

Five daring boys are embroiled in a madcap caper story set in 1960s Dublin.

When Nelson's pillar and the most controversial statue in Ireland is blown to smithereens, five lads decide to steal the head for ransom. The Government and the Garda will go to any lengths to get it back.

A true story.

Five art students sit around a table in the crumbling student union of the National College of Art, Dublin, in 1966. It's the morning after a Republican group bombed Nelson's pillar, and the story has made global headlines. Unless they can find some money soon, their beloved union will be forced to close forever. After some discussion, they decide to steal the head and ransom it for cash. It's a harebrained, dangerous and poorly thought-through scheme. But they are all willing to give it a go.

The destruction of Nelson, a colonialist British symbol that had loomed over Grafton Street since 1809, was the biggest news story worldwide on the morning of March 8, 1966. It was the only story on anyone's lips in Ireland. Sean Lemass's (The Taoiseach) failure to condemn the attack led to frosty relations with Harold Wilson (The British Prime Minister).

The students, including our protagonist twins from Derry, Brendan and Ciaran, select a few other students based on size and strength. The plan is hatched to steal Nelson's intact head. After gaining entry to the yard where the head is being kept 'in state' to 'sketch it' for prosperity, the boys draw plans of the place.

Days later, on St Patrick's Day, they carry out the robbery, evading the police, scaling twelve-foot walls and getting past the security personnel employed to keep watch over Nelson's massive granite cranium. It's not smooth; they aren't master criminals, but somehow, however comically, they actually steal Nelson's head.

The news that the head has been retaken creates global headlines. An embarrassed Sean Lemass makes it clear to the Garda that he wants the head back pronto. D.I Sydney, a female detective, is told to drop everything and deliver.

A cat-and-mouse game ensues between the boys and the police, with the head being ransomed to the highest bidder to maximise the ransom amount; the police are always a few steps behind them.

The students hired the head for nylon tights advertisements and Guinness commercials, it was photographed and used as cover art for many significant Irish Albums. It famously appeared on stage with the biggest Irish band in the country, The Dubliners, exiting through the stage door just as half the Guards in Dublin were raiding the building. All this deepened the embarrassment for government and police alike and made them even more determined to secure it and the boys' capture.

A word about the thieves. At no point did these young bucks perceive themselves as the Great Train Robbers. They were a bunch of daft, mad young boys trying to do the right thing for their college. The situation quickly escalated and became bigger and more serious than they ever imagined. The story is about friendship as much as anything else. All the boys are funny, carefree, and innocent to various degrees. Their tight bond, comradeship and naivety are wildly infectious. The audience will see themselves in one or another of these friends as they navigate the huge mess they've got themselves into.

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The formidable and slightly sociopathic D.I Sydney will not stop in her efforts to get Nelson's head back, not least because her job is on the line if she doesn't. She chases them all over the country. She manages to catch most of the gang at a fivestar hotel, the boys have treated themselves to, but alas for her, the twins and Nelson evade her.

Back in Dublin, an antiques dealer from London is also looking for Nelson. After he is taken for a wild goose chase all over the city, he eventually catches up with Brendan and Ciaran. The boys agree to rent the head to him for big money, so Nelson emigrates to England, where lines of people stand and wait to pay for a glimpse of him for weeks on end.

Lemass, the outgoing Taoiseach, wants Nelson's head back before he retires. His nephew, Charlie Haughey, summons the boys and sends them to London to steal it once again.

Now things have really gotten serious. Haughey informs them they really have no choice, it's this or jail. The lads board the ferry. Their plan this time is no less harebrained, no more thought through.

Somehow, some way, with brass necks, a bad papier-mâché replica, they again steal the head and return it to Dublin.

It's eventually delivered to the Taoiseach on the back of a flat truck with the boys and The Dubliners on board playing 'Up went Nelson', a song they'd written about the explosion.

The world's press covered the event, and the boy's picture was seen in newspapers worldwide.

Nelson's Head is a caper story. The boys' innocence, friendship and terror at what the consequences may be due to the unbridled chaos they've created provide great comedy and edge-of-the-seat drama throughout. It depicts an essential piece of Irish history that went viral long before the internet.

There has always been a bravado about Dublin, a front-footedness; the story aims to capture that. There has also always been marvellous eccentricity emanating from the city, from the Dublin taxi driver who knows the only man in the town who has the head to the man in a bad wig that can't locate Nelson but does have the Turin

Shroud in the attic. To the twins' brother, Tony, an RTE reporter covering the story on TV. Unbeknownst to him, the head had taken up temporary residency in his very own coal bunker until the boys were forced to move it on once again.

All true.

The film will appeal to people of all ages as the central tenets of friendship, togetherness, and spirit remain timeless.

Nelson's head is a true Irish story. It was told to me on dozens of occasions by my father-in-law. His name was Brendan O'Connor, one of the twins who stole the head.

This excellent piece of Irish folklore now has to be told to the rest of the world.