

Not so clean sweep

Tony Canavan

THE IRISH Sweepstake which ran from 1930 until the arrival of the National Lottery ('the Lotto') in 1985 was one of the most successful Irish businesses ever. Not only did it make certain individuals rich, but sweepstake money also helped other businesses develop such as Waterford glass. Added to this it was an international phenomenon that was celebrated in Hollywood movies and gave a new meaning to the old saying, 'the luck of the Irish'. And the amazing thing is that it was actually illegal in other countries and relied on a smuggling network established by the IRA to sell tickets abroad and get the money back to Ireland.

This all makes for a sensational story and it would have been easy to write a racy, sensationalist account of the Irish Sweepstake 1930-1987. However it was also a very serious enterprise which supported hospitals throughout the Irish state. Coleman is an academic historian who

approaches the history of the sweepstake in a matter-of-fact manner. She sets the scene by explaining that lotteries of one form or another had existed in Ireland from as early as 1621 and from the eighteenth century onwards it was not unusual for lotteries or sweepstakes (that is a lottery based on the outcome of a horserace) to be used to support hospitals, even at a time when lotteries were technically illegal. It was their popularity and the need to finance hospitals, most of which were run by religious orders and voluntary institutions, which led the government to pass an act in 1930 establishing the Irish Sweepstake.

While the idea was welcomed in most quarters, interestingly it was the Protestant churches which led the opposition to it on the basis that their hospitals could not accept money raised through gambling. However such opposition did not last long and soon tickets for the sweepstake were on sale not just in Ireland but also in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. In the following years winning tickets turned up in places as far away as Canada and South Africa as well. No one could have foreseen the sweepstake's success. By the mid-1930s it was the biggest lottery in the world and routinely handed out prizes worth hundreds of thousands of pounds each. In Ireland the Hospitals Trust Ltd, which ran the sweepstake, was one of the most wealthy companies in the state with influence in the highest echelons of government and impacting on the wider economy.

While Coleman does not lay stress on it, it is difficult to