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# "Climate change is here now. I don't think people have processed that fact yet": Interview with Ronan McGreevy[1]

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**Abstract.** Ronan McGreevy is a journalist with *The Irish Times*. In this interview, partly undertaken in direct conversation and partly by email correspondence, McGreevy talks about some of the key themes that have marked his work as a journalist and which figure in the books he has published. Various themes arising from the long decade of centenaries which commemorated key events in the period from The Third Home Rule Bill in 1912 to the end of the Civil War are dealt with: ranging from the Rising and the monuments and cemeteries of France and Flanders that mark the participation of Irish soldiers in the First World War to the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson which triggered the Irish Civil War. McGreevy also throws light on the 1983 kidnapping by the IRA of Don Tidey, the theme of commemoration relating to the period of the Troubles as well as revisiting the key historical role of former Taoiseach Séan Lemass and the interviews with him which form the basis of McGreevy's forthcoming book *Seán Lemass: The Lost Memoir: The Autobiography of Ireland's Most Admired Taoiseach*. McGreevy also talks about the current state of journalism, the impact of populism and the challenges we face in relation to public and global health in the context of a decline in literacy and climate crisis.

**Key Words.** Ronan McGreevy, *The Irish Times*, First World War, Commemoration, Sir Henry Wilson, Don Tidey, Seán Lemass.

**Resumen.** Ronan McGreevy es periodista del *Irish Times*. En esta entrevista, realizada en parte en conversación directa y en parte por correo electrónico, McGreevy habla sobre algunos de los temas clave que han marcado su trabajo periodístico y que aparecen en los libros que ha publicado. Se abordan diversos temas surgidos de la larga década de centenarios que conmemoraron eventos clave en el período comprendido entre la "Third Home Rule Bill" de

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1912 y el final de la Guerra Civil, desde el "Rising" y los monumentos y cementerios de Francia y Flandes que conmemoran la participación de los soldados irlandeses en la Primera Guerra Mundial hasta el asesinato de Sir Henry Wilson, que desencadenó la Guerra Civil Irlandesa. McGreevy también arroja luz sobre el secuestro de Don Tidey por parte del IRA en 1983, el tema de la conmemoración relacionado con el período de los "Troubles" de Irlanda, y retoma el papel histórico clave del ex Taoiseach Séan Lemass y las entrevistas con él que constituyen la base de su próximo libro, *Seán Lemass: The Lost Memoir: The Autobiography of Ireland's Most Admired Taoiseach*. McGreevy también habla sobre la situación actual del periodismo, el impacto del populismo y los desafíos que enfrentamos en relación con la salud pública y global en el contexto del declive de la alfabetización y la crisis climática.

**Palabras clave.** Ronan McGreevy, *The Irish Times*, Primera Guerra Mundial, Conmemoración, Sir Henry Wilson, Don Tidey, Seán Lemass.

Ronan McGreevy was born in Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim. A graduate in English and Politics, he also completed a master's degree in journalism at University College Galway. Following graduation, and after gaining initial experience with local Irish papers and *The Irish Press*, he moved to London where he wrote for publications including *The Times*, the *London Evening Standard*, and the principal newspaper for the Irish in Britain, *The Irish Post*. During his years in London he also worked as a radio and television producer with the *BBC*.

On his return to Ireland he first worked as a producer for *Sky News*, but he has been a journalist at *The Irish Times* since 2006. Much of his work since then has focused on themes of historical interest, most notably in relation to the key events commemorated in the decade of centenaries of the period from The Third Home Rule Bill in 1912 to the end of the Irish Civil War. McGreevy also produces and presents video content for *The Irish Times*, both on historical and commemorative themes and on current events.

McGreevy has achieved significant critical acclaim for his published work. His first major book, *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front*, came out in 2016 and was a key influence on public debate relating to the commemoration of 1916 as not just the year of the Rising but also of the participation of Irish soldiers, including those from the diaspora, in World War I. The book takes readers on a tour of the Western Front, looking at the monuments, cemeteries and landscapes of France and Flanders where Irish soldiers left their mark. In response to the publication, the French government appointed him a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2018.

In light of his contribution to and expertise in commemoration, McGreevy was invited to edit the official State book published to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, *Centenary: Ireland Remembers 1916*. In addition, he edited *Was it for This?: Reflections on the Easter Rising and What it Means to Us Now 1916-2016*, an anthology of writings on the Rising published by *The Irish Times* in partnership with the State's 1916-2016 Clár Comórtha Céad Blian/Centenary Programme.[2] He also edited two eBooks based on *Irish Times* archives: *'Twas Better to Die: The Irish Times and Gallipoli 1915-2015* and *The Mad Guns: Reflections on the Battle of the Somme 1916-2016*, and wrote and presented the 2017 documentary film *United Ireland: How Nationalists and Unionists Fought Together in Flanders*, shortlisted for the Best Film award at the 2018 Imperial War Museum's short film festival.

[2] The centenary programme consisted of seven key strands reflecting the themes of Remembering, Reconciling, Presenting, Imagining and Celebrating.

In 2022 McGreevy published *Great Hatred: The Assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP*, an exploration of the assassination of the Irish-born Sir Henry Wilson, formerly the British government's most senior military advisor and an Ulster Unionist MP at the time of his death. The author proposes that the killing was Ireland's Sarajevo, that it precipitated the Irish Civil War and that the killing had been ordered by Michael Collins. Named the *Business Post*'s History Book of the year, it was very widely reviewed in the Irish and British press and fulsomely praised by, among others, Professor Diarmaid Ferriter, Former President of Ireland Mary McAleese and broadcaster and former UK government minister Michael Portillo.

Along with journalist Tommy Conlon, in 2023 he co-authored *The Kidnapping: A Hostage, a Desperate Manhunt and a Bloody Rescue that Shocked Ireland* on the 1983 IRA kidnapping of supermarket executive Don Tidey and the rescue in which the kidnappers killed a young Garda and an army private. Forthcoming in March 2026 is McGreevy's *Seán Lemass: The Lost Memoir: The Autobiography of Ireland's Most Admired Taoiseach*, based on interviews given by Lemass a few years before his death in 1971.

**Alfred Markey:** Firstly, thank you very much Ronan for finding time for this interview. I know you are busy at the moment in the run up to the launch of your new book *Seán Lemass: The Lost Memoir: The Autobiography of Ireland's Most Admired Taoiseach*, which will take place on March 19. I suggest we start there. It is based on a series of interviews which he gave in his later years and gives us fascinating insight into, as your title puts it, the Taoiseach who is perhaps most admired by the Irish public. How did this project come about?

**Ronan McGreevy:** Thanks for the interview, Alf. *Seán Lemass: The Lost Memoir* is based on a series of 23 interviews, and 22 hours of recordings amounting to 270,000 words, which Lemass gave to the businessman Dermot Ryan between 1967 and 1969. Ryan was a member of the Fianna Fáil national executive, a successful tourism operator and a huge admirer of Lemass.

He had intended the recordings to be the basis of an authorised biography of Lemass told from Lemass's point of view. In the context of the time, it was a massive undertaking. You needed reel-to-reel tapes which were hard to get and he also employed a stenographer and a typist to type up the transcripts. Unfortunately, Lemass, who completely approved of the project, died in 1971 and Ryan ran out of money to bring his project to fruition. To cut a long story short, the Ryans gave the tapes and the transcripts to the Lemass family in 2017. Lemass's great-grandson Aidan O'Connor suggested I do something in *The Irish Times* with them. We published a supplement in 2018 which went down very well. It was always my intention to turn them into a book, but I got distracted by other projects. Also, I needed the hard copy transcripts to be converted into a Microsoft Word document I could edit. That only happened last year.

**AM:** Lemass is, of course, primarily associated with the perceived modernisation of Ireland and considered to have been a key catalyst for the changes that came about in the 60s. Indeed, both the general public and scholars have coincided in this perception, with the latter also affording significant protagonism to T. K. Whitaker. In the light of the interviews and your own research, do you think this assessment stands up?

**RMcG:** Yes, it does. The First Economic programme, published in 1958, is regarded as the catalyst for the growth of the Irish economy which began in the 1960s. Lemass is clear in his memoirs that the impact of the first programme was as much psychological as practical. It seems incredible, but there never had been a plan for economic growth for the Irish economy prior to 1958. Lemass deliberately set a modest goal of 2 per cent growth per year. When growth was

twice that, it had a more significant impact on morale in Ireland. Lemass was a confident man and transmitted that confidence to a country that badly needed it. As his biographer Tom Garvin observed in *Preventing the Future: Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?*, Lemass's impact was "profoundly cultural: the collective imagined project of a successful and modern Irish nation-state" (Garvin 2004: 278).[3]

**AM:** The perception of Lemass as a moderniser is also in part due to the contrast with de Valera. In the decades following Lemass's tenure as Taoiseach his legacy seemed secure in view of the fact that he was so clearly associated with changes that, eventually, brought about a prosperity that contrasted with the supposed stagnation of de Valera's time in power. However, can we feel, to an extent, a slight change in this assessment given that many of the problems we associate with the Ireland of today, such as urban congestion and excessive materialism, can be traced to a shift to modernisation? And does this allow for a slight reassessment of the more "spiritual", or even more "culture-oriented" figure of de Valera?

**RMcG:** There is no doubt that Lemass was connected with materialism in the way that de Valera was not. But Lemass could see, as many others did, that de Valera's bucolic vision of Ireland was not shared by the people who voted with their feet and left the country. During the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising, Lemass gave a speech in Tralee where he said "the symbol of patriotism is not the armed Irish volunteer, but the student in the Technical College, the planning officer, the busy executive of industry and trade union, the progressive farmer, the builders and workers on whose skills and enthusiasm the country's future depends" (McGreevy 2026: 302). It's impossible to imagine de Valera saying such a thing. Fortunately for Lemass, de Valera's disinterest in economic matters was good for him and Lemass says in his memoir that he was in charge of economic policy in all Fianna Fáil governments and shadow cabinets from 1948 on. In relation to the impact that urban congestion and excessive materialism are having on modern Ireland, I would say that it is infinitely better to have problems caused by prosperity not poverty.

**AM:** There is also, I feel, an interesting paradox here. While Lemass's own background was that of a businessman – generations of his family had owned a thriving hatting and outfitting business – and he is associated with a valorisation of the private sector as a driving force in society, the change he is associated with can largely be sourced in the public institutions of the state, the work of civil servants led by T. K. Whitaker, the establishment of semi-state bodies such as the IDA (Industrial Development Authority) to attract foreign business and multinationals – which incidentally was set up by John A. Costello's inter-party government as far back as 1949 – and the subsequent investment in education. How do you interpret this paradox and does Lemass shed any light on it in the interviews?

**RMcG:** Lemass was by no means an unabashed capitalist or free marketer in the beginning. In fact, he had a very statist idea of economic management. His Control of Manufactures Act in 1932 limited foreign control of Irish enterprises and sought to protect Irish manufacturers from foreign influence. He changed his views in the late 1950s because the whole world was moving away from protectionism towards free trade. Lemass saw the private sector as a means to generate the revenues to provide better public services. One of his relatively unsung achievements was to increase the size of the Irish state without causing public unrest. The Irish state was relatively small compared to other European countries until the 1960s, health was

[3] Garvin's biographical study of Lemass is titled *Judging Lemass: The Measure of the Man*. It forms one of a series of studies on key Irish historical figures from the Royal Irish Academy publishers including de Valera, W. T. Cosgrave, George Bernard Shaw, as well as a comparative biography of John Redmond and Edward Carson.

largely privatised and under the control of the Catholic Church, there was no free secondary school education in Ireland until 1967. Lemass believed that increased prosperity would provide more taxation revenue and better public services. As he says in his memoir:

> I am saying that if the total national income is a thousand million pounds, which it will be, the government takes twenty-five per cent of that. It is the total cost of all the services provided by the government including the paying of interest and debt and all this. In other countries it would be thirty, thirty-five and forty per cent of whatever the total income is and it will be here in that way also at some stage, because, as our national income rises, as the income per head rises, not merely will the government expenditure grow in line but it will grow faster than the national income and this in itself is a good thing. (McGreevy 2026: 9)

**AM:** And what does he have to say about Dev in the interviews?

**RMcG:** Quite a lot. He was in awe of Dev's connection with the Irish people, something that Lemass admitted he did not have in the same way at all. "A lot of de Valera's support was due to this fervent honesty, his capacity to be able to stand in the rain and talk for an hour on the simplest terms to [people], which I could never do" (McGreevy 2026: 271). Nobody but Dev could have taken the anti-Treaty forces and fastened a Fianna Fáil party that won an overall majority just 10 years after the Civil War. He also praises Dev's 1938 agreement which ended the Economic War and got back the Treaty ports as "political genius" (McGreevy 2026: 111). But the contrast between Dev pre the Fianna Fáil defeat in 1948 and afterwards is one of the revelations in the book. Essentially de Valera stopped acting in a leadership role after 1948, but, such was his hold on the Irish people that Fianna Fáil thought it better to have him as party leader, if only as a figurehead. As Lemass says in the book:

> The preparation of the first programme was left to me. He was told what was happening, but he had not for many years attempted to initiate anything. At one time he was the initiator of policy, but this had ceased by 1948 or thereabouts. He then became the arbitrator, the man to whom you took your case when you had an argument or wanted something done and he decided whether to support you or not. He never asked why you did anything; new ideas did not come from him at all. (McGreevy 2026: 210)

Not only did Lemass and de Valera have fundamentally different views on Irish society and the economy, but they disagreed about multilateral institutions. Had de Valera been still in charge, he would never have sought membership of the EEC for Ireland. He believed that small countries would suffer in multilateral institutions against the interests of bigger countries. Lemass believed the opposite. He thought institutions like the Common Market amplified Ireland's influence on the world stage.

Also, unlike de Valera, Lemass had no interest in the Irish language. Indeed, the only reference in his memoirs to it was to describe Ernest Blythe as a "fanatic for the language" (McGreevy 2026: 70).

**AM:** And of course, we can't forget the other great figure we associate with Lemass, Charles Haughey, whose rise to power is, at least in the popular imagination, linked with the fact that he married Lemass's daughter Maureen. Haughey is perhaps the Taoiseach at the other end of the spectrum, the least admired in view of the fact that he funded an extraordinarily extravagant lifestyle, by, so to speak, getting into bed with precisely the generation of businessmen whose wealth and success can be traced back to the supposed modernisation of Lemass. In part the

modernisation brought corruption. Do we get any further insight into the character and activities of Haughey?

**RMcG:** Bear in mind that Lemass recorded these interviews between 1967 and 1969 before the Arms Trial in 1970. In *The Lost Memoir*, Lemass recounts the story that he told many times about appointing Haughey as a junior minister in 1961. Appointing Junior ministers was the prerogative of the Cabinet. Lemass wanted Seán Flanagan because he didn't want to seem to be favouring his son-in-law. It was the Cabinet who overruled him. Lemass said of Haughey: "Once he had broken through there was no question of any restraint in further promotions for him. He went right to the top post. His ability justified my choosing him. If he had not the requisite ability I would have advised him to stay out of politics" (McGreevy 2026: 266).

There's an interesting observation in the book that Lemass makes. If he had nothing to do in the evening, he would read a book. If Haughey had nothing to do, he would go out. This speaks to how self-contained Lemass was while Haughey was always seeking the approval of others.

You are right that Lemass is the most admired of Irish Taoisigh, but also the best. While Haughey is the least admired, I would contend that he was not the worst. His early administrations were calamitous, but those between 1987 and 1992 were extremely successful governments, albeit dogged by scandals, most of them of Haughey's own making.

The partnership agreements which Haughey negotiated gave real economic stability at a time when the country was doing very badly economically. Lemass forecast that it would be possible to achieve growth of between six and eight per cent annually if all sections of society bought into it. Haughey achieved eight per cent growth in 1990 and it was real growth, not "Leprechaun economics". That being said, it is impossible to divorce Haughey the politician from Haughey the person who debased his office to enrich himself. Seán Lemass was the opposite of Haughey. He was famously incorruptible and did not die a rich man. His estate was worth €821,000 in today's money, most of that in the value of his home that he bought from his parents.

**AM:** Given your own interest in and work on the revolutionary period that gave rise to independence, you no doubt paid close attention to Lemass's mature reflections on the nature of the process. What new insights do the interviews give us?

**RMcG:** None unfortunately. Lemass asked Dermot Ryan not to go into the period before he entered politics in 1923 and Ryan stuck diligently to the task. However, I have included significant new material from the military archives in the introduction to the book. Mine is the first book to mention the extraordinary circumstances in which Seán Lemass killed his younger brother, Herbert. I have also proved, I believe definitively, that Lemass was responsible for the killing of the British spy Geoffrey Baggallay in Baggot Street on Bloody Sunday. He admits as much in a handwritten note in his pension archives. One thing he does say about the 50th anniversary of the Rising is that Ireland would not have made the progress it had done to that point under British rule. That was a bold and contentious statement in the context of the time, as living standards in Britain were still well ahead of Ireland. It is undoubtedly true now that Irish independence has been good for Ireland economically. That's not something you could have said with any authority 50 years ago.

**AM:** Looking back at the life of Lemass I am struck by the early familiarity with violence. One of his brothers was killed after the civil war, possibly by pro-treaty forces, while, as you mention, he himself, when only 16, shot dead his baby brother in an accident strikingly reminiscent of that in which Spain's then future King Juan Carlos killed his own brother. How

does Lemass assess the question of violence and the revolutionary period? Is there any hint of trauma or regret?

**RMcG:** Lemass was famously reticent about his time during the Irish Revolution. He mentions in the memoir that he was asked to write an account of his time in the GPO in 1966 for the academic journal *Studies*.[4] Lemass was reluctant to contribute as he didn't want to go back there. The article he wrote was shorn of all drama and was self-deprecating. One could speculate that the death of his brother Noel Lemass and that of Herbert turned him off violence and all bragging about it. Paradoxically, both de Valera and Lemass were men of peace and detested later iterations of the IRA. In fact, Lemass blames the IRA for wrecking attempts at reconciliation with the North with their bombing campaigns in England in 1939/1940 and the Border Campaign of 1956 to 1962.

**AM:** It does sound like a fascinating testimony and I am very much looking forward to reading it. But let's turn to you yourself. Following your graduation in journalism from what was then University College Galway, and after working on local Irish papers, and *The Irish Press*, you moved to London where you published in *The Times* and the *London Evening Standard*, as well as working for the *BBC* and also for that beacon of the Irish community in the UK, *The Irish Post*. How did this experience influence you and your perception of Irishness and how it is inflected by the diaspora?

**RMcG:** Good question. Firstly, most of my books have been about the relationship between Britain and Ireland. My first book, *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front*, about the Irish experience of the First World War and my book about the assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP were about Irish identity reflected through the complicated relationship with Britain. The most important thing I learned from living in Britain is that Irish exceptionalism is a nonsense. All countries have problems, ours are no worse nor better than most other places.

**AM:** But let's face it, the times of dancing at the Galtymore in Cricklewood or The National in Kilburn are long gone. It is often proposed that the influence of the London Irish, and the Irish in Britain generally, served as a sort of dissenting foil to the autarky and insularity of the new state in its early decades. But that dynamic no longer seems to exist. The Irish community in the UK is now mostly elderly or has less of a sense of common identity than in the past. While in Ireland, the younger generations consume less television and so appear, at least to me coming from Spain, as less influenced by the likes of the *BBC* and British culture generally, including the culture of popular music and even sport. See, for example, the striking rise of interest in League of Ireland football, now considered "real" and authentic in contrast to the hyper-mercantilism of the alien Premier League. And, of course, Brexit has played its part! As someone intimately familiar with both sides of the axis, both metropolitan centre and colonial periphery, how do you read the relationship today?

**RMcG:** Irish people have always had an ambivalent relationship with Britain. On the one hand, Irish people have always stressed the differences with the English and there are very real differences. On the other hand, Irish people are completely immersed in British culture and

[4] This Spring special number of *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* had also initially intended to include the article "The Canon of Irish History: A Challenge" from the Jesuit Celtic scholar Fr. Francis Shaw. However, in view of its polemical nature, it was not published until 1972, two years after Shaw's death, during perhaps the most violent year of the Northern Troubles. The article is credited by many scholars as the seminal text in the development of the revisionist turn in Irish scholarship.

sport and are active participants in it. When I was young, Britain was a wealthier, more liberal-minded, more dynamic society than Ireland. I don't think any of that is true anymore. Irish people were aghast at Brexit and the chaos that ensued. There was also a rise in anti-British sentiment as a result of the antics of so many of the Brexiteers. There used to be a grudging admiration of Britain among Irish people, I'm not sure that exists anymore.

**AM:** After the best part of a decade in London you returned to Ireland and started working for *The Irish Times* in 2006. From an early stage your work turned towards themes of historical interest. This was especially so in the run up to the decade of centenaries which commemorated key events in the period from The Third Home Rule Bill in 1912 to the end of the Civil War. And evidently at the heart of this was 1916. The 1966 50-year commemoration had brought about something of a schism in Irish academia with the emergence of the so-called revisionist turn which hugely impacted scholarship on history and in the field of Irish studies. One of the consequences of this was that not only academics but also journalists, politicians and a range of protagonists of public debates from civil society were acutely aware that the decade of commemoration could significantly impact the future nature of Ireland, its political structures and how its identity or identities would be interpreted both at home and abroad. One of the most significant developments of this period of commemoration was the increased protagonism given to a reconsideration of the other hugely significant event in 1916, the participation of Irish combatants in the First World War, or in the common shorthand, the Somme. You played a significant part in the debate. You were editor of *Centenary: Ireland Remembers 1916*, the official State book commemorating the centenary of both the 1916 Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. You also edited *Was it for This?: Reflections on the Easter Rising and What it Means to Us Now 1916-2016*, a collection of writings taken mainly from the *Times* archives reflecting on the Rising,[5] as well as two eBooks based on the *Irish Times* archives: *'Twas Better to Die: The Irish Times and Gallipoli 1915-2015* and *The Mad Guns: Reflections on the Battle of the Somme 1916-2016*. But most interestingly, in 2016 you published *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front*, in which you take the reader on a tour of the monuments, cemeteries and landscapes of France and Flanders where, in your words, Irish soldiers made their mark. Could you take us through the process that led to your interest in this whole theme and, in particular, where or who stands out most for you in *Wherever the Firing Line Extends*?

**RMcG:** I've always been interested in the First World War – the brutality and tragedy of it. While the Second World War was necessary given the evil of the Nazi regime, the First World War was completely unnecessary. None of the protagonists involved needed to go to war. When I was learning about the First World War in school, I had no idea of the Irish involvement in it – some 270,000 men were direct participants. It was never mentioned. The latest figures suggest 45,000 dead from across Ireland. It's the biggest conflict the Irish have been involved in, but it was completely elided from the public memory. Hence, F. X. Martin's famous comment about the "national amnesia" (68). There would be no Irish State but for the First World War. The Easter Rising was an event that happened in that war not during it. After all, the rebels sought the help of their "gallant allies" in Europe – i.e. Germany. The fact that the UK was at war also explains the British response to it and the executions that followed. The reality is that those involved in British uniforms during the war outnumbered those involved in the national struggle by three to one. This confounds our view of Ireland as perennial rebels. In reality, when the war

[5] The publication contains writings from a fascinating range of relevant figures. Among the contributors are: John Redmond, Vladimir Lenin, John Dillon, Sean O'Casey, Desmond FitzGerald, Sean O'Faolain, Douglas Gageby, Conor Cruise O'Brien, John McGahern, John Bruton, Gerry Adams, Declan Kiberd, Paul Bew, Diarmaid Ferriter.

broke out in 1914, most Irish people were resigned to British rule into perpetuity and were fixated on Home Rule. The British army was known as the army. There was no other.

My book arose out of a visit to the Western Front in 1914. I was struck by the sheer scale of the Irish memorialisation, from the Ulster Tower to the Island of Ireland Peace Park and Messines Village. My favourite location is probably the grave of Major Willie Redmond which is the only grave on the entirety of the Western Front which stands alone. (He is not buried in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery). Redmond was 56 when he signed up. He was an Irish patriot to his boot straps, but felt that the German invasion of Belgium upended the whole world order.

**AM:** Having come to the conclusion of the long decade of centenaries, how do you think it has all worked out? Has it had a lasting impact on how we interpret Ireland and its history?

**RMcG:** I think it was a tremendous success. The Irish public really embraced it in an empathetic and thoughtful manner. As Dr Maurice Manning said in the preface to my book *Centenary: Ireland Remember 1916*, it showcased a country at ease with its own history (McGreevy 2027a: 14). The real success was at local level where there were thousands of unsung events which brought communities together.

**AM:** Let's turn to your next book, *Great Hatred: The Assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP*. Published in 2022, as indicated on the back cover, it has been described by Professor Diarmaid Ferriter as "an important and valuable addition to the library of the Irish Revolution" and by the extravagant Michael Portillo as "both forensic and a page turner". It deals with the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson, an event which precipitated the Irish Civil War. Talk to us about the genesis of the project which allowed you to develop your particular thesis that the assassination had been ordered by Michael Collins.

**RMcG:** The book arose out of *Wherever the Firing Line Extends*. The final chapter is about Robert Armstrong, an Irish gardener who grew up on the Wilson estate in Currygrane, Co. Longford. Armstrong fought in the First World War and used his status as a Commonwealth War Graves Commission gardener in France and Belgium to join the French Resistance. He was captured by the Germans and died in a German prison camp in 1944. While writing that chapter, I realised that the assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP was a seminal event in Irish history and would make for a great book. There was a book in 1961 about the assassination but it was flawed and its conclusions were dubious.

**AM:** What has been the reaction to your thesis from academic scholars?

**RMcG:** I think history is one of the disciplines in the humanities where a non-academic can operate in the same field as academics. I always say that history is too important to be left to historians, and by historians I mean academic historians. Though not an academic myself, I try to adhere to an academic rigour in writing my books. That includes conducting original research, footnoting everything and ensuring that what I write is factually correct and accurate. I have had nothing but support for my work from academic historians and the reviews prove it. *Great Hatred* was very well reviewed by academic historians. I was particularly pleased by Professor Roy Foster's review in *The Spectator*. Others like Professor Eunan O'Halpin and Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid were also complimentary. The reviews I fear are not those who don't like a book I write, but those that point out inaccuracies. There's nothing worse than having factual errors pointed out in your book. Fortunately, there have been very few of those types of reviews of my books.

**AM:** Of course, you must be the envy of academics everywhere given you got the chance last year to participate in two of the six episodes on the War of Independence and the Civil War of the hugely successful podcast *The Rest is History*. These were recorded in the Four Courts, no doubt you felt the weight of history on your shoulders!

**RMcG:** I have lost count of the number of people who have mentioned that they heard me on *The Rest is History*. To me it's the podcast equivalent of having been on *Top of the Pops* back in the day. I'm a huge fan of the show and its presenters, Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook, who have done more to popularise history than anyone I know in my lifetime.

**AM:** Reading *Great Hatred*, I particularly enjoyed the sensitive portrayal of Reginald Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan, the two key characters responsible for the physical assassination of Wilson. One, Dunne, lame, the other, O'Sullivan, had lost a leg at Passchendaele. They were, of course, English born and ex-WWI soldiers – although Dunne went so far as to describe Britain as "the enemy country" – while Wilson himself grew up in Ireland, in County Longford. There is a teasing symmetry to it all that challenges us to avoid broad brushstrokes when trying to interpret Irish history.

**RMcG:** I agree. I have many cousins who were born and brought up in England. Some consider themselves Irish only; others a mixture of both. Identity is always complicated in the children of immigrants, but that adds to the rich tapestry of modern society. This phenomenon is universal among the children of immigrants. Norman Tebbit spoke in the 1980s about the cricket test as to whether the children of Indian or Pakistani immigrants would support England. The kernel of my book *Great Hatred* is that Wilson, an Irish-born British imperialist, was killed by two British-born Irish nationalists.

**AM:** In 2023 you turned to more contemporary issues. Specifically, you published, along with Tommy Conlon, *The Kidnapping: A Hostage, a Desperate Manhunt and a Bloody Rescue that Shocked Ireland* on the 1983 kidnapping by the IRA of the English supermarket executive Don Tidey. Kidnapped while on the school run in Dublin, he was rescued from a Leitrim wood 23 days later but not before a young Garda Gary Sheehan and soldier Patrick Kelly were shot dead by the IRA kidnappers. If earlier, in relation to the decade of centenaries, we noted how commemoration plays a key role in determining who, in short, is on the right side of history, this reality is even more acutely pressing today. Being from Leitrim yourself, these events obviously had an effect on you as a schoolboy, but this very much remains a live issue. Take us through your thoughts on the whole affair and perhaps you could also touch on the relevance of the theme of commemoration to the case.

**RMcG:** The book was my friend Tommy Conlon's idea. When he asked me to come on board, I said yes immediately, especially after Sinn Féin's First Minister Michelle O'Neill said there had been "no alternative" to the Provisional IRA campaign. Sinn Féin and its Republican proxies have been relentlessly trying to rewrite the history of the Troubles and many young people are falling for it. The fact that there is a memorial in Ballinamore to John Joe McGirl, who facilitated the terrorists who kidnapped Don Tidey and murdered Garda Gary Sheehan and Private Patrick Kelly, was another motivating factor for writing that book. We felt we had to put a stain on the silence on the terrible events of December 1983 and give the silent majority in our county a voice on the matter. Tommy and I were delighted that in Ballinamore last year a memorial to Kelly and Sheehan was unveiled at the other end of the town. We've been told

that our book was the catalyst for getting that memorial across the line which is deeply gratifying to the both of us.

**AM:** Over the last year or two you have often been on the front line covering protests and disturbances which have largely been precipitated by tensions related to immigration and housing, and with what is perceived by a growing section of the population as a dilution of Irish identity. How do you read the current political reality?

**RMcG:** Immigration is a huge issue across Europe. Nearly a quarter of the Irish population was born abroad. This has happened in the last 30 years. It's a remarkable success story and Ireland has avoided many of the mistakes that other countries have made. The heat has gone out of the arguments over the placing of asylum seekers in hotels around the country at the moment, partially because refugee numbers are down significantly.

That being said, immigration is undoubtedly contributing to the housing crisis in Ireland. That is not the fault of immigrants, but when you have a shortfall of 300,000 homes in the State and net migration is running at more than 50,000 a year, it is making a bad situation worse. The Irish Government only recognized this reality earlier last year when they revised their housing targets upwards. Ireland is historically speaking an underpopulated country so there is plenty of room for a lot more people, but the broken nature of the Irish housing system is a serious impediment.

**AM:** Let's turn to talk about journalism today. In the time you have been a journalist the newspaper world has been transformed. What's your reaction to how journalism has evolved and, in broad terms, where it stands today?

**RMcG:** There is no doubt that these are perilous times for journalism. Newspapers all over the world are shedding staff and influence. That being said, the editor of *The Irish Times*, Ruadhán Mac Cormaic, announced in December that our newspaper is paying for its journalism through subscriptions. That's a milestone frankly most of us thought would never happen. The internet is both the best and the worst thing to happen to newspapers. It's the worst because it is the biggest ever threat to the newspaper business model. It's the best because articles on the internet can reach a worldwide audience. For instance, people like yourself have as much access to Irish news living abroad as Irish people do at home. That was unheard of in the pre-internet era.

**AM:** Increasingly, traditional prestige media outlets are described in derogative terms as "legacy media", often with the implication that they serve an "elite", that they have had excessive power as the gatekeepers of information, and in essence are somewhat authoritarian, with centralised power structures and even "strong man" editorial figures. How do you react to such charges?

**RMcG:** I have heard this criticism all the time. Legacy media has been very bad at explaining itself or pushing back against its critics. It is true that traditionally legacy media have been the gatekeepers of information. In the past, if the media decided not to cover an event, it didn't happen as far as the public was concerned. That's changed now and for the better. The internet has brought a level of accountability to the mainstream media that was not there before and again I think that is a good thing. We constantly get it in the neck from left and right – why don't you cover this? Why don't you cover that? In many cases, we do cover things, but not in the way that critics like.

**AM:** We can also see a parallel phenomenon with non-traditional media outlets and personalities seemingly becoming increasingly emboldened, an obvious case in point being the presence of often very unconventional influencer types at US White House press briefings, with this presence very much facilitated by the Trump administration. And of course, Trump himself famously boasted that he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue and get away with it. Can media today, whether more traditional media or a sort of a hybrid with the new emerging forms, continue to hold power accountable in the manner it did in the past, however imperfect that process may have been?

**RMcG:** If the mainstream media could hold people accountable the way it did in the past, Trump wouldn't be president, so the answer to that is no. The days when two journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, could bring down a sitting president are long past.

**AM:** In a recent podcast interview on *Politico*, if I'm not mistaken, Steve Bannon, one of the key ideologues behind the MAGA phenomenon, and one of the many Irish Americans who seem to form the driving force behind the movement, openly commented that he and likeminded figures are actively seeking to influence Irish politics with a view to developing an Irish MAGA-style movement, and even "creating" an Irish Trump. Do you think they have any realistic chance of gaining significant traction?

**RMcG:** They have no chance whatsoever of creating an Irish Trump. Firstly, the Irish electorate show no sign of voting en-masse for far right-wing parties. Secondly, the Irish political system would not allow a Trump to emerge as that person would have to become the leader of a political party first and that party could never hope to achieve an overall majority. Trump has emerged in a binary system in the US which has only two major parties. Ireland is more typical of European countries with a multitude of smaller parties and permanent coalitions. Bannon is talking nonsense.

**AM:** Commentators and scholars frequently suggest that the rise of populism is related to an overall decline in literacy and the decreasing capacity of citizens to accurately understand discourse in relation to interpretative frameworks, and to subsequently participate actively and intelligently in the public sphere. I note in a recent *Irish Times* report from Jack White that "The University of Galway is proposing to discontinue and replace its general arts course due to an international downward trend in popularity as students are increasingly attracted to "direct routes to employment". An arts degree in Galway was, of course, where you started out. Is this an existential crisis for the humanities?

**RMcG:** Absolutely there is. Literacy is under threat in a way it hasn't been since universal literacy. Young people don't read books anymore. Smart phones are rotting all our brains. AI is hollowing out the uniqueness of all our perspectives. People can't tell facts from fiction anymore. We may be regressing to a 19th century model where only an educated elite read books. The Enlightenment model was that people educated themselves, discerned fact from fiction and made informed judgements on things. You can only do that properly by reading. I hope I'm wrong about this.

**AM:** Of late you have covered a lot of significant climate events, particularly during the dark and wet start to 2026. What did you glean from engaging first hand with public health and wellbeing in the context of climate crisis?

**RMcG:** What I have found in my time as a journalist is that climate change, which always seemed at least a decade away, is here now. I don't think people have processed that fact yet.

**AM:** And so what is next? Perhaps you could fill us in on any upcoming projects we can look forward to.

**RMcG:** I'm hoping in the next year or so to write a book about Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* painting in the National Gallery of Ireland. It was thought to be a copy until it was confirmed as the original in 1990. That in itself would make the painting interesting, but it's the story of the woman that purchased it in 1922 that really interests. Her name was Marie Lea-Wilson and she was an Irish woman who was married to a British officer Percival Lea-Wilson. Lea-Wilson, like his namesake Henry Wilson, was assassinated on the orders of Michael Collins, in this case in 1920. Marie Lea-Wilson gave what she thought was a copy of the Caravaggio to the Jesuits in the 1950s, as a thank you for helping her to deal with the grief of losing her husband. Lea-Wilson went on to be the first female paediatrician in Ireland.

**AM:** Thank you very much, Ronan. It has been a pleasure to talk to you.

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