

# 1916

## THE MORNINGS AFTER

Tim Pat Coogan is Ireland's best-known historical writer. His 1990 biography of Michael Collins rekindled interest in Collins and his era. He is also the author of *The IRA*; *Long Fellow*, *Long Shadow*; *Wherever Green is Worn* and *The Famine Plot*.

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**TIM PAT COOGAN**

**1916**

**THE MORNINGS AFTER**

**From the Courts Martial to the Tribunals**



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## Introduction

THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE EVENTS OF EASTER 1916 WILL, understandably, be a time of justifiable national pride and commemoration, but it should also be a time of national self-examination. We are currently passing out of the worst crisis to hit the Irish state since independence and there is a natural tendency on the part of official Ireland to accentuate the positive and play down negative statistics and uncomfortable truths. However, it would be a gross insult to the memory of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion and a betrayal of the idealism of those who took part in or supported the Rising to allow a rose-tinted view of modern Ireland to prevail over the uncomfortable realities of what has happened in this country in the years approaching the centenary.

In post-war Ireland, as the revolutionary generation aged and became increasingly unable to deal with the very real problems of emigration and unemployment, and the strictures of Mother Church grew ever more irksome, it became commonplace for criticisms of the Establishment to be referred to as ‘letting down the country’. No such approach can be tolerated nowadays. A grim and unpalatable statistic, which is never alluded to in the jargon-laden commentaries about ‘recovery’ and improved economic performance, is the fact that the number of people who have committed suicide in the seven or eight years since the financial crisis of 2007–8

is higher than the total of those killed in the thirty years of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'.

Those responsible for creating the climate of austerity that sapped the will to live of so many decent Irish men and women, mainly the banking community and to a degree the accountancy, legal and political elites, have – at the time of writing – escaped virtually scot-free. Had the miscreants been pursued for reckless trading and/or neglect of their fiduciary responsibilities as directors of banks and financial institutions, those of their number who felt disposed to read this book would have had to do so courtesy of a prison library.

Instead, in the unlikely event of their wishing to turn these pages, they are likely to be doing so either on holiday or in their comfortable homes. Obscenely inflated pension settlements and golden handshakes have accompanied a fortunate few decision-makers into luxurious retirement, while emigration, unemployment, poverty – and even suicide – have been the bitter fate of the many. Homelessness is on the increase. On the one hand building costs are too high and, as a result, not enough homes are being built; on the other, rented accommodation soars in cost so that more and more people – men, women and children – find themselves on the streets. The doctrine of 'women and children first' meant that the helpless were the first to feel the pain of slashed state benefits and the loss of support for either challenged children in the classroom or the aged in care. Apart from the destruction of pensions and the savings of retired taxpayers, whom glib stockbrokers induced to place their money in the shares of their golfing companions' banks, the state added further privations such as the withdrawal of medical cards for many over the age of seventy.

These miseries and many many more have occurred almost in direct proportion to the extent to which successive

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governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s colluded with bankers, developers and lobbyists to depart from any semblance of the idealism that permeated the 1916 leadership.

And how were the guilty men treated?

The response of official Ireland recalls George Bernard Shaw's caustic definition of a government commission being like a man going to the lavatory. It sits. For a long time nothing is heard; then there is a loud report and the matter is dropped.

As will emerge from these pages the setting up of a spate of tribunals was the chosen response to many of Ireland's ills before the crash. As this book was being written, a government-sponsored banking inquiry is being conducted by parliamentarians who quiz as many of those with either an involvement in or an opinion on the crash as can be summoned.

Amidst the expressions of regret, obfuscations and denials of culpability which have flowed from the inquiry exercise, one comment stands out: it was made by Ms Eithne Tinney, a lady who served on the upper slopes of finance. She observed that she saw no real sense of guilt amongst bankers and said that if left unchecked it could happen all over again.

Her words have been given added weight by the fact that one side effect of 'recovery' has been the rapid acceleration in house prices around Dublin and some cities outside it, prompting fears that another property bubble could well be in the making.

This is obviously undesirable, but the really dangerous nub of the situation lies in what Ms Tinney had to say about bankers being ready, willing and able to repeat the sins of the past. For it is not merely that the banking crash highlighted the fact that the winds of testosterone blew through banks' boardrooms in what were termed the Celtic Tiger years prior to the crash.

There is a twofold and deep-rooted problem here. One is the fact that Ireland was allowed to become a happy hunting-ground

for the multinationals whose profits, garnered elsewhere, as well as in Ireland, could be rerouted through Dublin back to the US in ways that avoided standard taxation. President Obama has made a strong public attack on Irish taxation policies – not at all the soothing tones the Irish have come to expect from the White House, but certainly tones the Irish can expect to hear in the future, to judge from the hard line taken by the US Treasury towards Ireland when the country was floundering in its attempts to bail out the banks.

As education and the effects of TV and social media spread, the Irish have clawed back from the Church a number of freedoms in the area of personal morality. A marked liberalization has occurred in the legalization of contraception, divorce and same-sex marriage. The abortion taboo is increasingly being questioned. In education, moves are afoot to provide school places for children without forcing their parents to have them hypocritically baptized as Catholics so that they can access state schools which, for historical reasons, are still controlled by the Church.

But there are elements of ‘I was hungry and ye founded a study group’ about all this. When it comes to feeding the hungry, or assisting the homeless, it is very often the Church which is still relied upon to fill the gaps left by state policy. The legendary Brother Kevin Crowley and his Capuchin confreres at the Capuchin monastery in Dublin keep alive both the spirit of St Francis and the memory of the parable of the loaves and fishes as, somehow, in the midst of privation, an ever-rising tide of free meals and food parcels flows out daily from the monastery to an unfortunately ever-growing army of the needy. On the housing front it is a Jesuit, Father Peter McVerry, who champions the plight of another ever-growing army which calls out daily, but without McVerry would scarcely be heard – the

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homeless. Thus, in the midst of real and disgraceful examples of Church misbehaviour, is witness given that the beating heart of goodness within the Irish Church is not yet stilled.

The laws of the bedroom may have been changed, but no such overhaul occurred for those of the marketplace. And this in the era of the corrupt banker, account and lawyer, the swashbuckling billionaire vulture capitalist, the multinational corporation. The fact is that, on the anniversary of 1916, the Irish legal system is not fit for purpose. It cannot properly control white-collar crime.

On the one hand, civil servants and politicians have greatly subverted the workings of the Freedom of Information Act, so that redactions and costs deter the average citizen from finding out how those who rule, and profit from him or from her, are behaving. On the other, the law, like the Ritz Hotel, is open to everyone. The laws of defamation in Ireland are powerful (and frequently used) weapons in the hands of the rich and the unscrupulous when they wish to cover their tracks.

Where the law-makers are concerned, parliament is very constrained in what it may investigate, even in matters relating to taxpayers' money. Its principal watchdog committee is the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), but there are legal limitations to its ability to investigate the expenditure of public money or to compel witnesses to attend before it. As matters stand the PAC can be, and sometimes is, given the two fingers in its efforts to find out how public money has been spent. The Committee needs to be given the necessary powers to enable it to function effectively in the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't world of electronic banking and deals.

It was hard not to fall prey to feelings of despair when one observed Ireland's refugee policy in the summer of 2015. The Irish attitude to the plight of those fleeing conflict in

the Middle East was a disgrace. The Irish naval service had done noble work in plucking refugees from the waters of the Mediterranean, but the government was proposing to admit only a few hundred refugees – nothing like what Ireland should have been able to absorb. When the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Examiner* placed the image of a drowned Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, on their front pages, there was an immediate outpouring of sympathy. As a consequence the government was forced to triple its targets. It should not have required the newspapers' action to force the government's hand. If we can borrow billions of euro to bail out the whited sepulchres which the Irish banks turned out to be, we can surely raise the comparatively few millions required to help ease both the refugee crisis and the situation of the homeless on our streets.

Northern Ireland appears to offer one of the few significant good examples of progress as the anniversary of 1916 approaches. However, there are disturbing signs that a dark heart still beats there. Violence is far closer to the surface than the political Establishments in Dublin, London or Belfast – or indeed the mainstream media – are prepared to acknowledge. A combination of unemployment, sectarianism and the activities of dissident republicans against the backdrop of the approaching anniversary of the Easter Rising, contains a potential for serious trouble that should be met with a renewed concentration on the problem equal to that which preceded the Good Friday Agreement. Here, in this vital area of Irish life, as in the legal system, to paraphrase Lincoln, the price of peace is indeed eternal vigilance.