

# Dr MARK DOOLEY



## MORAL MATTERS

# With so much talk of the Rising, we've forgotten St Patrick

**I**T is only when the curtain falls and we drift away that our lives can be truly assessed. It is only when the passage of life is complete that we will be considered in the round. It is then that those who survive us shall judge the type of people we were.

From the fragments of memory, our descendants will paint a picture of you and me. They will tell their grandchildren stories about the best and worst of times.

This means that our legacy is in the hands of people we might never meet.

No life is fully transparent. We project a public image that is very much at odds with our private lives.

There are things about us that are never seen or known except by our nearest and dearest. Those things are more true to who we are than the life we lead in public. However, those things rarely make it into our personal histories. And what are those things?

The love that you share with your spouse, your children and those who require a helping hand. The peace and happiness that you bring to your home. The long nights of conversation that follow the family meal.

There are the rows and the upsets that are healed in silence. There are the highs and lows that animate all human life, but which are often kept behind closed doors. There are the troubles that threaten to tear existence apart.

We live them, we survive them and we move on. Sometimes they persist only in your mind, but this does not mean they are not part of who you are.

For better or for worse, they belong to your experience and have shaped your identity.

The forgotten things are, in many ways, the most important things.

The small act of kindness, the loan that saved a life, the night spent teasing out a problem. You may have forgotten such moments, but the person whose life you saved will never forget. To him, you are a hero and a saviour.

So it is with all history. The verdict on a person is delivered by those telling the story. How you are perceived by future generations depends on the perspective of the historian or biographer.

Tomorrow is St Patrick's Day and next week we commemorate the Easter Rising. Both events are pivotal to Irish identity. No account of Irish history can exclude either St Patrick or Pádraig Pearse.

It seems, however, that we have turned away from the legacy of St Patrick while embracing that of Pearse. It is as though we seek to deny a part of ourselves, one without which we would not be who we are. It is as though we are actively trying to forget the past.

Nations are like people. Each has a long story to tell, a story or moral ups and downs. Shameful episodes combine with heroic highs to give a rounded picture of our identity.

Ireland is no different to you or me. It has a memory, a history and tales that it would rather not tell. It has a bright side and one that remains hidden from the light.

A balanced person is not afraid to

speak about the past. Indeed, suppressing the past is a recipe for emotional distress. It is only when we let a healing light shine on our darkest corners that we can be fully at peace.

The Rising was not a success. It ended in disaster and great loss of life. And yet, the events of that week eventually gave birth to a thriving democracy.

It took St Patrick 30 years to convert this island to Christianity, but convert it he did. The subsequent history of Irish Christianity contains some glorious highs and some diabolical lows. And yet, who can deny that we as a people have been shaped more by Christianity than

any other force? Ireland is no different to you or me because we all need to tell our stories, to project an image that will be affirmed, loved and respected. However, we must also learn to forgive ourselves for the bits we would rather forget, suppress or deny.

Forgiveness allows us to come to terms with ourselves.

It allows us to face our demons and to see that imperfection is the stuff of life. It permits us to see that we all make mistakes and that only by reconciling with the past can it be healed.

**T**HAT means telling the truth about ourselves and our country - warts and all. It means accepting all dimensions of our personal and national stories. It also means that we should cease denying what we don't like about ourselves.

At one level, Ireland is still a very young nation with a lot of growing up to do. At another, it is an old and venerable place with a great story to tell.

It is a story of endurance, of hope and of perseverance.

It is a story of saints and monks, of conquest and defiance, of heroism, war, subjugation and emancipation. It is a story of people such as Pearse and Joseph Plunkett, but also of Charles Stewart Parnell, Daniel O'Connell and John Redmond.

It is a story of Yeats and Joyce, but also of Edmund Burke and Jonathan Swift.

It is, like yours and mine, a complex story that deserves to be told with honesty and love.

Only then, perhaps, will we know what it really means to be Irish - what it means to forgive, to forget and to be at peace with a past in which nothing is purposely forgotten.

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