

"The mark of a man's success is not the wealth he leaves behind him when he dies, it's what he bequeaths to society while he is alive."
 — Sam McGuinness (attributed to Tommy (RIP), homeless all his life, and probably the only thing he said that ever got printed).

ROY FOSTER

History don whose work can teach us about the present



ARGUABLY our greatest modern historian. An ironic critic of fake Irishness. But Yeats's great biographer never lets us forget that we, in coming days, will be still the indomitable Irishry. As a bonus, he writes like an angel, some women will tell you he looks like one too, and is one of the few historians — the others are Tom Garvin, Paul Bew and Henry Patterson — whose elegant and sometimes enigmatic narrative skills use irony to impart an insight. As befits one who comes from the Protestant tradition, Foster is always aware of those who might be marginalised or written out of history. His good manners, good humour and gentle rectitude are tinged with a touch of melancholy about the past, which may be an occupational hazard of those whose profession is Irish history. Although based in Oxford, the only spires he seems to truly cherish are the modest ones. Be reassured about our future: pick up his *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* and in an hour you will lift your head in hope, knowing that if we came through that, we will come through this.

SINEAD O'CONNOR

Heart of a lion, and it's in the right place



TO SEE her still stunning face is to be filled with nostalgia for the future. Who of my generation can forget our first glimpse of that flawless face? Most women wanted to both slap her and salute her. Most men wanted to sleep with her, or tuck her into bed when she threw a tantrum, or take her on their knees to wipe away her tears. But while she looked like a lost lamb, she had the heart of a lion. And if we sometimes sighed at her wilder musings, we knew her heart was in the right place, and most of the time her head was well screwed on too. After all, some of the angrier things she said about the Roman Catholic Church turned out to be true. Naturally, a small clique of talentless begrudgers cannot bear so much beauty and talent so they sneered at her recent marriage. But I believe Steve Cooney will be good for her, and she for him, and they for us.

MARY McALEESE

National mother, perfect President for pluralist times

IT'S THE small things that inspire. Watching this good-looking woman, in a good-looking coat, inspect a good-looking male guard of honour always gives me a lift. And I suspect I am not alone. The picture says: Mary is at work and all's right with the Irish Republic. Like Seamus Heaney, Mary McAleese is a Northerner from the nationalist tradition; she has made the Aras a home for all the homeless traditions on the island. Not as easy at it looks, as southern nationalists who tried to live in Northern Ireland would soon find out. But her ability to get around in two cultures makes her the perfect President for our pluralist times.

An attractive woman, she is at one and the same time, national mother, national wife, and national wise woman. A sort of secular nun, someone who long ago leaped over the convent wall, but brought her sense of order and discipline with her. I was sceptical of her at the start, but I soon came to see what most Northern Protestants see too: a warm, caring woman who has taken the best from Roman Catholicism and reached out to the best in Northern Protestantism. I wish she had a third term to take us through this terrible time.



FINTAN O'TOOLE

Gets up my nose, like a good snuff

REMEMBER this: the recession will summon up deep reserves. Some of my RTE colleagues who retired early, died early. We cannot golf our way through life. We need the aggravation of those around us who get up our nose. Fintan gets up my nose, like a good snuff, and makes me sneeze. He is the pin-up boy of the Irish Left, the darling of Dublin 4, the thinking woman's thinking man. Love or loathe his politics, Fintan is the biggest influence on how the Irish intelligentsia sees itself in its mental mirror. And what they hope to see looking back is a Left-bank French intellectual: liberal, witty and worldly. But I believe the mirror really reveals a college-educated, and thus privileged, public-sector class. For all his fertility of thought, Fintan has few thoughts on how to bring the public sector to heel. And no wonder. Most of his readers hold down permanent and pensionable jobs which allow them to flirt with juvenile forms of socialism. But right now, Fintan is the hot founder of Ireland's small but most influential media party: the feeling good about feeling bad party.

MIRIAM O'CALLAGHAN

Finger is on the pulse, not wagging at us



MIRIAM O'Callaghan can make me smile on a bad day, simply because she is so full of beans. Like a *legume* that's rich in protein, Miriam is rich of public protein. John Hume might have beaten Michael Collins without Miriam as his backer, but I wouldn't bet money on that. Like Napoleon, her presence on any public opinion battlefield is worth many divisions — and she looks a lot better. Since she is a serious journalist, I am told we are not allowed to talk about her looks. But I'm too old to give a toss. Miriam is more-ish. Her 50 is the new 40 — which means I can pass myself off as 50. Accordingly, I have a heavy investment in her health and happiness. The thing about Miriam is her huge emotional intelligence. This gives her an extra edge in political programmes. But the best, and most Irish, aspect of her is that, although a natural radical, she remains too much of a Roman Catholic to really believe in the perfectibility of man. Hence her non-judgemental attitude to the flawed people who populate the political sphere. Miriam has her finger on the public pulse, but thank God, you will never see her sanctimoniously wagging it in someone's face.