

PATRICK FREYNE



On this week's Room to Improve finale, Dermot Bannon is completely owned by a couple with a fondness for interior walls, bone china and darkness

THE BEST-LAID OPEN PLANS...

Watching Simon Schama extol the wonders of both the Italian Renaissance and the art of the great Mogul emperors on BBC Two's *Civilisations* this week, I wonder vaguely what he will say about the great extension builders of early 21st-century Ireland when he gets to it (presumably in the finale).

Looking at Irish history from the perspective of ancient estate agents (and what other perspective is there?), the Hibernian historical landscape is certainly up and coming, and littered with "potential". Newgrange is, thanks to the people who rebuilt it in the 1970s, a well-appointed bungalow that gets the sun in the morning but could do with an en suite. The prehistoric fort of Dún Aonghasa is fashionably open plan, and it does have an en suite (the ocean is nature's en suite), but it's sadly devoid of storage space, underfloor heating, a roof or decent broadband.

Ireland itself is, in a sense, an extension, historically treated as a nice new conservatory by the Brits, with its fourth province not so much a green field as a room to improve. There was even a Dermot keen to do some remodeling back in the old day (Dermot MacMurrough).

Basically we are genetically programmed to like *Room to Improve*. It is our culture's small-C version of *Civilisations* and the nearest RTE gets to statement television. As its title suggests, it engages in a sort of modest Irish incrementalism at odds with any of the grand teleological narratives that nearby empires might tinker with. The lot of man might well improve, it says, but largely because we've put in some new windows and a bit of dry lining. The Enlightenment is what happens because of a well-placed skylight.

The 11th series of *Room to Improve* ends this weekend, although the franchise itself will never end. I hope to be reviewing *Room to Improve* annually until the day I die, at which point a robot Dermot Bannon (a DermBot, if you will) will no doubt be arguing about the correct location for a space sarcophagus or jewel-embossed laser turret in an orbiting satellite/underground bunker.

The penultimate episode (last Sunday, RTE One) is a classic. Dermot is faced with his worst enemy, farm folk who have no truck with his metropolitan notions. Bigger windows? An open-plan kitchen-cum-diningroom? Natural light? Would you go back to Dublin with yourself, we're grand here in the dark. Over the course of the show, china-collecting teacher Katie and taciturn farmer Pádraig slowly drive Dermot to the brink of madness.

But let's go back to the beginning. Every *Room to Improve* has a few classic set pieces. First there's the planning bit that finishes with them sitting down to agree the cost of the renovation. Working out the cost of a renova-



Dermot confronts his worst enemy, farm folk who have no truck with his notions

tion is filthy sex stuff for the Irish people, and around the country we all wear away this bit of the videotape, rewinding and replaying it. (Everyone records *Room to Improve* on video.) This weekend's preplanning has a touch of sadomasochism to it, with Katie deciding that Dermot's plans get "zero out of 10". Dermot is appalled and brings this slight up at every opportunity. "You have to admit that those first drawings were not your best work," Katie says later.

Dermot decides to try to learn about his hosts. He goes out with Pádraig on to the farm in overalls, disguised like emperors of yore. The cows just think he's a normal person. Stupid cows. But he gives the game away. Confused by anything that isn't a form of extension, Dermot likens Pádraig's herd to Katie's chinaware collection, as though Pádraig is an eccentric aficionado of bovine collectibles and not a farmer with a job. (In an aside, Pádraig mentions that his favourite cow, coincidentally, has the same name as Katie's sister, proving, once again, that simple Freudianism is no match for us Irish.)

Then Katie takes Dermot to see her mother, a former Calor Kosangas Housewife of the Year, which is what we used to call our leaders before we had the word taoiseach. She fills Dermot with cake and confuses him with an even more extensive china collection.

Eventually the builders start ripping the house down, as a metaphor for what Katie and Pádraig are doing to Dermot's sense of self. We all hold our breath in erotic excitement and hope they find a serious structural problem and have to recalculate the costs. Sadly, this doesn't happen, but they do find a difference of opinion. Katie and Pádraig want a wall dividing the kitchen and the diningroom, and Dermot Bannon hates walls and loves windows and natural light. His ideal home is a greenhouse on the surface of the sun, and someday, by God, he's going to build it. Katie and Pádraig's ideal

home, in contrast, is their farmhouse looking more or less the same, except deep underground and filled with china cabinets.

Dermot repressing his rage is my favourite thing on television. One day he's going to snap, and RTE is going to have another big internal inquiry, but until then we'll get gems like "It doesn't really matter to me... I'll drive down that lane and I'll never have to see that wall again." What he means, of course, is, "**** you and your ****ing wall. I'll stand in the ruins of your lives and turn your farmhouse into a freestanding modernist umbrella if I ****ing choose. I'm Dermot Bannon, bitches!"

Sadly for Dermot, Katie has the measure of him. She just looks at him with mild pity, as though he is a local character whom they have permitted to wear a hard hat and pretend he is an architect. She tells him that the colour of the window frames is wrong. She accidentally douses him with water from a shower when visiting a showhouse. And so, over the course of the programme, Dermot slowly spirals into an existential crisis. If his opinion is irrelevant, then he's irrelevant, he says to the camera, and you're a better person than I am if you don't respond from your couch with, "Sorry, what did you say there, Dermot? I was just thinking about how much I hate windows and natural light."

Anyway, it's all building towards a twist ending in which it's revealed that Dermot Bannon had been a ghost the whole time, like Nicole Kidman in *The Others* or Bruce Willis in *Live Free or Die Hard*. But then, ultimately, everyone admits that the house does look pretty good, and Dermot tries to convince Katie that maybe he had something to do with this and tries to convince himself that he does, in fact, exist. "I'll give him 10 out of 10, but don't tell him," Katie says to the camera, clearly happy that she has destroyed a man.

Then there's a party and a speech, and someone mentions how the whole project came in on budget, which is, for the Irish, a statement that's usually followed by lying back in bed and lighting a cigarette.

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PATRICK FREYNE

Love Island: An attempt to tell a beautiful story using the medium of hunks



“Grandfather, what did you do during the ‘Dark Years’ (2017 to today inclusive)?” asks a wild-eyed child.

Grandfather pauses from whittling an iPhone 8 from calcified wood. “Well son, I largely watched *Love Island*.”

“You weren’t paying attention to global politics?”

“I was! But I’d seen that already. It was sh*t. All repeats. I changed the channel for a while in search of cheer.”

A shriek cleaves the air as one of the giant mutated Nigel Farage rampages by, dropping tiny Trumplings from his pelt as he goes. The child shudders. “I hate the Trumplings.”

The grandfather puts a finger on his mouth. “Hush now child. Put another rat on the fire and let me tell you of the *Love Island*.”

The child sighs, picks up a rat and puts it on the campfire. Grandfather sits back and continues whittling. “*Love Island* was an attempt to tell a beautiful love story using the medium of hunks.”

“This sounds stupid.”

Grandfather ignores him. “A selection of the world’s best hunks and hunkettes were placed on an island where they took instructions from an anonymous producer and were encouraged to fall in love and play mind games and hopefully have sex in front of ‘the general public’.”

“The general public? Those bastards! I’ve heard of them. They voted for Brexit and Trump and that thing with the tentacles and the Fianna Fáil/Sinn Féin coalition.”

Grandfather chuckles and reaches for his scrapbook. “They really were scamps, the general public.”

He opens the scrapbook. There in the middle of a big love heart drawn in marker is a sepia-coloured photograph of the full cast of *Love Island* 2017.

The child grimaces. “Ugh, they’re hideous misshapen freaks.”

Grandfather looks hurt. “Now son, before our current skin conditions and vitamin deficiencies and toothlessness, this is what passed for ‘fit’.”

“But they’re so . . . lumpy. Who’s that?”

“That’s Caroline Flack. She owns the *Love Island*. She lives there still surrounded by her hunkbots if the legends are true.”

“She looks well paid.”

Grandfather laughs. “Probably not as much as a male counterpart, son, but yes.”

“So how did it work?”

“Well, each day the islanders would gather around a sort of watering hole and would accede to the whims of a handheld device. They bickered and

formed twosomes and threesomes and touching bromances and engaged in ridiculous mind games and mugged each other off and had DMCs and had sex on telly and they all slept in a big communal bedroom like the seven dwarves or the Smurfs. And they did so happily, not out of terror as we do today. All in all, it was a fantastical hunktopia and we shall never see its like again.”

“Where are their clothes?”

“They rarely wore shirts because shirts chafed their delicate skin.”

“Was there any dark side to this wonderland?”

“Okay, every now and again The Flack would come and there would be an event called The Recoupling. And then, in good Darwinian fashion, those not in a breeding pair were excluded from the group and sent out into the wilderness to die. But frankly we were okay with that; the couples left over were totes adorbs.”

“I feel like you’re anthropomorphising them.”

“Um, it wasn’t a wildlife documentary.”

“You’re making it sound like a wildlife documentary.”

The grandfather sighs and flicks over a page in the scrapbook. “Let’s have a look at the ‘finale’.”

“The Trumpocalypse?”

“No just the final episode of the series. By the last episode [which was Monday night on 3e for readers in 2017] the four best couples were left. There was Chris who had a head like a sullen Ken doll and Olivia who seemed to enjoy hurting him. There was Jamie, who had a jaw like a rectangle and was a renaissance man in that he modelled underwear but also read books, and Camilla, who was posh and saintly and beloved by all. There was Marcel and Gabby who, having been a couple for a whole four weeks, taught us all something about monogamy and stick-to-itiveness. And there was Amber and Kem.”

He sighs. “They were total melty sorts.”

“Kem isn’t a real name,” says the child, a little sulkily.

“It totally is, Kemstopher. Anyway, it was great. They all did the tango badly and wrote declarations of love and jumped into the swimming pool and drank champagne and then The Flack presented them to the baying crowd who loved them.”

“I don’t know Granddad, it sounds kind of exploitative, heteronormative and a bit porny.”

Grandfather looks sad. “You don’t know how bad things were by 2017,” he says. “I was a television reviewer. *IKNOW*.”

Things were dark. The hunklings seemed so sweet and naive and simple and funny, like a *Love Is...* cartoon but with real sex. It was a world in which a woman could say, with a straight face, ‘It was very difficult [for me] after ‘Licence to Swill’.”

“But they were grown adults. How did they put up with such nonsense?”

“These were more innocent times. None of them had fought in a war [yet]. Except possibly Marcel, who was in Blazing Squad, a branch of the armed forces. All I know is, they were the heroes we needed at the time.”

“I’m not sure they were,” says the child, lifting a roasted rat from the fire with his stabbing stick.

“Anyway, the general public made their choice and it was Kem and Amber,” says grandfather. “Kem and Amber were the best at being in love. And they had come through ‘difficult times’ and they agreed to share the £50,000 prize. And then Elon Musk sent them to Mars to spawn a golden race of hunks. I think I forget. Things get a bit hazy after the finale because of, you know, the horror.”

The child raises an eyebrow. “I’m not sure that was ‘love’.”

And looking at the pictures in your scrapbook, I’m not sure that it was really an island. At best it was an archipelago. It was a lust archipelago. That’s what you have there, Grandfather, a lust archipelago.”

Grandfather moans and clutches his scrapbook to his chest. “You have no poetry in your soul, boy. Eat your rat.” He stares for a while in the firelight at his wood-carved iPhone. He smiles and mutters to himself as he taps on it. “They were so goddamned hunky,” he mutters. “Hashtag hunky,” he adds. “Hashtag my happy place.”

The child observes him sadly. The old man is unlikely to survive another winter, he thinks. In the darkness the Trumplings emit an electronic scream.



“A selection of the world’s best hunks and hunkettes were placed on an island where they took instructions from an anonymous producer”

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STAY IN TOUCH

PATRICK FREYNE



There are food shortages and riots and death and politics and plot. But by far the most important bit of *Poldark* happens on a beach in the first minute

AN OBJECT OF ENDURING INTEREST

This week my column is an essay that I have titled *The Meaning of Poldark Striding Topless Out of the Sea*. The new series of *Poldark* (Sunday, BBC One) starts underwater off the Cornwall coast with Poldark (Aidan Turner) swimming by the camera like a merman in an ad for smellgood lotion (aftershave) or maybe like a particularly muscular sea-lion cub looking for his mother.

"Finally!" says you. "A season of *Poldark* set under the sea. It was inevitable."

But, no, then we get a long shot of the hunky aristocrat striding purposefully out of the water. He has no shirt on, and his body is glistening with seawater. His dark hair is tousled. His eyes are soulful. The cliffs of Cornwall seem to call to him. "Sexxy Pooldaaaark," they seem to say, unaware that this is a form of harassment, because they are cliffs from another time. Just out of shot some anachronistic career women are drinking Diet Coke or, possibly, diet laudanum, it being the 18th century. Then someone says aloud, "Poldark? More like Phwoahdark!"

Full disclosure: it was you. You said that.

Apart from his skin and hair, Poldark is also wearing tan trousers that are probably meticulously researched vintage bathing trunks but that for the purpose of this article I'm going to call "chinos of the past". He is breathing heavily, but then so are you. His chest goes up and down 10 times as he stands there. You rewind the player to be sure. Yes, it was definitely 10 times (#journalism).

The camera pans up to the Cornwellian sky, and then it pans back down to Poldark, who is now wearing a big flouncy white shirt with his chinos of the past.

"Aw," you say.

Being temporarily topless on a beach has made Poldark reflective. He thinks about his flame-haired, free-spirited wife, Gazebo (editor's note: I think you mean "Demelza"), and her recent affair with the poetic young waif Hugh Armitage, who writes poems and is sickly. Unlike Poldark, who likes slow-motion horse-riding along the cliffs, lifting things sweatily and frowning his brow. (These are listed as "hobbies" on his Tinder profile.)

He's doing the furrowed-brow thing now, as he moodily hallucinates his wife and her lover into existence on the beach. "What is love? A possession to be hoarded or a blessing to give away?" says hallucinated Armitage, which is a perfectly ordinary thing to say in the world of *Poldark*, even for a hallucination.

Poldark starts buttoning up his shirt and looks sad, and we are sad too, because he is buttoning up his shirt. Then Gazebo (editor's note: seriously? "Gazebo" isn't even remotely like "Demelza") and his two frolicking children arrive on the beach, because their marriage is apparently still intact despite their ongoing extramarital shenanigans. "Papa!" one of his children cries, which is olden days for "Da" or "Male Progeni-



Aidan Turner in his chinos of the past

tor" (as you call your father). Poldark still looks sad—I might be projecting here, but I feel like he really hates having to wear a shirt—and then the opening credits roll.

And that's the first minute of this week's *Poldark*. Other stuff happens after the credits, but all of these scenes feature shirts and should technically be outside the boundaries of this week's discussion.

But let me just run through it all anyway, lest the hordes of *Poldark* completists send letters of complaint to the editor. There are food shortages and riots in Cornwall, and Poldark's nemesis George Warleggan is now an MP who works in a CGI version of 18th-century London. He is intent on executing rioters, the smug-faced shit. Warleggan hates Poldark because Warleggan is married to Poldark's sometime lover Elizabeth, and Poldark is a manly man of action while Warleggan is a narky babyman of nefarious scheming.

Oh, there's something else. Warleggan and Elizabeth have a brooding dark-haired three-year-old son who likes cliff-top horse-riding and tin smelting and might as well be named "the Eponymous Toddler, Poldark 'Junior' Poldarkson". For this and many other reasons Warleggan really hates Poldark.

So Warleggan ensures that Poldark's hunky friend Jago and Poldark's two hunky brothers-in-law, Samuel and Drake, are caught up in the riotous arrests and are sentenced to be hanged in a probably vindictive but possibly ecologically necessary hunk cull. (I'm not an environmentalist, but there are lots of hunks in ancient Cornwall, and there may be some issues with overbreeding.)

Poldark decides not to tell Gazebo about her brothers' dire circumstances and leaves her to struggle with her forbidden love for sickly, sweating Armitage, while Poldark rides his horse in slow motion along the cliff top, makes populist man-of-the-people speeches on behalf of his doomed friends (the "gallows-side plea" is this era's "best man speech") and performs conspicuous acts of labour while implausibly wearing a

shirt. (This is just bad writing, IMO.)

In his charismatic speechifying he derides the globalist merchants who snatch "corn from the mouths of babes" (presumably a reference to himself and his hot chums), and the fake news used to convict the rioters. Ultimately, he convinces the local toff Sir Francis Basset (sadly, not a hound) to spare his brothers-in-law but not Jago. Then he and his wife sit together in grief, wondering about the mysteries of marriage, while external forces plot a political career for the brooding action man.

At programme's end Poldark's status is . . . shirted. (Full disclosure: there are only two statuses on the scale I'm using.) So let's go back to that opening sequence and contemplate, again, Poldark emerging from the waters.

Why is it so compelling? Why have you looped the footage and used it as a screen saver? Why have you printed the image on a card, pasted a cut-out of your own head on top of Poldark's and typed "Happy Christmas from All the Family" at the top of the card and distributed it to everyone you know even though it's not Christmas? You think for a moment.

"Perhaps," you say, "Poldark is 'man'. The sea is 'life' and the beach is 'death'."

Maybe. But that seems a bit heavy for BBC One on a Sunday.

"Perhaps," you say, "this was just a particularly gratuitous attempt to hook a flagging audience with some eye candy on the first beat of a new season?"

Maybe. But *Poldark* is intriguing enough with its likable, broody costars, life-or-death melodrama and glorious cinematography.

"Perhaps," you say, "the sea is 'Europe', Poldark is 'Britain' and the beach is 'Brexit'."

Ah now! Poldark is played by an Irishman, so unless this is a comment on the invisibility of the Irish question to the average Brexiteer, I'd say probably not.

"Okay," you say, "perhaps we are all Poldark and this open-plan office I'm sitting in is the sea?"

That's more like it. But please keep your shirt on. You're on a final warning from HR.

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