research on its English counterpart – recently renamed the Catholic Association of Performing Arts<sup>1</sup> – when I discovered a newspaper clipping from *The Manitoba Ensign* in December 1948 discussing the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland’s annual awards. The Guild was only three years old at the time of the article’s publication and yet, by 1948, Seamus Brady’s article claimed, “[The Guild had] branches in every city in Ireland, as well as in Britain, America and Australia.” Its presence, according to Brady’s article, was overwhelming and yet, mysteriously, the Guild seemed to disappear altogether by the 1970s.

This popularity and disappearance piqued my interest and led to my primary question: how did the Catholic Church shape the Irish entertainment industry in the twentieth century? I found almost immediately in my archival research that the Church’s influence was conducted through an entity known as the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland. Thus, this discovery encouraged numerous subsidiary questions including: how was the Church’s influence administered through the Guild? What does this influence tell us about the formation and deconstruction of the Irish Catholic in the 20th century? And why did the Church and its Guild lose this influence? In this manuscript, I aim to answer these questions by analyzing how the Church’s vital organ in the Irish entertainment industry, the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, elucidated the development and dismantling of Irish Catholicism in the twentieth century.

The Catholic Stage Guild remained active within the Irish and international entertainment world for nearly three decades, battling through differences and continuously endeavoring to serve the Catholic artist and his/her industry. Its successes were worldwide, but the public often overlooked the daily assistance offered to anonymous needy actors. Throughout its life, the Catholic Stage Guild consistently attempted to remain true to its original titling of the organization, focusing on the aspects C/catholic, Stage/entertainment, and Guild. The Guild grasped the belief that all are children of God through its closely knit society and amiable interaction with other countries, and the Guild’s Benevolent Fund embodied the belief that it was bound to love others through practical help. Through these aforementioned qualities, the Catholic Stage Guild brought “into existence

a social, economic, and industrial order” that was in accord with Christian teaching and a modern day guild.<sup>2</sup> The study of the Catholic Stage Guild (which until now has not been conducted) will not only examine the history and purpose of a group of Catholic artists but also takes place against the backdrop of twentieth-century Ireland and provides insight into the Catholic Church’s influence in Ireland during this time.

## **Organization of Chapters**

The first chapter (“The Beginning of the Catholic Stage Guild 1945–1949”) opens with the founding of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland through the dominant (although semi-forgotten) Catholic political movement in Ireland during the Second World War. As this political movement, known as *Ailtirí na hAiséirghe*, began to incorporate the Irish entertainment industry, the Catholic Church sought to address the industry’s need for such an organization in an effort to freeze the political movement’s influence on the arts. Many of the Guild’s founding members concurred with this attempt, resulting in the formation of the Catholic Stage Guild. The ideals and practices implemented in the Irish Catholic Church prior to 1945 (the Guild’s first year) created the mold for the practices and beliefs of the Catholic Stage Guild. Through evaluating the separate strings of Catholicism, theatre and the Irish image, this chapter will illuminate the role the Catholic Church played in the Guild’s creation, and the Catholic Stage Guild’s role in Ireland’s Catholic movement in the 1940s.

The second chapter (“Domestic Disputes and a Bridge into International Relations 1949–1955”) uncovers the Guild’s internal disagreements while its status grew exponentially. As the Guild’s power grew, a decisive division between two camps within it began to form. The first camp argued that the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland should focus solely on its Catholic roots before attending to other facets of its identity; another group began to feel that the Guild could become more than a Catholic organization, and fought to refocus its aim. This group’s new purpose for the Guild aligned with Ireland’s desire for a positive international image, and these members believed the Guild had the potential to act as the vehicle for such an international image. Although the two groups managed to achieve gains through their own devices, a permanent schism inevitably formed that would later lead to the Guild’s downfall. As the Guild grew stronger in its domestic proceedings, its international status also skyrocketed. The second part of this chapter examines the Guild’s international presence and prestige primarily due to its creation of its Six



Statuettes. These statues were originally created to honor outstanding work in the fields of radio, television, theatre, film, literature and music; but the international recognition of the awards also attracted the international press. The purpose of these statues was sometimes questioned amongst the members as to their true objective but, regardless of their origin, the statues raised awareness of the Catholic Stage Guild in the eyes of the international entertainment industry.

The third chapter (“The Guild’s Overarching Power 1956–1959”) examines the Catholic Church’s influence on the Irish entertainment industry in the latter half of the 1950s. However, it also introduces the moment when other sects of the Irish entertainment industry began to pull away from the conventional and conservative beliefs of the Catholic Church in pursuit of more risqué and daring creative endeavors. The Catholic Stage Guild found itself caught between its two defining – and now conflicting – characteristics: Catholic and artistic. As Ireland slowly crept into the decade of the 1960s, the Catholic Stage Guild was forced to decide where its allegiance lay.

The fourth chapter (“The Catholic Stage Guild’s Final Years 1960–Disappearance”) focuses on the closing years of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland and unearths the rumbling severance between the Irish Catholic Church and the Irish entertainment industry of the 1960s. This chapter discusses the decline of the Guild and suggests certain possibilities for its disappearance. The archives at the University College Dublin and Irish Labour History Society contain documents dated from 1966 and 1967, with a rewritten constitution in 1966. Elements from this constitution and certain letters from Guild members during this time align with the change in attitude and perception of Catholics domestically in Ireland and internationally, particularly in regards to the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church from 1962–65. This chapter argues that the “changing winds” of the entertainment industry coupled with the Guild’s strong connection to the Irish Catholic Church ultimately led to the Guild’s disappearance.

## **Justification**

Though often forgotten, the pages of the twentieth century are spattered and soaked with Irish blood as the Emerald Isle attempted to gain and sustain independence from her Protestant English neighbor. Wrought with violence, the history of the Irish Catholic has been macabre, both outside and within the country’s borders. Yet, in the stifling darkness, art sparked

a flame. Heated tension took the form of theatrical works at a time when violence was the answer to everything else.

Although medieval Catholic drama is widely researched, studies on the modern relationship between Catholicism and theatre remain sparse. The relationship is potent yet under-researched, and offers an array of possibilities for study. The specific relationship that will abound in this manuscript is the contemporary relationship between religion and theatre, and what the disappearance of the Guild says about modern theatre. A study on the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland amidst twentieth-century Irish Catholicism is a vital step towards opening this dialog in the academic world due to the international strings intertwined in the Guild's creation.

Three relationships concerning Ireland are embedded in this manuscript: Ireland's relationship with the Catholic Church, the theatre, and the world. The study of Catholic identity has been addressed by Frans Jozef van Beeck, Gibson Winter, James Provost, and Knut Walf,<sup>3</sup> but it is Thomas P. Rausch's 2003 book *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* that fully addresses the challenges the Catholic Church faced in the twentieth century, primarily based on the differentiation between Catholicism and Protestantism. While the traditions of Catholicism vary slightly based on cultural influence, Rausch addresses the globalization of the Catholic Church, dedicating one chapter to globalization and another to how the unique traditions of the Catholic Church unite its members amidst cultural changes. Rausch argues that the Church's belief structure allows universal Catholics to remain connected to one another.

However, as noted by Geoffrey King, the study of Catholic identity in an individual culture should be regarded as unique since "Catholic identity is, inevitably, shaped by culture."<sup>4</sup> The role of Catholicism in playwright Paul Claudel's dramatic works was very different from the works of Kevin Laffan because the culture in which each Catholic was placed was different. Claudel was a French poet and dramatist during the first half of the twentieth century and was devout to the Catholic tradition, eventually receiving an award from the Irish Catholic Stage Guild in 1952. Kevin Laffan, frustrated with the Catholic Church's stance on contraception, turned away from the Church and wrote his play *It's a Two-Foot-Six-Inches Above-the-Ground World* to express his irritation. Each playwright had a specific relationship to the Catholic Church, depending on his culture, time period, and the status of the religion at the time. These examples illustrate the necessity of assessing the Catholic identity within a specific time and place.

As a "[theologian] of inculturation," King recognizes that the culture in which we are raised "is not like a set of clothes that we put on. Culture is

part of our body [because we] are necessarily incultured beings.”<sup>5</sup> The impact the culture has on the Catholic Church and, inexorably, vice versa, is profoundly different dependent on a number of factors, including the strength of the Catholic Church within that culture, the location of the culture, and the exterior culture and its impact on the smaller (usually communal) culture. While it is possible to study the Catholic identity as a whole, as van Beeck, Winter, Provost, Rausch and Walf have done, to truly grasp the conditions of Catholicism in any given time and place, one must study the time and place itself while situating Catholicism in its midst.

The Church’s interest in theatre in the twentieth century is one area rarely explored by scholars. Lionel Pilkington’s *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland* examines the particular time period of this manuscript, but it is primarily focused on “the history of theatre and national theatre initiatives for successive unionist governments in post-1922 Northern Ireland.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Pilkington’s work is vital but frankly states that the text is “a selective treatment of an extensive and complex topic. Much has been omitted from its ambit”; most notably, any mention of the Catholic Church’s influence on the Irish theatre industry of the twentieth century or the Catholic Stage Guild.<sup>7</sup> Yet the Church played a crucial role in shaping and influencing the Irish theatre industry through the Catholic Stage Guild, and this manuscript aims to fill this gap in the literature.

I do not seek to redefine the performance of the Irish national identity. Research on that subject, while not vast, is strong. Diane Negra’s *The Irish in Us* offers a complex multi-voice study of the performance of the national identity onscreen, onstage, and in American pop culture. Emily Sauerhoff’s symposium paper “Irish National Identity and Irish Drama: A Social Psychological Analysis” includes in-depth script analyses charting the portrayal of the Irishman and his nationalism onstage. Deirdre McFeely’s publication *Dion Boucicault: Irish Identity on Stage* and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s article “National Identities in Performance: The Stage Englishman of Boucicault’s Irish Drama” in *Theatre Journal* (49.3) provide two comprehensive studies on one of Ireland’s most nationalistic playwrights. Thus, a study on Irish nationalism on stage in addition to my primary study on the Catholic Stage Guild would be superfluous.

Since no scholarly work exists on the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, it is best to analyze the obtainable literature surrounding the topic so to adequately place this manuscript and justify its unique contribution. It is critical that this manuscript *not* be seen solely as a study of Irish Catholic

history or Irish economic/social history, but instead as a study that incorporates both histories to focus specifically on the history of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland and how it represented the relationship between the Irish entertainment industry and the Irish Catholic Church from 1945 to 1971. Since very little research has been done on modern Catholic guilds, this manuscript will forge a path into new research territory, illustrating how Irish, Catholic and theatre histories joined to create a fully functioning twentieth-century Catholic Stage Guild that was an emblem of Irish Catholicism.

The Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland's founders deemed their organization a "guild" but to successfully evaluate whether this label was accurate, we must understand the basic structure of a medieval guild. Founded in the Middle Ages, guilds (or "gilds") were fashioned to serve primarily one purpose: economical. During medieval times, economics, religion and socio-politics coexisted in the guild system as they did in day-to-day life but, retrospectively, it is possible to examine these factors separately, noting the medieval guild system's primary *functions* and *principles* and recognizing the difference between the two. For the purposes of this study, "functions" refers to the guilds' daily duties and special purposes for which it exists, and "principles" refers to the moral rules and beliefs within the guild. By separating these two, I argue that although the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland existed centuries after the medieval guilds, the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland mirrored certain principles and functions of the medieval guild system, allowing the system to be continued – albeit briefly – into the twentieth century.

The guilds' beginnings in the English isles were at first intermittent, sprouting up in boroughs where trade and/or craft representation was necessary. As their presence grew, so too did their power. As Sylvia L. Thrupp notes, the guilds' "many-sidedness shows that the gilds [*sic*] were able to command the loyalty and energies of the artisan élite as no other form of association could. This made them both useful and dangerous."<sup>8</sup> The guild thus became one of the first organizations to group similar trades and craft but "it was not until the latter part of the thirteenth century, when the expansion was slowing down, that [guilds] became at all widespread. They multiplied most rapidly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, often in circumstances of population decline, trade recession and fiscal crisis."<sup>9</sup> This expansion during difficult financial times emphasized the guilds' primary role as economic aid and the guilds' presence as influential in the society.

The bonding of guild members has often been compared to familial bonds due to the closeness amongst its members. The reason for this close

tie could be that weakened families led young men to seek fraternization elsewhere, or that “guilds and fraternities encouraged unity in a way that the official church, by the end of the Middle Ages did not.”<sup>10</sup> This statement presents one possibility that the guilds were seen as a fraternity amongst local men due to the lack of fraternization within the local church. While other evidence provided later in this introduction will illustrate a certain religious element of medieval guilds, it is important to note that in some boroughs, the guild, in addition to its economic role in the society, also offered religious tradition when the local church did not.

Yet the importance of the guilds’ economic role was the sustaining characteristic throughout the medieval ages. Ken Farnhill contends, “The foundation of guilds in the medieval period was often a response to social change,”<sup>11</sup> and it is a common belief that this social change alludes to the economic and political changes in the society.<sup>12</sup> Their influence on commercial trade eventually led to a monopoly on most economic matters, thus directly and/or indirectly influencing local and national supply and demand.<sup>13</sup> Further, “the men of every recognized artisan gild [*sic*] were aware of themselves as organized in at least two different ways simultaneously. They were an organ of the commune and they were a private group concerned with technical and trade interests.”<sup>14</sup> As members of a working society, the guilds realized the opportunity to influence the economy to provide a greater benefit to the guild members. By increasing/decreasing the economic prices of supplies or their final product, the guild was able to guarantee perpetual work for its members.

As the guilds grew in economic power, their influence began to seep into other political areas as well, including government administration: “Their organization was important also in bringing more formal deliberation to bear on the shaping of the law and custom and on the administrative procedures through which orderly relations were maintained among buyers and sellers.”<sup>15</sup> In this manner, the guilds not only influenced the market and economy but also began to influence the actual political structure that supervised the market, thus gaining control of the political and economic structure in their locale.

The strength of a guild was often measured by its influence on the market but as Hugo Soly notes, membership in the guild, and thus obtaining this influence, often came with strict regulations.

Craft guilds are often described as ‘powerful’ or ‘weak’, based primarily on their measure of political influences, ranging from participation in the local administration to the absence of the right to file petitions, in conjunction with the extent to which the members of these organizations

could regulate the occupations; powerful guilds might penalize those who violated the regulations.<sup>16</sup>

These regulations were strict because of the guild's association with the Catholic Church and because of the political requirements that were now assumed by many of them: "Gilds then became primarily political associations, and heavier miscellaneous responsibilities were thrown on their officers' shoulders."<sup>17</sup> As the town government became more comfortable with the guild's presence in administration, the workload increased, amounting in stricter regulations for the members. Since the positions were now handling the local military as well as the economy, maintaining a pious and clean public appearance became standard and mandatory for each guild member.<sup>18</sup>

Tine De Moor extends the discussion concerning the regulations of each guild, claiming, "With a large set of rules, [...] guild members tried to regulate the behaviour of their fellows – to prevent them from free riding – and to control the effect their surroundings could have on the behaviour of the members."<sup>19</sup> While De Moor makes this claim in regards to the economic market, the assertion can be extended to the members' religious life as well.

Although the guilds often identified as being interested in trade and an organ in the commune, "in most cases they were organized in still a third way, as a fraternity under the auspices of patron saints. The religious and fraternal sanction was the source of their deepest solidarity."<sup>20</sup> According to Lucassen, De Moor and Luiten van Zanden, there were certain characteristics indicative of guilds worldwide. These characteristics were: "more or less independent, self-governing organizations; people with the same or similar occupations; aimed at furthering their common interests; and in almost any respect, i.e. in the economic, political, social cultural, or religious fields."<sup>21</sup> Ken Farnhill's definition simplifies the guilds further and suggests a stronger religious influence on the guild system, stating, "Although there was considerable variety of practice [of guilds...] these three features – the patron saint, the church base and the annual mass and feast – recur almost continually in the surviving records."<sup>22</sup>

The benefits of joining a guild were economically and spiritually worthwhile. Many members paid certain dues, which were then put into an account and distributed for services, feasts and charity as necessary. Among these, charity often acted as insurance: "Almost all of the ordinances contain some provision [...] for helping members who have fallen on hard times or who might wish to go on pilgrimage. [...] Similarly, provision is made for members who have died, and for commemorating deceased members by means of prayers and masses."<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, the monies were spent not only on provisions for the earthly life but for the repose of members' souls. While the member's fees would ultimately assist his family should he become unable to work or in the event that he passed away,<sup>24</sup> he was also ensuring his eternity by paying for masses to be held in commemoration of his soul. Further, the medieval guilds "provided not merely for their working members but also for those [members] who, not through their own fault, had become unemployed or poor, and for those who were aged or in bad health."<sup>25</sup>

These examples illustrate that one of the primary focuses of medieval guilds was caring for the earthly life of the guild's members and their families<sup>26</sup> – a practice that was extended into the foundation of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland. This notion is evident in the distribution of the funds raised by the performance and feast days. While the exact dispersal of these funds remains relatively unknown, Corbett's analysis of the East Anglian guilds' records notes that "the guilds accumulated special reserve funds, distributed relief to members in distress, bought property, endowed hospitals, and made regular contributions to religious houses and other charities."<sup>27</sup> In this light, while the guilds gained profit, a percentage of their income was devoted to causes that benefited their members and society at large, and that would act as a visible reminder of the guild within each community.

One act that consistently reminded the community of the guild's presence was the lighting of candles in the community's church. Known as the "keepers of the lights,"<sup>28</sup> numerous guild records in Farnhill's East Anglian study show a budget consistently set aside for the purchase of candles. Three reasons can be provided for this action: first, the act of lighting a candle in remembrance of someone who has died is a long Christian tradition, illustrating the guild's concern for deceased members' souls; second, consistently providing the church with light was a visual reminder of the guild's presence; and third, it was relatively inexpensive to purchase candles, thus it ensured an economical but effective maintenance of their status in society. As Farnhill claims, "[T]he maintenance of candles before images of saints or representations of the deity [...] was one of the most common practices of the guilds, and was one of the few which gave them a permanent presence within the church."<sup>29</sup> While this presence was continuous, it was only seen inside the church. A much more public presence was established outside the church walls on the feast days.

The feast days of the saints were often celebrated by the namesake guilds with a large banquet. While the central focus of the day was the membership and patron saint of the guild,<sup>30</sup> it was also "an opportunity for some more prosaic activities: making business contacts, exchanging

commercial information between traders and craftsmen, finding marriage partners, and adjusting ‘political networks.’”<sup>31</sup> This example illustrates that the feast days were multifaceted, mixing religious, business and personal affairs. To celebrate this feast day, the members would often not only hold a large banquet but also produce a pageant play, introducing theatre into the realm of the guilds.

Perhaps the best example of the mixture of devotion and economic gains of many guilds lies in their annual pageant productions. In an effort to support the guild’s trade/craft in conjunction with honoring their patron saint in a leisurely manner, medieval guilds would often produce patron plays on or around the saint’s feast day that coincided with their trade. Corbett outlines their function.

[T]he plays produced by the guilds of late medieval England were a type of public, corporate, pious activity, and were considered as such by the guilds which produced them. Thus, if guilds were founded primarily for the benefit of the members and secondarily for the benefit of the wider community, then the plays were, first and foremost, an activity designed to promote the guild’s ends, and to accrue worldly prestige and supernatural grace for the guild and its members.<sup>32</sup>

Taking this system into account, the plays served two purposes for the guild: first, advertising and highlighting their trade/craft with a production featuring the craft’s patron saint; second, in return for “producing communal pageantry and plays at the festival of Corpus Christi and on other civic occasions, [the guilds] were allowed to levy dues on the whole of their trade.”<sup>33</sup> These plays thus presented the guild with multiple forms of monetary income in the form of levied dues and interest in their trade by means of advertising. Further

The plays of the guilds, due to the mechanics of drama, do indeed emphasize concrete details and espouse narrative. The desired response to the plays is principally an affective one, in common with most meditative actions. [...] The plays are devotional in intention, part of the wave of devotional aids that swept fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. They are not [...] catechetical in any official sense of the word, but pursue an agenda of their own. They do not specify an emotional reaction [...] In this case, the community consists of the guilds [...] whose religious practices would supply them with a *modus operandi* and a range of socially endorsed responses, both affective and cognitive, to the spectacle.<sup>34</sup>

This excerpt boldly states the twofold benefit of the productions. The guilds could use the pageants as guild advertisement, but they also provided a certain spiritual benefit for both society and the guild. The



plays honored the Catholic patron saints, and often the saints were prayed to, to intercede on behalf of the entire guild, a particular member or the Church/society. As Clune notes, "Attention was paid to the spiritual welfare of the members. Religious processions and plays were organised, and chaplains were appointed to offer Mass for the living and the dead."<sup>35</sup> The religious processions and plays were, reiterating Corbett, meant for devotional means, and while they earned profit and recognition for the guild, it could be hoped that a certain amount of piety was also gained.

One argument concerning pageant plays produced by English medieval guilds is whether the Reformation had any effect on their pageant productions. Rainer Warning presents one thesis that "the plays represented a contest between the church and popular opposition."<sup>36</sup> Yet, as Corbett recognizes, Warning's thesis "appears to make no distinction between the church which allowed the plays to be performed and the post-reformation [*sic*] Protestant church, a different organization altogether, which suppressed them."<sup>37</sup> While the guild system could continue under a Protestant ruling since their primary function was economical, the guilds that originally aligned with the *Catholic* Church had no place in post-Reformation England. Thus, once the Reformation settled and Anglicanism became the enforced religion, the guilds founded on Catholic ideals slowly began to shrink and shrivel, while it seems other guilds founded on the Protestant religion began to thrive.

The end of the medieval guilds is a topic not fully known but long contested. In his analysis of the medieval East Anglian guilds, Farnhill's study of the collapse of the English guild provides evidence that "does not suggest a sudden collapse in guild activity in the face of hostile government legislation, but a gradual process of dissolution which in part reflected some of the more important injunctions, but which was probably also influenced by the consistent criticism of the guild's most popular devotions."<sup>38</sup> According to Farnhill, although "the Reformation of Henry VIII and Edward VI ultimately led to the abolition of guild activity in England," the deciding factor in the termination of the medieval guilds was the Chantries Act of 1548.<sup>39</sup> The Chantries Act passed under Edward VI confiscated church property to be used for educational purposes, but this loss of property hardly seems sufficient to abolish such a strong organizational movement as the English guild system. Farnhill continues by providing two supporting reasons for the collapse of the guild system: economic and social change; and a "shift in attitudes across Europe to fraternities in particular, and parishioners in general."<sup>40</sup>

The atmosphere in sixteenth-century England changed drastically from the English societies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. England was

becoming one of the strongest economic forces and the Catholic Church's role was beginning to shift. Once Henry VIII and Edward VI expelled the Catholic Church from England, it became a disdained presence whose members were scorned and expelled. Likewise, the medieval guilds that were Catholic in principle grew out of mere beginnings into enormous forces across the country only to be removed with the expulsion of the Catholic Church. This trend suggests that while the medieval guild system was primarily economic, those associated with Catholic principles did not survive into post-Reformation England because the religion of the society had shifted – an image mirrored in the fourth chapter of this manuscript.

To name a society a “guild” in the twentieth century held certain implications that the founders of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland had to take into consideration. This choice in title was possibly influenced by Reverend George Clune's book, *The Medieval Gild System*, written in Ireland in 1943, two years prior to the founding of the Guild. Relatively little information is known about Fr. Clune but his collection of other writings (amongst them, *Christian Social Reorganization*) suggests the priest's interest in a new possibility for the guild system in the twentieth century. Although the evidence strongly suggests that medieval guild systems were primarily focused on economic gains, Fr. Clune offers a view of the medieval guild system that is somewhat contradictory to the aforementioned evidence: “[This] form of organisation [the guild] was widespread in Europe and was supported by an idealism such as the world had never known, the reason being that the Middle Ages were par excellence the Ages of Faith.”<sup>41</sup> In his argument, Clune attests that it was the age of the time that guaranteed the guilds' prosperity. As Clune recognizes, “These gilds were not merely commercial and industrial; they served charitable ends as well and breathed a spirit of social love. But they went further; their regulations and their activities were shot through with religion.”<sup>42</sup> According to Clune, every aspect of guild life was either religious in practice or religious in foundation, offering society an organization of Christian men wholeheartedly devoted to their God and their community. This definition of a guild is one that more closely aligns with our Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, suggesting a certain view of the guild system that was more focused on religion and less on economics than the previous evidence suggests.

As this section has illustrated, the functions of the guild and its principles should be handled as two separate entities.<sup>43</sup> Since society has changed vastly from the Middle Ages, the principles of the medieval guild would perhaps adjust better to twentieth-century society than its functions. Clune argues that it is not necessarily the system of the medieval guild that

could be applicable during his writing era (circa 1942–43) but instead these “Medieval Gild *Principles*”, which were

(1) All men are children of God, are brothers of Christ, and are, therefore, brothers to one another. (2) Men are bound to love one another by special command of Christ. (3) This love does not consist in fine words, but in practical help. (4) The goods of earth are meant by God, not for a few, nor for a class, but for all men, and should be so divided that every man will be able, through his work – if work is necessary, – to get all that is sufficient to meet his reasonable needs. [...] (5) The practical love referred to must seek to secure to every man the necessary sufficiency. It will strive to provide him with useful work, to get him a reasonable income, and to guarantee his freedom and independence by making it possible for him to become an owner of property. It will seek to bring into existence a social, economic, and industrial order which will accord with Christian teaching. It will in all its activities keep in mind the command of Christ: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”<sup>44</sup>

Writing at the same time as the formation of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, Clune’s principles were similar to those originally outlined by the founders of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, suggesting an influence by the former on the latter.

Lucassen, De Moor and Luiten van Zanden note, “Twenty years ago [...]the accepted wisdom was that guilds were a European medieval phenomenon which stifled entrepreneurship and innovation by laying down specific rules for the production of goods and services, and had therefore become less important in English towns by the seventeenth century.”<sup>45</sup> But as we will see in this manuscript, the idea of guilds was not stifled indefinitely and instead, expanded to include dramatic fraternities. Thus, extracting the aforementioned identifying principles of medieval guilds as outlined by Clune and applying them to the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland, the first chapter will analyze the intention behind the naming of the guild and its economic and spiritual role in twentieth-century Ireland.

## Conclusion

My reason for tackling such a topic mirrors Peadar Kirby’s aspirations when he undertook his work on the Catholic Church in Ireland: “While the detached observer may have a valid insight to offer, on a topic like this I believe the committed observer can uncover much more thoroughly the dynamic of growth that might not be apparent to the detached observer.”<sup>46</sup> By no means is this work one of a detached observer. I have strong connections to theatre, Ireland and the Catholic Church. However, when

assessing these topics in a joint project, I feel my relationship to each will assist me in discovering certain aspects of this history that would otherwise go unnoticed to the impartial eye.

In many ways, the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland acted as a microcosm of twentieth-century Ireland, dramatically depicting the heartaches and successes of the Irish Catholic Church and its members. The Guild's international influence as seen in its correspondence papers with the Office of Foreign Affairs suggests a rudimentary opening dialog into examinations of other Catholic stage guilds worldwide. A study of the Catholic Stage Guild not only examines the founding and disappearance of a Catholic theatre organization but also serves as a lens through which one can inspect and better understand the presence of the Catholic Church within the Irish society. The Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland's persuasion over the theatre population both within and outside the country's borders as well as the dynamic group of members such as Noel Purcell, Cyril Cusack, and Gabriel Fallon, proposes a story long overdue to be told – until now.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNING OF THE  
CATHOLIC STAGE GUILD

1945–1949

*“Why, man alive, we haven’t started yet!”<sup>1</sup>*

The beginnings of the Catholic Stage Guild of Ireland occurred through a man’s dream and a stroke of happenstance. The need for a Catholic Stage Guild was growing but a number of events immediately prior to its founding in 1945 encouraged its launch and rapid development. Within the first four years of the Guild’s existence, the Catholic Church of Ireland, through its Catholic Stage Guild, made a dynamic impact on the Irish theatre scene by redefining the connections between the Catholic Church, Irish theatre and the international entertainment industry. In doing so, the Guild finished the decade with international recognition, but also a swelling rift amongst the members between achieving a Catholic organization that was active on multiple continents and an international organization that happened to be Catholic.

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The Second World War never officially hit the borders of Ireland. Irish newspapers and citizens referred to the war as “The Emergency” and although the country itself remained neutral on paper, the government and people constantly wrestled with their alliance. Ireland’s Taoiseach during the war, Éamon de Valera, and the rest of the Irish government were considerably pro-Ally, contributing men and supplies to Great Britain and the United States. However, R.M. Douglas states that the Irish population often found itself pro-Axis: “Many people during the Emergency thought that Ireland owed Germany a debt for her support of the Easter Rising in 1916. Irish commentators often drew parallels between Germany’s ‘partition’ at Britain’s hands in the Treaty of Versailles and the division of

their own country.”<sup>2</sup> In the hope that Ireland could once and for all gain a lasting independence from Great Britain that would be recognized internationally, the Irish people began to inspect the workings of the world’s resilient countries during the Emergency in an effort to establish and maintain their own robust government.

Young Irish activists in the early 1940s were upset with their fresh government. In their eyes, the government idled while the Emergency called the rest of the world to action. However, Taoiseach de Valera was hesitant to enter a world war so soon after the country’s own struggle for independence. He believed that connecting with either the Allied Powers or Axis Powers during the Emergency would spark a second Irish civil war since the Irish people remained divided on the situation – siding with the Axis would encourage a British defeat and might lead to the liberation of Northern Ireland, but doing so would cost Ireland its alliance with the United States and her thousands of Irish immigrants.<sup>3</sup> De Valera’s hands – at least on paper – were tied, and thus remained neutral. Unsurprisingly, this neutrality was untenable to the young Irish activists who yearned for a united, independent Ireland.

Towards the end of the 1930s, a young Irish nationalist, Gearóid Ó Cuinneagáin, devised a plan for Irish unity. Ó Cuinneagáin (originally named Gerald Cunningham) believed that the only way for Ireland to truly stand united was to return the country to its Celtic roots. This initiative was not a new idea, but due to Ó Cuinneagáin’s fascist policies and the country’s “neutrality” in a war concerning Fascism, many in the nation quickly embraced it.<sup>4</sup>

Ó Cuinneagáin and his likeminded company created the society *Craobh na hAiséirghe* – the “Branch of the Resurrection” – to reinstate Irish Gaelic as the nation’s official language and to bring Christian (and, pointedly, Catholic) values to the forefront of education. After all, Ireland was noted as the “island of saints and scholars,” but to Ó Cuinneagáin, this definition was only desirable when the saints were Catholic and the scholars wrote and discoursed in Irish. Initially, Ó Cuinneagáin’s idea to unite Ireland required a plethora of internal reorganization and external forces. However, at the beginning of the 1940s, the activist realized that an increase in Irish military strength could allow him to achieve his idea of a united Ireland without the aid of foreign militaries, thus building a stronger, independent Ireland that was not only self-reliant but also self-sufficient. To Ó Cuinneagáin, Ireland was to become “the island of priests, scholars and soldiers,”<sup>5</sup> but one key opponent stood in the way of this idyllic Ireland – its recently established government.