



VISIT: Queen Elizabeth with President Mary McAleese at Aras an Uachtaráin, Dublin during her historic visit to the Republic in 2011. Dr Martin McGuinness and the Duke of Edinburgh are also pictured

God save the queen from well-meaning prelates

THERE'S been a lot of hot air this week about the forthcoming church service to mark partition, and the fallout over President Michael D Higgins's decision to stay away from it.

As the president has demonstrated, he is more than able to defend his actions, so I don't intend to go over the ground here. Suffice to say that Michael D has distinguished himself throughout his time in office as a force for good.

He has a better understanding than most of the complex relationships between these islands and has consistently demonstrated his respect for the different traditions that make this island such a remarkable place.

In fairness, his opposite number in the UK has also shown a deftness of touch – as demonstrated by her ground-breaking state visit to Ireland in 2011 and her work with successive Irish presidents and her advocacy of organisations promoting cross-community engagement.

Unlike the poet president, she carries significantly more baggage – much of it inherited along with her crown. You do not need to be a nationalist to acknowledge that British rule in Ireland was malign in the extreme (as it was in other parts of the world). There is more than enough evidence.

It is also the case that mess we face today is the direct result of inept decisions made by generation after generation of British governments – whether headed by monarchs such as James I, who colonised Ulster; dictators like Cromwell, about whom least said is best; or elected leaders who turned a blind eye to gross abuses of human rights (Churchill, Attlee, Macmillan, Wilson), or who presided over them (Heath, Callaghan and Thatcher).

While other former colonies have had the opportunity chart their own

Tom COLLINS



course in the world. Ireland remains hobbled by the gross injustice of partition. The seeds of the troubles were sown by opponents of home rule in the British body politic. They were nurtured by Craig and Andrews, Their successors in the DUP and TUV, still fondly look back on 50 years of unionist misrule as the golden age.

It is that 'golden age' that will be marked by the service next month in Ireland's ecclesiastical capital.

I can think of many reasons why church leaders might wish to get together to pray – the world is full of troubles, and which of us has not turned to prayer in an hour of need. Even the ungodly have whispered sotto voce a Hail Mary or an Our Father at a moment of crisis.

And of course praying is what priests and ministers do. They are paid to pray – and have been throughout the ages, even in

the days before the son of a carpenter was walking on the Sea of Galilee.

But why in God's name (and I use that phrase deliberately) would anyone think that it was appropriate to hold a Service of Reflection and Hope to mark the forced division of a country and the formation of a sectarian state? It beggars belief.

To try and dignify it with the presence of two heads of state, one representing the victims and the other the oppressor, is straight out of the *Monty Python* sketchbook.

Services like this are part of the script for so-called national commemorations – the lazy tick-box of events that include garden parties, fly pasts, children's colouring-in competitions, and tree planting ceremonies.

What can one possibly object to? We are all peaceniks now, and on the face of it, it is curmudgeonly to be complaining about something that brings together the religious leaders of the main denominations in Ireland.

But the simple truth is that this event is part of the glorification of a dark chapter in the history of this island; just one of many events this year designed to whitewash the continuing presence of sectarianism in a statelet which is yet to recognise the full dignity of Irish culture and traditions.

The cause of peace will not be advanced by this overt communion of politics and religion.

The archbishops of Armagh do not need to be reconciled. They get along quite nicely thank you in their twin-cathedrals city. If peace with justice is their desire, they should call this tainted service off, and let the queen have a quiet night in.

Now, what's next on my hymn sheet... ah, *God Save the Queen*.

Indeed, God save her from well-meaning prelates and committees of the great and good organising political festivals.

ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 24 1921

Outbreak of Brutality

A SERIOUS disturbance took place on the Newtownards Road shortly after noon today and for about a quarter of an hour an ugly situation presented itself but peace was quickly restored. Large bodies of workmen are at present engaged in re-laying the tramlines in that district and it appears a sudden attack was made on them by gangs of men who congregated in the vicinity. Several were badly beaten and kicked and numbers had to take refuge in the police barracks. Police were quickly on the scene.

The above simple narrative appeared inconspicuously in yesterday's Belfast Evening Telegraph. Unsophisticated readers must have been puzzled. Not a hint of the reasons for the attack was conveyed: Catholic ex-servicemen to the number of about thirty who, with other workmen, are engaged in re-laying the tram track on the Newtownards Road were subjected yesterday afternoon to attacks of the most brutal character by an Orange mob which suddenly descended without warning. As a result of the savage onslaught, four men had to be removed to hospital while others sustained minor injuries.

A stringent rule of employment in the tram track re-laying operations is that only ex-servicemen should be engaged and, consequently, amongst the batch of men there is a percentage of Catholics. Up to yesterday the work had proceeded without interference. ...About one o'clock a descent was made on the unoffending workmen by an Orange mob of at least a couple of thousand, armed with every conceivable kind of weapon. It was evident that the Catholics had been 'spotted', as in the majority of cases they were instantly singled out. It did not matter that their victims had faced the Germans for three or four years...

Taken by surprise, the Catholics were trapped and became defenceless victims in the hands of a brutal mob of savages.... They were felled with iron bars and sticks and in cases and kicked along the streets. One policeman drew his revolver but did not fire as the mob was of too great dimensions.

A visit to the Newtownards Road at about three o'clock revealed an amazing state of affairs. The mob, many thousand strong, held the thoroughfare without interference.... Youngsters were playing with the tools left behind by the hunted Catholics.

THIS report highlights how the different Belfast papers chose to report sectarian attacks during the 1920s Troubles. In this case the victims were nationalist ex-servicemen who had been working on a relief scheme in loyalist east Belfast. However, Protestants were not immune to sectarian attacks in nationalist districts at this time.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com