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Beyond the Bullets: making the new documentary series

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By Ciara Breathnach

What was life like for ordinary people in Ireland in 1921, 1922 and 1923? A new documentary series looks beyond the bullets to find out, as historian Ciara Breathnach explains

New year's eve 1920 marked the close of a brutal chapter of the War of Independence, particularly in Munster where martial law prevailed. Nationalist-leaning newspapers like the Irish Independent carried the grim tallies of injuries coupled with the names of casualties both young and old. Crown forces who were tasked with maintaining the law regularly broke it with impunity, as military inquiries in lieu of inquests and subsequent court martials routinely cleared them of blame for unlawful killings.

In Belfast City, Catholics endured even more violence prompted by deep sectarian rifts, yet life continued as normal. In the most challenging of times, children went to school, shops opened for business, people observed religious rites and, even in the poorest of households, special efforts were made to celebrate Christmas. This series looks Beyond the Bullets to explore how life was experienced in Ireland in 1921, 1922 and 1923, years of extraordinary socio-economic, cultural and political upheaval.

Research for this project relied heavily on newspapers as so few historical artefacts survive from the period. With the exception of the General Registrar Office and its collation of civil records of births, deaths and marriages, very few other statistical data were collated.

Much to the dismay of future genealogists and historians, the decennial census of 1921 was suspended as the efforts of the usual enumerators, the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police, were concentrated on law enforcement. Routine returns like judicial statistics, trade records, and many of the sources that social historians regularly rely upon were either not collated or gradually faded from the public record from 1919 onwards.

Needless to add, the reverberations of the fire in the Public Records Office in June 1922 were keenly felt in the course of our work. The records of the judicial courts suffered major losses. Fragments of these invaluable records survive and are held at the National Archives of Ireland, and among them are evidence of ordinary crime, much of which was precipitated by dire economic circumstances.

Social inequality

Poignant pleas for compassion came before the courts, like that of a WW1 veteran who had few recourses other than petty theft on his return to a very changed Ireland. The judge in that instance recognised his plight and he was released without charge. Cases of domestic violence and sexual assault weighed heavily on the lives of poor women and their children. Much of what we uncover in this series documents the systemic social inequality that governed the limitations of life for the poor.

Newspapers show how the annual calendar was punctuated in much the same way as it is now: sporting fixtures in rugby, horse racing, association football and various Gaelic football and hurling competitions, the school year, state examinations, and the dreaded back to school adverts of late summer.

The weather also dominated discussion as the summer of 1921 saw a prolonged dry spell, giving rise to a drought and a failed harvest portending food shortages not just in Ireland but right across Europe for the winter ahead. Newspapers gave several column inches to advertisements ranging from fine furs in the Brown Thomas winter sale to pedlars of patent medicines making spurious claims with cure-all potions. As frivolous as it may seem, these adverts provide the pulse of consumer culture for the wealthy and the poor.

World affairs

Another striking feature of the newspaper coverage is the attention given to world affairs, from post-war agreements and war reparations to the exploits of internationally-recognised sporting stars like baseballer Babe Ruth, and heavyweight boxer Jack Dempsey.

Life on screen

Fortunately by the 1920s technological advances meant that some excellent quality photographic records and film footage survive for the period. Equally the unmistakable dulcet tones of Count John McCormack, jaunty vaudeville tunes and the influence of the jazz age are peppered throughout the series' carefully selected score.

The 1920s was an exciting time for cinema and saw the emergence of global superstars like Charlie Chaplin whose endearing 'Tramp' character captured the hearts of audiences globally. Curfews in place in 1921 and 1922 condensed entertainment into daytime hours but entrepreneurs responded quickly to this lucrative new market and theatres with seating capacity for up to 900 people were established in Dublin and Cork.

The threat of moral contagion from foreign influences preoccupied many on the foundation of the Free State. That influential Hollywood actors and producers were embroiled in high profile murder cases meant that film was seen as a particular threat and resulted in the Censorship of Films act 1923.

Produced by Paula Williams for Indiepics, *Beyond the Bullets* adopts a lively pace to provide a broad overview and all-island perspectives of these formative years in Irish history. While warfare and partition provide an undeniable background to this work, our focus was very much on the everyday, the rhythm of ordinary life and how it endured.

Beyond The Bullets is a six-part series, produced by Indiepics for RTÉ. The first episode airs on November 4th 2022 on RTE1 at 8pm.

The series is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries Programme 2012-2023.