

Bridges of the Liffey

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A City Runs Through Them: Dublin and its Twenty River Bridges

By Fergal Tobin

Atlantic Books, 304pp, £20

In the spring of 1916, a detachment of Irish Volunteers who were preparing for the Easter Rising crossed the Ha'penny Bridge. When the toll keeper, in his booth on the south side, demanded payment, the Volunteers refused. Soon after, the toll was abolished. Centuries earlier, the rebel Rory O'More escaped across the river while being pursued by Crown troops. The bridge built at the spot, known simply as Bloody Bridge, was renamed for O'More during the Civil War.

What emerges in Fergal Tobin's account of the Liffey bridges is that these are sites of resistance. Even the bridges not directly tied to revolution, such as East Link and Millennium, are part of resisting the long tail of empire. In helping build up the city these structures have allowed for the economic and civic expansion of its people.

While this ambitious history centres on the city's musculature, with its ribs of iron and concrete, the nature of bridges is to collapse over time. It is the Liffey itself,

then, which is constant. Whether it be from the vantage point of Mellows Bridge or Grattan, Dubliners are constantly drawn to the water below. The city keeps to the river, in Tobin's view, because it is fed by the sea, and no matter which invaders arrive, whether it be Richard de Clare or Cromwell, in good time the Liffey will flush them out past the docks. To this end, he quotes Louis MacNeice in *Autumn Journal*: "It will not be only / A drag from stone to numbered stone / But a ladder of angels, river turning tidal."

The IRA never waited on the tide. In the early hours of March 8th, 1966, the volunteer Liam Sutcliffe, with orders from the Republican leadership in Belfast, crossed O'Connell Bridge and planted a bomb that blew up the Nelson column. No one was hurt, although the army spent a week cleaning up the debris. Tobin is surprised the column stood in place for so long, calling the explosion a "very neat job". The bridge that enabled the destruction of this absurd monument was named for Daniel O'Connell, known as The Liberator, who led Ireland's Catholic majority to emancipation in the mid-19th century.

When resistance seems futile, one can always turn to drink. In the 1830s a Catholic priest from Cork, Fr Mathew, led a temperance campaign. But while it didn't take, the church found a hero in Matt



An aerial view of the River Liffey in Dublin, looking east. PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Talbot, a recovered alcoholic who pledged total abstinence and wore body chains as penance. He died in Granby Lane, off Parnell Square, only for the church to award him the title, "servant of God", a first step towards sainthood. Ironically, the Matt Talbot Bridge, of little architectural merit, has become a great place for teenage drinkers to try their first lager.

The tone of the narrative is caught between technical details and casual declarations. It is as though Tobin hits a sandbank, or abutment, in his race upstream, and decides to change direction. On the 20th-century expansion around Phoenix Park, near Islandbridge, he writes: "This was a heroic undertaking, not least because the state barely had an arse in its economic trousers when it

embarked on the expenditure required." This peculiar and flitting tone also devolves, at times, into unintended comic writing, where he cites "the spread-eagling suburbs running away towards the open country" and Dublin being "a sort of cross between a wannabe Urbino and Dodge City". There is soft poetry too, often as non-sequitur: "It was all a straw in the wind."

One advantage of this roving view is the accretion of minor historical details. Who would you prefer to meet on the bridge? A band of upper-class hoods known as The Pinking Dindies who operated above the law in the 1770s, beating up brothel owners and gamblers. Maybe the English-born Humphrey Jervis, and Dublin mayor, a venal character willing to do almost anything to remain in power. Or one of the ruthless women from Peg Plunkett's pleasure house on Drogheda Street, many of whom carried knives and would sever the fingers of would-be exploiters.

Tobin's project is a stunning achievement. At its heart is a lament, full of love for a city once known as the most substantial in Europe and now prey to philistine developers: "Where's your fuckin' pride, Dublin, that you can let this visual smorgasbord of mediocrity and ugliness subsist where once was classical harmony and reason? It's tragic. Oh, how we need dreamers and lunatics."