



AWAY (SOCIAL DISTANCING) IN A MANGER: A roadside Nativity scene at Redcastle, Co Donegal

PICTURE: Margaret McLaughlin

# Generosity and kindness of festive season must inform all our choices

**"A**NY bars [gossip]" I ask my Derry-born mother every time I ring home. "Sure what bars would there be?" she says.

We must have repeated the same lines about two hundred times this year. So starved are we of proper conversation that I've started to monitor the behaviour of the grey squirrels near my home in the same detail as Soviet analysts used to watch the annual May Day parades. "I saw one burying acorns this morning," I tell her, with the air of someone divulging classified information about a new Soviet general. "He was patting the ground with his tiny paws." Mum is polite enough to feign interest.

Conversations with my older sister in Co Kildare are no better. She's so tired of repeated lockdowns that she's started to buy Christmas decorations already, thus breaking our family code of never acknowledging the festive season until December 1. One decoration is an anthropomorphic Christmas pudding with striped tights and little red boots. We've already named him Mr Pudding. Or at least she has. I've gone too far by giving him an elaborate back-story (rival brother, a tragic 'incident' that forced him to leave his Pudding family) and have started to ask that she send me photos of Mr Pudding reclining in bed, drinking tea and watching Netflix.

It can't just be me who longs for something, anything, to break the monotony. I'm hugely privileged to be healthy, with a job, home, dog and loving family who cheerfully put up with me. But times are tough when you excitedly point out to your younger sister that the Christmas lights are up in Ballymoney already.

Spare a thought then for Mid & East Antrim Borough Council which was forced to apologise "for any offence caused within the community" after two

Claire  
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Christmas trees were put up in Ballymena in "error".

The trees were put up close to the town hall and in Harryville but will now be taken down following complaints that they should not have been in place before Remembrance Sunday.

Meanwhile, Tesco has been full of Christmas food since August and it's taking all my willpower to avoid buying mince pies before Halloween.

Really all my silly family in-jokes are hiding the real fear that mine, and millions of other families, won't have a proper Christmas this year.

Chief Secretary to the Treasury Stephen Barclay has said we "all hope" that families can spend Christmas together, which doesn't sound terribly comforting.

Professor John Edmunds, a member of the

*Times are tough when you excitedly point out to your younger sister that the Christmas lights are up in Ballymoney already*

Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), was blunter in his assessment. He has warned that expecting we can have a normal Christmas is "wishful thinking in the extreme". And he told MPs last week that the north and Britain would see "peaks around Christmas, in the new year of very severe numbers of cases throughout the UK".

With tougher restrictions in the Republic, there's a real possibility that my older sister won't be able to travel north for Christmas. Although we've already talked about contingency plans – me making a mercy dash down the M7 on Christmas Eve – she's already preparing herself for the idea of spending the day alone, with only Mr Pudding for company. Thousands of families like mine will be in the same miserable situation – no big get-togethers, carol concerts where we're separated by social distancing and plastic screens.

In a few weeks' time we will all face difficult choices about who we should and should not see around Christmas. Should we visit that elderly aunt who lives alone or not?

For those of us whose families are effectively separated by the border, the choice may be taken out of our own hands. It's already much too late to align coronavirus restrictions north and south. That should have been done in March. But if various

regions of England couldn't even agree with central government on their own restrictions then we had little chance.

"One of the squirrels was chasing another one away from his acorn hoard this morning," I tell mum. It felt like a very on-the-nose metaphor for how we're all trying to protect our little patches of earth. As everyone's thoughts turn to Christmas let's hope that the generosity and kindness of the original story informs all our choices in the weeks to come.

## ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 28 1920

### Greenwood's Attack on Free Press

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Mr Hogg asked the chief secretary if he would state the precise charge on which the directors of the [Nationalist] Freeman's Journal newspaper were being court-martialled.

Sir Hamar Greenwood – The charge is for spreading false reports likely to cause disaffection.

Mr Joe Devlin, MP – Is it not a fact that the reason the Freeman's Journal is being prosecuted is because it attacked the right hon. gentleman and the Prime Minister [Lloyd George]? Sir Hamar – It is not.

Lieutenant-Commander Kenworthy (Lib.) – Is this an attempt to hide the truth by intimidating the Press in Ireland? Mr Devlin – And intimidate the people?

Mr Devlin said he resented the manner and method by which the Chief Secretary dealt with these horrible affairs in Ireland. He seemed to have made up his mind to become the defender of the indefensible – to take advantage of having a majority of 350 well-intentioned but ignorant Englishmen. He did not care about "the hard-faced men who had made money out of the war" but his function was to draw attention to the appalling condition of Ireland and the responsibility of the Government and the right hon. gentleman for these horrible outrages committed against innocent people. [Sir Hamar] denied all allegations against the forces of the Crown. He said that if any Irish newspaper uttered the slightest amount of public opinion on these infamies it would be prosecuted. That was not crushed by Cromwell would not be crushed by a Canadian who thumped the table of the House.

### Lord Mayor's Funeral

LAST evening the body of the late Lord Mayor of Cork was removed from Brixton Prison to St George's Cathedral, Southwark and after Requiem Mass today it will be conveyed to Houston en route for Cork for burial. The coffin, with the Sinn Féin flag as a pall, was borne to the Cathedral in a motor hearse followed by a Dail Eireann deputation headed by Count Plunkett. There was an orderly and reverent crowd outside the prison. Dublin and London Irish Volunteers shared with the Cork contingent the guard duties.

### Village Horror

TERRIBLE scenes, resulting in a tragedy, were enacted in the village of Skerries, fifteen miles from Dublin on Tuesday night. John Sherlock, aged twenty-two, a farm labourer, was taken from his house by uniformed men and shot dead in a field.

As so often in these years, the knock-out blow against the British government's Irish policy was delivered by Joe Devlin, Falls MP and Irish News chairman. The Freeman's Journal (1763-1924), like the Irish News, was a consistent advocate of non-violent nationalism.

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