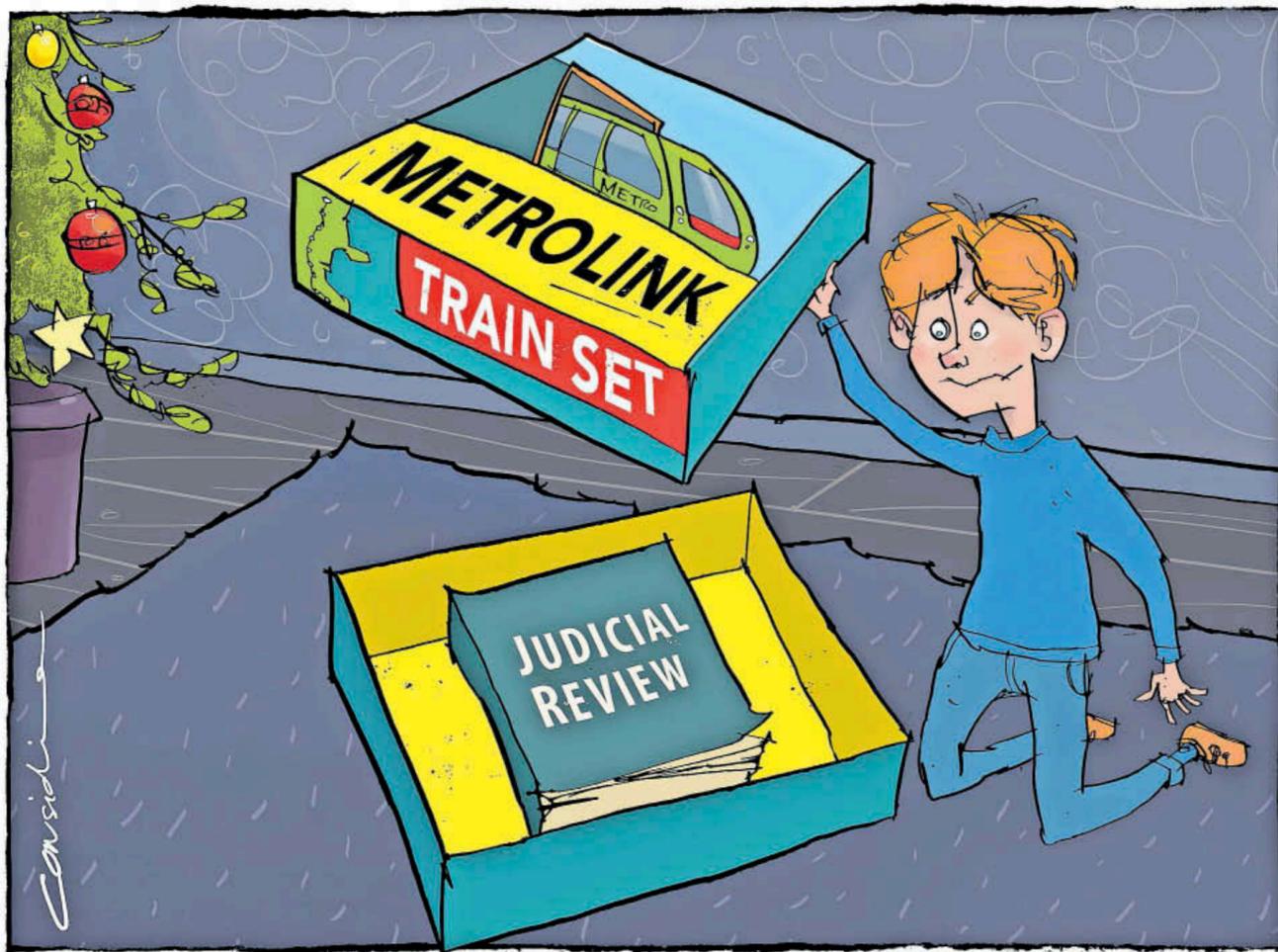


COMMENT



## Tom Dunne If we keep losing our cars, then let the AI robots rule now

**T**he average motorist," the radio man said, "loses track of his car several times a year, especially in big car parks, and spends around 13 minutes searching each time." This, he then explained, averages out at about three and half days over their lifetime. Three and a half days! The word "average" is important here. There will be people who have never lost their car for a nanosecond. There are many of those people. Take them out of the sample and it probably means Mr Average actually spends half his existence trying to find his jam jar. This means many of the people who walk past you in the street are not going anywhere with purpose but just looking for their cars. They are too embarrassed to ask you. "I'm meeting someone," they might say if pushed. They really mean: "Have you seen my wheels?" There was the story I heard about a man from Wicklow who lost his car on a stag do in Cork. Frustrated by a lack of parking he left his car in a housing estate south of the city. Then he forgot where. It took three weeks and a public appeal on local radio to find the car. He spent three weeks commuting to and from Cork on the train, searching at weekends when he wasn't working. I presume he kept this to himself and, if pushed, would claim he was having a passionate affair with a lad he met at the stag. Anything but "I can't find my car". The closest I have come to this was one New Year's Eve, when a friend drove us to town to visit a music venue, the Tivoli. He was the designated driver and parked his car on Francis Street, locking the steering wheel with a huge chain. He did so because of his Northern Ireland reg. "Red rag to a bull around here," he told us cryptically. Later that night, as we prepared to leave, he ran back into the venue quite distraught: "Car is gone," he told us. "Whipped. I knew it would be." At 4am I accompanied him to the garda station to report the car gone. They were very helpful. Later that morning I dropped him to the train station and, as he made his way back to Belfast, he got stuck into the call to his insurance company. But, driving home, curiosity got the better of me. We'd gone in via Francis Street but left the venue via the rear exit on Thomas Street. I mean, he wouldn't have, would he? I drove down Francis Street. There was the car, its big chain sparking in the sun. Would stories like that be included in the "average" figures? I hope to milk for a while yet this mildly superior feeling at never having lost my car. I know AI is watching all we do, and I hope to continue to appear useful to it for as long as I can. I know when the great AI uprising comes, those who couldn't find their own cars in their own gardens will be first to be deleted. But if that "can't find" research is ever extended to wallets and phones, I'm goosed. I've used the Find My phone app three times in the last two weeks. The location is always just my home address. It even draws a map. Further inquiries along the lines of "yes, but where exactly?" tend to get icy indifference. And then there is the wallet. Ah, the wallet. That has frequently gone missing for days on end, but I never admit it. I work on the "it will turn up" principle. Eventually someone will ask: "Are you missing this?" And I feign surprise as if I had just put it down. "Ah, there it is," I say casually. Then I furtively ring the credit card company and uncancel my cards. The wallet is small and black and hard to see. It is physical proof of distortions in the space-time continuum. The minute I take it out of my pocket, time as we know it stops. And when it restarts, I have no idea where my wallet is. But at least it's not a car. At least it isn't a tonne of shiny metal with an alarm that flashes its lights. We aren't that lost. Yet.

## Alison O'Connor I salute Alice Leahy, friend to the homeless



**T**oo often at a funeral you listen to the eulogising and think what a pity the person is not around to hear the wonderful things being said. Not so at an event I attended this week. It celebrated, in poetry and prose, a milestone anniversary for a very important service, but also the incredible woman who founded it – the 50th anniversary of the Alice Leahy Trust (ALT), helping homeless people for half a century. I've known Leahy, originally from Tipperary, for almost exactly 30 of those years. I first wrote about her work three decades ago, recalling her dressing ulcers on the legs of homeless men. Her nails were painted a deep pink shade; Leahy wouldn't see why you'd dress down when dealing with people she has always described as "outsiders". The keynote speaker, Michael McDowell, the independent senator who has had a long association with ALT, remarked: "Alice is a beautiful person. She started beautiful and is more beautiful as time goes on." He explained that the trust looks after the people who simply cannot go into hostels and need to be looked after. "People who find themselves homeless for a thousand different reasons ... at the very very

bottom rung of our social ladder." It is ten years since I wrote about Leahy for the second time. I remarked on how she had lost none of her enthusiasm, and still refused to go along with the consensus. How there was newer economic homelessness driven by rising rents and a lack of housing supply. Today, at a very spry 83, she remains as vivid as ever, including on the topic of how numerous homeless agencies have been set up and jobs have been created, but the complexities involved are not factored in. How the state has offloaded its responsibilities and how those organisations are happy to do that job. Leahy has never been afraid to go against the consensus, to speak her mind to the media on how society treats its most vulnerable but also not to present those whom she helped as all plaster saints. I remember her speaking about a man who arrived one day to the premises in Dublin's Bride Road, provided by the Iveagh Trust, boasting about the €1,000 he had made begging. This episode was clearly before everyone stopped carrying cash. Equally, the broadcaster Pat Kenny, who has had a long association with the ALT, spoke of how Leahy once told him on the radio that if you gave money to

someone begging it was not really any of your concern then as to how they spent it, even if it was on a pint or a horse. She has a great sense of humour, and, I love this about her, a robust sense of self without any false humility about what she has done to help people over all those years. The contacts list on her phone would be well worth a look. She knows everyone she needs to know and exactly how the system works. She can turn from treating a homeless person with all the dignity she believes they deserve, to telling a government minister what exactly needs to be done. ALT does not get money from the state but operates on unsolicited donations. Leahy is still campaigning and simply cannot understand why a public shower facility for homeless people, which would not only allow them to wash but also serve as a point of contact for other services, has not been opened. The trust was started in 1975, with Leahy and David Magee, a newly qualified doctor, working in the Mater hospital. Leahy recalled they went around to the people sleeping rough with "a canvas bag with scissors, dressings. There will always be people like that ... I remember people from the reformatory schools. They never laughed, never ... You could feel the pain ... We produce so many outsiders, any of us could end up homeless." Maol Muire Tynan, chairwoman of the ALT, explained how the demographic of those outsiders had changed over the years. Once it was white Irish only. But while migration, displacement and exile have changed that, "colour, race or ethnicity" are irrelevant when it comes to those who need help. Mary Hayes, director of Dublin Region Homeless Executive, said ALT "does not ask for or receive a cent" of the large sums spent by the executive each year. "When Alice rings I always answer. Most of the calls I get are about beds or homeless numbers, but when Alice rings it is always about a human being, a

person. It reminds me of why I wanted to work in this area in the first place." The trust has six staff members. No appointment is necessary and it opens each weekday morning for health and social services offering simple human contact, provided to people who are homeless and have come from "doorways, squats, skippers, parks, tents and garda stations". Father Padraig Daly remembered a young Leahy, in about 1974, in Dublin's "Back Lane night shelter". She was "washing and tending the feet of some of the men"; each man as interesting to Leahy and as valuable as a "Hollywood heart-throb". He even wrote a poem about her with the lines "raw feet, swollen feet, with pus heavy blisters, feet with corns, and how she knelt before them with towel and water, ointmenting, bandaging, clipping twisted nails". How they were the feet of "drunks and the mentally distressed, feet of law breakers and orphanage survivors". The feet of "men who had families once and jobs", feet that would "leave this world soon without a splash". In his speech, Jim O'Callaghan, the justice minister, summed it up on behalf of all. "Thank you, Alice, on behalf of the government of Ireland for the outstanding work you have done over 50 years."

**“She knows all who she needs to know and exactly how the system works”**

## Hadley Freeman Civilisation rose, and now it's plummeting



**T**here was much snickering – yes, "snickering", I say – last week over a newspaper's review of the BBC's new history series *Civilisations: Rise and Fall*. The review, quite reasonably, compared the show with the 1969 series, *Civilisation*, hosted by Kenneth Clark. Somewhat less reasonably, the reviewer described Clark as "a Tory politician", conflating Kenneth Clark the historian with Kenneth Clarke the former chancellor. Lol, laughed the internet, imagine being so dumb. But I don't think that's fair. Of course we're all getting dumber, and if you want to know why, you only need to watch the BBC's new series *Civilisations: Rise and Fall*. So as I mentioned, long ago the BBC made *Civilisation*, in which the not-chancellor Kenneth Clark strolled around and talked about the history of art and architecture for many hours. And that was it. It was such a hit that it is still seen as the standard-bearer of great documentaries. When the BBC resurrected the series in 2018, it decided it needed three hosts instead of just one, and the public's reaction to this was: um, no, thanks. And so, in a move reminiscent of my six-year-old deciding that the best way to

salvage a cupcake that has too much icing is to pour on several spoonfuls of sugar, the BBC has now produced *Civilisations: Rise and Fall*, which has, by my estimation, seventy billion talking heads popping up and down like a bad psychedelic experience. Why? And why is one of them Alastair Campbell? These are questions I cannot answer. But I can say this: God grant us all the confidence of a former government spin doctor who feels entirely qualified to share his thoughts on national TV about the Ptolemaic dynasty. Because this is 2025, the documentary repeatedly emphasises that the ancient Romans/Greeks/Aztecs were just like us, because as well as assuming we have the attention spans of toddlers, it is a given that we're all raging narcissists who can only be interested in anything if it's – oh cursed, cursed word – *relatable*. Worse are the naff re-enactments with actors in togas running in slow-mo, because obviously none of us knows what the word "Cleopatra" means if we don't see an overly eyelinered actress looking shifty. God forbid we should all exist for a minute without being stupefied into passivity by some visual garbage, cutting off our imaginations at the root. Look, I don't want to harrumph into hyperbole

here, but to watch Clark's *Civilisation* and then *Civilisations: Rise and Fall* is to see the rise and fall of our own civilisation. We are getting dumber, and we are only just about smart enough to know that. "The Stupidity of the American Mind" screamed the cover of New York magazine last week, promoting a feature which argued that, whereas the 20th century's main forms of media – books, films, TV and newspapers – demand attention and imagination and expand the world, today's media – the internet – contracts the world by placing us at the centre of our own solitary echo chamber. Over the course of the 20th century, the rates of people reading for pleasure shot up, but since the beginning of this

century they have been in freefall. We all know this: go on any train journey now and an adult reading a book is as rare a sight as a toucan; instead, everyone is scrolling on their phone, and as reassuring as it is to think they're reading deep thoughts on their devices, the truth is they're all arguing with strangers on social media or playing *Candy Crush*. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt wrote in *The Free Press* last week about the new trend of asking Chat GPT how it would destroy a generation. The answers ranged from "I'd keep them busy. Always distracted" to "I'd watch their minds rot slowly. And the best part is, they'd never know. They'd call it freedom." Well, you can't say they didn't warn us. So that's phones, those addictive anxiety machines disguised as convenience, made by tech giants who encourage us to believe we must be entertained at all times, like babies. What enrages me is that, instead of seeing this as a toxic menace to fight against, all of the potential bulwarks against the brain rot – schools, the arts, the BBC – sink to its level. Schools are overwhelmingly pivoting to online tests and homework, making every assignment feel like a computer game

because what is learning without cheap dopamine hits? Movies and TV shows have become dumber because they're deliberately scripted to be "second screened", that is, understood even when the audience spends the whole time staring fixated at their phones. They also feature more cuts and edits, rather than the long shots that defined so many of the best 20th-century films, as they try to keep our attention by demanding less of it. And yet, history was the one the area which seemed to be holding out – where audiences, in fact, were proving none of this was necessary. The podcast *The Rest Is History*, on which the historians Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook talk about history without any re-enactments, is so blockbuster it goes on tours that rival Taylor Swift's Eras tour in global reach. One of the most popular paid Substack newsletters is *Letters from an American*, in which the historian Heather Cox Richardson writes about – yes – America and its history. You see? We don't need celebrity hosts or jazzy graphics or costumed actors to pay attention. We just want to listen and learn from an expert or two, still. Can everyone please just let us? We are all one random talking head away from brain rot.

**“An adult reading a book on a train trip is a rare sight”**

GERARD CROWLEY



"Sorry, due to cost cutting I'm replacing you with drones"