

A close-up portrait of Frank McNally, a middle-aged man with light brown hair and glasses, wearing a patterned shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

THE IRISH TIMES



AN IRISHMAN'S DIARY

Frank McNally

IRISH TIMES BOOKS

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Introduction

McNally, Frankly 23 things you should know about *The Irish Times* diarist, herein celebrated with 23 of his eclectic Irishman's diaries.

1 – McNally's "Irishman's Diary" has appeared four days a week since May 2006. In his first column, he confessed he had spent much of his goddaughter's confirmation ceremony keeping up with the Monaghan-Armagh game (Ulster championship first round), a *leit motif* in his subsequent work.

2 - Inheritor of the mantle of Quidnunc.

3 - Monaghan of-the-stony- grey-soil- man.

4 - Of farmer stock, country boy of Carrickmacross, "the place with the Guard on the street".

5 – Listophile.

6 - Champion of the study and enduring legacy of the "unholy and divided trinity" that was Brian O'Nolan /Myles na gCopaleen/ Flann O'Brien, once of this parish.

7 - Cyclophile, like, he claims, Samuel Beckett. The "molecular theory" suggests he is among those whose "personalities [have] mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them ... half people and half bicycles."

8 - Runner of (half) marathons, though beginning to feel his age.

9 - Has six siblings, three children, a put-upon wife, although he is definitely a new man.

10 - Sucker for abandoned cats – guilt-tripped, reluctant ailurophile – Pete Briquette and Jerry, albeit poor mousers.

11 - Kilmainham now his home.

12 - Refugee from the ranks of "lowly civil servants ", who nearly became a Garda.

13 - Devotee of Patrick Kavanagh. "*My father played the melodeon / My mother milked the cows, / And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned / On the Virgin Mary's blouse.*"

14 - Ageing rocker. Electric Picnic, Leonard Cohen.

15 - Lover of Paris in the springtime.

16 - Maker of hay.

17 - Hurler on the ditch.

18 - Great fashioner of purses out of sows' ears.

19 - Not Kevin Myers.

20 - Football fan, in its several guises, follower and player (though less of the latter these days).

21 - Collector of euphemisms, pomposities, clichés, excuses, nonsense and words. Defender of the correct use of grammar and language. Quite lost the run of himself when he discovered he was cited by OED as an authoritative source for the use of “losing the run of oneself”.

22 - Catechist of Fianna Fail (“Q. What is a bad confession? A. One that’s forced out of you at the tribunals, or on live television. Q. Does Limbo still exist? A - Yes, it’s where Micheál Martin is)

23 – Everyman.

Patrick Smyth, The Irish Times.

Patrick Kavanagh and the Dalkey land case

April 10th, 2008

He seems to have gone unnoticed amid the general obsession with Pat and Kathy Kenny. But among the more unusual visitors to the Dalkey land dispute case at the High Court this week has been the ghost of Patrick Kavanagh, writes **Frank McNally**.

I spotted him straight away, the first morning. In fact, I had no choice. He stood on my foot with his size-12 hobnailed boots as he shuffled past me in the packed public gallery, searching for a non-existent seat. And it was reassuring to see him, despite the pain, if only because he assuaged my own guilt about being there.

There seemed no justifiable reason for attending the case, other than pure nosiness. I had just happened to be passing when I saw the media scrum outside, and couldn't resist dropping in for a few minutes. But the feeling of prurience was still nagging me when Kavanagh appeared.

Then I remembered his famous sonnet, *Epic*, and its opening lines: "I have lived in important places, times/ When great events were decided: who owned/ That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land/ Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims." The similarities between the Gorse Hill sage and the events Kavanagh described were striking. In fairness, there have been no pitchforks used in Dalkey (not that we've heard, anyway). And at 0.2 acres, the disputed piece of rock there is closer to three-quarters of a rood than a half.

Also, on a technical point, there are no "gorse hills" in Kavanagh country, only hills covered with "whins". But still, the resemblances between the two scenarios were uncanny. They became more so when counsel spoke of raised fists, angry words, gates being closed on people's arms, and so on.

Another verse from the poem came back to me: "I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'/ And old McCabe, stripped to the waist, seen/ Step the plot defying blue cast-steel - / 'Here is the march along these iron stones'."

I noticed Kavanagh taking copious notes, no doubt for use in a future poem. And yet it was hard to imagine how the evidence would help him improve on his original, unless he were simply to relocate the action from Inniskeen to suburban south Dublin.

This might be useful, in fact. I have since discovered that, in its poetry notes for students, the popular website skoool.ie cites the lines "That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land/

Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims" as an example of - and I quote: "the loneliness, conflicts, and frustrations of rural life".

Fair enough. But it may be worth reminding Dublin kids that, despite their rugby schools and their hoity-toity lifestyles, they are not necessarily above this sort of thing. If the High Court case serves any useful purpose, it shows that Epic's themes are universal, not just applicable to muck savages from Monaghan.

Of course, Kavanagh makes this point himself when he recalls, in the poem's conclusion, that the Duffy/McCabe row happened in 1938, as supposedly greater events were unfolding elsewhere: "That was the year of the Munich bother. Which/ Was most important? I inclined/ To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin/ Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind./ He said: I made the Iliad from such/ A local row. Gods make their own importance."

Yes, this is the real message of the Dalkey case for we mortals: that not even the gods are immune from neighbourly tensions. That, on the contrary, passionate boundary disputes can just as easily occur in the vicinity of Mount Olympus (or Killiney Hill, as it's known locally).

I didn't see Homer's ghost in the public gallery, by the way. But I could easily have missed him. The case is being heard in the High Court's new rooms at the Distillery Building, and I've heard there are spirits all over the place in there. (It's not true, however, that juries hearing cases on the premises can reach verdicts on the basis of 40 per cent proof; although I have previously proposed such a reform as a means of dramatically reducing the courts backlog.)

Anyway, reassured that my presence in the gallery was motivated by more than vulgar curiosity, but was rather an exercise in better understanding mankind, I sat through all the gory details that the lawyers insisted on revealing. And when the hearing finally ended, I waited at the door for a chance to meet my hero. No, not Pat Kenny. Kavanagh, I mean.

I was a bit nervous, given his fierce reputation. But I remembered that in another poem, he once invited us: "If ever you go to Dublin town, in a hundred years or so, inquire for my ghost on Baggot Street. . ." The specified period had not elapsed, I knew, and this was the wrong part of town. Even so, I hoped to find him in a mellow mood.

I was not disappointed. No doubt buoyed by the evidence that *Epic* was holding its relevance so well 70 years after the events that inspired it, he was in the best of form. So when I blurted out something about how his poetry had touched all our lives, he thanked me warmly, shook my hand, and went on his way.

Then he paused and turned to me again. "Speaking of being touched," he said. "Any chance you could lend me a few bob?"

A History of Ireland in 100 Euphemisms

March 24th, 2011

1. Soft day, thank God.
2. Sorry for your troubles.
3. I'm grand, thanks.
4. An bhfuil cead agam dul amach?
5. The first official language.
6. The Soldiers of Destiny.
7. The night before Larry was stretched.
8. The Kilmainham Minuet.
9. The harp that once in Tara's halls.
10. Our gallant allies in Europe.
11. Public house.
12. I must have had a bad pint last night.
13. He's fond of a drop.
14. He's a great man for the drink.
15. Under the influence.
16. While at the wheel of a mechanically propelled vehicle.
17. I knew him when he didn't have an arse in his trousers.
18. That'll soften his cough.
19. There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind.
20. I have to see a man about a dog.
21. He digs with the other foot.

22. Sally O'Brien and the way she might look at you.
23. Himself.
24. Herself.
25. The Quare Fella.
26. A belt of the crozier.
27. Foul play is not suspected.
28. Gardaí are pursuing a definite line of inquiry.
29. Heated exchanges in the Dáil yesterday.
30. Certain sections of the media.
31. The nerves are at her.
32. He's a bit touched.
33. She's away with the fairies.
34. Did you shift last night?
35. He's a bit failed.
36. He's shook.
37. He's bet.
38. They've sent for the priest.
39. He's gone to a better place.
40. A bit of a shemozzle on the edge of the square.
41. It was a fair shoulder, ref.
42. A robust challenge there by Páidi Ó Sé.
43. The dead man was known to gardaí.
44. They were engaged in an altercation outside the pub.
45. A man is helping gardaí with their inquiries.
46. The national question.

47. He's sound (on the national question).
48. Our fetters rent in twain.
49. The Wild Geese.
50. The Year of the French.
51. The Races of Castlebar.
52. Black 47.
53. The Black Diaries.
54. Black and Tans.
55. The Black Maria.
56. They don't sow potatoes nor barley nor wheat, but there's gangs of them digging for gold in the street.
57. It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.
58. The Troubles.
59. The Emergency.
60. The dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone.
61. We will not stand (idly) by.
62. The Provisionals.
63. P O'Neill.
64. The North.
65. The Wee North.
66. The black north.
67. The northern part of this island.
68. The Two Communities.
69. The Six Counties.
70. These islands.

71. Stroke City.

72. The Fourth Green Field.

73. The Heavy Gang.

74. “No doubt many of you are familiar with an expression in some parts of the country where an outsider is described as a ‘blow-in’. Some of these are blow-ins. Now as far as we’re concerned, they can blow out, or blow up.”

75. A thundering disgrace.

76. The Border Fox.

77. On mature recollection.

78. Exercising our right to

walk the queen’s highway.

79. Traditional route to church.

80. They haven’t gone away, you know.

81. A revolutionary new training regime designed by her husband Erik de Bruin.

82. A complex but legitimate business arrangement with Ben Dunne.

83. “There’s a little something for you.” “Thanks, big fella.”

84. Deceptively spacious two-bedroom house in

upcoming area. Some refurbishment needed. Guide price €1.2 million.

85. The Galway Tent.

86. Up every tree in North Dublin.

87. Dig-out.

88. Whip-around.

89. Light-touch regulation.

90. Losing the run of ourselves.

91. The economic fundamentals are sound.

- 92. Soft landing.
- 93. Sub-prime.
- 94. Biffo.
- 95. Fully funded until into the middle of next year.
- 96. We have turned the corner.
- 97. We are where we are.
- 98. Nasal congestion.
- 99. We have not asked the IMF for a facility.
- 100. Ireland is open for business.

Mary O'Rourke's Election Catechism

January 21st, 2011

Mary O'Rourke has called on Fianna Fáil to draw up a “catechism” for election candidates (Home News, January 20th). She envisages a handy question-and-answer booklet that would help canvassers deal with the issues of party doctrine and Government policy most likely to arise on the doorsteps. I’ve taken the liberty of writing a rough draft.

Q. Who made the world?

A. God made the world.

Q. Who made the global financial melt-down?

A. God made that too. And Lehman Brothers.

Q. Did God make us?

A. Yes He did, in the Garden of Eden.

Q. But where are we now?

A. We are where we are.

Q. What happened to the Garden of Eden?

A. It was rezoned for residential use and bought for €500 million by one of the Anglo Ten. Then the crash happened. Nama owns it now.

Q. Does God want to punish us?

A. No, God still loves us. It’s the electorate wants to punish us.

Q. How?

A. By making us burn in hell-fire for all eternity, if possible.

Q. Why do we never see God?

A. Because He is a spirit.

Q. Why do we never see Brian Cowen, in between leadership crises?

A. Because he's so busy running the country.

Q. Are there two persons in the one Taoiseach?

A. It increasingly looks that way.

Q. Is that what we call a “mystery”?

A. Yes, it is.

Q. Why did we bail out Anglo?

A. That's a mystery too.

Q. Are we all sinners?

A. Yes we are all sinners. Even holier-than-thou members of the Opposition are sinners.

Q. Are some sins bigger than others?

A. Yes, the really big ones – such as robbing the Northern Bank, or having friends in 1980s Moscow, or taking a shilling off the pension in 1924 – are called “mortal” sins. Smaller sins are known as “venial”. In some cases, these would not have been sins at all if it hadn't been for the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

Q. Can we be forgiven our sins?

A. Yes, if we make a good confession and if we argue convincingly that other people would have done exactly the same thing in our position.

Q. What is a bad confession?

A. One that's forced out of you at the tribunals, or on live television.

Q. Apart from confession, how can we achieve salvation?

A. Through prayer and good works.

Q. What are examples of good works?

A. Attending funerals, fixing pot-holes, advising on planning applications, getting Mary a job in the new factory, etc.

Q. If you haven't performed enough good works, can you still be saved on the last day?

A. Maybe if you pray a lot.

Q. Do we have guardian angels to watch over us and help us do the right thing?

A. Yes, but they never said anything about Lehman Brothers.

Q. If we pass though the valley of the shadow of death, fearing no evil, is that still a legitimate mileage claim?

A. Yes, if it was part of the journey between the Dáil and your normal place of residence.

Q. What are the most important commandments for election candidates?

A. 1. There is but one vote and thou or thy electoral agent shall not be caught casting a second one. 2. Thou shall not covet thy running mate's half of the constituency. 3. Thou shalt not kill thy running mate, unless thou findeth him canvassing where he's not allowed.

Q. When do you require the sacrament of extreme unction?

A. When it's the 14th count and you're one of two remaining contenders for the last seat, and the other is from Labour or Sinn Féin, and you're now depending on a 60 per cent transfer from the last eliminated candidate, who was running for the "People Before Profit" alliance.

Q. Apart from God, did anybody else make me?

A. Yes, the party helped make you – and don't forget it. Despite everything, the party can unmake you too.

Q. What is purgatory?

A. Purgatory is the thought of Enda Kenny being taoiseach for five years.

Q. And hell?

A. Hell is the prospect of Enda being succeeded by Leo Varadkar and Fine Gael running Ireland for a generation.

Q. Does Limbo still exist?

A. Yes, it's where Micheál Martin is.

Q. When will the last day and judgment be?

A. March 11th.

Q: Is that the only poll that matters?

A. Yes it is.

Q. Whatever happens then, will Fianna Fáil rise from the dead and ascend into heaven, eventually?

A. Let's hope so.

Q. Or will we henceforth be seated on the right-hand side of the Ceann Comhairle (as he looks at it), for ever and ever, amen?

A. Try not to think about it. Just keep canvassing.

If the 1916 Proclamation had been written by lawyers

March 22nd, 2008

If the Easter Proclamation had been written by lawyers instead of poets:

Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, our client (hereinafter called "Ireland"), through us, subpoenas her children to attend the general vicinity of the flag, forthwith or immediately (whichever is sooner); and strikes for her freedom.

We are instructed that, having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation (which shall be referred to as the "Irish Republican Brotherhood", although that may or may not be its real name, and either way, nothing in this document should be taken as confirmation that any such grouping exists), and through her open and perfectly legal military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army; having patiently perfected her discipline; having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself; she now seizes that moment.

We are further instructed that, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, in case her allegedly gallant allies think better of becoming joint parties in this action, she strikes in full confidence of victory; or failing victory, in the confidence that any reasonable jury will subsequently acquit.

Our client submits that the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, is sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right, *res ipsa loquitur*, by a foreign people and government (hereinafter called the "defendant") has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people.

In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: we refer you to the cases of O'Neill v Bagenal (1598); McCracken v the Crown (1798); Bold Fenian Men v Britannia (1867), et al. Six times during the last three hundred years they have asserted it in arms; although we would stress that none of the signatories of this document was present on any of those previous occasions, and all can produce alibis, if necessary.

Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, our client hereby proclaims the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and pledges her life and the lives of her comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, of its

exaltation among the nations, and of its right to use capital letters on the phrase "Sovereign Independent State" for no good reason.

The Irish Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens. However, in common with all guarantees, this is subject to conditions. Citizens contemplating litigation against the future Republic are advised to familiarise themselves with Appendix I of this document (available on request from our offices), particularly pages 19-42, which detail certain exceptions to the warranty.

The Republic further declares its "resolve" - citizens should note that this is aspirational and non-binding - to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Without prejudice to existing insurance policies undertaken in the secular sphere, our client hereby places the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing she invokes upon her arms, and she prays that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, rapine, or anything else that would invalidate the policies aforementioned.

In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

However, our client would like to point out that when she refers to "children", both here and in paragraph two above, she does not mean people under 18. We are instructed that "children" is a poetic term: meaning in this context "adults", preferably male and with weapons training. Further to paragraph two, our client urges parents to keep minors well away from the flag, now and until further notice, and regrets any confusion caused by her summons. The Republic accepts no liability for personal injury, loss of property, theft, or damage arising from this Rising. Past performance may not be a guide to future returns, but military experts have advised us that it probably is. Therefore, notwithstanding the name given to this event, participants are advised that their fortunes may fall as well as rise.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government:

Thomas J. Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, P.H. Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, Joseph Plunket, Solicitors at Law.

In Memory of Gary Sheehan

December 16th, 2011

If my Leaving Cert class had had a “boy most likely to succeed” award, it would probably have gone to Gary Sheehan. Certainly he was the nearest thing I had to a role model. He was a year or more older than me, which made a big difference then. But he was also made of leadership material, the obvious choice always for class prefect.

He was an athlete as well, famously scoring two goals in the 1978 Monaghan minor county final in which Carrick Emmets lowered the colours of the mighty ’Blayney Faughs, an event sadly rare in the annals. Most importantly of all, to me, he was popular with women. He seemed to have everything girls wanted. And for those of us who had none of it, he was a man to watch and copy.

We were never best friends or anything. Although our homes were barely a mile apart on the same side of Carrickmacross, he was a townie and I was from the country. There was a subtle social divide, a farmer/cowboy thing. Even so, we got on well and for various reasons he was present at several key moments of my life.

The only team sport medal I ever won was in a five-a-side soccer tournament, playing alongside Gary. We were also members of an Irish debating team (God knows why – my Irish was terrible even then) that represented our school against the local, vastly superior, St Louis girls, who duly handed us our rhetorical arses on a plate. The humiliation still burns.

Crucially too, Gary was in the near vicinity – I’ll spare the details – on the occasion that I first kissed a girl. For readers under 30, I should explain that this was an earth-shattering event back then: a bit like losing your virginity now. Anyway, Gary was my corner-man. And, as in the soccer tournament, he provided important advice on tactics and positioning.

I was a clueless 16-year-old when I did the Leaving and so repeated, not picking up many clues in the process. Gary repeated too, but then got a job and left mid-year. The job was in Galway, where months later he would host an unforgettable party on the weekend of the Pope’s visit. After that, I didn’t see him again for a few years.

I drifted out of school eventually and into a lowly civil service job (my Irish didn’t allow anything better), spending my first summer in a Dublin office rather than a hay-field, and hating it. Journalism was an impossible dream: I knew nobody who moved in those circles. But anything would have been better than where I was, so I applied for various other jobs: equally low paid but with less of the feeling of a life sentence about them.

Unfortunately, it was the 1980s now. Jobs of any kind were scarce and getting scarcer. Sensible civil servants were staying where they were. And I stayed too, for a while. So that I was an even more bored civil servant when, one day, I saw an ad for Garda recruits and thought: why not? In retrospect, I don't know which of us had a luckier escape, me or the Garda Síochána. We would have been very wrong for each other, I fear. But those were desperate times for both of us, clearly. So, to my own surprise, I made it through the exam and interviews and the informal chat with the home-town superintendent who vouches for you not being a known corner-boy.

Then, in the spring of 1983, I was called for a medical in the Phoenix Park. And who should I meet there but the bould Gary. As it happened, his father was a Garda detective, so maybe this had always been the plan. I suspect otherwise, somehow. My feeling was that he had wanted to be something else in life. I may be wrong.

Anyway, we greeted each other like lost brothers and compared notes about football and women. I was running a lot at the time and fit as a whippet. Whereas – amusingly for me – Gary was worried that his fitness levels had fallen below what was needed for training college. It was the last secret he ever confided in me, before we said “see you in Templemore, maybe” and went our separate ways.

I never did see him in Templemore. Soon afterwards, I sat an open civil service exam called the Adult EO. It seemed designed for my special needs, being a combination of short English essays and an aptitude test based on ability to process useless information. Irish was secondary. So I aced it and got a promotion that made civil service life bearable for a while. By the time the guards called me up – many months later – I was no longer available.

Gary had been called much earlier – being a patently better candidate – although I didn't know this at the time. Then one dark December evening, 28 years ago today, I watched the evening news on RTÉ, which led with the sensational freeing in a Leitrim woods of the kidnapped supermarket executive Don Tidey, after a search that had gripped Ireland for weeks.

Two men had died in the shoot-out, however – a Garda and a soldier. And as I watched, rapt, I heard the newsreader say that their bodies could not be recovered until morning, because the IRA gang was still in the area and the woods were surrounded.

In fact, the kidnappers were already gone. But I remember being struck by the awful heroism of two young men giving their lives for somebody they didn't know, somebody deemed by society to be more strategically important than them. And then I remember thinking about the bodies lying in the forest overnight, and the loneliness – on top of grief – that the parents must have felt for their dead boys.

That was before I realised I knew one of them too. When my family rang me with the news, it was the first time I realised Gary had even made it to Templemore. He was still in the middle of the training that had worried him (the award for best recruit is named after him now) when pressed into the countrywide man-hunt.

Unfortunately for him, he was the one who found the hide-out in the woods. And I learned later that, by pure coincidence, our home-town superintendent – the man who had interviewed me months earlier – was close by him. He was the man who knelt and whispered an act of contrition in Gary's ear.

I know my friend was just one of more than 3,700 people killed during the Troubles (Private Patrick Kelly was the soldier who lost his life that day). But even though we grew up in a Border town, he was the only one of those thousands I knew well.

Every year around this time, I wonder what he would be doing now were he still alive. And of course I think about how, but for a twist of fate, it could have been me.

Bertie and the 12 Apostles: A reading from the Gospel according to St. Luke's

September 28th, 2006

And lo it came to pass that in the second year of the reign of King Albert, Bertie called unto himself his disciples, and from among them chose 12; or, to be more exact, they chose themselves.

And when they offered him financial assistance, he at first rebuffed them, sending them forth unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But in the event, the apostles went not unto the Sheep, but unto the Goat (bar and lounge), where they hatched a plot to help him anyway. For the kingdom of Bertie was at hand.

And the names of the Twelve were these: James (the Just); Joseph, son of Zebedee; Fintan; Charlie the publican; Padraig; Paddy the Drumcondra-ite; Paddy, also named "the plasterer"; Des; David; Dermot; Barry; and Mick.

And Bertie said unto them: "I will make you fishers of men." But he added quickly that this was just a metaphor, and that if there were any marine jobs going, such as the chairmanship of Dublin Port, they would be filled strictly on merit.

Quoting scripture (Matthew 10:18-22), he also said, ominously: "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues. And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. And ye shall be hated of all men for my sake; but he that endureth to the end shall be saved."

Then, on a slightly lighter note, Bertie gave the Twelve some lifestyle advice: "Carry neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your pockets. Nor wear ye two coats, unless at least one be an anorak." For this was the way of Bertie, who - even to this day - liveth humbly. And so they went forth together among the Faganites, casting out unclean spirits and drinking only ale.

Now it came to pass that in the last year of the reign of Albert, the tribes of Hibernia, who had long wandered in the economic wilderness (beyond the shores of Georgelee), began to hear of the great things that Bertie was doing.

A vast multitude gathered to acclaim him, whereof Bertie said unto the servants (who were also called "Department of Finance officials"): give ye them food to eat. But the servants said: "We have here but five loaves and two fishes, for this is only 1994 and Exchequer

returns are still modest." And Bertie took unto himself the loaves and fishes and fed the multitudes, saying afterwards that there was plenty more from whence that cometh.

Some time later, Bertie sent his disciples into a boat, and went up a mountain to pray. But a storm came and a great Rainbow appeared in the sky. The ship was tossed on the waves, so that his disciples were sore afraid, until Bertie came upon them again and walked on water. And lo, the storm subsided, and the Rainbow disappeared.

Henceforth, even greater multitudes acclaimed him, gathering wherever he went, that they might only touch the hem of his garment. And Bertie went among them, performing miracles and shaking many hands. So that the scribes and pharisees saith: "Who is this man, that cureth the sick, that maketh the blind to see again, and that performeth the official reopening of Lazarus's tomb? Surely he be not as good as all that?" And lo, it came to pass that the scribes and pharisees heard of his deeds among the Faganites and of the Goat sacrifice offered in his honour. This was to fulfil the scripture: "Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, to give testimony".

And the scribes and pharisees came unto Bertie, saying: "Wherfore taketh thou money from these people? Amounteth that not to a transgression of the ways of the elders?" And Bertie said unto them: "Woe unto you, scribes and pharisees, ye that would count my communion money but see not the confirmation money in thine own eyes. Woe unto you, ye pied pipers! Get thee hence."

And saying this, he went down into the valley of Sharon, which is also called the valley of Dobbo. And appearing before a great multitude, he saith of his apostles: "I was hungry and they gave me food; I was thirsty and they gave me drink; I was naked and they clothed me. But verily I say unto you, they neither sought nor were given anything in return." And so saying, he went forth again to await the verdict of the people, who on the whole were prepared to cut him some slack, apart from one or two shouts of "Release Ivor".

Now there was called at this time a meeting of the Sanhedrin (literally the "Progressive Democrats"). These were the chief priests and judges of the Hibernian people, who gathered periodically on a place called the Moral High Ground.

A History of Ireland in 100 Excuses

February 9th, 2012

1. Original sin.
2. The weather.
3. The 800 years of oppression.
4. A shortage of natural resources.
5. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak
6. Red hair.
7. The Celtic temperament.
8. He stole Trevelyan's corn/So the young might see the morn.
9. It was taught badly in schools.
10. The Modh Coinníollach.
11. Peig.
12. The questions didn't suit you.
13. No-one shouted stop.
14. Johnny made me do it.
15. Oh no! 'Twas the truth in her eyes ever dawning/That made me love Mary the Rose of Tralee.
16. That fella has a bad drop in him.
17. Her father didn't like me anyway.
18. I have to see a man about a dog.
19. Don't mind me - I haven't been myself lately.
20. And then he lost the head altogether.
21. Lehman Brothers.

22. The Christian Brothers.
23. Biddy Early.
24. Benchmarking.
25. We only did it for the crack.
26. April Fool's Day.
27. Halloween.
28. Stag parties.
29. The stony grey soil of Monaghan.
30. The rocks of Bawn.
31. The hungry grass.
32. The pipes (the pipes) were calling.
33. And that's the cruel reason why I left old Skibbereen.
34. Come all ye young rebels, and list while I sing/For the love of one's country is a terrible thing/It banishes fear with the speed of a flame/And it makes us all part of the patriot game.
35. He must have got it from his father's side - it couldn't have been from us.
36. "Your health!"
37. "Cheers!"
38. "Sláinte!"
39. "Is it your round or mine?"
40. "Last orders!"
41. "I suppose we might as well have one for the road, so."
42. Ah, you're drunk you're drunk, you silly oul fool, still you cannot see/That's a lovely sow that me mother sent to me.
- 43 - 48. See 42, excuses relating to drunken nights two to seven, inclusive.
49. I can resist anything except temptation.

50. The Old Lady Says 'No!'

51. Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths, etc, etc/But I, being poor, have only my dreams.

52. I loved too much/And by such and such/Is happiness thrown away.

53. But I being young and foolish with her could not agree.

54. If [Mrs Nugent] hadn't of poked her nose in between me and Joe, everything would have been alright.

55. Home Rule is Rome rule.

56. Yes, but what about...?

58. This Bill seeks to provide an Irish solution to an Irish problem.

59. It was a bizarre happening.

60. An unprecedented situation.

61. A grotesque situation.

62. An almost unbelievable mischance.

63. I never had to concern myself about my personal finances. [Des Traynor] took over control of my financial affairs from about 1960 onwards. He sought, as his personal responsibility, to ensure that I would be free to devote my time and ability to public life.

64. We get here and the skips containing the team's training gear are missing.

65. The pitch is like a car park.

66. We had no goalkeepers for the five-a-side.

67. Packie [Bonner] said that they'd worked hard. Alan [Kelly] said that they'd worked hard. I said: "Do ye want a pat on the back for working hard - is that not why we're here?" I did mention that they wouldn't be too tired to play golf the next day and, fair play, they dragged themselves out.

68. We're the Irish team. It's a laugh and a joke. We shouldn't expect too much.

69. I had to attend my grandmother's funeral

70. No, not that grandmother, the other one.

71. All right, then - I never wanted to play for Ireland anyway.

72. I must have had a bad pint.
73. It was either that, or the curry on the way home.
74. Nasal congestion.
75. Heavy bones.
76. A bug going round.
77. The 5.15 from Thurles has been delayed due to leaves on the line.
78. We made those pre-election promises in good faith. It was only in government we realised how bad the country's finances were.
79. It was a complex but legitimate business arrangement.
80. The money was only resting in my account.
81. You try running three houses on my salary and see how you get on.
82. I regarded it as a loan.
83. I had no bank account at that time.
84. I won it on the horses.
85. But the tent is only a small part of our annual fund-raising operation.
86. The banks were throwing money at us.
87. We were hit by a perfect storm.
88. Don't blame me - I was only the taoiseach.
89. Lehmans had testicles everywhere.
90. The Welsh just seemed to want it a bit more than we did.
91. And we were going so well all week in training.
92. That wasn't the real Ireland you saw out there today.
93. I'm off the beer for Lent.
94. Yes, I took out gym membership in January, but I'm off that for Lent too.
95. I can't believe it's that time already.

96. The day just ran away with me.

97. It started out as a joke.

98. There was drink involved.

99. One thing led to another.

100. The dead man was known to the Garda.

Time for Good Ireland to tell Bad Ireland to split

September 24th, 2010

I'm no economist, God knows. But if all else fails to get us out of the hole we're in, I humbly suggest that the Government should consider splitting the country into separate, mutually independent, entities, known loosely as "good" and "bad" Ireland.

"Good" Ireland would retain most of the national territory, including islands and seas; all working parts of the economy; success in the arts and sport; a reputation for friendliness; any remaining tours of *Riverdance*, etc. "Bad" Ireland (BI) would take over the mess left by the construction bubble. In this respect, BI wouldn't be so much a country – at least initially – as an asset company with impaired loans.

Its vast debts thus moved "off-balance-sheet", Good Ireland would (one hopes) soon recover a triple-A credit rating and be borrowing money again at under 3 per cent, like the Germans. Bad Ireland, meanwhile, could test the thesis – popular among some economists – that markets have short memories, and that having failed to reward us for being virtuous, they might equally fail to punish us for defaulting.

This is a radical proposal: untried at national level anywhere. So in breaking new ground, there would be many big questions to answer.

Speaking of ground, for example, would Bad Ireland need a territory? Arguably not. It could be just an accounting exercise, run from a back-office in Dublin, like those tax-avoiding multinational subsidiaries that have no employees but control billions of their mother company's profits. In this sense, bad Ireland could be a logical progression of an idea beloved of business leaders: "Ireland Inc".

But maybe some geographical identity would be advisable, if only to distinguish it from Good Ireland. There are several possibilities. One is that, while moving debts off-balance-sheet, we could also move them off-shore: to one of our abandoned islands, which – in a swift referendum on Article 2 – would be declared independent for the purpose. If the mainland was deemed preferable, however, a greenfield site near Malin Head might suit. Not only would it be safely distant from good Ireland's HQ, benefits might also accrue from that part of Donegal's mythical location. As Ireland's most northerly point, while also being firmly in the "South", it could encourage the creative ambiguity that my two-state solution requires.

Speaking of two-state solutions, another possible model would be along the lines of the Palestinian territories. The borders of Bad Ireland need not be contiguous. On the contrary, there's an argument that, as well as nominally owning all the country's ghost estates, abandoned building sites and empty office blocks, the administration of Bad Ireland should be physically based there too.

Hence there might be a "Gaza strip" in every Irish town, self-governing and connected to each other by "corridors" through Good Ireland. Yes, it would be a nightmare to run such a state. But in my ideal scenario, the territory would be administered by those people who love saying – vis-a-vis the causes of our economic disaster – that "we are where we are". Maybe after a year or two of getting lost on backroads, they might finally drop that phrase.

On the other hand, the Palestinian model could make Bad Ireland bigger than Andorra, San Marino, and several other European states that have their own football team. I'm not sure we want that. So getting back to more concentrated territories, my last suggested location is the site earmarked for Thornton Hall prison. This would be apt for many reasons: including the possibility that, eventually, certain people would be deported there to help run the new country, as part of their community-service sentences.

Bad Ireland would need an official name: perhaps "Namaland" or the "Anglo-Irish Republic". It would also need a flag. I suggest the existing Tricolour with skull-and-crossbones, or a harp with all the strings broken. Ideally, the statelet should not be too political. It would, after all, be a business arrangement. So whatever its name (this is important), it should have the letters "PLC" after it. And rather than a president, it would have a chief executive.

The dangers of this new form of partition would be numerous, of course. They include the possibility that the bad Ireland would in time prove more successful than the good one. Indeed, if it pulled out of the EU and euro, as it likely would, the resulting freedom could be exploited at Good Ireland's expense.

The breakaway state might also develop in unexpected ways, like Dublin's Temple Bar area did when CIÉ tried to turn it into a bus garage. At the least, it could become an alternative tourism destination: attracting people via casinos, duty-free cigarette sales, Jedward concerts (in my ideal, the brothers would be among the first deportees), cock-fighting, etc. Or it might just concentrate on being a low-wage economy or a high-finance tax haven. Or all of the above.

By the next global boom, it might have turned into Europe's Hong Kong. But these are desperate times, and we may have to take that risk. Besides, I suggest that Good Ireland

should hedge itself against all such eventualities, by granting Bad Ireland complete independence, but only on a 99-year-lease.

The Longest Hay Day

June 28th, 2014

The summer I was 10, my father fell ill and spent three months in hospital. There was never a good time then for a farmer to be sick, but hay-making season was the worst. So we had to throw ourselves on the mercy of relatives and friends that year.

Happily, the weather proved merciful too. The hay was cut, dried, and baled, in quick order. And it only remained then for it to be drawn in. But that was the problem.

There were two routes to the fields where the hay was. One was a long, winding lane – the official right-of-way that had come with the 30-acre farm my father bought just before I was born.

Unfortunately, the residents of that lane included a man, long dead now, who had retrospectively objected to the purchase. Having hoped that, unsold, the farm might be acquired by the Land Commission and redistributed, he had ever since been on a revenge mission.

There were many guerrilla tactics in his campaign book. But one of the most effective involved planting six-inch nails in the lane, under camouflage, in such a way as to pierce any tractor tyre that crossed them.

He was so adept at this that my father quickly abandoned the right-of-way, in favour of the other route, which involved a diagonal crossing of the steep hill behind our house. The hill would be nothing to today's tractors, but it was dangerous then, especially if you had a heavily laden trailer behind.

Even so, my father became skilled at negotiating this northwest passage safely, using low second gear and with the added assistance of the Rosaries my mother was always saying at the time. Somehow, he never overturned.

My mother's confidence in the power of prayer did not, however, extend to third parties. There could be no question of us asking strangers to risk the hill. So an emergency summit was held, and a fateful decision taken. We would mount a mass assault on the lane.

I'll never forget the dawn of that great day. It was like the Normandy landings, as a never-before-seen force of seven tractors and trailers, driven by uncles and friends, departed our yard. I don't remember us calling the Belmullet weather station the night before to get a forecast for the operation. But apart from that, nothing had been left to chance.

The most poignant part of the plan was that my father's tractor, an old Fordson Dexter, was to be sacrificed. My Uncle Jamesie would drive it up the lane ahead of the flotilla – thereby, it was hoped, flushing out all the nails.

Being 10, I was too young to drive a tractor myself. Under the health and safety regulations of the time, you had to be at least 11 before they'd let you do that. Instead, as acting man of the house, I was posted on sentry duty outside the nail-layer's den, lest he emerge during lulls in traffic to strike again.

I was of course petrified. Even with so many tractors, there were long gaps between hay-loads when the loneliness of a dark country lane was unnerving. I had no idea what I'd do if the enemy appeared – was I supposed to fight him?

He was about 60 by that time. And God love him, he was probably even more petrified at the events unfolding. In any case, he didn't stir. Looking back, I have only pity for him now. He was a product of his time and circumstances, when one man's victory in land, however small, was another's defeat.

By a sad coincidence, many years later, when my father was dying, they found themselves in the same hospital, simultaneously. The nail-man was in the marginally better condition of the two. So before he was released, my mother sought him out and suggested he pay a final visit to his neighbour and make peace. Sure enough, he did. They were both dead by autumn.

Anyway, all those years earlier, Operation Haymaker proved a huge success. There was a cost, of course. By nightfall we were mourning the poor Fordson, which lay grievously wounded, with four flat tyres. It had done its job well. Only one of our neighbours suffered a puncture. There were no other casualties.

The Fordson was succeeded a year or two later by a Massey Ferguson 165. I don't know what happened it after that. Perhaps its remains are still mouldering somewhere, in a Tomb of the Unknown Tractor. One of these years, I must put up a commemorative plaque.

There is a crack in everything

October 27th, 2006

The debate about a new national anthem more suited to modern Ireland has lapsed into silence of late, writes **Frank McNally**.

But as often happens in quiet moments, I have had a blinding flash of insight on the subject. It happened at the cinema the other night when I was watching - of all things - a documentary about Leonard Cohen, the aptly-named *I'm Your Man*.

The great songwriter's work is often dismissed as depressing, and much of his earlier stuff certainly was. But he has lightened up in old age: a process helped by his recent spell in a Zen monastery, where he became a monk. Even before that, the signs were there. In fact, as the documentary reminded me, the new, happier Cohen was already in full voice on a 1992 song called - wait for it - Anthem.

Anthem is about acceptance and serenity. It warns of the futility of expecting perfection in this world and says that wisdom comes to us through mistakes. The message is driven home in its uplifting chorus: "Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering/ There is a crack, a crack, in everything/ That's how the light gets in." And as I listened to those inspiring lines again, it hit me that Cohen had unwittingly summed up the state of modern Ireland. The port tunnel leak. The de-bonding Luas tracks. The e-voting debacle. There is a crack in everything! That's how the light (and the water, and the Dutch computer hackers) gets in.

It was as if, in calling the song simply Anthem, he had left room for the words "Irish" and "national" to be added as a prefix. But the beauty of his message was that, rather than despair about our mistakes and failures, we should embrace them and draw on them a source of wisdom.

On the way home, still inspired by his words, I passed the Millennium Spire, which in a sense inverts his metaphor by being illuminated from within. Indeed, given the record of public projects in Ireland, the wonder in this case is that light ever got out. But of course it didn't get out as originally envisaged by the spire's designer, who wanted a soft glow.

Technical problems meant the soft glow was not practicable, so we ended up with what looks like a strip of tinsel at the top. No matter. Full of the new spirit of acceptance urged by Cohen, I was now ready to embrace the spire, with all its imperfections (until a Garda asked me if I'd been drinking and told me to move along).

The earliest inhabitants of this island would have known exactly what Cohen was talking about. They built Newgrange with a crack that means the light gets in on the darkest days of the year. That was deliberate, of course.

But if you've ever walked up the narrow tunnel into its inner chamber, you'll know that you have to stoop not to hit your head. Maybe that was a mistake. Perhaps the neolithic project engineers ignored warnings that the height restriction would make it unsuitable for a new generation of so-called "super-humans".

Either way, thanks to Newgrange, using Cohen's song as an anthem would stress the continuity of 5,000 years of life on this island. And if that's not enough to clinch the argument, the alternative meaning of "crack" (or "craic" if you insist) surely does. This would not be lost on Phil Coulter, who would probably be commissioned by the Government to produce an arrangement of the song suitable for the Army No 1 Band. I'm guessing Phil would rewrite the final chorus as "There is crack in everything", to represent the sense of fun endemic in the Irish character.

When he wrote Anthem, Cohen was not consciously offering the song for sponsorship by any country with a vacancy. But we know he's short of money these days, and he might well be open to offers. Although he won a legal case this year against his former manager over the millions of dollars he says she misappropriated, it is not clear if he will ever be compensated.

It was of course a rather unfortunate twist by which Cohen emerged from the monastery to find a large deficit in his retirement fund. There was a crack in that too, it turned out. But as far as Ireland's new national anthem goes, I say: he's your man.

The Diary welcomes publication of a volume setting the record straight about famously witty things that people never said. The thesis of the Yale Book of Quotations is that many celebrated quotes were invented or improved after the fact until, through popular conspiracy, they became part of the record.

It is typical that we in Ireland should stand this global trend on its head. The Yale book arrives, aptly, as we mark the 30th anniversary of then Minister for Defence's "thundering disgrace" comment that caused the resignation of a president. This is the public record of the quote, recorded verbatim by the only journalist who was there.

Unfortunately, its credibility has always suffered from the fact that it makes Paddy Donegan sound like a 19th-century editorial in the Times of London. Most people in Ireland still prefer - wrongly - to believe he said something stronger. Cearbháill Ó Dálaigh himself thought there were at least two expletives cut from the original, which may even have influenced his decision to resign.

There must be other such examples. I wonder if Yale would be interested in a companion volume?

Finding Pete Briquette

August 29th 2012

Driving along a wet road in Tipperary recently, I narrowly avoided crossing what looked like a piece of turf. That it was turf was entirely plausible. This was a bog road, near where my in-laws live, and turbary debris is so common there that, en route back to Dublin once, I collected the makings of a fire from sods that had fallen off trailers.

But this was just a scrag-end of turf – and a soggy one at that. So I nearly drove over it. And I was glad I didn’t afterwards, because just as I passed, out of the side of my eye, I thought I saw it move.

Studied in the rear-view mirror, the turf was still on the road. But was it my imagination or had it now developed a small head and pointy ears? I stopped, did a U-turn, then drove slowly back to the spot. And there, on close inspection, the turf turned out to be a kitten.

It wasn’t more than a week old and its eyes were half-shut from infection. Its ears, apparently the only thing alerting it to traffic, didn’t look good either. It was wet and mucky. And oblivious to its location, or aware and petrified, it was sitting precisely in the middle of a two-lane secondary route.

On a scale of one to 10, where 10 is the most pathetic thing I’ve ever seen, this was an eight-and-a-half. But how had the kitten even got there? There were no houses nearby. Had it come down in the last shower? Or had some black-hearted monster dumped it from a car? Even as I pondered these questions, I was also considering the consequences of bringing the kitten home. After all, as long-time readers may know, I needed a cat like a hole in the head.

We already had one in Dublin, or it had us, to be more correct. It used to belong to someone else and then devolved into community ownership before, several years ago, choosing our back garden as a permanent home.

It’s now very ancient – about 105 in human terms we think – but thanks to the excellent diet I’ve been guilt-tripped into providing it, continues to enjoy good health and threatens, for several more years yet, to make us feel bad every time we go anywhere.

As I’d told my children repeatedly, we didn’t have room for a second pet. And if we did it would be for a dog, not another bloody cat. So looking down on this soggy ball of flea-bitten fur on the road, my feelings of empathy were not unmixed.

I tried telling myself that its appearance of helplessness was in fact a clever Darwinian survival strategy honed by cats at the expense of humans over countless millennia. If so, admittedly, it was a very high-risk game for a browny-black kitten, even one with lives to spare, on a turf-strewn road.

And in any case, of course, it worked. I picked the little critter up, still not totally sold. But that's when I noticed he had been sitting on one of those road safety devices we call "cats' eyes". I swear.

The terrible thought occurred to me that, with his impaired vision, he had mistaken the cats' eyes for his mother. On which note, the pathos-ometer briefly hit 10, and by the time I copped myself on again, it was too late. I took him back to the in-laws' house, where my children had been ensconced for a holiday. "We're not keeping him," I told them. "We'll just fix him up and then find a home." This was agreed in principle. As luck would have it, an acquaintance had been inquiring about getting a cat. So with her in mind, the feline intensive care unit swung into action.

A visit to the local vet resulted in no fewer than three prescribed medications: for the kitten's eyes, ears and general wellbeing. Just to be on the safe side, he was also treated to an old Tipperary hot-drink recipe involving milk and whiskey.

Within days, now back in the city, I was informed by phone that the kitten was on his way to full recovery and looking cuter every day. "We're still giving him away," I warned, but resolve was weakening all round. Never mind veterinary expenses. In terms of emotional investment, my children were already in over their heads.

When they came back to Dublin, so did the kitten. And I was resigned to keeping him even before he looked at me with now-wide eyes that seemed to say, "Thank you for not squashing me under your car."

The worst part was introducing him to the existing cat. It went as well as could be expected, in the circumstances. The relationship is a cool one, so far, although the old-timer is still an outdoor creature, mostly, and their paths don't cross much.

As for naming the kitten, that was easy. Dried out, his coat has resolved itself into a very dark brown: part shiny, part matt. With apologies to a former bass player in the Boomtown Rats, he could only be "Pete Briquette", although we call him "Pete" for short.

The non-iconic windows of Bewleys

August 26th, 2011

The time has surely come for all self-respecting newspapers, like this one, to consider a ban on the word “iconic”. At the very least we need a quota system that would limit its appearances in print. Because not only is it the most overused adjective of our age, but the extent to which it has strayed from the original meaning – on which it still depends for all legitimacy – is plain ridiculous.

In the past week alone, I have seen or heard it applied to the Kerry footballer Colm Cooper, to the fences of the English Grand National, to a recipe for chicken, and to those Belgian animated dwarfs who feature in a new film, *The Smurfs*.

Not long ago, I also saw one of the Sunday papers use it to describe a well-known Dublin hairdresser. And as good a coiffeur as the man might be, it seemed to me that his work could hardly be described as “iconic” unless, along with highlights and hair-extensions, he was also supplying customers with gold-leaf haloes.

All of which said, I was if anything more put out by an example in our own pages earlier this week, even though it was much closer to the original sense than normal. The reference was to the “iconic stained glass windows in Bewley’s of Grafton Street”.

And okay, the windows in question are by Harry Clarke. Who did indeed create iconic windows, in the original sense that they depicted religious figures and are situated in churches.

But the point is, he didn’t create those kinds of windows for Bewley’s. On the contrary, the ones he made for the restaurant’s ground-floor cafe are deliberately secular, instead featuring such things as flowers and butterflies and exotic birds and sea creatures. So whatever about Colm Cooper or *The Smurfs*, the Bewley’s windows should be the very last things to be described as iconic, if only to avoid confusion.

It would be more accurate – in one case at least – to call them “Ionic”. This is because their unifying theme is classical architecture. Thus, the central motif in each window is a column in one of the famous Greek styles: Ionic, Doric, Corinthian, and a composite form.

In fact, if you’re sitting in Bewley’s some day and have nothing better to do, it can be an amusing game to draw your neighbours’ attention to “Harry Clarke’s Ionic stained-glass window”. Then sit back smugly and wait for them to correct you before flooring them with

your knowledge of Greek architecture. It's the third window from the left, by the way: I wouldn't want you making a fool of yourself by getting it wrong.

(While we're on the subject – confused readers sometimes ask me what style of column this is. I tell them it's predominantly Doric, with Corinthian elements. But being very old, the structure is delicate and requires constant maintenance. Hence the unsightly scaffolding that frequently obscures its beauty.)

I suspect 20th-century Russian Communists are to blame for the plethora of misplaced icons in the modern world, just as James Joyce is implicated in the mass redundancy of apostrophes that continues to be such a problem.

All those commas, inverted and otherwise, that Joyce threw on the scrap-heap in the 1920s have ever since been making a nuisance of themselves in a fruitless search for meaning. They or their unloved offspring now form a lumpen underclass of punctuation, unable to find gainful employment except in grocery stores, or occasionally doing part-time work for the class of journalist who doesn't know how to spell the possessive form of "its".

And perhaps something similar happened with Russian icons. In their war on organised religion, the communists destroyed millions of the pictures, using them as target practice and the like. But maybe they didn't destroy them completely. Maybe, being spiritual representations, the pictures had souls that, freed from their temporal frames, have since been wandering the earth.

Unlike redundant apostrophes, some of the old icons may at least been able to get legitimate employment in the computer industry, representing those otherwise ineffable objects that lurk behind the screen. But there must be many others that couldn't retrain and are still seeking more traditional work, attaching themselves to Kerry footballers and Dublin hairdressers, and anyone else who seems even slightly saint-like.

Of course the communists were not the first to destroy religious images. The history of iconoclasm is nearly as old as the history of religion itself and the earliest iconoclasts were themselves believers. In the service of God – as he saw it – the 8th-century Byzantine emperor, Leo III was as ardent as any Stalinist in his zeal for icon-breaking.

When he died, the work was carried on by his son, Constantine V, even though it made him so unpopular with other Christians that iconophiles gave him the Latin nickname "Copronymus", meaning (in a loose translation) "Dung-head". Eventually, however, iconoclasm waned and the picture lovers triumphed, although there are renewed outbreaks of the conflict periodically.

Perhaps another outbreak is now due. In our unprecedentedly secular world, the tendency to describe everything and anything as iconic must arise from some deep-seated human longing for aggrandisement, formerly the preserve of religion. In any case, it has gone too far. We need a new campaign, more in the spirit of Leo III than the communists. So pending a formal media ban, I urge all believers in English to act now and, if you see the word “iconic” anywhere today, smash it.

Poetry, politics, and the dumbing-dah of Irish life

October 12th, 2011

As the presidential campaign grew dirtier, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, somebody would raise the poetry issue. No surprise that the somebody was Gay Mitchell. The Fine Gael man is politically descended from a long line of philistines, including Kevin O'Higgins, who established an early precedent for this kind of thing when dismissing as “mostly poetry” the programme of the First Dáil.

But it's interesting to note a certain defensiveness in the response of Michael D Higgins (no relation to Kevin), the clear target of Mitchell's warning that voters should not elect a president “to sip champagne and recite poetry”. Most poets would have homed in on the second half of the implied insult. Whereas the Labour man focused on the first, riposting that “for a start”, he had “never liked champagne”.

Perhaps he was acting on legal advice to be circumspect about his past. It's public knowledge that he was for many years a prominent member of what Patrick Kavanagh called the “standing army” of Irish poets: a body whose numbers, Kavanagh estimated, never fell below 20,000. We also know that Higgins didn't leave the army in 1974, if ever. But now that the issue has been broached, it's incumbent upon him to state whether he's still involved and, if so, in what capacity.

Instead, in yesterday's news reports, the candidate appeared to be sticking to a carefully worded formula for describing his para-literary past. As our reporter put it: “Mr Higgins said he had four volumes of poetry published. ‘They have all been reviewed, some better than others’, he added.” No doubt his caution is in part born of awareness that public scepticism about this form of literature extends well beyond Fine Gael. The truth is that – speaking of the First Dáil – most Irish people regard poetry in much the same way that they regard political violence. The older stuff is admired as noble and heroic: we learned it in school and it has stood the test of time since.

It's the modern type we're queasy about. Unable to understand it, we point to the sales figures as proof that it has no mandate: conveniently ignoring the fact that even Pádraig Pearse's early poetry was supported only by a militant minority of readers.

Interesting too that Michael D should stress the reviews his collections have received, good and bad. It's almost as if he believes that critical attention legitimises his poetic activities: even when that attention is negative, like this paper's 1993 review, which found his language “loose and not quite defined”. Or could it be that his use of the word “review” was calculated

to make himself sound more presidential? After all, a big part of a president's job is to review things: guards of honour, usually. But if this was deliberate, it raises more questions than it answers. If elected president, does Mr Higgins plan to expand the review section? Will he favour looser, less defined guards of honour, rather than the classic format with lines of equal length? And what if the lines speak to him (as one infamously did to Mary Robinson, saying "Here comes big bird")? Will he feel the urge to speak back? These are just a few of the questions that now need to be answered.

Not that Gay Mitchell can talk. Or rather, he can talk – and how – but not without resorting to poetic language to express his own presidential qualities. Witness the squabble between his and Mary Davis's camp over who could use the slogan "Pride at home, respect abroad". Conceding defeat in which, Mitchell settled instead for a very similar-sounding phrase (albeit suggesting mastery of chronological rather than spatial dimensions): "Understanding in our past, believing in our future". Both slogans are examples of a figure of speech known as isocolon, wherein an idea is expressed in clauses of similar structure and equal length. A famous three-part example was Caesar's "*Veni, Vidi, Vici*". And a four-part one was by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who said: "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." Which, with some tweaking, would make a good presidential slogan, appealing to all the key demographics.

Unsurprisingly, Higgins's slogan ("The president who will do us proud") combines several poetic techniques, including alliteration (president/proud) and internal rhyme (who/will do). If we elide the middle syllable of "president", it's also a perfect example of iambic tetrameter, with the unmistakeable dah-dum, dah-dum, dah-dum, dah-dum rhythm found in Emily Dickinson, eg: "Because I could not stop for death/He kindly stopped for me".

By contrast, the slogan Davis and Mitchell both wanted is trochaic rather than iambic, with the stress on the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th metrical feet. If it had an 8th syllable – let's say, "Pride at home, respect in Europe" – it would echo perfectly the dum-dah, dum-dah, dum-dah, dum-dah rhythm of Longfellow's classic, *The Song of Hiawatha*.

And it's curious that it should have been so attractive to rival candidates. But the question of whether this is an example of a general dumming-dah of Irish political slogans, we'll leave to another day.

Budget couples revisited

December 8th, 2006

Ever wonder what happens to those people in our budget case studies after the media spotlight has moved on? asks **Frank McNally**.

In the first of an annual series, we track down the veterans of past Budget supplements, 10 years later, and find out what their lives are like now.

Brendan and Jill fared well in the 1996 budget. A double-income couple in their late 30s, with a medium-sized mortgage and a rental income from a cottage in Wicklow, they gained £912 a year from the tax changes introduced by Ruairí Quinn.

Although he had hoped for the abolition of residential property tax, Brendan - an accountant - described himself as "fairly happy" with the package. The gains were quickly wiped out, however, when a mid-life crisis prompted Brendan to join a crazed religious sect that required members to donate half their incomes. Jill tried to be amused by his claim to have achieved a 100 per cent saving of his soul. But her sense of humour vanished when she became pregnant and Brendan pointed out that his beliefs required her to deliver the baby in silence and without pain relief.

As their relationship came under strain, the couple neglected their Wicklow property which, unknown to them, was now being used for raves. With bitter irony, it was burned down the night before the 1997 budget, when RPT was dropped. Brendan and Jill now live separately.

Andrew was an unemployed 20-year-old in 1996. He benefited from the £3 increase in welfare payments, although this was partly offset by an increase in the price of cigarettes. His employment prospects appeared bleak until he completed a FÁS computer course in 1998 and set up a dot.com company in his parents' garage.

Despite having no products, no business plan, and making a loss of £15 in its first trading year, the company was quickly snapped up by a major financial institution for £10 million. After a short career as an international playboy, Andrew returned to Ireland in 2003, when he was arrested and charged with losing the run of himself. He now works as a barman.

Niamh and Liam were a cohabiting couple in 1996 with a nine-month-old baby and an apartment in Skerries. They gained £317 in the Budget and described themselves as "pleased enough". Unfortunately Niamh's mother, who had appeared to be coming to terms with their failure to get married, was mortified to see the family's shame paraded all over again in a

newspaper. She renewed her campaign, making the couple's life such a misery that they finally relented and agreed to a no-frills wedding in 1998.

Niamh's annoyance at being forced into such a hollow charade was at first assuaged by the tax benefits. Because she had not returned to work, all her allowances went to Liam. But when Charlie McCreevy initiated his controversial tax individualisation policy, the relative benefits of being respectable disappeared and family tensions resurfaced. Niamh rarely rings her mother now.

Bob and Jackie were a married couple in their 40s with four children and an income of £19,475 from his job as a semi-skilled factory worker. In our 1996 supplement they expressed happiness that the car scrappage scheme had been extended, as they planned to change their 10-year-old Mazda soon. They were also pleased that there had been no increase in duty on alcohol, because they enjoyed "meeting their friends every Friday and Saturday for a couple of drinks".

What they didn't say was that Bob enjoyed meeting his friends for drinks every other night of the week as well. The friends were entirely optional, in fact. The truth was, he had no friends, if you didn't include the barman. His problem came to a head during the millennium celebrations, when his car was involved in an unofficial scrappage scheme involving an ESB pole. He gave up drink and, instead of the pub, started going to college at night. He now runs a small engineering company.

Orla was a single civil servant in her mid-20s. She had just been promoted to executive officer in the Department of Social Welfare and had bought her own apartment. Because it was in a designated area, she benefited from extra reliefs under Ruairi Quinn's budget and described herself as "extremely satisfied". Unfortunately she was lying, even to herself. Deep down, she was sick of being sensible and crushed by the mind-numbing conformity of her life. All she had ever wanted to do was dance.

And when she was chosen for the chorus line of Michael Flatley's show in 1999, she leapt at the chance, quitting her job and selling the apartment. It was while performing in Sydney that she met Scott, a male stripper, with whom she now runs a dance studio near Bondi Beach. She describes their sex life as "sensational".

Clive and Brenda were a professional couple in their 30s with two perfect children and a combined income of £105,000. They did well from the 1996 budget, and even better a year later when the abolition of RPT allowed them to trade upwards to a four-bedroom house in Ranelagh. They invested heavily in Eircom shares and sold at exactly the right time, making enough profit to buy a holiday home in Sligo.

Freed-up equity from their Dublin house has since allowed them to acquire properties in the south of France and Bulgaria. Clive had a brief health scare last year when he was diagnosed with a severe form of smugness. He now controls this with medication.

The Journalists nightmare

February 5th, 2011

I may be sharing too much here, readers, and if so, advance apologies. But for years I've had this dream in which I'm on assignment somewhere, very close to deadline and getting anxious about it, and yet – for often unexplained reasons – I haven't even started writing yet.

It's probably a common thing among journalists: I must ask at the next group therapy session. In any case, a recurring feature of the dream is that the problem is not resolved, one way or another. The deadline never actually passes. In fact, nothing much happens except that it gets even later and I still haven't started writing. Then I wake up.

I only mention it because, recently, in a town that shall remain nameless, the dream almost came to life. It wasn't quite as late as it would normally be. But I had a long news feature to write, and about half the time ideally required. So suffice to say that the gnawing-in-the-pit-of-my-stomach phase was already well advanced and the cold sweat phase was not far away.

Also, for reasons we don't have to go into, I needed to write the piece somewhere with WiFi. Thus I had made my way to a hotel that looked promising. And I was just outside the door when a woman stopped me, drew my attention to a man leaning against the wall nearby, and asked if I could help him down the street. "He only lives around the corner," she said, "but I can't do it." I studied the man a moment, hoping he was merely drunk, in which case I could ignore him with a clear conscience. But he wasn't drunk. He was just old, and he had a walking stick, and he was clearly struggling to stay on his feet.

So I went over to him and offered help, whereupon he thanked me and gripped my arm. "I'm only round the corner," he said. And then he started walking, very, very, slowly. It would be an exaggeration to say he walked at snail's pace, but not much of an exaggeration. Each step was only a few inches, with pauses for rest every three or four.

And even as I noted this, I also noted for the first time that the nearest corner was not especially near. Furthermore, I started to experience intense concern about what the phrase "just around the corner" meant. At which thought, the gnawing in my stomach grew.

Thanking me again, the old man listed his various medical problems. It was a long list, including arthritis and thrombosis and I can't remember what else. Then he mentioned that he should have called an ambulance earlier when he was leaving wherever he'd been. So, already looking for an exit strategy, I offered to call an ambulance for him now.

But he wouldn't hear of it. "I'll be grand once I'm home," he insisted. Nor would be let me phone a taxi, although I would have gladly paid for one. "It's only a hundred yards," he said. We had travelled perhaps 20 miniature steps at this stage.

I decided it was time to explain my situation, mentioning words like "story", "deadline", and "newsdesk will kill me". But even as the words came out, I could sense they were so far from his experience as to be meaningless. They sounded foreign, even to me. And he just ignored them. "I'm only round the corner," he repeated. "We're nearly there." Worse still, he now told me how somebody had passed him earlier, promising to return: "I've known him all me life, but if I was to wait until next week, he wouldn't come back. It's terrible how quick people you think are your friends can desert you." I wondered if, in spite of his apparent distress, this journey was a routine occurrence and neighbours, like those even now hurrying by, had learned to avoid it. But growing desperate, I asked if there was a family member I could ring for help.

There was, he said, only he couldn't remember the number. He recited three digits – I was pressing them even as he spoke – and then went blank. So instead I offered to run around to the house and ask them to come.

"It's just that I'm under a bit of time pressure," I explained. And although he was clearly reluctant to let go of me, he told me the address. Memorising which, with a mixture of relief and guilt, I propped him against a parked car and sprinted around the corner.

As I feared, nothing there quite resembled his directions. I tried the address on a passer-by. Blank look. Then, further on, there was a shop where they pointed me back the way I'd come. And it turned out I had passed the slightly-hidden entrance in my panic. The street really was just around the corner, or near enough.

When I found the house, though, there seemed to be no lights on anywhere. In fact, I was already reverting to plan B – ringing the ambulance – when a woman answered the door. His daughter, maybe. And as I told her the story, she nodded calmly.

This had happened at least once before, I guessed. But anyway, I ran back to where the old man was, and told him help was on the way. Then I mentioned "deadlines" again, wished him well, and left. God love him, he was stuck in a worse nightmare than mine. But this was no comfort at the time.

Back at the hotel again, I asked at reception if they had WiFi. They had, but of course it wasn't working. So I inquired where else in town might have it, and the man on the desk thought hard.

After which, not looking confident, he suggested a certain cafe whose name meant nothing to me. The gnawing in my stomach worsened, but I asked where the cafe was. And then, just as in a dream, he gave me the directions, pointing vaguely towards somewhere in the darkness on the edge of town.

After hours drinking

May 24th, 2007

Walking home one Saturday night recently through a certain part of Dublin - I won't say where - my wife and I passed a quaint old pub that we often mean to visit and never do, writes **Frank McNally**.

It was 12.48am, sadly, and the pub was closed. Or so we assumed, until the strains of some lively traditional music escaped from within.

Feeling a bit like Goldilocks at the house of the three bears, we tried the front door and -lo! - it opened. Whereupon we stepped inside and, ignoring the simultaneous glances of everyone in the pub, tried to make ourselves invisible. This was not easy, since the premises is so small that if you swung a cat in it you would knock at least four customers off their stools.

It was a charming scene, even so. A small group of instrumentalists performed skilfully and in respectful silence to a crowd enjoying the music and the cosiness. I sensed that we had introduced a slight draught, literally and metaphorically. But the door was now closed behind us, the room temperature was returning to normal, and as we joined in the applause for the musicians, it must have been clear we meant no harm.

Certain questions of etiquette remained, however. It was obvious that the barman was still pulling pints. But should we order a drink? We didn't want one, in fact. We only wanted to enjoy the atmosphere for a few minutes. But would that appear mean? Or, worse, would be look like tourists?

I was still wrestling with the issue when I found myself at the sharp end of a triangular exchange of glances between the barman and a woman who was sitting among the customers, but exuding authority. She glanced at him, nodding at me. I glanced at both of them. He glanced back.

It was clear that at least two of these glances were meaningful. I just had no idea what they meant, until the barman emerged from behind the counter with a creamy pint of stout. In one continuous movement, he placed the freshly poured pint in front of a customer, then turned to me and asked: "Can I help you?" His tone was brusque. But this is not always a clue to a Dublin barman's state of mind. Dublin barmen are like New York taxi drivers. You don't expect politeness. You're just grateful to get their attention.

So, misinterpreting his question as an invitation to order, I obliged. At which point, with inverse proportions of irony (very little) and indignation (a lot), the barman informed me that

the pub was closed. "It's ten to one," he added huffily, as if offended that I had formed the impression he was still serving.

There was nothing to do in the circumstances except withdraw, as gracefully as possible. Ideally, I should have done so after performing my own triangle of glances - at the pint, the barman, and the woman proprietor - with a smile that conveyed exactly equal portions of forgiveness and sarcasm.

But you always think of the witty responses when it's too late. Instead, I instinctively accepted all responsibility for the misunderstanding, nodding an apology and making for the door. We left the pub feeling even more awkward than when we came in.

The Irish licensing laws - as amended by everyday practice - are a very complex subject. If anything, the reforms of recent years have only made them more so. The scene I intruded upon in that pub may have been what we used to call a "lock-in". And if the door had indeed been locked, I would have been spared my embarrassment.

But I suspect the reason it wasn't locked is the smoking ban, which is so well observed in Ireland that people will interrupt illegal drinking sessions to have their cigarettes outside, in accordance with the law.

Then again, it may not have been a full-blown lock-in. Weekend closing is 12.30am, so with a liberal interpretation of drinking-up time, the pint I saw served was almost legal. It would have been less legal for me, of course, because as a new arrival on the premises, I occupied a different position in the space-time continuum from those who were already there. If pub closing is a set of traffic lights, I was on red. They were on orange (though not in the beverage sense, of course).

I'm not sure where the law stands on the playing of music during drink-up time. It hardly helps clear the house. And yet, I would argue that as with food, a premises that serves good-quality traditional music (no piano-accordeons, a maximum of one bodhran player, etc) should be entitled to an extension.

Then again, the existing reforms have already diminished the opportunities to drink illegally, an activity that is still highly prized in Ireland. There remains a furtive thrill to be had from being in a pub after hours. It's just annoying that you have to stay up so late now to experience it. Further postponements might be unacceptable.

You could write a thesis about the contrast between the respect for the smoking ban here and the lack of respect for legislation relating to drink. My own theory is that the licensing laws are seen as a left-over from British rule. By subverting them, you are retrospectively standing

up to imperialism. Whereas the smoking ban comes from the new confident Ireland, and was such a good idea anyway that the rest of Europe has since rushed to adopt it.

The after-hours drink is like an old rebel song, if you will. The smoking ban is *Riverdance*.

The Doll's House

November 2nd, 2013

Six or seven years ago, when the boom was still booming, I bought a ridiculously big house. The good thing, in retrospect, is that it wasn't a real house, although I was in the market for one of those too at the time.

The house we were in then was getting very cramped for three children. Nearly all the received wisdom, still, was that we should trade up, via the biggest mortgage possible, and worry about payments later. But being a natural procrastinator, I dragged my heels. Then the crash happened, and what had been mere inertia suddenly looked like prudence.

In the meantime, I had bought a doll's house for my daughter. And this decision, at least, must have been infected by the madness of the period. Because it was an enormous house: a neo-Georgian mansion, with three storeys and an attic, plus basement (for the servants, naturally).

Mind you, I didn't appreciate its size then, because for months the house was still in boxes, awaiting assembly. After the enthusiasm of the purchase, there were the inevitable delays in starting construction. A few times, I took out the booklet and, appalled at the amount of work involved, put it back, postponing the job until my holidays.

Then, very belatedly, the project got under way. This is when I first became concerned at the disproportionate size of the doll's house vis-a-vis our actual home, in which space had been scarce even before this monstrosity. Still, I cleared a site, somehow, and the doll's house rose on it, in fits and starts.

It took me at least a year, maybe two. Out in the real world, whole housing estates were being constructed in less time. But in my defence, I had to consult the owner on every important decision: the wallpaper in the master bedroom, the kitchen tiles, the all-important choice of chandelier for the entrance hall.

And I'm glad, looking back, that my daughter and I did linger over these things, at least. I'm glad too that we shared a moment of triumph the day I finished the last part of the job – the ingenious but finicky wiring – and switched on the lights.

Because along with that fleeting triumph came a bittersweet epiphany. It was like the denouement of an O Henry short story. The doll's house was at least finished, but my daughter was suddenly 12. Even as we discussed which room to furnish first, I realised that, any day now, she would be too old to play with it.

Sure enough, that's what happened, and even sooner than I feared. Months passed without furniture acquisition. Then a year. Then another year. The house remained bare inside. It also remained where it was.

Well, the detachable basement was moved to her bedroom at some point, where it has since gradually disappeared under clothes, make-up, petrified pizza slices, and the other accessories of teenage girlhood. But the main part was too bulky to move anywhere. It stayed where it was, occupying a corner of the kitchen/living room, mocking me with its grandeur.

Mostly, these days, I just try to ignore it and the small nagging pain it causes me. And any time it or our general lack of elbow-room becomes oppressive, I remind myself that – property disasters aside – space is always part of the trade-off for city living.

This is painfully obvious whenever the children visit their country cousins, who tend to have bigger houses and gardens, and more apparent freedom. Against which, as I tell the kids, we have parks and museums and theatres, only minutes' walk in every direction.

All right, museums and theatres are still a hard sell to people under 15. But there are also shops: the deal-breaker for my daughter now. And some museums are better than others, even for children.

I was also reminded this week that, about decade ago, when my two older kids were still pre-schoolers, we had the exciting prospect of Ireland's first national children's science museum being built just around the corner.

It would be part of a huge complex of apartments, offices, and shops. And the thought of it helped sustain us through the subsequent siege as construction machinery took over the neighbourhood.

In the event, we got the apartments, offices, some of the shops. After that, the money ran out and the science museum was shelved. Until this week, that is, when we learned that it will finally go ahead, but scaled down, and at a site elsewhere in the city.

Also, it will be not open until 2017, by which time the aforementioned pre-schoolers will be entitled to vote. The moral of the story is that children always grow up too soon. It's only economies and construction projects that stand still.

Mrs McQuaid and the Wilde sisters

July 9th, 2009

If ever there can be a happy funeral, it must be something like the one I attended last weekend in the north Monaghan village of Threemilehouse. The dead woman, Brigid McQuaid, had passed away peacefully aged 92. She was surrounded at the end by devoted children and grandchildren, some of whom had returned from Australia when the call went out. And among the many tributes paid to her was a fine old tradition whereby friends and neighbours dug the grave.

There were more than a dozen men involved in this task: Protestant as well as Catholic. The serious digging was left to the younger ones. But even bystanders contributed, in the form of conversation or other gifts deemed necessary to the occasion. I believe there were bottles of whiskey involved.

The deceased had been a famous dressmaker, who once drew customers from several counties on either side of the border. The concept of coat-turning survives now only as a metaphor for disloyalty. But it was economic necessity once; and in poorer times, Brigid's skill in turning coats, thereby making new coats, was much sought-after.

Her former customers, or at least their descendants, swelled the large attendance at the funeral mass. A heavy shower fell on the church during the service, by way of a blessing. Then the sun came out in time for the burial in a hill-top cemetery, where there was much conversation and laughter. I attended the Monaghan-Armagh football match in Clones later that day; and if either event could be described as grim, it definitely wasn't the funeral.

Communal grave-digging is a disappearing tradition, sadly. It is going the way of other funerary customs, like the one referred to in John McGahern's book *That They May Face the Rising Sun*: namely the arrangement of graves – indeed whole cemeteries – to point east, the expected path of the resurrection. (Not that Christians thought of this first; the architects of Newgrange had a broadly similar idea.)

For good or bad, probably both, the famous Irish wake is not what it once was either. In his 2006 travelogue-cum-memoir, *Booking Passage*, Irish-American Thomas Lynch wrote movingly about the phenomenon with the combined sensibilities of a poet and an undertaker (based in Detroit). In his professional capacity, he performed funerals for all faiths and none; but he thought his Irish ancestors had elevated death to an art form. "Communal theatre" he called it.

Not all old Irish funeral customs were so healthy. One of them may or may not have inspired a famous sketch on Dave Allen's 1970s TV show, featuring a race between two funeral processions. Either way, there was a belief once widespread in Ireland and Scotland that the latest arrival in a graveyard was obliged to perform onerous duties for the other spirits.

When two funerals coincided, therefore, both sets of relatives would vie to spare their deceased loved ones such work, and trouble often ensued. *The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland* mentions a case in Cork in 1897, where one party locked the cemetery gates beforehand to thwart the other, only for the rivals to "throw" their coffin over the wall and celebrate victory with a "wild cheer".

It wasn't always as restrained as that. A similar case in Dublin in 1835, reported by the London Times, "led to a full-scale riot the deaths of two mourners and the serious injury of many more". The last recorded mention of the custom here was 1923, so by now it can be presumed both late and unlamented, or so one hopes.

From Threemilehouse on Saturday, I finally made the short pilgrimage to another cemetery: the Church of Ireland one at St Molua's, Drumsnat, barely two miles away. This is one of the oldest Christian sites in Ireland, dating from 500 AD. But I went there mainly to see the graves of Mary and Emily Wilde, half-sisters of Oscar, who died locally in tragic circumstances

Their headstone was barely legible until we wiped the surface with wet grass. Then the names and ages – 22 and 24 – stood out along with the epitaph, which includes the line: "They were lovely in life and in death they were not separated."

This is poetic euphemism. The sisters were "love-children" of Sir William Wilde, raised in Monaghan by his clergyman brother Ralph, away from the eyes of Dublin society.

They were attending a Halloween Ball in a private house in 1871 when Emily's muslin dress caught fire. Whereupon Mary ran to help, and her dress caught too. Both died from their burns.

If Irish Catholics made an art form of wakes, Protestants did so with cemeteries.

It probably helps that they tend not to be densely populated, although the judicious planting of trees is a big part of it too. But especially in rural Ireland, Protestant graveyards are invariably picturesque and profoundly peaceful places. St Molua's is no exception.

Under a yew tree nearby, I noticed what at first looked like a marble bust, sculpted in the Greek style. Then it moved. And on closer inspection it turned out to be a sheep: one of a

small flock of ewes that (safely) graze in the old part of the cemetery, where all that was missing was a Bach soundtrack.

The Irish habit of assertion by negative of the opposite

December 7th, 2013

A reader was giving out in an e-mail recently about the spread in Ireland of what he considered an ungrammatical Americanism – the habit, when people are asked how they are now, of saying “I’m good”. He was especially annoyed to hear it in a radio interview from a former minister for education, Mary O’Rourke, who should have known better, or so he thought.

In fact, contrary to what the e-mailer believed, there’s nothing ungrammatical about saying “I’m good”. I won’t go into details, unless readers insist. But in the meantime, I suggest that if Mary O’Rourke deserves censure for anything, it was for giving a straightforward, positive answer to the question, which is not the Irish way.

No indeed. The correct procedure for asserting your well-being in this country, as any 10-year-old could have told her, is to use the negative of opposite.

Thus, instead of saying “I’m good”, Mrs O’Rourke should have replied: “I’m not bad.” Or to be on the safe side – since saying “I’m not bad” might be considered boastful by some listeners – she could have gone further than mere opposites and said, “I’m not *toobad*”. That’s the form I generally use myself.

I have a theory that the reluctance to say a simple Yes to anything in Ireland has been a factor in the successive referendum defeats suffered by Governments in recent years. It’s not that people are against the proposals, often (as the re-run polls show).

It’s just that most of us were brought up not to give a straightforward Yes to anything, even the offer of a cup of tea. My suggestion is that, in future referendums, “I wouldn’t say no” should be added as an option on the ballot paper. That, I believe, would have secured the abolition of the Seanad.

Assertion by negative of opposite is not a recent phenomenon. On the contrary, in his 1911 book, *English and How We Speak it in Ireland*, PW Joyce identified it as one of the keynotes of Hiberno-English even then.

The examples he gave included the custom – still popular today – of suggesting that people are old by pointing how how young they’re not. Typically, this involves noting that it wasn’t “today or yesterday” someone was born; or in Joyce’s even more damning example – also still used – suggesting that the person lacks not just youth, but feathers, eg: “He’s no spring chicken”.

The other main area of negated opposites Joyce mentioned was the custom, rather than calling something “good”, of suggesting it was “no harm”. The example he gave was a woman saying: “You must be hungry now, Tom, and this little rasher will do you no harm”.

But again, I would argue that “will” sounds a little too positive to be fully authentic. After all, the rasher could be well past its sell-by date (and we know much more about the harmful properties of bacon now than they did in 1911). So instead, I suggest that the classic Irish usage is to add the conditional mood to the assertion by opposite: thereby suggesting only that the rasher, or whatever, “*might*” be no harm”.

Not surprisingly, this approach is especially popular in politics. In fact, I googled the phrase “might be no harm” just now. And five of the first 10 results were from Oireachtas debates, ranging chronologically from 1959 to last April.

The US writer and language scholar HL Mencken once argued that a similar (although ungrammatical) construction, the double negative, was the cornerstone of American English. He considered it such a national characteristic that, in tribute, he rewrote the Declaration of Independence in slang, using the double negative wherever possible, eg:

“When things get so balled up that the people of a country got to cut loose from some other country, and go it on their own hook, without asking no permission from nobody, excepting maybe God Almighty, then they ought to let everybody know why they done it, so that everybody can see they are not trying to put nothing over on nobody . . .”

I’m not sure the 1916 Proclamation would lend itself so readily to assertion by negative of opposite. Having said which, I can just about hear Padraig Pearse declaring that Ireland, while she wouldn’t say no to a bit of help from her gallant allies, and while some assistance from her exiled children in America would be no harm either, would not be relying on the strength of others in the first instance, but would instead strike in full confidence that an armed uprising might not be a complete disaster.

The catechism of cliché updated

April 8th, 2006

TheLastStraw: Forty years after his death, the greatest tribute we can pay Myles na gCopaleen is to say that, thanks to his Catechism of Cliche and its relentless exposure of tired journalism, no self-respecting Irish reporter would ever again commit a hackneyed phrase to print.

Well, all right, that's not completely true. There are a few small journalistic enclaves where the cliche survives: politics, for example. As in Myles's time, exchanges in the Dáil are still invariably described as "heated". Either there are no unheated exchanges, or if there are, they go unreported. But I work in Leinster House a lot and, in the media's defence, I would blame the temperature of the exchanges on inadequate air conditioning, especially in the older parts of the building.

Business is another arena still notorious for repetitive jargon, something I would appeal to financial journalists to address going forward. Then there is sports reporting: a spectrum of human activity so eroded of meaning that, for example, a striker can tuck the ball "home" or he can do the exact opposite and tuck it "away", and it will end up in exactly the same place.

But it's probably in the area of crime (a suburb with a lot of problems, generally) that the most incorrigibly recidivist phrases recur. The Garda-speak of which Myles complained in the 1940s is one of the few things that survived the country's subsequent transformation intact. Some of these phrases have the half-life of uranium. You could encase them in concrete and bury them five miles deep in geologically stable terrain, and they'd still eventually resurface in a Garda press release.

With apologies to Myles, gardaí are always doing one of two things: pursuing a definite line of inquiry, or keeping an open mind. Q: If it's the latter, what are they ruling in or out? A: Nothing. Q: At what stage of the investigation are they ruling nothing in or out? A: This stage. Q: What did gardaí invariably do with the cocaine? A: They seized it. Q: By what vague-but-authentic-sounding measure was the cocaine deemed to be worth €2 million? A: Its estimated street value.

Q: What are they now doing with a man in his 20s? A: Holding him. Q: Where are they holding him? A: Under Section Four of the Criminal Justice Act. Q: Is that painful? A: No. Q: But is it not inappropriate for a complete stranger to be held in this way? A: He's no stranger - he's well known to the gardaí.

You don't have to be a criminal to be subjected to this sort of thing. Should you be unfortunate enough to be on the wrong end of a row outside a pub, you could find yourself trapped in a nightmarish world of hackneyed phrases from which escape is impossible. Firstly, the row will be upgraded to an "altercation". You won't merely have suffered injuries, you'll have "sustained" them. Then you'll have to go to hospital, where you won't be allowed to enter, like a normal person. You'll be "admitted".

The matron will take over where the gardaí left off, allocating you to one of only four categories that exist for patients in whom the press takes an interest. The following day, you'll read that your condition "was said to be" "comfortable", "stable", "serious", or "critical". I know there are privacy issues here, but I think hospitals could profitably adopt the range of descriptions used for ground conditions at racetracks (good-to-yielding, yielding, yielding-to-soft. . .), which at least allows for intermediate states.

AS I WAS saying, apart from these isolated cases, Irish journalism is now dominated by the freshly-minted phrase. Of course, this creates its own challenges for the newspaper consumer - a point illustrated by perplexed reader Phil Mortell from Limerick, who has written asking me to "translate" the following passage from a recent review - in this supplement - of Seamus Heaney's new book:

". . . the quick density, the clotted swiftness, of his style increasingly; an intensified telegraphese of notation, catching ever more exactly the actual arabesques of consciousness; fresh proofs of his innate mix of eases and facilities, whereby a rich workaday demotic is fused with the heights of literary sophistication . . . "

Phew. Sorry, Phil. I have no idea what an "actual arabesque of consciousness" is, although I would argue that - to borrow a phrase from American humorist Dave Barry - the Arabesques of Consciousness would be a great name for a rock band. Apart from that, I suspect that the act of fusing a rich workaday demotic with anything may be a crime under Section Four of the Criminal Justice Act.

Accordingly, I have referred your query to the gardaí. They're keeping an open mind at this stage of the investigation.

Fechin Looneys

January 20th, 2010

One of the features of recent decades here has been a big revival in the use of old Irish names. Parents of new-born babies have scoured the history books for names of saints or kings or warriors: the more ancient-sounding and unusual the better.

There may even be a competitive aspect about it among certain sections of the middle class, viz: “I’ll see your Neasa, and I’ll raise you Naoise.” But one venerable Irish name that has not been part of the revival, so far, is that of the famous holy man whose feast-day falls today, January 20th.

I refer of course to St Fechin, whose name is not only ancient but also continues to have the rarity factor so prized by some. Even in the better class of south Dublin Gaelscoileanna, so far as I can see, Fechins are still few and far between.

The name’s neglect is made more conspicuous by the fact that its original owner was a particularly celebrated figure. Born of an aristocratic family in Co Sligo, he stood out, even in the hothouse of religious activity that was 7th century Ireland.

One measure of his fame is that, although his year of birth is unknown, his death is meticulously recorded as occurring on February 14th, 665.

He was by then most associated with the great abbey at Fore, Co Westmeath – renowned for its “seven wonders”.

But his empire stretches from Omey Island in Ireland’s far west, where a church still bears his name, to Co Louth in the east, where the seaside village of Termonfeckin does likewise.

The saint’s importance was sufficient for several accounts of his life to be written, and his fame continued unabated up to the reformation period, when *Hammer’s Chronicle*(1571) noted of today’s date: “Ireland remembreth the feast of St Fekin, that he was the king’s bloud, and an Abbot, cured many of the flix or fluxe, and dyed thereof himself.”

In old English, “flix or fluxe” covered a range of disorders, from haemorrhaging to diarrhoea. But the Annals of the Four Masters say that Ireland was struck by a great plague in 665, which carried off not only Fechin but many other saints. This wasn’t unique to Ireland, in fact: yellow fever ravaged Europe at the time.

There was famine here, too. And there are stories that Fechin had been prevailed upon by the high kings to pray for a plague on the lower orders, to ease the pressure on food supplies. Or,

in another version, that he merely opposed praying for the poor's relief from plague, since it was the lesser of two evils. In any case, the disease, when it struck, did not discriminate.

It can hardly be any lingering controversy over his role in those events that makes the name Fechin such an unpopular choice among Irish parents. So I suppose it must be the phonetic issue.

Of course, as the Oney Island place name of "Templefeheen" hints, the name can sound quite poetic when used with the appropriate fadas and a western accent. But on the other hand (and the other coast), you have the aforementioned Termonfeckin, and its GAA club, St Fechin's; or "the Feckers" as they're popularly known. And there you have the nub of the problem.

In an English-speaking world, you would probably be asking for trouble calling your child Fechin, however many fadas you used. This is even more the case if you have one of those fine old Irish surnames whose meaning was mangled by anglicisation.

For example, a baby boy born in Ireland could easily end up, through no fault of his own, becoming a "Fechin Looney". And imagine trying to apply for a job as an airline pilot with a name like that. A "Fechin Hooligan" would have a better chance.

The irony in this is that the Hiberno-English verb "feck", which causes the confusion, is considered much less offensive than the Anglo-Saxon F-word for which it sometimes substitutes. But as such, and mainly because of Father Ted, it is now increasingly popular in Britain too. When Magners Cider upset some TV viewers there a while back by using it in an ad (with an orchard farmer saying: "Feck off, bees"), the British Advertising Standards Authority accepted the brewers' argument that the phrase was just a "mild rebuff".

The complaints were rejected.

But this also means that, whereas in the past, the name Fechin would not have meant anything outside Ireland, now English people know it sounds like the verb-adjective form of a "mild rebuff".

So there would no use in a Fechin Looney applying to British Airways either. Not while the war on terror lasts, anyway.

Thus, for all his fame, the name of the seventh-century holy man has joined the list of F-words to be generally avoided: like flix, flux, and the one that you still can't use in a family

newspaper. As a result, to the Seven Wonders of Fore, we could probably now add an eighth. Along with the tree that won't burn, the water that doesn't boil, etc, Fore was also home to the Irish saint that not even religious people will ever name their children after.

Losing the run of ourselves

March 25th, 2011

A FEW YEARS AGO, some London publishers commissioned me to write an Irish edition for their series of travel booklets called the *Xenophobe's Guides*. The brief was to be humorous, if possible, but also informative; assuming the reader to be a foreigner who knew nothing about us. And whether I succeeded or not, the slim volume has since been translated into many languages, including Estonian; although its translation into royalties appears to have been less successful.

In any case, one of the concepts I tried to communicate in it was the importance Irish people attach to not “losing the run” of themselves. This was 2005, however, when arguably the entire country had already lost it. But as I explained to my Estonian and other readers, the condition was a bit like body odour. Self-diagnosis was always difficult: it was much easier to recognise the problem in others.

“Your neighbour is especially at risk,” I wrote. “When he buys a big new off-road vehicle, for example, even though you know for a fact that he never leaves the city, he is in definite peril of losing the run of himself. When his wife suddenly appears to have much larger breasts than she had the last time you looked, she may be losing the run of herself too. And when the pair of them head off to Marbella for Easter, and they only back from a skiing holiday in Austria, you just know they've lost the run of themselves, altogether.” Well, fast-forward six years and everything in Ireland has changed. For those of us (you and I, reader) who heroically retained the run of ourselves at that time, the dangers of losing it now or in the near future have greatly subsided.

Despite which, my interest in the phrase was piqued again this week when the *Oxford English Dictionary* released its latest revisions: mostly (because the mammoth task is being carried alphabetically, over decades) beginning with the letter R.

In the process, as we reported yesterday, it announced that the word “run” has become the dictionary’s single biggest entry. The verb form alone has expanded to 645 different senses. Its nearest rival, the verb “to put”, has only half that many, even though you might think it more useful to mankind.

On the contrary, the R-word’s ubiquity suggests Bruce Springsteen was right when, all those years ago, he said we were “Born to Run”.

BUT EVEN the all-embracing *OED* can make mistakes of omission: the letter R being a case in point. When the dictionary first compiled its R section – over seven years from 1903 to 1910 – it famously left out “radium”, perhaps thinking that the Curie’s 1898 discovery would never catch on. And vast as the dictionaries’ section on “run” had become, I was almost prepared to bet that the aforementioned Irish sense had been overlooked.

So armed with a press-pass for the online version, and a sufficient supply of oxygen for several hours, I spent Wednesday evening delving into the noun section of “run”: itself of cavernous depths. And sure enough, all the obvious meanings were there, from its recreational and sporting senses, to those relating to rivers and printing presses, to a well-known problem affecting women’s tights.

There were also senses to do with mining, geology, fish, transport, smuggling, diarrhoea, and sheep-shearing. There were historic meanings, such as the “Oklahoma land run” of 1889. There were natural-historic ones, like the run meaning “the bower of a bowerbird, prepared and decorated by the male as an arena for courtship”.

There were good runs, such as those enjoyed by plays, and bad ones (eg on banks). A run could also be a “passage of rhythmic and alliterative prose” in Gaelic folklore, I learned, or it could be a short flight by an aircraft “for the purpose of dropping bombs”.

But it was with a feeling of vindication that I finally reached the last of the noun senses – one related to oil-drilling – and had still seen no mention of the Irish usage. Then I realised there was yet another sub-section on the word, this time featuring phrases. And lo, there it was at No 12: “slang (chiefly Irish English). to lose the run of oneself: [meaning] to lose one’s self-control; to behave in an unexpected or uncharacteristic manner.”

I COULD ONLY bow to the *OED*’s magisterial command of the language, after all. But wait – what was this? Gasp! Among the four, er, authorities cited using the phrase was: “2005 F. McNally *Xenophobe’s Guide to the Irish*: ‘When the pair of them head off to Marbella for Easter, and they only just back from a skiing holiday in Austria, you just know they’ve lost the run of themselves.’” Well, you can imagine the excitement of finding myself between the *OED*’s illustrious covers. In fact, my immediate instinct was to go out and buy 50 copies of the dictionary so that I could give them to friends and family. Then I discovered that even 12-months’ online access costs £205 plus VAT. Which makes the £675 for the 20-volume hard copy version look attractive. Either way, I decided to wait for the paperback.

I also noticed that the next most recent source cited for the phrase was Anne Enright’s novel *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), in which a character is quoted saying: “Frank’s lost the run of himself”. It was a timely warning. I took a few deep breaths and gathered the run

of myself as best I could. Since then, apart from writing a column about it, I have tried to carry on as if nothing happened.

Brock the terrier's lost weekend

October 30th, 2004

He was just a regular Ballyfermot Jack Russell terrier until his spectacular debut at Croke Park last Sunday catapulted him onto the celebrity A list. How did it happen? Brock tells all.

My name is Brock. I am a Jack Russell terrier, aged one-and-a-half. I live in a country called Ballyfermot, with a good family. Ballyfermot is a nice place, with many cats to chase. I was very happy there for a while. But then the war came.

I don't remember when it began. All I know is, one night, explosions started going off all over the neighbourhood. I hid under a blanket, but the bangs continued. It was the same every night. Mum laughed and said, "Poor Brock, he's scared of the fireworks!" But many humans were scared too.

I think now that the explosions made me a little crazy. I heard one of the older dogs say something called "Hallowe'en" was coming. I thought: if it's this bad before it comes, I'm not waiting for the invasion. I decided to leave Ballyfermot.

I knew some dogs in a country called Inchicore, so I thought I'd go and stay with them for a while. But the war was in Inchicore too, and my friends were in hiding. I had no choice but to keep travelling. Somewhere further on, I saw people running for a train and I ran after them.

The train was called Luas. It was fun. The passengers liked me. There was an invisible woman making announcements and when I barked at her, everyone laughed. I got off the Luas eventually. The passengers waved. The driver waved. Everybody seemed happy. Then a car crashed into the train.

My first night away, I met some rough-looking dogs. They smelled my bottom and, just to be polite, I smelled theirs. But when they asked me where I was from and I told them, they said I was a "culchie". The mood was very threatening. Luckily a cat appeared, and after we chased it down an alleyway together, they said I was "sound". I stayed with them for the night.

The next morning they were gone, and I had fleas. I wandered aimlessly. There were many strange sights. I saw arms dealers selling explosives on the streets! "Get the last of the bangers," they shouted. I barked at them angrily and ran. Some time later, I noticed crowds of people walking hurriedly, and I followed. They must be refugees from the war, I thought. But they led me into a giant stadium, where a group of children - very big children - were chasing a ball. There was also a man blowing a whistle. At first I thought I misheard, so I listened to

the whistle carefully, and there was no mistake about it. It was inviting me to join in! I couldn't believe my luck.

Anytime I ran onto a pitch in my home country, I would get - as Ballyfermot people say - "a boot up the hole". But the humans in the big stadium were great. They let me play for ages. Finally somebody took me off. He said it was nothing personal, that I'd played well, but they just needed to "change things around tactically".

After that, I ended up in a place called Drumcondra. I met a gang of cross-breeds, who claimed to be the famous "dogs in the street". They were full of stories, mostly about a man called "Bertie". But none of it made much sense. So I started wandering again.

I walked down a big wide street, with a huge silver spike. I had no idea what this thing was, but I peed against it anyway, just to be on the safe side. I walked and walked. Night came, and the explosions started again, but I was too tired and hungry to care. I tried stealing sausages from a butcher's shop, half-hoping I'd get caught.

I had hit rock bottom. I sat down and howled. Luckily, some children took pity. They brought me home and fed me and said I was theirs now. I knew it was wrong, but I just let it happen. They bought me a collar, and gave me a nice bed to sleep in. The next day, my new dad brought home the newspaper and - guess what? I was on the front page! So was my real family. One thing led to another. And soon I was back in Ballyfermot.

Although I miss my new friends, I'm glad to be in my own house again. I'm famous now, but it hasn't changed me. My experience has made me appreciate how lucky I am. All I wish now is for peace in our country soon.