

MOONCAR

EDWARD EVANS



Chapter 1

I was on my way to Ireland on a mission. My boss, the editor of the Mail had learnt of the discovery of a burnt out rusted remains of an old Rolls- Royce armoured car. My job was to find out whether it was the mysterious Moon Car stolen from the English in 1917, some seventy years earlier, or just another myth that had grown into a reality. Either way, I found myself on the way in search of anyone who knew anything about it.

I booked into a hotel close to the Mutton Lane Inn, just off St Patrick's Street near the centre of Cork. I thought it would be the best place to start as it was one of the oldest drinking houses in the area, if not the oldest and steeped in the history of the early Republican Movement. Its reputation of serving a first-class pint was another reason for being there, but of course, the main reason was having the chance of meeting someone who could help.

I had been in Eire for at least a fortnight, fascinated by all the versions and stories that emanated from this small group of people when by chance I met someone I believed would help.

Only a halfwit would think that George 111 was his real name; nonetheless, he conned me out of a hundred quid with the promise he would arrange a meeting with a man who would be able to give me some answers. He left the pub with me thinking that was the last I would see of him and the money, but sure enough, he came back an hour later with the time and place where I was to meet another man who would discuss terms as and when.

I had to travel to Breinan Quay to meet this fellow in the Old Spinnaker the following Tuesday when the pub opened around 5 o'clock. He had supposedly driven the Moon Car in the 1920s, so I knew he was getting on a bit.

'How will I know him?'

'Oh, don't you worry your little head, he already knows you.' With that, he left.

I suppose everyone who had been involved with the car would have known me by now, as I had been almost everywhere asking questions, and leaving my card. However, I spent the next few days drinking in the atmosphere, getting a feel of the area and its history.

At the appointed time I walked into the Old Spinnaker, to meet God knows who, and found myself slap bang in the middle of a concert by the Wolfe Tones – an Irish Folk group. Wow! What an atmosphere they created; soon I was singing along with the rest, if not with their words, then with my own and just making a noise.

I walked up to the bar to order my third or fourth drink when, with a nod of the barmaid's head I was ushered away to a table.

'He's round there.'

I slowly walked to a secluded corner where an old man was sitting. I started to introduce myself when he exclaimed, 'I don't want to know who you are, just sit down.' Just as I did, the barmaid came to take our order.

'They capture the right spirit, don't they?'

'Who?' I asked naively.

'The singers – the Wolfe Tones. Oh forget it,' he said, seemingly beginning to lose his patience. 'They named a square after him, you know.'

'Who?'

'Wolfe Tone. I can see you haven't done much research into our history and that's a pity because you'll never understand what was behind all the troubles and why it was necessary to steal the Moon Car.

'Wolfe Tone was one of the founders if not the founder of the Republican Movement as we know it today. He was due to be hanged in the 1870s, but killed himself so that the British could not claim he was hanged for treason against the English Crown. You see it goes back a long way.

'Couple of Guinness, Bridie, and what are you having?'

'Just an orange, thanks,' I replied.

'Oh my God, Bridie, he wants an orange juice! Quick as yer can girl, I'm parched.'

'Someone else joining us?'

'No! No one else is joining us, they're both for me.'

I wondered what I had let myself in for ... Michael Finn was about to tell me.

Chapter 2

Now I know yer wondering why I have chosen this place to meet so I'll tell yer that. Just look at it. Haven't you noticed anything? Where are we, for example?

Yeah, that's right, it's quiet and it's tucked away, and look around you. See how many exits there are and look where they go to. We were often raided here in the early days. They always knew we came in here, but they never caught us.

That door there, it leads straight to the harbour. Twenty paces and you were in a boat or swimming away. That door there leads straight to the roof and again you were away over the other rooftops. That one there leads to the cellar where there are two secret passages and a place where we could hide, and the others? I'm not going to tell you everything now! Anyway, it's where my heart is. It's where I first met Maureen O'Hanlan, my wife and where I spent many happy hours just being with her.

This place was the centre of village life; everything went on here, and everybody at some time came in here – so what more do you want.

I love this place with its dark secluded corners, its strong wooden tables, which seem to have been here long before the English came and they'll be here long after we've got rid of them. Even the barman couldn't see what we were up to.

This pub's been here forever. Take the beams. Never mind your English oak beams – these are hewn from real Irish oak. They weren't tarted up like this when I was a lad; that's just for the tourists. They were just natural, just plain like the floor. Do you know some of those stone flags are eight inches thick and if they could speak, they would have many tales to tell? The fights, the killings, the intrigue, the plotting and the planning, and worst of all – the traitors that would do anything for a few extra shillings in their pockets. It all happened here.

I've been on the Wanted List by the British Government for over fifty years and I don't intend to give them the benefit of my company now. They can have my remains when I don't need them any more. I am not going to give you my real name or where I'm from, but you can call me Michael – Michael Finn and doesn't this tell you something?

So you're having trouble understanding my Irish accent? Look laddie, I'm beginning to think you're wasting me bloody time – I'm not interested in your money. We never did speak the King's English. Why should we? We didn't belong to him ... phft, I spit on the past. Bastards!

You ask about the spirit of the Irish. I've been on the run since 1917 and no one has ever betrayed me.

Why am I telling you this? I don't know. I must be getting old and I suppose the world's changing and dinosaurs like me no longer have a place and no, I don't want to make my peace. I did everything because I believed in what I was doing at the time.

Would I have been prepared to die for it? Of course I would, and so did all the others who fought for what they believed in. On both sides, but now ... mmmm ... I wonder.

My family were there to be counted from the word go, not just this century, or the last, but from the beginning because you know it's not just about now, it's about what went on before.

It's about how you would feel if the English had lost the war against the Germans and were occupied for two hundred years. Not allowed to even speak your own language, not allowed to own property, not allowed to do the things you want to do when you want to do them and what's worse, having to do things, knowing that they killed your father or mother or raped your sister, or burned your house down. And ... to make matters worse, took your homes and shipped in hundreds of thousands of Germans to live in them and for want of a better word, to occupy your country. That's what happened to us almost three hundred years ago.

I have heard many an Englishman who lived through the First World War and the Second say, some sixty years later, they still hate the Germans. Look how you behave when you play them at football. If you lose you say, 'Well, we won the war,' and if you win you simply say, 'You can't beat us at anything.'

It is the same with us. My relatives fought and lost to the English in the 1700s, with the result they lost everything and many of them their lives. Their families had to go into hiding and hundreds starved to death and

throughout the years, we were treated as second-class citizens.

The problem for many of us now, is how, after all these years, we can improve our situation. We can't eject the people from their houses in the North because they have now lived there for two hundred years themselves and would naturally fight to defend their rights. You have to respect that.

The fault lies with successive British governments since the reign of George 111 who have consistently broken the promises they made to us. And you must remember the large numbers of our people who died defending Britain in the two world wars and whose names are etched on the many memorials because they fought and died in the belief we would get self-government.

We knew we couldn't beat the English in a straight face-to-face battle as they had superior numbers and superior arms and plenty of money behind them. So we had to learn another tactic, another way of fighting. So it was to be the new way – guerrilla warfare, quick attacks, kill a few people, blow up a few places and disappear. We could keep a whole army occupied looking for us and lose very few men.

We learned these tricks a hundred years ago and yet the English, French, Russians and now the Americans are still making the same mistakes. Just as they did many years ago in Afghanistan, Vietnam and Cuba. It's very difficult to win a war when you don't know who the opposition is – when they can disappear into the crowd after they have carried out the deed. It works as long as you have the people behind you and that you can trust those who are with you. When you don't ... well ... things start to disintegrate.

People become worn out with the constant violence. They want to be left alone; they want to get on with their lives and they want peace. There are very few now that really know what they are fighting for, both on the Unionist and Nationalist sides. Some do, but others on both sides are using the ideals as an excuse for gangsterism and I'm not part of that.

I suppose that's why I'm telling you this now. I can see the way things were and I can see the way things are going. I believed it all in the beginning. I was brought up with it. We had our heroes; some were worshipped – like De Valera, Michael Collins, Bobby Sands and many others. Several were hated, but even *they* believed in what they were doing at the time.

I know you only want me to tell you about the Moon Car and how I

got involved. Well, it is a long story, steeped in Irish history and you need to know some of that history – about the reasons why, when and where we were involved before I can tell you about the Moon Car. But I promise I won't bore you with too much of that. Afterwards, I'll just tell you about the part I played ...

Chapter 3

I was almost fourteen and a fairly big lad for my age when I went on my first fishing trip; I remember it as if it were yesterday.

My father woke me up at four in the morning and told me to get ready, as I had to go and help Patrick Whelan on his fishing boat because the English had arrested Seamus Finn, a member of the five-man crew and he was a man light. Seamus was an out and out Republican and a long-time thorn in the side of the English. He was always getting arrested but as he had many friends, no one ever came forward to bear witness against him. Anyway, my father had volunteered me to take his place. I had to go as we needed the money, even though I'd never been to sea before; in fact, I had never been away from home before, so I suppose I was a bit scared.

In fairness to my father, deep down I wanted to go, to impress him, show that I was made of stern stuff, but as we made our way to the harbour and I could see the activity on several of the boats, I suppose trepidation set in and I began to dawdle.

I wasn't prepared for time at sea. All I had was all I was standing up in. Neither of us, my dad nor me had given any thought to the fact I might need a change of clothes. The dawdle almost became a crawl, as I could now clearly see all the activity on the boat and the fact that the crew all seemed bigger than me. I began to imagine what they would be like. Would I be teased as I was the youngest? Or bullied? Even then, there was plenty of that going on.

I know my dad could sense my reticence. He squeezed my shoulder and said encouragingly, 'Come on son. Patrick will look after you, so don't worry. Now hurry, he wants to catch the tide.'

That spurred me on and we hurried along the dock side to the *Mary Anne* CH 4231, a lovely blue and white boat, well painted with its name on the bridge, where Patrick and the others were waiting.

‘I appreciate this, young man,’ Patrick said the moment we arrived. ‘Seamus should be back soon. Hopefully.’

My dad left straight away with Patrick shouting, ‘Don’t worry I’ll look after him.’

Of course, he knew he would. Anyway, I tried to be brave in front of my dad and didn’t look back, although I was really desperate to do so, but I was so busy looking at them, I suppose I forgot. However, we all became good friends the moment my feet touched the deck – Roger, Declan and Ronan, and of course, Patrick.

Even though I was only 14, they treated me as an equal, but I did have to start at the bottom, making the tea, doing some cooking, cleaning everything, fetching this and that when asked; and that was the difference – I was always asked – never told. Except when there was an emergency or when the sea was rough: ‘Tie that, fasten that, hold that, quick, etc. etc.’

Patrick treated us all as one of the family and the others treated me as if I was their brother and if I was in trouble or was being maltreated by someone, they were always there, as I was for them.

The boat was a lovely little craft; at least that’s how I remember it now. Aft we had the wheelhouse and from there it stepped down into our sleeping quarters. From the wheelhouse forward, we had the fish holds, which were also entered by steps, which in this case were very steep and almost on every occasion we simply slid down them, holding onto the two hand rails either side.

The four of us slept in the same cabin, each with our own bunk and in reality so did Patrick except his bit was curtained off and God help any of us if we forayed into his domain. I remember he had a table where he kept all his charts and papers and a wash basin to himself which was the height of luxury.

Then of course, we had the galley, which was only about six feet by four and the most dangerous part of the ship. You could tell that from the eight sand buckets placed in full view in case of fire. This was because we cooked with paraffin – but not if the weather was rough – and this became mostly my responsibility, at least for the first few occasions. Then, as before my arrival, we all mucked in. There were no second chances if the boat caught fire at sea. No radios to call for help. All we had was a rowing boat, which would just hold the five of us if the sea was calm.

I spent four days at sea on that first occasion, working harder than I

ever knew was possible and was so tired I could have slept for a week, except for the stench of that cabin after the first day and night. However, we arrived back in the little port with huge smiles on our faces. Apparently, it was a good catch and we spent the next two hours unloading it. Patrick and Roger took some immediately to the market, whilst we, that is, Declan, Ronan and me, continued unloading and sorting the fish.

‘We’ve done well,’ Patrick told everyone as they returned to the boat.

He then gave me a crown (five shillings) for helping him and told me he would give me some more when all the catch was sold.

‘Give it to your mum now ... and this.’ He handed me an enormous cod with a big hook in its tail. ‘And tell yer dad you did us proud,’ he said, almost whispering the last few words as if he had made a mistake.

I can’t tell you how I felt to be taking home a crown. I had never seen so much money in my life and I knew I would be the hero of the house, what with the cod and all. I can see myself now almost skipping, singing and whistling as I went the half mile back home.

There was no one about when I got back and it was strangely silent. I opened the door slowly and saw my mother lying motionless in a pool of blood. She had received a huge blow to the back of her head and was face down. Her right arm was outstretched as though she had tried to get to the door. I couldn’t scream and I couldn’t cry; nothing would come out of me.

When I look back, it was strange. I calmly dropped the fish, lent down beside her, gently lifting her head. She was still alive. She opened her eyes slowly and looked at me. That lovely gentle smile that my mother always had, suddenly appeared on her face. And then she was gone. She died in my arms with that smile still there. It was as though she was waiting to see me return safely.

I ran back to the village in a total daze, screaming to everyone that my mother was dead until I eventually found Patrick and told him what I had found. The villagers had tried to tell me what had happened but I couldn’t take it in.

‘Get the Peeler,’ Patrick shouted and with several others, we ran back to the house. It was a terrible mess. Obviously, someone had been searching for something as everything was tipped out, the cupboards thrown over. Most things seemed broken, and there was my mother now

cold, still smiling. We were all standing around with Bernadette, a neighbour, tending to my mother as the Peeler arrived. He told me my dad had been taken away.

Yes, my dad was taken away, charged with treason, found guilty and was hanged within two days.

My mum was protesting and pleading when they took him away and because of that, one of the soldiers cracked her on the back of the head with his rifle butt and they just left her there to die. That was their justice.

When I grew older, I wondered how they could have charged my dad with treason when he was not English; he wasn't even in England and he did not owe allegiance to the King. I will never forget Sir Roger Casement's address to the court when he too was charged with treason and was fighting for his life. In fact, I know it by heart.

It was the same for my father, except he didn't have the chance to address the court. They knew he sympathised with the Nationalist view and they hung him on the evidence given by one of their stooges, who, I am pleased to say, suffered the same fate. But I had lost my dad and my best friend because someone lied, and was paid to lie.

With Casement, they did it another way. They took him to England to be tried by twelve honest Englishmen, and all he wanted was to be tried by twelve honest Irishmen like me, and whatever result it gave, he would face his fate head on – without argument.

I used the crown Patrick gave me to bury my mum. My father – they just buried him in quicklime. The house is still there; I own it, but no one has ever lived in it and never will. It is my memorial to my parents. Someone made a little plaque and screwed it to the wall in memory of them with the inscription: *They were murdered by the barbarous English*. I remember seeing a similar memorial in a place near Marseille just after the war, but that's another story to do with the Nazis.

The entire village turned out to my mother's funeral – men, women and children. Everyone contributed to the cost.

As Patrick walked to the church with his arm round my shoulders and Ellen holding my hand, I knew I would always have friends.

I tried not to cry, but when Patrick told me not to be ashamed and to show the world how much I cared, that was it – I sobbed my heart out.

However, what has tormented me all my life was that I never looked back at the harbour to wave my dad goodbye on that first journey. I would have loved to have seen his smile as his now grown-up son was off to work.

I'm sure you can appreciate how I felt about the English and I'm also sure that in similar circumstances, you would have felt the same.

I know I am and that's the reason why I was an easy convert to the cause. In fairness, my dad was all for the cause, just in words, not in deeds as he too had seen members of his family killed and didn't want the same thing to happen to us.

Anyway, Patrick Whelan gave me a permanent job on the fishing boat and offered me a place to stay, for a short while. As I've already mentioned, I was only 14 at the time and a bit softer than the others. My dad had been a little overprotective of me because of the troubles. Patrick could see this and for many years became a father figure to me. I think, over those years, I began to think of him as my second dad; I certainly confided in him as though he was.

'Come on young man, time to get up. We've got a boat to catch,' Patrick would say every morning we were about to go to sea.

I had now been to sea on three or four occasions, and each time, we came back with another good catch, so much so, I became their good luck mascot; at least that's what they told me.

But what was more important, I was beginning to have a little money for myself, giving Ellen, Patrick's wife, some for my keep, and always for a little bunch of flowers for my mother. I'm sure everyone thought me mad as I would go and chat to her, for about twenty minutes every week and still do, telling her what I had done that week and what I was going to do the next week. But to me it was important; somehow she was always with me.

Anyway, one morning we set off for the harbour, me walking like a professional as though I had been fishing for some twenty years instead of twenty minutes. Ronan joined us and the three of us walked to the boat. I now felt ten feet tall.

We pulled out of harbour and again, we had a magnificent catch, returning some four days later. However, there was a strange feeling this time. The place was almost deserted and those that were there did not want to acknowledge us.

Patrick stopped the boat in the centre of the harbour and let her drift slowly into the berth. I knew what to do now and jumped onto the quay, tied her up fore and aft and from then on we did everything in slow motion, looking around as we were suspicious that something was going on.

I remember it was within minutes of the boat docking that all hell let loose.

The British Army or I should say, the Black and Tans and what seemed like one hundred of them, charged down the quay, yelling at the top of their voices. Bayonets at the ready, they attacked the boat.

We all just stood there, hands in the air as many of them jumped on the boat, bashed us with their rifle butts and knocked me to the ground.

Ronan shouted, 'Leave him, he's only a lad!'

Those few words cost him three teeth and a scar from his mouth almost to his ear. They were a rum lot, the Black and Tans – they were all volunteers on better pay than most, mostly undisciplined and allowed to bully, rape and kill almost without sanction. That's what we were having to put up with, so you can see it was another reason to get rid of the English.

'What do you want?' Patrick shouted.

'You know what we want. Where have you been?'

'Just fishing.'

'No you haven't. What's below?'

'Just fish.'

'What are you looking for?' Patrick asked but they didn't answer.

One of the younger soldiers told me they were searching for arms. Of course, they knew that wouldn't be the case, but just to make sure, they tipped all the boxes of fish we had caught and sorted back into the sea, many of the boxes as well, laughing as they did it.

They didn't even bother to search; it was simple vandalism and all the time we were held at gunpoint, hands in the air, still on the boat and having to watch our week's work destroyed. But just to make sure everything was done properly, they threw the nets, ropes and cables overboard as well.

'My oh my, didn't we catch a lot of fish. You *were* a lucky man. Ooops, I forgot this one!' the bloody sergeant shouted, throwing the last box of fish overboard as the rest of the troops left the boat, grinning all over their stupid faces.

We took Ronan to the doctor, another strong Republican who was appalled at the injury.

'They will be paid back for this one,' I heard the doctor say.

My dad had taught me to swim and even at my age, I was a strong swimmer, so when we returned to the boat, I spent several hours diving into the harbour, collecting the nets and as much as I could lift into a large rowing boat, which Patrick had borrowed to make the job easier. I

was so tired after the work, I simply fell asleep and woke up at two in the morning to find that they had put me to bed on the boat and Declan had stayed on board with me, just to make sure the boat and me were looked after.

‘I’m going to get them bastards back,’ Declan said to me the moment I awoke. ‘Are you with me?’

I didn’t know what to say; I didn’t know what to expect; I didn’t know what he wanted to do, but something made me say yes.

It was just something minor at first. Like some idiot, I slipped into the freezing cold water whilst Declan sneaked across the harbour and released the mooring ropes off the Army launch. It was my job then to simply swim to the boat and pull it gently away from the jetty in the hope it would float away. It nearly killed me with the effort it took, and it achieved very little as the tide brought it back in. Even so, it did sustain a little damage and I’m sure the soldier was bollocked for not making sure it was moored properly.

However, later in the day we were all repairing the damaged nets. We set to, cleaning the boat and generally making everything seaworthy. We would have to go straight out again, having lost our catch and our wages, when Declan began bragging about what we had done to the boat. At that point, Patrick called us into his cabin.

‘Now then, Declan, I hear you caused a little problem to the British soldiers this morning?’

‘Yeah,’ Declan replied proudly, ‘we did, didn’t we?’

I didn’t answer as I could tell from Patrick’s tone he was none too happy.

‘Do you realise that little escapade could get you hanged if they found out who it was? Damaging property of the British Army is a hanging offence.’

‘But they won’t find out, will they? I’ve only told us.’

‘Us is now three people and any one of those *US*,’ he shouted, ‘could let it drop accidentally, and what’s worse you, stupid idiot, is that you have told others that he was involved, and he could be hanged because you have a big mouth. What happened to us yesterday? Come on. Answer me, what happened?’

‘The British chucked our fish away,’ we both said sheepishly.

‘Well now, who do you think they will come looking for first of all?’

Who?’ His voice was reaching fever pitch.

‘Us,’ we replied.

‘Yes, that’s right. *Us*, and you have put all of *us* in danger.’

He paused for what seemed like a minute or two, allowing his words to sink in, staring at us in the process, before adding, ‘Now Declan, what is worse, you have involved him, a fourteen-year-old boy on a stupid adventure for what? Next to nothing! Don’t you think for the moment he has lost enough and needs some time? Declan, you stay and you ... you go and help the others,’ he yelled, pointing at me.

I rejoined the others and helped prepare the boat for sea, when Declan came over to see us, followed by Patrick.

‘I’m sorry everybody for what I did and I can promise it will not happen again. Patrick has told me I will be accidentally lost in the Irish Sea if I do anything like that again. I am sorry.’

Patrick winked at us behind Declan’s back and then said, ‘It’s over with. No one will mention it again. Right, let’s get out to sea as quickly as possible and not give anyone the chance of talking to us.’

I learned a powerful lesson: you do not discuss with anyone what you are doing, what you have done and what you are going to do and furthermore, you only discuss the planning of an operation with those who are taking part and you never discuss the results with anyone unless there is a lesson to be learned.

I was worried the entire trip that someone would have seen us and I think this made Patrick have a quiet word with me as it was affecting my work. He explained my efforts were needed and then said, ‘Don’t worry, you were with me all the time that was happening and in any event you were in the water and will not have been seen.’

After only two and a half days at sea we had another bumper catch and came home. We had run into an enormous shoal of herring and that was that. We pulled into the harbour, tied up the boat and went to sell the fish. My worries and Declan’s for that matter, were unfounded. It was only then that I stopped worrying. We were not wanted and it was obvious to us that the matter was closed.

Poor old Seamus Finn’s friends had at last let him down. He was given an eight-year sentence of hard labour for sedition, which could have got him hanged but I think the judge was under the influence of something or other, but at least it confirmed that I was a permanent member of the crew.