

DUBLINER Colm Toibin isn't sure what to celebrate in 1991

No Such City



Dublin has been chosen as the European City Of Culture for 1991. The title sits uneasily on a place which is, for very good reasons, unsure of its own identity. It sometimes seems that there is no such place as Dublin. Every definition of it can be swiftly undermined, so there's inevitable uncertainty about what it is that we should be celebrating. In the meantime, 1991 is also the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Rising and nobody is quite sure

what to do about that either. But perhaps the breakdown in the city's sense of itself is as useful an emblem as any for Europe as it uneasily approaches 1992.

In 1967, Charles Haughey, then minister for finance in the Irish government, made a speech on opening a new building on St. Stephen's Green in Dublin in which he said: 'I for one, have never believed that all architectural taste and building excellence ceased automatically

with the passing of the 18th century.'

That same year, Haughey bought a house designed by the 18th-century architect Gandon and a farm outside the city. He sold his old house and the land around it for £200,000, having bought it for £50,000 some 10 years earlier. He was simply lucky, perhaps, that the land which he sold had been allocated for residential purposes in a period when a new suburban city was coming into being.

The new suburbs have seven houses to the acre, whereas the old city had 30. Throughout the 60s and 70s, they were built piecemeal without proper facilities while the city centre was destroyed by property developers.

Dublin has never been an important element in the mythology of Irish nationalism. The country's founders, those who led the 1916 Rising, were given little support by the people of the city. The leaders saw the Ireland of

the future as rural, self-sufficient, Gaelic speaking, Catholic and well-protected from the filthy modern tide.

Dublin, on the other hand, was a complex place, a port, almost a British city. Its people, as exemplified in the plays of Sean O'Casey and Denis Johnston, had very little time for the pieties of Irish nationalism. So in the 60s, when serious money came to Ireland as a result of determined government policy to encourage foreign investment in the country, it was possible for a nationalist to become involved in tearing the heart out of Dublin while extolling the virtues of Irish freedom. In some ways, Dublin, with its Georgian heritage and imperial status, was always less than Irish anyway, it was alien, excluded from the list of sacred places.

Dublin's culture might be found in the ghost city we half remember, half imagine. In the alley-ways which led from Dame Street down to the river, now covered by the Central Bank. Maybe it's in the re-discovered Viking city, now covered over by the Civic Offices. Or in the old pubs, demolished for road-widening and the derelict areas, which look like bomb-sites. The 'City of Culture' accolade will perhaps be an opportunity for the people of Dublin to howl in protest at what the Dublin Corporation and the Irish government have done to the city.

If the city's culture lies in its heritage, its great literary tradition - Wilde, Shaw, Joyce, Beckett, O'Casey and all that - then surely the celebrations must involve a recognition that they found the city less than congenial and got out as soon as they could? Or is the genuine Dublin culture to be found in the new sprawling suburbs with its run-down libraries and shopping malls? This is where most of the best new writing is coming from. But because of its fierce realism and deep antipathy to authority (whether it comes in the guise of nationalism or Catholicism), this culture is likely to resist any attempt to include it in the cosy con-

sensus of Dublin as Europe's cultural capital.

There will be celebrations, a writers' conference, a number of important art shows, street theatre and circuses. But the central issues will not go away. They have destroyed the city on us and become rich on the pickings. They have built suburbs and left them stranded, separate from the 'official' culture. The writer Dermot Bolger describes his growing-up in Finglas, a city suburb, as 'internal exile'.

There is no such place as Dublin, then. But in the same year we now have two opportunities to celebrate: our capital city of culture on one hand, and our Great Rebellion on the other. The 50th anniversary of the Rising was celebrated with great gusto in 1966. Suddenly, blood sacrifice and small armed groups rising up against the state seemed worthy of three cheers. A few years later, when Northern Ireland blew up, Irish nationalism south of the border was shown to be a sham, something to wave flags about on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, but to be kept behind bars under emergency legislation the rest of the week. It was, for some, a bitter lesson indeed.

Twenty-five years later, nobody is comfortable with either of the celebrations to which the city is host - not even those in charge. This fact is a cause for mild celebration in itself. The consensus about the ideals of Irish nationalism is gone and the rhetoric of 1966 is no longer possible.

We know that nationalist ideology has not saved our capital city from the speculators and we know, too, that anything good in our political and artistic life comes from the unofficial city, the hidden lives. Any real celebrations in Dublin this year are likely to be laced with black humour, bitterness and irony, as well as laughter, wit and mockery. 1991 might be a year well-spent after all as we finally come to pay such a meaningful tribute to Wilde, Shaw, Joyce, Beckett and O'Casey.©