

## *Launch of Donal Fallon's book*

# *The Pillar*

### **Honour**

I could use the cliché that it is an honour to be here. In fact there are three reasons why this is in fact true.

I am billed on the invite as Guest Speaker. The last, and only, time I was so billed was in 1967 at the UCD L&H when we were setting a trap for Des Fennell. So I am honoured to be back.

I am described on the invite as a Photographer. Now I have been taking photos since the late 1950s but I have never been so described in public before. Again I am honoured at this recognition.

The book is dedicated to Shane Mac Thomáis who, but for his tragic death earlier this year, would be standing here today. Donal had intended to have Shane launch the book and after Shane's death I suggested a replacement who would have the academic standing and gravitas required. Donal demurred. I think he just didn't want to replace Shane with someone else. So he said to me "it'll just be the two of us". So I got a right fright when I saw the invite. But I am honoured to be standing where Shane would have been.

### **Declaration**

I have eight photos in the book, including one on the cover. Now, you might think that this would automatically lead me to give the book a rave review, but, in fact, the opposite is the case. This is the first outing in print for these photos and I was very anxious that they appear in a good setting. So, when I got a copy of the book I evaluated it very critically. So, I can be objective about it.

### **The Book**

In the event I was thrilled. It is a gem. A very tasteful production by New Island Books who should be congratulated, and the text is excellent. It is thoroughly researched and, at the same time, makes for compelling reading. Eoin has referred to Donal as a storyteller and that is the style of the book.

It is not just a history of The Pillar. It is a history of the site, including before and after The Pillar. The wider city context is introduced where it is relevant to an understanding of what was going on. And there is a chapter on other imperial monuments, many of which suffered the same fate as The Pillar, and one of which involved an elderly lady emigrating to Australia where she now sits in regal splendour in Sydney.

### **The Photos**

I have been taking photos since the late 1950s and, where possible, I nearly always carry a camera.

In March 1966 I was attending UCD, then in Earlsfort Terrace. I used to come in from Ballybrack on the train to Westland Row. When Nelson went up, I simply carried on to Tara St. and went up to the site. My academic shedule allowed for some flexibility so I was there most days between the time Nelson went up and the site was restored to a flat surface.

For most people, Nelson was a piece of street furniture. An important piece: people met at it and it

was used as a starting point in giving directions. The fact that it housed a British admiral who, a mere seven years after 1798, clobbered our allies, the French, did not weigh with most people. There were some who thought Nelson inappropriate and over the years various replacements were suggested, but, due to bureaucratic inertia and politicians being wary of controversy, nothing was done.

Then Nelson was gone. This put the authorities in a position of having to make some sort of conscious decision: the stump could stay as a reminder; it could be repaired with Nelson or someone else on top; or it could just be gotten rid of.

There was a serious deadline here as the much vaunted 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the 1916 Rising was to take place within a few weeks and much of the outdoor activity would be focused on this very spot in front of the GPO. So, the decision was made to get rid of it.

Then it was over to the army to take the column down. Which they did, a week later and in the middle of the night. They did a marvellous job and also provided the citizens of Dublin with a night's entertainment the like of which has not been seen since. People were kept well back from the site. The Pillar itself was floodlit and surrounded by scaffolding. And there was a countdown over the Tannoy. My recollection is that this was by Kevin O'Kelly who a few years later was to do the radio commentary on the moon landing. Remember that, at this time, Radio Éireann occupied the third floor of the GPO.

Once the column had gone, all that was left was the cubic base with the entrance and inscriptions. This was disposed of, battered into submission, by the wrecker's ball over the next few days.

There is a myth that has been on the go for almost fifty years now and Donal definitively demolishes it in his book. Dubliners, in particular, are wont to say that the IRA blew up The Pillar and didn't break a single window, while the army broke every window in O'Connell St.

There is an element of truth in this but it leaves a lot out of consideration. Now I don't want to cast any aspersions on the original explosion. It had all the signs of a really expert job. The explosion was to happen above roof level so the blast could travel freely outwards and Nelson was to be blown upwards so that the resultant falling masonry would not, for example, take the head off Parnell just up the street.

The army, on the other hand, had no choice but to have an explosion almost at street level and the resultant blast and compression would inevitably break a lot of windows. In these circumstances the army did a magnificent job. And, remember, the myth leaves out of account any damage done by a ton or two of falling masonry. This is taken into account in Donal's demolition of the myth.

I had always assumed that it was only the viewing platform and statue that had suffered in the original explosion. This impression was probably contributed to by the little piece of Nelson's plinth which was left perched precariously at the top of the column. In more recent times there was some discussion on the National Library's Flickr page about where exactly the explosion had occurred. I checked out some of their pictures (with Nelson) against some of mine (without Nelson) and, using the light holes as a measure, figured that the bottom of the explosion damage was about two thirds the way up the column.

I then came across a link, the other day, in that iconic Dublin blog "Come Here to Me!" to a video of the original explosion. This showed the explosion half way up the actual column, not where I would have put it. So I thought some further forensics were in order and overlaid one of my own photos, taken from Henry St., on a similar one from before the explosion. When this was scaled it

showed clearly that what remained was about two thirds of the column itself. You can check this out in the photos that will be around after this launch.

When the site was down to a piece of flat pavement, two things jumped out at me, unexpectedly.

The GPO suddenly dominated O'Connell St. This had never been the case before as The Pillar was already there when the GPO was first built. I thought this fitting in a 1916 anniversary year.

The street looked much wider. In fact, you could now see it as it was intended to be seen by the Wide Streets Commission at the end of the eighteenth century, for the first time since The Pillar was put up.

A clear case, in my mind, for now leaving well enough alone. But that's another story.

Finally, regarding the photos, the Killiney beach episode. I lived in Ballybrack at the time of Nelson's demise and I was out walking one day, with my camera as usual. From the Holy Child bridge at the southern end of the beach I saw some unusual activity at the northern end. One of the long rowing boats had been drawn up at the shoreline and it appeared to be flanked by some oddly dressed people holding oars upright. I hared up to the underpass at the northern end of Station Rd. but by then things appeared to have returned to relative normality.

There was an Austin mini parked on the outcrop surrounded by one adult and a number of student types. Half way up from the shoreline was a sack that clearly contained something heavy as it had left a large furrow in the sand behind it. I started taking photos and when I got to taking one of the front of the mini, one of the lads charged around and sat down in front of the registration plate. I immediately started getting the wind up. These guys clearly didn't want anyone to know who they were or what they were up to. So I scarpered, filed away the negatives and promptly forgot about the whole thing.

It was only some days later when I saw a photo in the Evening Press of the prow of a rowing boat drawn up on the shore. It was flanked by two sets of balaclavad youths holding oars like a guard of honour, Nelson's head was just in front of the boat, and in the back were two wans in fashion gear. It was an ad for Bolgers of North Earl St. So now I knew what had been going on that day. Nelson's head was in a fashion shoot in Killiney Bay.

## **Launch**

Well, that was the Guest Speaker bit done. But who was actually launching the book? I asked Donal this when I arrived only to be told that it was me who was launching the book.

So I now declare this book well and truly launched.

*Pól Ó Duibhir*  
*7 July 2014*  
*at Hodges Figgis*  
*Booksellers*  
*Dawson St.*  
*Dublin 2*