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First Steps in Building an Industry (1950s–80s)

“You don’t need a million dollars and the London Philharmonic to make a cartoon film.

You just need a lot of paper and a black marker!”

— HARRY HESS, ANIMATOR/LECTURER

IRELAND IS NOW THE WORLD’S GO-TO place for preschool TV animation. How did this happen? In the 1950s and 1960s, three developments stand out in the development of the Irish audiovisual industry and, by extension, in the seeding of the Irish animation to come. The first was the establishment of Ardmore Studios in 1958; the second was the setting up of a national broadcaster, Radio Telefís Éireann, in 1961. The third was the decision by German animator Hans Fischerkoesen to open an animation studio in Ireland in 1962.

Ardmore was a purpose-built film studio. Planned to kick-start the Irish film industry using Irish talent, Ardmore was not founded in the middle of the cultural revival like the Abbey Theatre in the 1910s. Almost immediately the studio looked abroad for projects to service rather than commissioned Irish ones. In fairness, that is because

there were still no commissioned Irish films. So Ardmore wasn't a major benefit to Irish writers, directors and producers. That said, Ardmore did put filmmaking in the national consciousness. For the studio, it was employment outcomes that mattered and not cultural ones. The crews of the camera, electrical, set, costume and catering departments did grow in size, and they all gained valuable experience. There was no animation department in Ardmore.

If the state had a weary disregard for a home-made audiovisual industry, it had to give ground with the advent of television. The fact was that in the early 1960s, the government was guilty of neglect, failing as it was to provide the Irish public with a national broadcaster. At this time, every European state except Greece, Iceland and Ireland had a state television company. Well, the Republic of Ireland anyway. BBC Northern Ireland began in 1955, and Ulster Television transmitted for the first time in 1959. These two stations were an embarrassment for the southern state. Eventually, the government had to create an Irish television company - Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). The station began broadcasting on 31 December 1961, and the Irish Republic, at last, to paraphrase Robert Emmet, took its place among the broadcasting nations of the Earth.

The fear now wasn't about the social or cultural content but that the technical quality of Irish television programmes might not be excellent. RTÉ was sandwiched between two English-speaking television superpowers, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and American mega-corporations on the other side of the Atlantic. These companies were further advanced in programme making than RTÉ, and their shows looked very good. So RTÉ - the new kid on the block - was worried that it would look poor, inferior and unprofessional, technologically speaking, and by extension this would make Ireland look poor, inferior and unprofessional. The station's solution was to create programmes with top-end equipment. They brought in equipment as good as any competitor and better than some. No expense was spared in designing the campus in Donnybrook, Dublin. Sizeable administration offices were built, as well as state-of-the-art studios complete with the best cameras, lights and microphones. There was an

excellent outside broadcast unit and brilliant sound recording and editing facilities. Even ancillary service departments were created. RTÉ had its own film laboratory, a machine shop to repair equipment and its own printing press.

The broadcast quality was high, but the quality of the content, for the most part, could have been higher. Consider that the ultra-modern studio complex in Donnybrook had no rehearsal space for actors! Was this because actors didn't count because they weren't technicians? Money for the latest gear could be found but never for an extra scriptwriter when more than one was needed. There were good talk shows for sure, but then the Irish can, well, talk for Ireland. But the drama? Drama production in RTÉ succeeded, and there were some successes, of course, when writers, directors and actors distinguished themselves beyond the call of duty.

As for animation production – despite its policy of buying all this top-end gear – there was, as in Ardmore, no animation department at RTÉ.

In 1962 six students from Limerick Art College were invited by the well-established Fischerkoesen Studio to study animation at their base in Bad Godesberg, Germany. The company saw an opening in the Irish commercials market and bought a country mansion near Rathkeale, County Limerick, as an Irish base. The students returned to Ireland to find that Fischerkoesen had decided that they had made a mistake in choosing Limerick as a base. Despite having Shannon airport nearby, Limerick was in the 1960s a long way from being the hub for media it is today. As RTÉ was about to be inaugurated and all the advertising agencies were in Dublin, Fischerkoesen now saw that the capital was the place to be. So, the company set up animation equipment and a camera in 7 Mount Street, Dublin, and the Limerick students decamped there. The company also put in place Gunther Wulff as animation director. Gunther, a German, was recruited into Hitler's Wehrmacht as a boy towards the end of World War II. The German army coloured his view on nationalism and war. He found a home in Ireland where nationalism was less about Ireland conquering the world and more about the country qualifying for the football World Cup. Fischerkoesen also gave the Irish public the first Irish animation

characters, the Lyons Tea Minstrels. Róisín Hogan – one of the six Limerick students initially trained in Germany – designed the minstrels for the famous commercial. She also animated the commercial. Róisín was always fascinated by “the possibility of the moving image” and, as a freelancer, would later follow Gunther Wulff to a new studio he was to set up in Bray. Róisín turns up later in our story as an educator, where she again made animation history.

The Lyons Tea Minstrels are politically incorrect today but were still a first in Ireland’s animation history. Like Disney’s pioneering *Three Little Pigs*, the minstrels stay in character, that is they perform, dance and sing in character, and when all is said and done, the ad is less objectionable than W. D. Griffith’s 1916 classic *The Birth of a Nation*. The minstrels and their godawful signature tune have endured, locked into the collective memory of the Irish television audience of that generation. That



Lyons Tea Commercial.

Lyons Tea commercial is as important as the famous Harp Lager ad with the line “And the way she might look at you” or the Kerrygold classic with the question, “Who’s taking the horse to France?” Gunther Wulff directed the Lyons Tea advertisement.

After Fischerkoesen wound up its Irish operation, Gunther stayed on. He set up his animation rostrum camera and studio as Gunther Wulff Services Ltd to shoot titles, credits and commercials in Bray, next to Ardmore Studios. He was a jack of all trades. His building by the gates of the Ardmore campus was a one-stop shop of sorts. He set up a lab for developing film as well as an animation studio. He shot both cel-animation and stop-frame model animation, making Ardmore animation-friendly. Gunther was also a very amiable man. Over his career, he encouraged people in animation, like Róisín, but also anyone who worked with him, people like Paddy Breathnach, who has gone on to make a name for himself as a live-action director, cameraman Des Whelan and Sé Merry Doyle, editor and documentary maker. Gunther’s resourcefulness and

excellent outside broadcast unit and brilliant sound recording and editing facilities. Even ancillary service departments were created. RTÉ had its own film laboratory, a machine shop to repair equipment and its own printing press.

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