

# BURNING HERESIES

A MEMOIR  
OF A LIFE  
IN CONFLICT  
1979-2020



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‘It is an heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in it.’

– Paulina, *The Winter’s Tale*  
William Shakespeare

# Prologue

EACH TUESDAY, I would email ideas back and forth with my page editor from the *Sunday Times* Ireland edition. On this particular Tuesday, both the last of July 2017 and of my career as a newspaper columnist, I told him that either of two related subjects would be my preferred choice for the following Sunday. One was the absurdity of one wing of the Irish Defence Forces, the Army, being warned to prepare for terrorist attacks while another, the Naval Service, was promiscuously ferrying thousands of unscreened migrants from the Libyan coast to Italy. The second option was the story of Ashers bakery in Belfast rejecting a request to ice a wedding cake with ‘Support Gay Marriage’. Either would have slotted neatly into the broader subject of the culture wars that have made rational discussion on so many subjects virtually impossible.

My page editor then strongly urged me to write about the gender pay row in the BBC: ‘So what about this gender pay row.’ He then cited the random example of a fictional woman who ‘wants to work less hours than her male counterparts, slope off to have babies whenever, and yet be paid exactly the same. Gwan.’ I argued that the case had no relevance in Ireland, pointing out that two RTÉ presenters, Marian Finucane and Miriam O’Callaghan, were amongst the station’s highest earners and, anyway, the story ‘will be quite old by Sunday’. We then had a phone conversation on the subject. I pointed out that my brief was to write on Irish matters, not British ones, and I again reiterated my reluctance to cover the story. However, he did not relent and, in what was the greatest

blunder of my life, I finally capitulated, and with catastrophic stupidity not merely agreed to go along with his wishes but did so in a disastrously jaunty vein. The column that resulted was, as I have consistently admitted since, hastily written and poorly thought-out, covering too many subjects with too many vague generalisations – or, by the standards of modern journalism, a pretty average piece.

I observed: ‘The HR department – what used to be called “personnel” until people came to be considered as a metabolising, respiring form of mineral-ore – will probably tell you that men usually work harder, get sick less frequently and seldom get pregnant.’

The purpose of that tongue-in-cheek conclusion was to establish a wry tone for the piece throughout: namely, this is neither a Shakespearean sonnet nor the Gettysburg Address. Nonetheless, my generalisations were not plucked out of the ether. According to the British Office of National Statistics, women take about 42 per cent more sick leave than men, and the *British Medical Journal* had recently reported that Finnish women aged between forty and sixty took on average 46 per cent more short-term sick-leave than men. However, my observation was not meant to be a mathematical, QED assessment, but an impressionistic one, which might have different explanations. Comparable observations about men could equally have been made, but without the ferocious accusations of gender-hatred that were to follow.

I also observed that men *tended* to be more ambitious than women, but without providing any evidence, or indeed meaning that to be a compliment. In fact, I had researched this also, and knew that the CEOs of 95.2 per cent of the Fortune 500 companies (or 476 of them) were male. And is there a more depressing insight into male behaviour than that testosterone trinity of corporate ego, corporate drive and corporate jets (effectively spelling ‘absentee-fathers’) which such figures reveal? Then moving on to the BBC row itself, I mused that such male ambition perhaps explained how ‘the deeply irritating jackanapes-on-steroids’, Jeremy Vine, was earning a berserk £750,000 a year, adding that he must have one hell of an agent.

I continued: ‘So, have the BBC’s top women found a revolutionary new kind of negotiator that likes to start high and chisel downwards?’

Is this amazing unter-agent dedicated to the concept of seeking ever-lower salaries for his/her clients, so earning a smaller commission for him/herself? And if such unter-agents actually exist, who is idiotic enough to employ them? The BBC's women presenters, apparently. I note that two of the best-paid women presenters in the BBC – Claudia Winkleman and Vanessa Feltz – with whose (no doubt) sterling work I am tragically unacquainted – are Jewish. Good for them. Jews are not generally noted for their insistence on selling their talent for the lowest possible price, which is the most useful measure there is of inveterate, lost-with-all-hands stupidity. I wonder: who are their agents? If they're the same ones who negotiated the pay for the women on the lower scales, then maybe the latter have found their true value in the marketplace.'

These words were intended as a compliment for the women's chutzpah, as well as a statement of the importance of agents. It did not occur to me that I might be playing into some objectionable Jewish stereotype. And I most certainly was not indulging in any anti-Semitism, because not merely is anti-Semitism the most ignoble of all the base prejudices, it is also utterly stupid. 22 per cent of all Nobel prizes have gone to Jews, though this group constitutes just 0.2 per cent of the world's population. There are no more exacting examinations of individual scruple and intellectual integrity than those set by the Nobel committees – and I already knew that amongst the greatest beneficiaries to humanity in the twentieth century were three Jewish scientists: Ernst Chain had effectively invented penicillin as an antibiotic (not Alexander Fleming, as myth proclaims), while Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin had separately created the two anti-polio vaccines which had eliminated that accursed disease from the face of the earth, as well as from my childhood. All three had disavowed any profits from their discoveries. Moreover, I was aware that Rabbi Julia Neuberger would be alongside me in a panel discussion at a conference in Cork that same Sunday, and such was my inability to detect what *others* might regard as offensive Jewish stereotypes that I even assumed she and I could share a little joke about my column. I filed my copy at 4.34 p.m. on Thursday, twenty hours before the usual deadline, headlining it 'Nice and early'.

One hour and forty minutes later, at 6.14 p.m., I received an email asking me how I knew the two women were Jewish, and what was my source.

I replied ‘Wikipedia.’

So, clearly, my references to Winkleman and Feltz had not slipped under the editorial radar. Copy is read by five people: two editors in Dublin, and a contents editor, a lawyer and a subeditor in London. They had over forty-eight hours to assess my column before publication, and I got no more phone calls about it. I certainly had no hand in the creation of an inaccurate and needlessly provocative headline, ‘Sorry, ladies – equal pay has to be earned,’ which reflected neither the terminology of my article nor its central argument, which was not about earnings but negotiations.

The newspaper came online at 12.01 a.m. on 31 July 2017 and shortly thereafter the first attacks on it came from London, where someone had accessed my column, read it, and swiftly denounced it. The instantaneity of this suggests that some people had been tipped off from within *The Sunday Times*. Either way, the tweets started about my ‘deeply offensive, misogynistic, anti-Semitic article’. Other tweeters duly responded, denouncing the Jew-hating, woman-despising creature Kevin Myers. Moods never moderate in such exchanges, their intensifying frenzies being untutored by fact and untroubled by truth.

At 9 a.m. in my hotel room in west Cork, still unaware of the internet horror show, I received a phone call from my page editor, who told me I was in trouble. I was astonished: for what? If anything, I assumed it was for my disrespectful remarks about Jeremy Vine. Soon, even though North Korea had fired a missile over Guam the night before, I was the lead news story on the BBC, and my ‘anti-Semitism’ was a ‘fact’. Instead of standing up to the mob, the then editor of *The Sunday Times*, Martin Ivens, took down my column and issued a statement apologising for it. Around noon, I received a text asking me to phone the administrative manager of *The Sunday Times* in London. I did. He asked me no questions, sought no explanations, offered no due process, but curtly told me I was being sacked. Ivens never once spoke to me.

The newspaper then publicly announced that I would *never* work for it again, as if I had just been exposed as an undercover neo-Nazi agent, thereby rendering me a journalistic pariah all over the world – an unprecedented sentence in the history of the media in my lifetime. Matters grew rapidly worse as the online lies about me swiftly and malevolently mutated, next turning me into a Holocaust denier. Over the following fortnight, amid an inferno of falsehood, misrepresentation and internet lies, my career, my good name and my position in public life in Ireland were incinerated beyond recovery in the most merciless pyre of recent journalistic history.

This was not an accident. The Holocaust-denial allegations came mostly from a loosely connected cumulation of *Guardian*-connected journalists, one of whom is closely affiliated with the Irish Republican movement. On page 279 you may read more about how this despicable defamation proved to be even more successful than its instigators could possibly have hoped, but in the meantime, if you wish to discover something about the man whom these evil lies cast into reputational ruin across the English-speaking world, from Manchester to Miami and Melbourne – which I know, because I got emails from all three places – then please turn the page.