

When RTE put five artworks from its collection up for sale at Sotheby's in London in October, the station had not fully researched what it was selling. Acting on a tip-off, The Sunday Times asked the Arts Council about two of the works: Táin, a tapestry by Louis le Brocqy, and a William Scott abstract painting. Hadn't the council jointly bought these with RTE?

After a root in its archives, the Arts Council discovered that, yes, it had paid half the asking price of the two works in 1967. The tapestry and the Scott abstract had been bought under the joint purchase scheme (JPS), which ran from 1954 to 2004 and was created to support living Irish artists at a time when there was little demand for their work. Another idea was to put art into often dreary public buildings. It started with local authorities, and was extended to hotels, schools, semi-state bodies, hospitals and universities.

In total, 1,855 artworks were bought. The Arts Council usually paid half, which could be a few hundred pounds, or several thousand. What that means, of course, is the Irish taxpayer paid half the cost. And since county councils, hospitals and universities are publicly funded, that meant a great deal of the art bought under the JPS was paid for entirely by the Irish taxpayer.

So what became of these 1,855 artworks: the 54 le Brocquys, the 45 Patrick Scotts, the 38 by Patrick Collins, 30 by Gerard Dillon, 17 by Robert Ballagh, 13 by Dan O'Neill, the four Jack B Yeats and the William Scott? Are they still hanging in those public buildings? Or have they, like RTE's pair, been sold off? And if they were sold, did the Arts Council notice? Did it reclaim half the sales price, to which it was entitled? Did art bought out of the public purse at a time when money was short and budgets were tight get flipped for profit, get thrown out or disappear?

The Arts Council has a list of the 1,855 works. It also has a second list of works that were resold and half the sales price refunded. There are only 23 of those. The amount recouped was a modest IRE538.71 in "old" money and €11,760 for the four most recent sales, three by the ESB.

So what of the rest? An interrogation of the dozens of organisations that bought art under the JPS has yielded mixed results. Some were unable to say what happened to the artworks they bought. These include University College Dublin (21 works), Mount Temple Comprehensive School (16), Aer Lingus (8) and Newbridge College (6). The Daughters of Charity Disability Support Services, which got nine works, says that its service "is so big they could be in any of our offices".

All of these various bodies did at least respond to questions. A group that did not was the Contemporary

PEELING BACK THE LAYERS

What became of hundreds of artworks bought with taxpayers' money to boost Irish artists? *John Burns* investigates

Wide spectrum Patrick Scott's rainbow rug in Finglas Training Centre

Irish Art Society, which bought 115 works under the JPS, by artists such as Dillon, Mary Lohan and Ciarán Lennon. The society failed to respond to emails, Facebook messages or letters from ourselves and the Arts Council. Four years ago, the society wrote to The Irish Times to "voice its strong objection" to the sale of works from Russborough House. But what has become of the 115 works it obtained?

The Limerick Contemporary Art

Society acquired 21 works under the JPS, but queries as to their whereabouts were not answered. And where are the eight works bought by the now defunct Carysfort College, including le Brocqy's "Two images of Seamus Heaney"? UCD says that contents did not come with its purchase of the Carysfort property.

Among the hotels that took part in the JPS was the Gresham on O'Connell Street in Dublin, which bought 42 works with the help of the Arts Council between 1962 and 1969. Five were sold soon afterwards, and half the sales ▶



► price was refunded. But what of the rest? The Gresham has changed hands many times since. Hugh Tunney bought it in 1975, and Precinct Investments in 2004. The hotel went into Nama after the financial crash and was bought in 2016 by Spain's Riu Group. We managed to persuade Riu to check the walls of the Gresham to see whether any of the JPS art was still on show.

"Let me first say these pieces of art were not mentioned during due diligence," Yvonne Swiezawski, an area manager, tells us. "The general manager has gone around the whole hotel and could find only five of the paintings on your list, and we have no knowledge of the whereabouts of the others."

By contrast, Renvyle House hotel in Connemara can account for all the artworks it acquired under the JPS. Between 1961 and 1975, there were a dozen, including works by Dillon and Maurice MacGonigal and two tapestries by Françoise Auxmery.

"I am the third generation to be involved in running Renvyle House," says Zoe Fitzgerald. "My grandfather Dr Donny Coyle availed of the scheme in the 1970s. My parents, John and Sally Coyle, own the hotel now and are good patrons of the arts."

"The only one we sold was Rostrevor Road by Dan O'Neill in 2013. The Arts Council received half the proceeds – €3,000 – and we used the balance to buy works from more contemporary artists. The remainder are on the walls throughout the hotel, and are as beautiful as ever."

Also still hanging, in Finglas Training Centre, is a rainbow rug by Patrick Scott. It was bought by Fas in 1983 for IR£3,000 and hung in the canteen of the Finglas centre for years before going into storage. "When I came in as centre manager, they told me about this famous rug," says Maria Murphy. "I was very conscious that it should come back and not just disappear."

"In some places it was sun-damaged and faded. Repairs were done to it in Galway. Due to some architectural changes to the building, it now hangs on two walls instead of one."

Among other institutions that can say everything they bought is still on public display are Kerry, Wexford, Mayo and Waterford county councils; the University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Trinity College and the National College of Ireland; and CIE. Laois county council says three sculptures it acquired are on display in Portlaoise library and the rest are in storage.

"I have checked your list and managed to track down all but five," announces Carolyn Gormley of the Institute of Public Administration, which is spread over several houses and has a premises in Clonskeagh. "There are several rooms locked that I couldn't gain access to, and would assume the [five] paintings are in those rooms."



JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY



In the frame George Campbell's Dun Aengus, Inis Mór, above left, Maurice MacGonigal's Clifden Bay Connemara, top, and Patrick Hennessy's Distant Mountains, Connemara, above, hang at the Renvyle House hotel; the Gresham hotel, left, bought 42 works

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The Arts Council should know exactly where each of the pieces is and what they look like

The archivist in King's Hospital School in Dublin can not only account for everything bought, but knows where each is hanging. Michael Cullen's Casino with Shootout is in "the corridor outside the headmaster's office" while Alice Hanratty's Blue Puppet is in the headmistress's office.

Some institutions have more than they know. Fáilte Ireland has everything it bought under the JPS, and volunteers the names of other works it finds during an audit. It turns out they were bought by An Coras Trachtála, a defunct trade agency, and include Brocquy's Sol y Sombra and two works by Michael Farrell. Some have been restored.

An alarming discovery, however, is that the Arts Council's database of JPS sales may not be accurate. For example, Enterprise Ireland says it once held

shared ownership of three artworks, originally the property of An Coras Trachtála. They included a le Brocquy, a Brian Bourke, and Barley Moon by Norah McGuinness. "These were sold in 2002 and 2007 and the Arts Council received half the proceeds," Enterprise Ireland said. The sales are not recorded on the council's database, however. Barley Moon was resold at an auction in 2009 and made €19,000.

Artist and art historian Garrett Cormican says it is a "shocking indictment" of the Arts Council that it does not have a photographic inventory of every work it jointly bought. That would mean any missing works could more easily be identified, tracked down and returned to the state. It has been known for at least a decade there were issues about the location of some works, he points out.

"This was a really good scheme that gave enormous support to Irish artists when they needed it," says Cormican. "Not only did it give artists money for work, sight of the pieces in public places may well have encouraged other private collectors to buy work from them. The Arts Council should know exactly where each piece is and what they look like. The fact that they don't appears symptomatic of a certain indifference to the visual arts in Ireland. No work should have been sold or transferred without the Arts Council's express agreement as joint owners."

Asked in October what it did to safeguard works from the JPS, one official somewhat breezily replied: "We don't have an ongoing audit, but we do monitor all the major auctions of Irish art." Is that really enough? ■

STATUES IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Is there something lurking in the Irish psyche that demands any sculpture or monument has to be destroyed or defaced, wonders *John Burns*

One Sunday in early August 1977, Charlie Haughey officially launched an open-air display of Irish sculpture in St Anne's Park, Raheny. *Oasis*, as it was called, was only the second exhibition of its kind to be staged in Dublin, and featured all the leading sculptors of the day.

By Monday evening, *Oasis* had been destroyed. "Reflective Columns" by Joseph Cregan was uprooted and partially burnt," reported The Irish Times. "Untitled Steel Glass" by Paul O'Keeffe was thrown into a stream. The exhibition hut was burnt out." Only the larger metal exhibits remained intact after a destructive spree that was blamed on an adolescent gang.

That was more than 40 years ago. Wouldn't happen today, right? Well, wrong actually. The Irish artist Vera Klute put up two sculptures in public areas last year: one in the south of France, and a bust of singer Luke Kelly on Sherriff Street. One is untouched; the other has been vandalised twice. Earlier this month someone put sunglasses on Kelly's face with black paint. "What I find annoying about what happened is that it's just spoiling the sculpture," says Klute. "There's no creative merit in it. It's not funny or well done."

Klute doesn't take the attacks personally, and why would she? There's a long and inglorious history of

disrespect towards monuments in Ireland, which starts with mocking nicknames – the Floozie in the Jacuzzi, the Tart with the Cart – and proceeds to vandalism and sometimes outright destruction or theft.

The most notorious episode was the butchering of the *Cow Parade*, 10 life-sized fibreglass creations, in 2003. They had stood unharmed in Zurich for five years. Within 24 hours in Dublin, one had a wing snapped off, another was decapitated and others were defaced with graffiti. They all had to be brought indoors out of harm's way.

"I have cited the cows when people want to put up temporary sculptures

Standing targets The Haunting Soldier, right; Cow Parade, below



around the city," says Ruairí Ó Cuív, public art manager for Dublin city council. "I say, 'Just be aware that we were the only city where all the cows had to be brought indoors to a safe space.'"

If only the statue of Pádraig Ó Conaire on Eyre Square in Galway could have been sheltered, the writer might not have lost his head in 1999. Seán Russell in Fairview Park was also beheaded. The shoppers on Liffey Street, aka the Hags with the Bags (more derision), once lost their bags. In August 2014, the newly refurbished Molly Malone statue was splashed with red paint. Phil Lynott, standing just off Grafton Street, has been knocked over, and had his guitar stolen.

Speed of Light, by the American artist William Dennisuk, was installed on the M1 in 2002. Comprising 320 luminous red tubes, and costing €170,000, it was bitterly criticised by politicians and then systematically vandalised by hooligans, some of whom drove specially from Drogheda. Each lighted tube cost €130 to replace. Thirty were smashed the first weekend, and 30 more the next. Soon half of them were gone. *Speed of Light* was eventually dismantled and put in storage.

A nationwide spree of thefts of bronze statues in 2011-13 swept away *Fish Column*, a 1.3m tall monument in Dundalk; the *Hitchhiker* from the Dublin-Cork motorway; the seven-metre-high *Gráinne Óg* from a slip road on the M6; and a sculpture in Castletown,



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We were the only city where all the cows had to be brought inside out of harm's way

Co Laois, which commemorated young people who died tragically.

Why is there so little respect for statuary? One theory is because our town centres are regularly given over to drunkenness, such as the national piss-up on St Patrick's Day. Yet Dublin-bikes, which everyone predicted would see cycles end up in the Liffey, has suffered only one act of vandalism in more than a decade.

Ó Cuív believes some of the defacement is about leaving a mark. "If you look at shutters all over Dublin, you'll find tagging," he says. "This is where an individual leaves their name or identity, such as initials, on property or lampposts. If you look at the tops of buildings, you often see spray-painted names or graffiti. It's partly attention-seeking, and has gone on for 10 years or more."

Spray-painting glasses on Kelly should be seen in that context, he says. One way to reduce the chances of a recurrence is to give such acts of vandalism no publicity. "I refused to go on the radio to talk about this," says Klute of the latest attack, "because the exposure encourages people to do more."

Another way to interpret these attacks, however, is as a hangover from colonialism. Throughout "British rule", Irish nationalists desecrated symbols of the British Empire. One of the early examples was a statue of King George II on the Grand Parade in Cork being tipped into the river in 1862.

After independence, the onslaught intensified. A statue of William III, or King Billy, which had stood on College Green in Dublin since 1701, lost its sword in 1798; was covered in tar in 1805; was blown off its horse in 1837; and finally blown up altogether in 1929. A fine sculpture of Viscount Gough in the Phoenix Park was also regularly vandalised, having its head sawn off on Christmas Eve 1944. It was eventually moved to Northumberland.

Most notoriously of all, of course, Nelson's Pillar on Dublin's O'Connell Street was blown up by the IRA in 1966.

The apparent desire to rid Ireland of any vestiges of the British Empire has spilled over into ugly attacks on First World War monuments, even though tens of thousands of Irishmen fought and died in that conflict. A war memorial was unveiled in Kilkenny in July 2018, and has been targeted several times since. Last March the carved stone face of the soldier in the centrepiece was mutilated. A vice grip and lump hammer were found nearby. ▶

► The monument is now protected by CCTV cameras, which cost about €30,000 to install.

Perhaps the most sickening attack was in November 2018 on the Haunting Soldier sculpture in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, which was defaced with red paint. Wreaths at the base were also damaged, including one placed by the All Blacks rugby team before a game with Ireland.

A First World War monument in Ennis was damaged in 2018. A wall in Glasnevin cemetery with the names of all who died in the Easter Rising, Irish and British, was defaced with paint – green paint. See what they did there?

O'Cuiv speculates that there's a subversive streak in the Irish psyche, which also manifests itself in jaywalking, fly-tipping and a dislike of paying taxes or using seatbelts. "We like defying authority, and I think it's probably a post-colonial society in that way," he says. "As more people come into the country from elsewhere, I do detect an evolution, or a change, in respect for common property."

For now, we'll have to be protected from our worst instincts. Asked why Rowan Gillespie's *Famine* statues on Dublin's North Quays are unharmed, Klute reckons it's because they're black. "If my Luke Kelly sculpture was black, there'd be little joy in putting sunglasses on him," she muses. "The light-colour stone makes for a good canvass."

One that every gurrer in Dublin 1 seems to keen to leave his mark on. ■

One in the eye Sunglasses were daubed on the Luke Kelly sculpture



BRYAN APPELYARD



England flattens out into a grey distance. There's a row of bungalows and small houses marking the horizon line to the left, all dwarfed by the huge concrete blocks of a nuclear power station to the right. The sea, another grey distance, only becomes visible at the last moment. Welcome to Dungeness, a bleak, windy Kent headland skirted by a vast shingle foreshore.

It was on this shingle that, in spring 1986, the artist and film-maker Derek Jarman discovered Prospect Cottage, a tiny house with yellow window frames and black-tar waterproofing. He bought it and, after being diagnosed with HIV, lived there until his death from Aids-related illnesses in 1994. He was 52.

Prospect Cottage is still yellow and black. The most immediately obvious change is on the west wall, which now bears a shortened version of John Donne's great poem *The Sun Rising* – an erotic plea – in raised black letters. But then there's the garden.

I assume there is a file in a council office somewhere that defines the legal limits of this garden, but, on the ground, there are none. The shingle is simply interrupted by strange plantings, driftwood, concrete and assorted iron fragments. Strings of hag stones – pebbles with holes in – provide decoration. There is no fence or wall; these interruptions could stretch from the shoreline to the power station.

"Paradise haunts gardens," Jarman once imperiously said, "and some gardens are paradises. Mine is one of them. Others are like bad children, spoilt by their parents, overwatered and covered with noxious chemicals."

This garden, built by non-gardener Jarman with Howard Sooley, an experienced plantsman, looks familiar these days because it has influenced garden design all around the British coast. I was accompanied there by crew and a presenter from *Countryfile*, BBC1's genial nature show. Jarman's once radical gardening has gone mainstream.

The whole area, bleak and forbidding as it may seem, has gone mainstream too. There is even a slicked-up black beach house built as part of Alain de Botton's Living Architecture scheme, in which good architects build houses for rental. Property prices have soared. I looked up a few humble houses – shacks, really – on the shingle that had gone for £200,000-£300,000.

Even before that happened, however, Prospect Cottage was neither a simple rural retreat nor a bleak emptiness from which Jarman could ponder his impending death. For one

THE HOUSE JARMAN BUILT

Admirers want to save the film-maker and artist Derek Jarman's Kent home. Is this humble shack worth preserving?



Altarpiece Jarman's desk, above; right, the garden at Prospect Cottage

thing, there's Dungeness nuclear power station. Such things are usually seen as sinister, but here it feels romantic, a mist-clouded palace. In a 2008 film about Jarman, made by his friend and collaborator Tilda Swinton, it is seen as the Emerald City from *The Wizard of Oz*, all part of his mythologised landscape.

At the other end of the scale, there's the narrow-gauge rail line that runs along the shingle: the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway, which, in summer, interrupts any contemplation of the bleak beyond with carriages full of babbling children. A poignant vision for a dying man. But what about Jarman now – where does he stand?

First, the cottage and garden. In 2018, the artist Tacita Dean contacted Stephen Deuchar, director of the Art Fund. She was an old friend of Keith Collins, who had been with Jarman throughout his last years. Jarman had bequeathed the house to Collins; now Collins was dying of a brain tumour. What was to happen to the house? When Collins died, it became the property of his husband, Garry Clayton, but this could not work long-term. So plans were laid to take the house into public ownership. "We

see the whole thing as Derek Jarman's last work," Deuchar says.

The plan is to raise £3.5m to buy the house and provide an endowment for its preservation. The scheme will then be taken over by Creative Folkestone, an arts charity. Apart from managing visitor numbers, it has plans to have artist residencies in the cottage lasting a few days or a couple of weeks.

Some of Jarman's archives have gone to Tate Britain. The house will be preserved as it is, but a decision has to be made about the garden. Is it to continue to be a changing spectacle? If so, who manages the changes? Even works of art need weeding. Or will it be preserved as it was at Jarman's death? Deuchar favours change; others may disagree.

So what does all this mean? Well, first, the cottage is tiny. There was a group of visitors in there at the same time as me, plus the *Countryfile* team, who, like television people everywhere, constantly got in the way. On top of that, passers-by were wandering around the garden, some trying to inveigle their way through the front door. Creative Folkestone will have to be very creative to keep this place intact.

It may reasonably be seen as Jarman's last work, rather than just a house where he lived. It is a wood-lined box of



treasures. Paintings by Jarman and others cover the walls, and curious arrangements of objects – mirrors, a helmet, strings of hag stones, dried plants, sculptures, artists' materials – fill the rooms. There's a green Islington "People's Plaque" that proclaims Jarman as an "artist, film director and queer activist".

If there is a dominant theme, it is religion. There is a fine Madonna icon, most startling, three prayers on plaques fixed to a thickly painted background embedded with nails. "Dear God," says one, "if you must insist on reincarnation, please promise me I will be queer, tho' I've heard you don't approve."

Everywhere you look there seems to be an altar or shrine of some kind: a plastic Hulk looking like a priest addressing a congregation of pencils on his desk, or the Madonna icon surrounded by crucifixes and pebble necklaces. Religion, usually pagan in the early years, also suffuses Jarman's films and paintings. This was not a matter of belief: God is present, as the prayers show, as somebody to remonstrate with. Tilda Swinton suggested that he may be, like Shakespeare, "a secret papist"; so secret, in fact, that, like Shakespeare, he probably wasn't.

I finally force my way through to the kitchen, which, astoundingly, is just a kitchen. Still, visitors pore over the usual drawers and work surfaces as if seeking some contact with the man himself.

If Prospect Cottage had been simply a place where Jarman lived, a blue plaque would have sufficed, but it does seem to be more than that. Is it enough for this glamorous effort of conservation?

By living as he lived and dying as he died, Jarman has become a kind of secular saint. Like Christ, he is adored as a victim. He suffered violence as a child at the hand of his father and, as he puts it, was a criminal for the first 25 years of his life. Homosexuality was partially decriminalised in 1967. He died of a condition often regarded as shameful, yet played that most admired of contemporary roles, the outsider.

"The adult Jarman," wrote his biographer Tony Peake, "would almost always operate on the fringe. As a painter, he hardly ever exhibited in a West End gallery. As a film-maker, he eschewed mainstream cinema. As a sexual being, he embraced his position on the margins of conventional society. When, towards the end of his life, he came to buy his first house, he chose a cottage on an isolated shingle spit at the far end of Romney Marsh."

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By living as he lived and dying as he died, Jarman has become a kind of secular saint



He is also, like Leonardo da Vinci, admired as a multiply accomplished artist – he wrote books, made films, music videos, paintings and, of course, Prospect Cottage. He was an eloquent and attractive figure who acquired admirers, friends and disciples. He represented a rather narrow view of art as dissident, anarchic, subversive, countercultural and provocative.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, there were many such people. But bohemia died thereafter, the visual arts having been flooded with money. Dissidence is now more a pose than an aesthetic.

In the process, much of Jarman's film work has become dated. His first feature, *Sebastiane* (1976), was made, he claimed, solely to show an erection on screen, and that is, frankly, all it really achieves. His full-on punk movie *Jubilee* (1978) aims more elaborately to shock, but is now dull and unwatchable.

At the time he dismissed punks as "petit-bourgeois art students, who a few months ago were David Bowie and Bryan Ferry lookalikes, who've read a little art history and adopted some dadaist typography and bad manners, and who are now in the business of reproducing a fake street credibility".

Both films betrayed a debt to the underground movies of the 1960s and 1970s; notably to Kenneth Anger, the supreme magus of that kind of cinema. The expressionist freedom – multiple dissolves and overlays, crazy camera angles, zero dialogue – of Anger's cinema stayed with him until the end.

After that the films improved, notably with *Caravaggio* and *War Requiem*, in which he managed to include Laurence Olivier in his last role. One of my favourites is *Wittgenstein*, which succeeds as a portrait of a man and an evocation of his philosophy, not an easy thing to do. Jarman found a distinctive form with this film, though he did, self-indulgently, spoil it with the pointless introduction of a furry green alien. At such times he descended into artiness, the opposite of art. His music videos continue the style of the movies – some very good, some dated. And as a painter and sculptor, he was not first rank, but he could, as with his late Aids-ridden work, be powerful. His writing is lyrical and fine when it is not merely angry.

"Vivienne Westwood accepts an OBE," he wrote in his diary in 1992, "dipsy bitch. The silly season's with us: our punk friends accept their little medals of betrayal, sit in their vacuous salons and destroy the creative..."

Above all, he represented a time – postwar, Thatcherist, post-imperial, punkish, inclined to dystopian visions – when we seemed to need an artistic outsider to distil our anxieties and anger, or perhaps just to embody art as a way of life, an aspiration. Prospect Cottage will thus represent the preservation of an era as much as the memory of a man. Either way, it's probably worth £3.5m. ■

Spy drama touches a raw nerve

LIAM FAY



The Salisbury Poisonings
BBC1, Sun-Tue

O'Casey in the Estate
RTE1, Thu

Keepin' er Country at Home
BBC1, Fri

Chemical warfare is an exact science, but formulating an effective response to it is not. For almost a week after the nerve-agent attack on the English city of Salisbury in March 2018, the advice proffered by public health authorities was confused and confusing.

Novichok, the invisible synthetic toxin deployed in an assassination attempt on a former Russian spy, is one of the deadliest substances on earth. Even fleeting exposure can cause organ failure, and a spoonful is enough to kill thousands. Day after day, however, the message to citizens who feared they might have been contaminated was a glib recommendation to wash their clothes and rub their possessions with baby wipes. Suds and wishful thinking were presented as an antidote to a weapon of mass destruction.

The setbacks and screw-ups that defined the early stages of the official response were intimately chronicled by **The Salisbury Poisonings**, a defiantly low-key dramatisation that managed to be alarming and reassuring in equal measure.

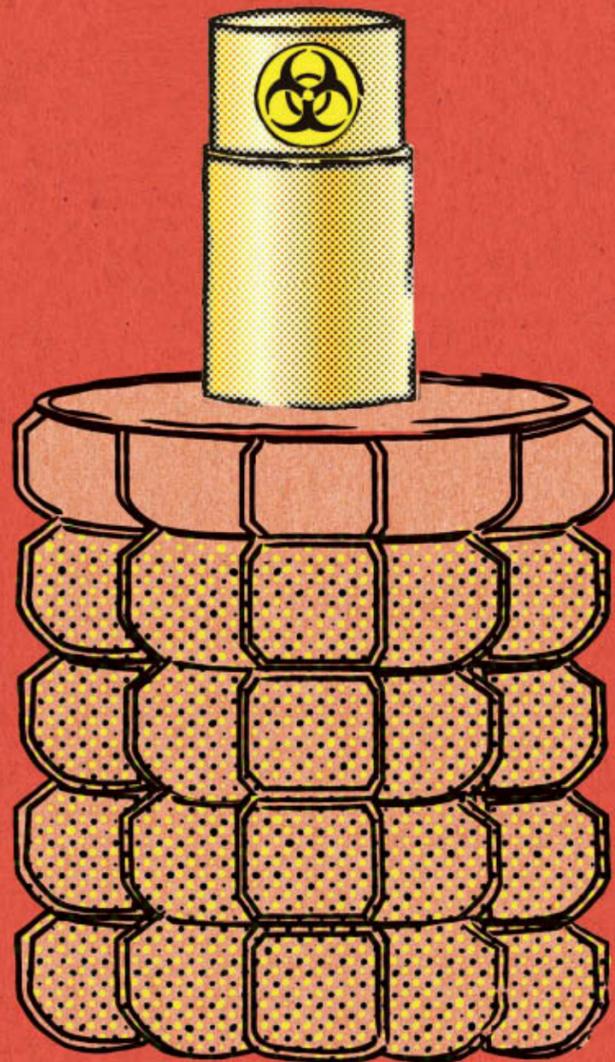
Sergei Skripal, the Russian

intelligence agents' target, and his daughter Yulia survived, but they barely featured in this version of events. The series wasn't a thriller or a Hollywood-esque disaster flick, but rather a sombre dive into the personal stories of the Salisbury residents and frontline workers whose lives were profoundly altered by the attack.

Skilful staging and fine acting, most notably Anne-Marie Duff's performance as the lead health official and Rafe Spall's turn as the detective who first entered the Skripals' contaminated house, added depth and complexity, bringing fresh detail to what we already knew. MyAnna Buring also excelled as Dawn Sturgess, a mother of three who died from novichok poisoning.

Parallels with the coronavirus pandemic were striking and abundant, but the series was best seen as its own distinct entity rather than an allegory or an exercise in accidental prophecy. The screenplay was co-written by Northern Irish journalists Adam Patterson and Declan Lawn, who lived in Salisbury for a year and drew heavily on interviews with central players.

At times, it wasn't so much an action drama as an inaction drama. For a while, none of the protagonists could believe the enormity of the emerging threat or the scale of the clean-up operation that would be required. Ultimately, the Salisbury crisis was a nightmare with a happy ending. When the machinery of state finally clanked into gear, it moved with speed and purpose. Tracking, tracing



that many tenement-dwellers used the rebellion as an opportunity to loot shops on O'Connell Street.

Directed by Luke McManus and Maurice Sweeney, *O'Casey in the Estate* works well on multiple levels, blending lively vignettes of literary and municipal history with vivid snapshots of contemporary city life. The programme is fronted and narrated by Liam Cunningham, another son of East Wall. Nevertheless, there are bum notes. Some of the contributors' efforts to liken modern Dublin to O'Casey's Dublin are beyond risible. Deprivation remains a problem in parts of the capital today, but asserting that it's on a par with the verminous misery of the Rising era is the kind of grotesque demagoguery for which O'Casey retained such hearty contempt.

Bland music and gilded backdrops make up the curious double-bill peddled by **Keepin' er Country at Home**, a simultaneously dazzling and dull series in which household names from the top tier of country'n'Irish cabaret invite us back to their households for a lockdown hoedown.

All of the featured troubadours emerge as generous and good-humoured hosts, happy to lead us on grand tours of their grand homes. Most of the interior design we encounter is impeccably tasteful and restrained – but, sadly, so too are the musical performances. Amid the opulence and sophistication, there is no room for the rawness or insolence that are the hallmarks of a great country racket.

There is, however, something to be learnt from this traipse through the domestic and the domesticated. Soft-centred country is often dismissed as a dying trade but, given the size and splendour of the mansions occupied by its leading practitioners, it's clear the business remains in rude health. Big bucks, it seems, can still be made from corny lamentations about the hardships endured by poor rural folk.

Country'n'Irish has yet to produce its Elvis, but the genre is already groaning with Gracelands. ■

JAMES CONNOR

THE CRITICS

“Defiantly low-key, it alarmed and reassured in equal measure”

and containment strategies were rapidly implemented. Lockdown worked. Within a year, the city was declared novichok-free.

Reality-based drama combined with drama-based reality provides the potent setting for **O'Casey in the Estate**, a two-part documentary about a production of *The Plough and the Stars* mounted by people from the Dublin inner-city neighbourhood that inspired the play.

Long regarded as a linchpin of the Irish theatrical canon, Seán O'Casey's masterwork has been widely and often brilliantly performed. But, with a cast of characters that

includes shawl-clad matriarchs and capering drunks, this highly declamatory period piece has also been the pretext for atrocious acts of stage Oirishry, at home and abroad. Here, however, the intention was to reclaim the play from the luvvies and the leprechauns, with a more streetwise and “authentic” interpretation.

East Wall, a now fashionable enclave on the capital's northside, is where O'Casey grew up. During his childhood in the 1880s and 1890s, the area was a notorious slum, an overcrowded ghetto of rat-infested tenements and

disease-blighted lives. Fanciful storytelling and pugnacious debate – “having a yarn” – was the only form of entertainment most inhabitants could afford, and the spirited language of this inventive culture permeates O'Casey's writing.

The Plough and the Stars explores the 1916 Rising from the perspective of disenfranchised working-class Dubliners. Its first staging at the Abbey Theatre in 1926 caused riots. Self-styled patriots took violent exception to its satirical disdain for the fevered rhetoric of Pádraig Pearse. There was also outrage at the play's recognition of the fact

MEDIA PLAYER JOHN BURNS

The plea #buyapaper is often posted on Twitter, and it can be shocking to see how the public reacts when asked to support journalism. Four comments were left under a recent #buyapaper post from NewsBrands Ireland – three hostile. “Irish journalism is in the gutter,” said one. “Journalism now means quoting whatever Denis O'Brien determines is fact,” read another. “Newspapers just print mostly what the government wants the public to know and cover up corruption,” claimed the third.

This is junk, as media analysis goes, but it reflects a widespread disdain towards the mainstream media, and an increased tendency to get “facts” from other sources, which in turn contributes to declining sales. Why is this? Has the vitriol poured over the press by Donald “fake news” Trump undermined respect for the fourth estate? Or are journalists too distant from their readers, no longer representative of society; not diverse enough in class, race or gender?

Let me suggest another reason for increased mistrust of the press: the fuzzing of the boundary between reportage and comment, in newspapers and in the minds of journalists. “News” and “opinion” were once strictly demarcated. No longer. The Irish Times still proclaims at the top of a left-hand page, usually 12, the start of “Opinion and analysis”. Yet its readers will have already seen “analysis” pieces on earlier pages, basically the opinions of journalists sitting alongside “hard news” stories – of which there seem to be fewer in the print version of the “paper of record”.

Facts are sacred Hard news must come first in the media

“News” and “opinion” were once strictly demarcated in newspapers, but no longer

The Irish Independent starts opinion as early as page 2, while the Sunday Independent has a comment piece on page 1. Online, the distinction between what's news and comment can be difficult to decipher.

This coincides with a change in the role of reporters. Until the 1990s, journalism was a trade, like carpentry. You emerged from the College of Commerce in Rathmines with a certificate, 60 words per minute typing, 120 words per minute shorthand, and the technical skills to gather news and write it fairly. Now, journalists leave universities with master's degrees, no typing or shorthand, and an academic background more suited to sociology. They join newsrooms that have tilted even further left than western culture, where there is less emphasis on hard news and investigations, and more on campaigns and comment.

Journalists are encouraged to develop a profile on social media, where likes and

clicks are most easily cultivated by expressing opinions. This can mean a journalist comments on a story one minute, and even-handedly the next. This was a particular problem around the abortion referendum of 2018. Older conservatives, who buy far more newspapers than young liberals, must have lost confidence in the press's ability to report fairly on social issues.

Tom Slater, a columnist with Spiked, recently encapsulated the case against modern journalism in a way the tweeters under #buyapaper, in all their incoherent rage, never quite manage. He said a “metropolitan media class has become so self-important that it is blind to its own biases, confused about the difference between opinion and facts, and increasingly hysterical when it doesn't get its way”.

“Comment is free, but facts are sacred,” CP Snow, editor of *The Guardian*, said in 1921. It was a reminder that newspapers' main function is news gathering. But news is steadily losing ground to comment. A huge inverted pyramid of opinion now pivots on a tiny fulcrum of facts, which are excavated by fewer and fewer journalistic miners. If we want people to #buyapaper, we need to go back to basics. ■

