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**Title:**

**‘Don’t tell me I’m still on that feckin’ island’: Migration, Masculinity, British Television and Irish Popular Culture in the Work of Graham Linehan**

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**Abstract**

The article examines how, through such means as interviews and DVD commentaries, television situation comedy writer Graham Linehan has discursively elaborated a distinctly migrant masculine identity as an Irish writer in London. It highlights his stress on how the working environment of British broadcasting and the tutelage of senior British broadcasters facilitated the satirical vision of Ireland in *Father Ted*. It focuses on the gendering of his narrative of becoming in London and how his suggestion of interplays between specific autobiographical details and his dramatic work have fuelled his public profile as a migrant Irish writer.

Graham Linehan has written and co-written several situation comedies for British television, including *Father Ted* (with Arthur Mathews – Channel 4, 1995-98); *Black Books* (with Dylan Moran – Channel 4, 2000-2004 (first series only)); *The IT Crowd* (Channel 4, 2006-13); and *Count Arthur Strong* (with Steve Delaney – BBC, 2013-15). Unusually, for a television writer, he has also developed a significant public profile in the UK and Ireland through his extensive interviews and uses of social media. Linehan migrated from Dublin to London in 1990 and his own account of his development as a writer stresses his formation through the intersection of Irish, British and American influences. He also notes how his

creative development has been enabled through the process of migration, and his subsequent induction into British television through learning the ‘discipline’ of the sitcom genre.

This article explores how Linehan has discursively constructed and elaborated an interpretative frame through which his work and public persona may be read. *Father Ted* is a celebrated symbol of the growing irreverence of contemporary Irish popular culture in its satire of Catholic Ireland.<sup>1</sup> However, Linehan has performatively located himself and his work within an interpretative frame of reflexive migrant masculine identity following his move to London. London provides a logical site within which Linehan articulates a migrant, neither/nor identity, distanced from any sense of Ireland as ‘home’, yet maintaining an ambivalent relationship with Irish popular culture and identity. I choose the term ‘migrant’, therefore, to signify that he has neither assumed the identity of an immigrant or an emigrant, but rather articulates an in-between, persistently ambivalent, liminal identity.

Linehan’s commentary on his migration stresses his ‘coming of age’ as a young man and as a writer in London under the avuncular tutelage of older, experienced figures in British comedy. He depicts British television as an inspirational environment which facilitated the realisation of comic invention in a form unimaginable within the more conservative Irish public service broadcasting system. This ‘coming of age’ narrative has a distinctly gendered quality: avuncular figures in Britain afford Linehan the opportunity to engage in a form of pointedly adolescent male humour at the expense of Irish cultural archetypes and shibboleths in *Father Ted*. Linehan situates this narrative in the context of childhood experience of bullying in Ireland and his recourse to humour as a coping tactic, drawing on British and American humour as an imaginative escape route.

The article examines the interplay between television comedy and Linehan’s identity as a displaced Irish man, arguing that his meta-textual commentaries have been a vehicle for the

articulation of a distinctly migrant, liminal, perpetually adolescent masculinity. I argue that his keenness to distance his work from the politically satirical or potentially offensive frames this liminal identity. While migration is the path to constructing a public profile as a writer and a more assertive masculinity increasingly distanced from his Irish origins, Linehan's benign 'silliness' also evinces a migrant sensibility, a courting of acceptance through the cultivated boyishness of his public profile.

The word 'work' in the title embraces Linehan's dramatic work *and* his discursive 'identity work', linking broadcast comedy and autobiography. I concentrate on Linehan and Mathews' *Father Ted*, arguing that Linehan articulates his migrant identity through orienting himself in relation to Mathews and various key figures in British broadcasting. The title statement is uttered by *Ted*'s Father Jack (Frank Kelly) when he emerges from a drunken stupor ('Cigarettes and Alcohol and Rollerblading', 2: 8). It is cited here as a metaphor for Linehan's relationship with Ireland: geographically removed, but psychologically tethered to an ambivalently imagined 'home'.

### **'There were huge ticks ...' – Coming of Age in 1990s London**

Linehan's migration narrative typifies contradictory aspects of Irish emigration to Britain in the late twentieth century and its intersection with structural changes taking place within the British cultural industries during that period. As such, it is a gendered narrative of becoming-through-migration that is historically specific. There is a long history of economic and voluntary migration from Ireland, both pre- and post- Independence from the UK in 1922. The renewed wave of emigration during the 1980s is represented by many Irish political and economic commentators as distinct from previous generations, who were disproportionately represented in construction and service occupations (Ferriter 2004, 471-5). The 1980s emigrants were better educated and were more likely to emigrate through choice rather than

as a means of survival (Ferriter 2004, 672-3). Linehan however describes his first experience of migration as a highly precarious period in which he worked initially as a poorly paid music journalist (Regan 2013). Although his experience was more privileged than previous generations dependent on the sale of their labour power in manual occupations, his often repeated story of inviting Mathews to join him and seek work as television comedy writers exemplifies the enduring insecurity and impulsivity of much Irish emigration.

Linehan describes how, having submitted unsolicited sketches to Griff Rhys Jones and Mel Smith's sketch show *Smith and Jones* (BBC, 1984-1998 – titled *Alas Smith and Jones* from 1984-1988) he and Mathews were invited to discuss their work at their independent production company Talkback in the early 1990s. During the visit to the company offices they were delighted to see their sketches in the waiting room with 'huge ticks' (Merton 2000). Talkback had emerged following the introduction of Channel 4's model of broadcaster-as-publisher in 1982. Symptomatic of the Thatcherite deregulation of broadcasting, Channel 4 facilitated considerable independent sector growth. *Smith and Jones* provided a vehicle for Linehan and Mathews' entry into a formerly highly restrictive industry and led to their becoming 'engines of comedy' (*Arts Lives*, 2008) in the mid-90s.

Linehan's account of Jones' approval and encouragement (Merton 2000), together with the purchase of their work on a piecework rather than salaried basis highlights the combination of opportunity, 'precarity' and competition between cultural workers as freelancers in such a deregulated, neoliberal economy (Deuze 2007, 20). Describing working for *Smith and Jones* as 'comedy school for a year' (Merton 2000), Linehan has extensively used the analogy of teacher and pupil (Merton 2000). Jones subsidised their precarious income by providing low rent accommodation; he recalls that 'for a while I was their landlord too and they sat in the flat and wrote *Father Ted* for Hat Trick – for somebody else's company!' (*Arts Lives* 2008). While Linehan illustrates Ursell's analysis of intensified 'self-commodification' in the

cultural industries in the 1990s (2000, 807-810), such commodification was clearly gendered. As geographically mobile young men with no family ties to prevent their fitting into an increasingly 'flexible', male-dominated industry, and as protégés of British male comedy stars, Linehan and Mathews' fortunes contrasted with female peers struggling to 'sustain their careers' in such a precarious working environment (Willis and Dex 2003, 139).

Linehan's story demonstrates how biography is situated within contradictory cultural and national contexts. The 1994 IRA ceasefire and the 1998 Belfast Agreement contributed to a cultural context in which the historical stigma of Irish identity in Britain, dating centuries prior to Irish Independence in 1922 and heightened during the Troubles, was perceived to be diminishing for younger Irish immigrants. *Father Ted* was among several successful British-produced drama series set in Ireland in the 1990s, including *Ballykissangel* (BBC, 1996-2001), which featured an English priest adjusting to life in Ireland (Sheehan 2004, 99). When a Commission for Racial Equality report (Hickman and Walter 1997) documented enduring anti-Irish racism in Britain, *Father Ted* actor Dermot Morgan retorted that 'the English are not only non-discriminatory but positively welcoming [...] so it seems a shame to go around looking for offence' (Byrne 1997). Linehan echoed Morgan's comment, representing *Father Ted* as the product of an irreverent migrant identity, liberated by the interstitial, migrant space of London, and under the disciplinary tutelage of senior British broadcasters who, given their Oxbridge background, represent a privileged and class specific version of Englishness.

Terry Eagleton (1996, 127) notes how the imagined relationship between Britain and Ireland has historically been characterised by the familial imagery in cultural discourse. The 1801 Act of Union subordinated the 'dangerously other', positing Ireland as the child incapable of self-government *and* the independently minded sibling (Eagleton 1996, 130). Colonial constructions of the Irish as other are always confounded by ambiguity and ambivalence,

typified by the form and cultural reception of the Irish joke, which perpetuates the profoundly stupid, usually male Irish stereotype.

Linehan and Morgan's account of migration as enabling and liberating contradicts historical representations of Irish migration to Britain as alienating and characterised by experiences of racism. Linehan's migration narrative is framed by Arthur Mathews acting as a kind of auxiliary ego prior to induction into the *Smith and Jones*' 'comedy school'. Following an invitation to write for London music magazine *Select*, he describes the discovery of its prohibition on 'the word "I", and one of my big things was to make fun of myself in my columns and that required the use of the word "I" [...] I just wasn't enjoying myself any more so I suggested to Arthur [a former colleague on the Dublin music magazine *Hot Press*] that we (sic) come over and try our hands at sketches' (Merton 2000). Mathews thus enables the vicarious recovery of the 'I', but it is the disciplinary context of British broadcasting through Jones' headmasterly 'ticking' that facilitates development. Rather than Linehan's masculinity being diminished through his liminal 'Irishness', instead he is nurtured as an emerging talent.

Jones' initial support was followed by *Father Ted*'s first producer Geoffrey Perkins, who later became head of BBC comedy (Rampton 1995). Perkins is credited as the nurturing British presence whose broadcast comedy experience reassured Linehan and Matthews, together with Seamus Cassidy, the Irish-born commissioning editor at Channel 4, that *Father Ted* was a viable series. Cassidy was reluctant to take another risk after the critical failure of Linehan and Matthews' first Channel 4 sitcom, *Paris* (1994): 'the main fear I had was that it was too Irish. It took Geoffrey' and script-editor Paul Mayhew-Archer 'to convince me that – both being impeccably English – they still found it funny' ('Comedy Connections' 2012). Linehan describes Perkins as the 'heart of *Father Ted*', the inspiration behind their development of the original 'mockumentary' concept into a sitcom, whose choice of the

somewhat melancholic theme tune contributed to an enduring sense of sadness and entrapment despite the show's absurd humour (Linehan 2010a).

Following *Father Ted*'s initial broadcast, Linehan faced criticism from a British-born, second generation Irish woman on Channel 4's *Right to Reply* programme (29 April, 1995).

Dismissing her concerns that the show continued a tradition of anti-Irish humour he recently asserted that 'we were of a generation that didn't give a fuck what the British thought of us' (Linehan 2010b). This self-conscious freedom from creatively crippling cultural expectations facilitated a humorous satire that may not have been feasible in Irish television. The *Right to Reply* encounter illustrates how sitcom 'operates as a site of negotiation of cultural change and difference' despite the 'charges of conservatism' often levelled against it (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 236). The freedom afforded by working in British broadcasting facilitated *Father Ted*'s irreverent, distinctly adolescent male humour at the expense of the most powerful cultural institution in post-Independence Ireland.

### **'Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse'**

*Father Ted* features three Catholic priests placed in an island parish as punishment for unspecified misdemeanours. Only Ted approximates a fully rounded character, desperate to escape this classic sitcom trap but repeatedly thwarted by his inadequacies or by his colleagues, the idiotic Dougal (Ardal O' Hanlon) and the drunkenly lecherous Jack. Their housekeeper Mrs. Doyle (Pauline McLynn) is a maternal figure whose dedicated service inadvertently precipitates injury to herself or others. Although the show echoes *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) in the conspiratorial confluence of seemingly disconnected plot elements, the character of Ted follows a 'Britcom' model in its emphasis on the archetypal 'loser', handicapped by the gap between how characters 'wish to be seen by others, and how they actually appear', unlike US sitcoms where characters' self-awareness is often traceable to

Jewish humorous heritage (Mills 2005, 41-42). Linehan has remarked that he and Mathews were unwittingly producing ‘a parody of popular perceptions of the Irish’ (Linehan and Mathews 1999, 8) in the permanently drunk Jack, profoundly stupid Dougal and dangerously friendly Mrs. Doyle. *Father Ted* has become a cult TV show in Britain and Ireland, though only purchased by Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ in 1996.

*Father Ted* is formally closest to British sitcoms such as *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962-74) and *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-2003), which revolve around family bonds as the basis for the characters’ entrapment and the plot circularity. *Father Ted* has a quasi-familial structure, with Ted as father, Dougal as son, Jack as grandfather and Mrs. Doyle as a maternal figure. It occasionally directly satirises the Catholic Church in Ireland – Bishop Brennan’s (Jim Norton) secret love child clearly refers to a scandal involving Bishop Casey in 1992 (Ferriter 2004, 735) – and parodies Irish cultural events such as the *Rose of Tralee*. In broader terms the series offers a satirical dramatization of the cultural stasis, sexual regulation and ritualization of Irish everyday life in the late twentieth century. Craggy Island is a mythical, irreverently adolescent view of Ireland’s cultural paternalism embodied by priests in a quasi-theocratic society. The 1937 Irish Constitution remains infused with Catholic doctrine, while the Church still controls 90% of Irish primary schools (O’ Toole 2014). Contraception was not universally legalised until 1992 and abortion is illegal. Although avoiding such contentious matters as transubstantiation and the Virgin birth, *Father Ted* reiterated a paradoxical vision of a nation in thrall to beliefs which hinder the fulfilment of its principal character’s barely repressed desires. Ted’s hedonistic fantasies are revealed in *Simpsons*-esque cutaways. The community of priests in *Father Ted* may be understood as a satire of twentieth century Catholic Ireland.

Perhaps most striking is the representation of priests as distinctly childish men. The schoolyard rivalry between Ted and Rugged Island’s Father Dick Byrne (Maurice O’



Donoghue) involves their competition, among other things, in a variation of the Eurovision Song contest ('A Song for Europe', 2: 5). Ted's exaggerated narcissistic self-regard belies his insecurity and fear of authority, classically manifested when Ted's forfeit for losing a contest against Byrne is to 'kick Bishop Brennan up the arse' and make a photographic record ('Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse', 3: 6). Having succeeded, Ted pleads innocence, but is betrayed when Father Dougal, having misunderstood Ted's instructions, displays a ten-foot-square print.

There is a long tradition of the Irishman's depiction as overgrown boy in Irish literature and theatre. The 'comic Irishman' is a figurative representation of the colonial Other infantilised in 'Celticist' discourses of Irishness; outwardly a man, he nonetheless possesses childlike characteristics (Waters 1984, 55-56). Post-colonial Irish society was dominated by Catholicism's culturally strangulating hierarchy, whose paternalistic, exaggerated claims to cultural purity and superiority exemplified the characteristic fate of post-colonial societies' imitation of the colonial master, as analysed by Frantz Fanon (1967 – see Kiberd 1996, 551; Lloyd 1999, 33). Ted's fragile narcissism and insecurity, perfectly captured in Dermot Morgan's edgy performance, highlight the absurdity of a celibate priest as a model of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Hearn et al. 2003, 191) in post-colonial Ireland. But his act of kicking an even bigger figure of Catholic authority is an act of revenge for the post-colonial children of a quasi-theocratic State. For an Irish audience particularly, the casting of Dermot Morgan, a comedian unknown in Britain, but with a long history of anti-clerical and political broadcast satire<sup>2</sup> enabled a double reading. He was both a figure of bogus cultural authority routinely humiliated and the one who delivers the metaphorical kick. Morgan gives Ted a sense of resentful frustration and anger, while the visual revelations of his hedonistic fantasies comically contradict his avowed faith.

This episode also typifies the series' characteristically masculine, adolescent, anal-sadistic humour. In 'Tentacles of Doom' (2: 3) an enraged Father Jack inserts the 'Holy Stone of Clonrichert' into another bishop's rectum while another dies from shock when a jet of Jack's faeces shoots up his frock from a drain when the toilet is flushed. It falls short of *South Park's* rampant scatology (Gardiner 2000), yet has a similarly juvenile 'up yours' quality. The Holy Stone is emblematic: the focus of the priests' entrapment in a pointless religious ritual (three bishops are visiting the island for a ceremony marking the Vatican's upgrading of the Stone to a 'grade two relic'), it becomes a weapon of revenge against the bishop who has in vain attempted theological conversation with Jack.

Linehan's recollections, in a later radio interview (Merton 2000), of coping with both childhood bullying and the brutality of an Irish Catholic school through humour, are doubly significant. He described spoofing school regulations in an anonymously posted classroom notice as a key moment on his way to gradually gaining kudos with his classmates, including the bullies, remarking that 'that's what I've been doing ever since, [...] hanging things up in the classroom and then running away' (Merton 2000). Such recollections give *Father Ted* a narrative of authorial inspiration (albeit within a collaborative context) and were prompted by the series' success. Paul Merton, an English comedian of Irish Catholic parentage, sought and licensed this confessional narrative; the interview was part of a BBC series about people in comedy who had experienced a Catholic upbringing. Linehan's classroom prank anecdote and his confession of cowardice parallel Ted's denial of 'kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse'. Merton's interview is indicative of Linehan's growing use of various media technologies, from radio and newspaper interviews to DVD commentaries, to supply an interpretative context for his work, particularly by situating it within an autobiographical narrative as an Irish migrant.

The sense of migrant liberation from Catholic Ireland was most apparent in *Father Ted*'s key satirical dimension, the recurrence of sexual themes in characters' dialogue and the dramatic situations they encounter 'despite themselves', so suggesting unconscious preoccupations that surface uncannily. The Catholic Church's regulation of sexuality has been discursively productive of sexual identities, practices and perversions (Foucault 1980). Inglis notes that, in contrast to Protestant individualist discourse, 'Irish Catholics tended to be constituted through the advice of priests and the practice of confession' (Inglis 1997, 10), which perpetuated the association of sexuality with sin. The paradox of Irish sexual 'repression', that sexuality is a permanent preoccupation, is regularly featured in *Father Ted*. Decrying sexual themes in the work of a visiting woman novelist ('And God created woman, 1:5), Mrs. Doyle launches into a litany of choice sexual quotes, from 'get your bollox out of my face' to 'ride me sideways' as an embarrassed Ted escorts her away. The latter was Pauline McLynn's unscripted addition (Linehan and Mathews 1999, 64), and Morgan's face clearly registers both surprise and barely suppressed laughter. The cast's performance in front of a studio audience often have an exuberance that additionally suggests a sense of migrant liberation beyond the potentially stifling cultural context of Ireland's Catholic heritage, an exuberance regularly intertwined with the running theme of 'protesting too much'.

However, *Father Ted*'s 'progressive' satirical potential should not be overstated. The only regular female character, Mrs Doyle's grotesque representation of the archetypal 'Irish Mammy' whose dedication to service is paradoxically tyrannical and overpowering may be seen to reproduce rather than challenge stereotypical constructions. Inglis and McKeogh (2012, 75) observe that in Catholic Ireland 'dignity, honour and respect' were attained through 'piety, humility, chastity, devotion and subservience'. For women, particularly, this was a basic cultural expectation and the Catholic Church's regulation of female sexuality in Ireland is well documented. Women were defined as wives/mothers or virgins/nuns, and the

Irish Constitution (Article 41.2) refers to women's 'duties in the home'. Arguably, Mrs Doyle evinces a distinctly Irish masculine dread of the seemingly loving mother as symbolically castrating hag; a stereotype apparent in Colm O'Regan's (2012) outwardly celebratory book about 'Irish Mammies' and Brendan O'Carroll's *Mrs Brown's Boys* (BBC1/RTÉ, 2011-14). In Irish popular culture the 'Mammy' is equally powerful and ridiculous, a paradox manifested in Mrs Doyle. Her catchphrase voices her servitude – 'go on, go on, go on' – but regularly results in harm. Shielding his cup from more tea, for instance, Ted is scalded ('Good Luck, Father Ted', 1: 1). Having encouraged Ted to sing with his 'lovely voice' she ridicules his efforts ('A Song for Europe', 2: 5). If Ted is Father and master of the house, he is repeatedly emasculated by this more one-dimensional representation of the perversity of Irish Catholic culture.

*Father Ted's* limitations as social satire are also evident in its reincorporation within Irish popular culture. For example, the 'Lovely Girls' competition ('Rock a hula Ted', 2: 6), a parody of the 'Rose of Tralee' contest, has become a standard reference for commentators on the latter. In the 'Rose of Tralee', young single women of Irish birth or extraction are interviewed about their family backgrounds, interests and career aspirations, then perform a song and/or dance 'turn'. *Father Ted's* 'lovely girls' slalom between cones and participate in a 'lovely laugh tie-break'. Ted remarks that winner 'Imelda has a lovely bottom', then, fearing female jealousy, adds that 'they all have lovely bottoms'. The frequent acknowledgement of Linehan and Matthews' parody in celebratory Irish commentary on the annual contest echoes the post-feminist emphasis on choice, together with the self-reflexive postmodern irony in contemporary media discourse. In the Irish *Sunday Times*, for example, Brenda Power acknowledged that the 'lovely girls' are 'a product of rose-tinted fantasy', but also rationalised their 'genuine enthusiasm' as 'a goodhumoured expression of post-feminist

confidence'; proof that 'it is possible to be a smart, accomplished and ambitious woman and still love shoes, pretty dresses and false eyelashes' (Power 2009).

Linehan frequently denies that *Father Ted* is satirical, proposing that 'we wanted the humour to be quite mild and gently mocking', but not 'satire as such in the political meaning' (Merton 2000). Insisting that 'the fact that they're Irish is just incidental' (Dixon and Falvey 1999, 59), his DVD commentaries also suggest some unease in his repeated use of the phrase 'concession to satire'. For example, while he remarks that the bitterly feuding couple who feign marital harmony whenever a priest appears was their 'only concession to satire' (Linehan 2007), he comments, on an episode in which Ted insults the Chinese community on Craggy Island, that this was one of 'few concessions to satire' (Linehan and Mathews 2012b). In the latter case the reference was to the extensive evidence of racism in Ireland at a time of growing immigration. While Dermot Morgan compared his own casting as Ted to Dr Mengele working in general practice (Rampton 1996), Linehan has repeatedly denied that the show has political intent, in an evident attempt to fend off potential appropriation and criticism.

Freud's (1927/ 1985) theory of humour is helpful in interpreting Linehan's denials in this respect. Freud theorised that humour is a temporary repudiation of reality licensed by the super-ego, the 'heir to the parental agency' (Freud 1927/ 1985, 430). By 'repudiating reality', gallows humour speaks 'kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego' (Freud 1927/ 1985., 430-431). Such humour offers the 'triumph of narcissism, the invulnerability of the ego', but the author of the humour is also acting as a 'superior adult' treating 'himself like a child' (Freud 1927/ 1985, 428-430). When Ted, the Father/child kicks Bishop Brennan and is exposed by the childlike Father Dougal there is a joyful indulgence of juvenile absurdity. But there is also a displacement of aggression against the Church onto a moment of aggression against its monstrous personification. Father Ted becomes a rebellious child against an

institution he represents – an impossible fantasy. And order is restored when the bishop, witnessing the photograph, delivers the final ‘kick up the arse’ to Ted. Thus Linehan’s reiterated denial of the show’s political intent is congruent with the manner in which its comedy affords the audience ‘pleasure’ which derives from a ‘heavily cued context’, marking the ‘loss of control’ as temporarily ‘playful’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 81).

*Father Ted*’s historical specificity in this regard is significant. It followed two major scandals in the Irish Catholic Church – the revelation of Bishop Casey’s secret love child in 1992 and the case of a paedophile priest, Father Brendan Smyth, who was convicted of numerous sexual offences in 1994. *Father Ted* concluded prior to the television documentary series *States of Fear* (RTÉ 1999), however, which detailed endemic institutional child abuse and cover-ups in the Irish Catholic Church that were confirmed by a subsequent Irish Government Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009). Linehan recently remarked that given ‘everything that’s come out, I’ve just come to really hate the church. I could never write Ted now’ (Gilbert 2013), but he also defends the series, arguing that it brings ‘a lot of people together’ and ‘lances a boil for Irish people [...] and I think that was only possible because we didn’t take the hard-edged satirical approach. We were just silly’ (Gilbert 2013).

Craggy Island thus became a metaphorical offshore space where a child’s eye view distils aspects of Irish culture and society into a dysfunctional scenario whose absurdity is comic rather than painful. At its core is a version of Irish masculinity marooned in a state of constant becoming, never realising a mature form of identity. However, its cultural reincorporation within Irish popular discourse is such that ‘a bit like *Father Ted*’ is a common expression of benign amusement, even in the wake of the abuse revelations. Linehan’s protestations indicate a desire to avoid debates about cultural representation and Irish identity so that the series becomes a metaphorical ‘kick up the arse’ while denying any

intent to offend, and, as such, a rather adolescent, boyish posture. There is, in his comments, a sense of liberation and creative freedom afforded by migration and the working environment of British broadcasting, but also a self-imposed limitation on expression, a refusal to take responsibility for interpretation of the work as anti-clerical.

### **‘I bet people think I can’t write a comedy on my own’**

Linehan became more self-consciously vocal about his self-promotion as a writer from his solo work on *The IT Crowd* onwards. The 2008 RTÉ documentary *Arts Lives: Funny Business* was a key moment in this respect. Its extended focus on his migrant life in London offers a narrative of his ‘working through’ an ambivalent relationship with Ireland as ‘home’. It features extensive scenes of Linehan on location in London and at *IT Crowd* studio recordings, orchestrating proceedings as writer/director and directly addressing the audience between takes. Linehan’s developing public profile, as manifested in the numerous interviews he subsequently gave, repeatedly highlights the theme of his liminal, migrant identity and its cultivation via British broadcasting.

His articulation of this identity is also depicted as a movement away from Mathews as a distinctly ‘Irish’ writing partner. In *Arts Lives* an explicit link is made between his admiration for Mathews and the homoerotic relationship between the English landowner Ralph (Charlie Higson) and his older Irish estate keeper Ted (Paul Whitehouse) in the series of sketches they wrote for *The Fast Show* (BBC 1994-2001). The comparison is suggested by Geoffrey Perkins (‘It’s Graham’s young love for the slightly older Arthur’), and confirmed by Linehan (‘If I’m Ralph then that makes sense’). Extending the Ted/Ralph analogy, his narrative of maturation and individuation is framed here and subsequently as akin to a painful marital dissolution: ‘[you must] tend it as you would tend any valuable relationship, you know, with a wife or anyone. [...] It’s a cliché but [relationships are] hard and [...] I wish I’d

realised that' (Regan 2013). Mathews is significantly cast in a somewhat subordinate role in this narrative, with Linehan as lead writer/editor/metaphorical husband. Linehan describes 'feeling more sure of myself, which was good long term for me' but 'fatal' to 'our writing relationship' (*Arts Lives*).

This shift is also presented as a desire to be publicly visible as a writer. The documentary's detailed chronicling of his working practices facilitates the discursive articulation of this more individuated identity:

The way I see the world is [laughs, looks away] .. and it's ridiculous. I shouldn't think this way 'cause it's not true, 'cause no-one thinks about the writer. [...] And that is a testament to [*The IT Crowd*] working in that people just think it kind of exists. [...]

But because I'm me and because your ego is what it is, I *bet* people think I can't write a comedy on my own. (*Arts Lives* 2008)

This simultaneous indulgence of and retreat from 'ego' is thus linked to a movement away from the 'Irishness' of *Father Ted* and Mathews.

The gendered language used in his account of his relationship with Mathews and the parallel with Ralph and Ted is notably reminiscent of the discursive construction of the Celt as feminised Other to Anglo-Saxon masculinity from Matthew Arnold onwards (Kiberd 1996, 30-32). Linehan's coming of age in London is thus a story of his masculinisation, his divorce from the – by implication – feminised partner in the marriage. The odd combination of homoeroticism and heterosexual analogy is quite pronounced. He told Paul Merton, for example, that Mathews has 'a vaguely effeminate laugh that just always cheers you up when you hear it' (Merton 2000). His masculinisation as a writer entails self-discipline, mastery of the craft of sitcom, while Mathews is associated with the relatively undisciplined extended



adolescence they shared in the quasi-marriage of their writing partnership, a marriage he outgrew:

He would hand me three pages in and it would be one paragraph that's germane to the plot and two and a half pages that were hysterically funny and nothing to do with anything. [...] I mean, I didn't think these things consciously, I just kind of realised it would work in these kind of ways. (Regan 2013)

'Making it' as a sitcom writer in London thus entails acquiring the approval of his British mentors and the 'live' sitcom audience on the one hand (as evident in the *Arts Lives* documentary), and a move away from the undisciplined/ feminised/Irish Mathews on the other in a progressively more assertive narrative of his masculinisation.

From their early success, Linehan and Mathews played out a kind of comic double act along these lines in interviews. A characteristic early interview concluded:

What's the difference between a stereotype and an archetype? "Basically," says Linehan, "Stereotypes aren't funny." "The comedy answer," Matthews butts in helpfully, "is that an archetype makes buildings . . . Oh no, that's an architect." His colleague fixes him with a withering chuckle - "I don't think you needed to explain that." (Thompson 1995)

Here, Mathews is playing the fool while Linehan attempts to protect their work from accusations of cultural stereotyping and mockingly rebukes him. In a DVD commentary on 'Tentacles of Doom' (2: 3), Linehan reminisces about the slapstick humour of *Bottom* (1991-1995) in which Rik Mayall falls downstairs, ending up 'headfirst in the toilet' (Linehan and Mathews 2012a). This is followed by Mathews' commencing an explanation of Dougal's 'childlike innocence' in questioning the 'basic tenets' of Christian belief, but slipping from

tenets to ‘tenants’ to ‘David Tennant’ (the actor), leading him to ‘... questions David Tennant about religion’. The improvised malapropism saves him from the trap of explaining and ‘killing’ the comedy. The juxtaposition of the enjoyment of pre-Oedipal anal regression in the *Bottom* reference, typical of male adolescent humour (King 2002, 73), and pre-Oedipal confusion and slippage in their verbal exchange is telling. It is a performative rekindling of their self-consciously silly, adolescent exchanges as young Irish migrant men in London. Linehan’s clarification characteristically restores order by situating the comedy within the self- and institutionally-imposed limits of mainstream broadcasting:

The various tenets of belief which we were always told to avoid [...] we didn’t really want to offend people. [...] We wanted people who were religious to watch the show.

Despite being the younger of the two, he assumes the ‘adult’ voice of authority, protecting both the work and their reputation.

Linehan’s many meta-textual commentaries on his work continue this narrative of maturation and learning the discipline of sitcom; resolving the tension between adolescent idleness as the path to creative discovery and meticulous mastery of a form. His repeated confession in interviews of difficulties in writing on his own performatively play out the tension between ‘boy’ and ‘man’, apprentice and master, and this tension is inextricably linked to his migrant identity as an Irish man in London.

He frequently describes a lengthy preparatory writing process involving idle perusing of the internet, jotting random ideas on cue cards etc. before plotting each episode, describing it as ‘do[ing] anything except work’, ‘playing with toys’ etc. (*Arts Lives* 2008). He plays out this tension between immaturity and maturity repeatedly in interviews and DVD commentaries, often presenting the process in scatological terms. While the ‘business of sitcoms’ is ‘like making a nice watch’ (*Arts Lives* 2008) he refers to the necessary ‘shitty first draft’ (Linehan

2010c) and first drafts as (presumably soiled) 'toilet paper' (Linehan 2010d). Thus the discipline of reaching a final draft must be preceded by a process of adolescent play that denies the potentially paralysing reality of work. The necessary isolation and adolescent regression of preparation in the nowhere/ everywhere of cyberspace are ultimately rewarded with studio audience applause, whose theatrical context is another liminal space.

This reiterated elaboration of adolescent play as the route to creative expression co-exists with an equally ritualistic confession of his failings as a writer. He frequently complains of finding it difficult to watch his own work, especially when undertaking commentaries immediately following production as the results are 'so far from the ideal' (Plume 2012) and 'I'm still seeing all the mistakes and the errors' (Linehan 2009). These confessions are an interesting illustration of what Fejes and Dahlstedt (2013) call the 'confessing society', the ways in which the Catholic ritual of confession pervades the discursive construction of contemporary identities. Culturally contextualising Linehan's relentless confessions, his self-criticism seems to be a constant search for the approval of the institution of British broadcasting and its audience: his identity as a writer requires the validation of the producers and audiences of idealised cultural texts from his own childhood and adolescence. Embedded within this is a discourse of masculinisation through a narrative of maturation and mastery as masculinisation, and this in turn is linked with the desire to be recognised, validated as a migrant writer in Britain.

Linehan's performance of a distinctly migrant Irish masculinity is evident in the way that he idealises the 'British' television that has enabled a creative development which he saw as being impossible in Ireland. In his comments on *Count Arthur Strong* (BBC2, 2013-2015), for example, remarks about the poignancy of Michael's vicarious rapprochement with his deceased father via his relationship with his father's former comedy partner echo remarks Linehan has made about the comedy that recreates 'moments when me and my Dad really

connected', rather than writing 'that makes Dad stand up and make a cup of tea' (Ricardo 2012). Such comments nostalgically evoke British sitcom as a vehicle of intergenerational father-son bonding through laughter in the context of the highly paternalistic and repressive Irish Catholic society of his childhood and adolescence in the 1970s and '80s. The retro feel of *Count Arthur Strong* continues Linehan's avowed aim, with *The IT Crowd*, to 'hark back to classic, sweet sitcoms like *Dad's Army*' (Anon 2006). His remark that 'we're facing all sorts of extinction threats, so why have a comedy that looks at the gloomy side of things? Bit of the Blitz spirit' (Anon 2006), suggests an ideal 'Britishness' encountered via his childhood experience of watching television, and informed by his induction into British television under the tutelage of avuncular mentors.

Such nostalgia also informs how Linehan has developed and framed his public persona as an inoffensive, rather boyish celebrity in British popular television. Linehan is thus comparable with (and of a similar generation to) other Irish men working in British comedy, such as Dara O' Briain and Ed Byrne. O' Briain has developed a popular persona through his stand-up and television work which is wryly humorous; a markedly unthreatening observer and commentator who is 'tickling the English' (O' Briain 2009). Like Terry Wogan, who migrated to London in the 1960s, such contemporary Irish men embody and perform a self-deprecating Irish migrant masculinity, frequently commenting on their welcome reception and appreciation by British audiences.

Linehan's commentary on his work thus illustrates how he has cultivated a betwixt and between identity as an Irish celebrity in Britain. His self-consciously juvenile humour and his description of his working practices suggest an interplay between the construction of comedy writing as a distinctly masculine, extended adolescent activity and migrant identity as a form of extended adolescence. Linehan's narrative of migration to London and his apprenticeship in British comedy, the childish humour and the figure of the priest as child-man in *Father*

*Ted*, the split from Mathews, the search for the approval of a British audience and his desire to avoid provocation, political or otherwise, are interrelated. They are biographically specific, but are also analogous to the changing political, social and industrial contexts of the past twenty five years. His movement into British broadcasting was facilitated by deregulation and independent sector growth in the 1980s and 1990s, while growing cooperation between the UK and Irish governments from 1993 onwards provided a less politically fraught context for the production, and the critical and popular reception of UK television drama with Irish themes. That Linehan's career is a significant indicator of both the coincidence and linkage between these developments is apparent in his presentation to the British Queen prior to an Irish Presidential visit in March 2014 as an exemplar of Irish success in the cultural industries in Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Held on Inis Mór island since 2007, the carnivalesque annual fan 'Tedfest' is widely celebrated in Irish media.

<sup>2</sup> Morgan had earlier created a comic priest persona, Father Brian Trendy for the RTÉ television show *The Live Mike* (1979-1982). His RTÉ Radio One satirical sketch show *Scrap Saturday* (1989-1991) featured lampoons of key Irish political figures.