

Cian O'Neill casts a quizzical eye on some of the celebrities and villains of the past twelve months.

Icons of 2006

Christmas approaches. The candle gutters on the ledge, and we stare dumbly into the maw of time as it chews up the last days of the year. Notwithstanding the dyspepsia, who shall be most fondly remembered when we get to the other end of Christmas and find ourselves in the chthonic mess of January? Who, in other words, are the glazed cherries on the skin of this year's yule-log?

Well, obviously, Kim Jong-Il holds tenure in any such list no matter how incomplete it be. This fine man makes clear that what the more aged gynecrats say to those bouncing on their knees is as impervious to critical deconstruction as the beauty in birdsong. To wit: never trust a short man. Never, no, never trust a short man. Churchill made do with a glowing Churchill cigar in his mitt, and the inadequacy-curing joys of gassing Kurds [hands up who picked up that baton?]. Kim Jong-Il feels impelled to get himself as big a toy as the next-door neighbour. In the world of armaments, size does matter.

But that is not to say that he has found his sole metier in radically destabilizing the Korean peninsula. Beloved Leprechaun is rounded not just corporeally. He is an aviophobe, a celebrated cinephile, an NBA fan and rail enthusiast [like Charles H.R.H. in that wise, though not in a Civil Partnership with a bannister-faced Centaur]. Showing again that the gourmand French should probably lay off the Ostrich, Paris has expressed doubt that the nuclear test did take place. Much like the First or Second World Wars. Anyhow, Kim is no lightweight, though he could probably, with those cute-us-get-out little tootsies of his, turn on a dime.

Speaking of a proper shill' [ing], Lord Levy has also had a good year. Peer of the Year, yes. Übermensch, yes. Levy has maintained a busier diary, been more engaged and more forthcoming with his experience and expertise this year, than any other Blairite. The Metropolitan Police declare him a model suspect.

One can only suppose what is going on in Iraq. When Saddam Hussein starts to seem the only consistent spokesperson in the region it is time to start checking the waiting list for Richard Branson's space-shuttles. Saddam has proven himself to be a formidably obdurate debater, something of a cross between a semitic owl and Ian

Paisley Snr [not his eldermost scion, who has the poise and class of an expectant heir to a used-car salesroom]. Saddam has rediscovered his voice. Not in a mid-career Sinatra kind of way [though I'll grant you he has had some serious bespoke sports jackets on show]. More like Bob Dylan – he has become incomprehensible. As someone who speaks absolutely no Arabic languages at all this writer can confidently attest that this Marsh Arab has the elocution of a marly-hole. It is all splutters gargles and farts.

That said, he makes more sense than Don Rumsfeld, whose departure from the field of battle with a truly shock-and-awed foe has been as tactful as his strategic planning of fullscale geopolitical meltdown. Yes, Don spared the long-cowed Washington Press the valedictions, but he led them a merry dance. His diction was clear, but his meaning behooved the Sphinx. "Known knows, known unknowns," you could not but forget the original question amidst the silver mists of his obfuscation. Anyway, we have lost Don – he is now permanently out to pasture, on the green grass of all those lucrative deals he and the Crawford Crew awarded themselves in the 2006's Yearbook entry for State Most Likely To Collapse Into Civil War.

Arthur 'Love' Lee ended his Indian summer bravely in a Memphis leukemia ward. Syd Barrett was finally released from his exile of the mind and, more sadly, his reputation was properly laid bare for the pigeons to pick over and mangle. The principled and charming Lord Gerry Fitt retired to that cornerbooth of the Palace of Westminster from whence none may return. Long-enduring auteur Robert Altman also 'bought it' this year.

Keith Richards, who has been doing his thang for longer than he can certainly remember, nearly achieved total release this year. Falling from a coconut tree like Newton's apple, one wonders if 'the Keef' had a revelation about what age feels like and what it actually means. His inability to learn the latter makes him still fun now, and a late-bottled hero of many a vintage year. 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise', quoth a certain London printer and poet, and one is little inclined to dispute the truth in it.

Of course, poor Michael Stone never learns. There are no training-nets around

the Shankill for practising the accurate bowling of grenades. Michael took a poor innings at that graveyard back in the 1980s, leaving the dynamic batting partnership of Adams-McGuinness to run on into the next century unperturbed. He was no better at the wicket up in Stormont on 22/11/6 – caught for a googly-eyed loon, with 6 makeshift bombs in his Primark Winter Collection raincoat. Unmanned by a female security guard, Michael was left a little silly-looking; like any fanatic. No hero.

One can but wonder what effect this will have on the morale of Johnny Adair, who was set to end the year on a real high thanks to securing a documentary in that hotly-contested late-night Tuesday on Channel Five slot. He spent this lost hour of dangerously shallow television driving in naked fear around his old haunts and babbling agrammatically through gritted teeth [that would be the charisma running through his veins] about one day returning home to a mystical council estate of free dole, 'community policing' and bags of e's for yer' tea. This man without proper function, existing day-by-day in the lay-bys of Northern Britain, serves only to show how cowardice and pride glean meagre profit in tears. The show ended with him 'thoughtfully' turning a childrens' roundabout like a gibbon forlornly contemplating its stool. Yet, that our pal Johnny spared nary a thought for the children whom he orphaned, while he ran his paws over that roundabout, is no worse than the chilling moral myopia of GWBush et al, who have set the world on course for a sandbank in 2007. Or is it 'quicksand'? Iraq. Afghanistan. North Korea. The price of oil, and the price of oil. Enjoy your turkey.



■ KEITH RICHARDS - OUT OF HIS TREE