

# Boom-time delusions fed by collective amnesia



**JOE HUMPHREYS**

## OPINION

History reminds us that all things must pass

**T**HE STRUGGLE of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," the Czech writer Milan Kundera once said. The truth of this statement is underlined by recent attempts by certain politicians, bankers and, yes, journalists too to rewrite the history of the economic collapse to deflect blame from themselves onto others.

This fictionalising of history will no doubt intensify as the general election approaches. While that's somewhat depressing, it reminds us that we have at our disposal a rich but largely untapped asset in this country – memory.

Had we used this asset in the good times we might have avoided the hard landing. We could have remembered the financial crises of the 1970s and 1980s, the failure of Irish Trust Bank and PMPA and the venal behaviour of financial institutions from the days of Ansbacher up to the Dirt scandal. We would have recalled how the economy goes in cycles, how public spending can easily get out of control and how seemingly unlikely currency collapses become next to inevitable overnight.

If the general population is to blame for the current crisis it is perhaps principally in this regard. There was a collective failure of memory: a forgetting that "this too shall pass". Perspective in the Celtic Tiger years was reduced to the shortest of terms. We lived for the day, reinventing ourselves to the point that we appeared to be ashamed of our humbler past.

One way this manifested itself was in our devaluing of history in education. The subject has never been particularly well taught in schools, and today it is tolerated in the curriculum rather than cherished. Less than one in four Leaving Certificate students take history. It was a lowly ninth most popular subject last year.

Contrast the lack of concern about history's fate with that for mathematics. The Minister for Education, the universities and the American Chamber of Commerce, no less, have backed a campaign to encourage more Leaving Cert students to sit maths at higher level. To what end exactly? So Ireland can produce more accountants and financiers (just what we need) and perhaps some more scientists and techies too?

The initiative is not without its merits but the financial crisis showed us, in a very specific context, the danger of fetishising numbers. The banking whiz kids whose formulae turned subprime mortgages into saleable loans

were the high achieving, mathematical innovators of their day. But, as we now know to our detriment, they had a poor grasp of the long-term consequences of their actions.

It would be facile to argue that learning history makes you a better person. Yet history matters in ways other subjects don't.

It matters, for example, that John Hume was this year voted the greatest Irish person ever in a TV poll. It matters that people still respect and value his contribution nine years after he retired as leader of the SDLP, although his victory did highlight the relatively short-term nature of collective memory. Daniel O'Connell never made the shortlist and one dreads to think who might be voted greatest in 20 years' time. Gerry Adams? Gerry Ryan? The public's capacity for amnesia seems boundless. Why, RTE's "nostalgia" show *Reeling in the Years* has reached 2008.

History matters in other ways. At its best, it gives us a personal link to those who gave their lives for our freedom. In his comic novel *Skippy Dies*, Paul Murray describes how a Dublin school teacher is suspended for taking his pupils on an unauthorised field trip to the Islandbridge war memorial. The teacher wanted to bring to life the sacrifice of those young Irishmen who died at Gallipoli, and his subsequent mauling at the hands of his boss for teaching "off the curriculum" is both hilarious and frighteningly realistic. Underlying Murray's humour is a serious point. He quotes the Jewish writer Joseph Brodsky: "If there is a substitute for love, it is memory."

And yet everywhere memory is under attack. In journalism, a long memory used to be regarded as an asset. Now it's widely seen as a nuisance. Context complicates matters. A shared forgetting makes it easier for journalists to create an endless sense of shock and outrage; and it facilitates the sort of reincarnations we see today whereby tarnished bankers and developers ostensibly become legitimate newspaper columnists.

History matters, furthermore, in a special, ethical sense – and this brings us back to those morally ambivalent banking "geniuses". Morality can't be understood without knowing its origins. So the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued. In his seminal work *After Virtue*, he demonstrates the futility of trying to construct a moral code that fails to reference teachings of yore. Human rights theory depends on Aristotle in the same way secular humanism leans on Christianity. That's the core of MacIntyre's thesis, and it lends itself to the conclusion that we would have fewer conflicts if we simply knew our history better.

As Ireland comes through the recession, as it eventually will, we will be encouraged to forget. The past is depressing, we'll be told: embrace the new, smart economy; look forward not back. But memory is an asset that can't be valued in pounds or euro. It's far more valuable than that.

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