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***Gombeens at the gate: Renewing the Rising through ideals,
character and place***

Finbarr D. Bradley and James J. Kennelly (Dublin: Teacht Aniar;
2016; ISBN: 978-0-995462-60-1; 101 pp; €15)

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, and with it comes much in the way of reflection on the establishment of the Irish state. In this provocatively titled book, *Gombeens at the Gate*, it is argued that the Republic of Ireland in its current condition does not resemble the nation for which those of the Rising fought. The men and women who strived for independence 100 years ago envisioned an Ireland that would be rich in creativity, culture and national identity, something which the authors argue has been overshadowed by policies that favour corporations and Ireland's place within the global economy.

The core thesis of this relatively short text posits that reflecting on the ideals and goals of the 'Irish Revival' (1891–1922) could serve as a valid resource for policymakers in the future. As the country recovers from recession, this book contends that by aspiring towards a new paradigm – one based on the historic hopes of what Ireland would become – the country can move towards a more sustainable, self-sufficient economy that promotes what it means to be Irish.

Gombeens at the Gate was written by Finbarr D. Bradley, Visiting Professor at the UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, Dublin, and James J. Kennelly, Professor of International Business at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York. This is the third book on Ireland that the two authors have written together, in addition to co-authoring a number of other publications. The self-proclaimed pejorative title of the book takes inspiration from the 1989 bestseller *Barbarians at the Gate*, a book based on the leveraged buyout of RJR Nabisco, and the reference therein to the 'gombeen man', one who

pursues profits by questionable means. The title is clearly indicative of the authors' opinions as to Ireland's progression as a state.

Divided into five chapters, the book encompasses the beginning of the Irish Revival right up to the current economic recovery.

The first chapter of the book, 'Easter 1916: Ideals and Freedom', discusses the Rising as more than just an attempt by the Irish people to secure political independence, but as an attempt also to achieve personal freedom through self-realisation. Looking to the notable figures of the Rising such as Pearse, Connolly and Plunkett, special mention is made to the type of people these men were – men of character. The authors point to the relationship of character and freedom as one of interdependence, where those strong in these virtues 'become immune to charm offensives from advertisers and less likely to pursue fads that are not about freedom but are simply money-making enterprises' (p. 10).

Chapter Two, 'The Irish Revival (1890–1922): Character and Self-Reliance', continues on this theme, looking to the concepts underpinning the Revival, such as creativity, identity and self-reliance, all of which influenced the men and women of the Rising. This chapter also looks to organisations such as the Gaelic League, the Abbey Theatre and the GAA, which, they argue, illustrate Ireland's cultural distinctiveness, and the potential to be self-sufficient rather than going 'to their imperial masters with hat in hand seeking a few crumbs from the table' (p. 24). From the first two chapters, it is clear that the authors feel quite strongly that the Irish Revival set the stage for an ideal Ireland that was never realised, one that valued character, self-reliance and a distinct native language.

Covering the period following the War of Independence, Chapter Three, '1922–1966: Vision without Capability', examines the first governments of the newly founded Free State, as well as their successes and inadequacies. The authors point to the then Taoiseach Éamon de Valera's hopes of moving Ireland towards the ambitious concept portrayed in the Revival, but also his struggles to make it a reality. Furthermore, attention is drawn to Ireland's comparatively weak performance as a country throughout the period, despite keeping its distance from the strife of World War II. While it could be argued that emphasis was placed on 'spiritual' growth (akin to that of the Irish Revival) at the expense of the economy, the authors are frank in concluding that, by any measure, Ireland's performance was lacklustre. They conclude the chapter by noting that, while there can

be difficulty for a newly independent country to 'get it right', Ireland 'lamentably' failed (p. 55).

Conversely, Chapter Four is entitled '1966–2016: Capability with Vision', highlighting the strong economic growth that emerged in the 1960s but also the further departure from the ideals and aspirations set out during the Revival. Many drastic changes occurred throughout this half-century, both socially and economically, yet the authors, referencing Fennell (p. 58), note this came at the cost of what comprised Irish culture, where 'far from being culturally conservative, Ireland was actually the opposite, progressively ditching almost its entire inherited culture, from language, to dress and even cuisine' (p. 58). The chapter continues by outlining much of the Celtic tiger's excesses, culminating with the global economic recession. While there has been a steady recovery since then, the authors are quick to ask if anything has truly changed, or if lessons have been learned: 'the answer to both these questions is a resounding "no"' (p. 73). However, hope is not lost in the authors' eyes, as they set up the final chapter by posing a realistic and important question: 'How best can a small island nation with an open economy, tied to both the EU and the US, and with its own unique culture, traditions and sense of place, successfully chart a distinctive path in the choppy waters of the 21st century global economy?' (p. 75).

This final chapter, 'Shifting Paradigms: A Better Way Forward', looks towards the next stage of economic development for Ireland, where the emphasis must be shifted away from competitive prices and tax rates, and placed on the unique advantages the country possesses: culture, tradition, character and idealism, 'all within an ethic of environmental sustainability' (p. 77). The authors note that while such a shift may seem counterintuitive, 'in this coming form of capitalism, purpose and morality will play more of a role' and policymakers must stop bending society to the needs of the economy, and do the reverse (p. 83).

It is clear from reading *Gombeens at the Gate* that the two authors are displeased with Ireland's progress as a country, and believe much can be done in the way of improvement by encouraging and fostering greater ties to culture and place, amplified by the ideals and character of the citizens of early twentieth century Ireland. What this reader struggles to deduce, however, is by what meaningful manner these improvements can be ushered in to the policymaking process of today. It is certainly an admirable aim, to establish a paradigm shift and propel the state in a new direction with these traditional values, but in

practice it is difficult to imagine this being a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, due to the systemic reliance Ireland has placed on foreign direct investment as a means of income.

Strides can of course be made through the policy process for greater self-reliance, and for ingraining closer links to our culture and mother tongue. By way of showing how this might be done, the book relies on pointing to working examples of indigenous enterprises nationally and internationally, such as the 'Mittelstand' in Germany (p. 85) and the Kerrygold brand in Ireland (p. 88). In doing this, it does not seem to have been the authors' intention to provide all the concrete answers to Ireland's policy problems, and while the book lacks empirical evidence to support its thesis, the authors note that 'relying solely on scientific research is not the best way to stimulate innovation, which requires intelligence of the heart and hand as much as that of the head' (p. 93). Perhaps if the authors *had* provided more measurable ways in which Ireland could place more emphasis on its society over the economy, the goal of tying in the aspirations of the Rising and Revival and the policy process could be more realistic in today's climate of evidence-based policymaking.

One hundred years ago, the men and women of Ireland fought for their independence and for the establishment of a Free State. Ireland has developed in many ways since the Rising, rooting itself as a global economic presence with an immediately recognisable culture worldwide. While there are clear issues within society, the economy and our system of government, it seems unfair to Ireland in its current state to imply that it has so utterly deviated from what was set out for accomplishment during the Revival and Rising when, comparatively, Ireland performs well on a large number of metrics internationally today, such as in education, quality of life and public health.

Gombeens at the Gate seeks to review and reflect on the ideals of the men and women of 1916 in the context of Ireland's economic and social evolution over the last 100 years. From an economic perspective, some of the book's recommendations may be unworkable; however, in challenging the tendency for groupthink, so strongly a feature of debate in Ireland about the economy and society, this book makes a valuable contribution. For those looking to reflect on Ireland's future potential, drawing from the historical roots of the country, *Gombeens at the Gate* is an interesting and thought-provoking read.

Daniel Doyle