

Albert Einstein wasted a large chunk of his life investigating a theory that his peers correctly regarded as scientifically unsound GETTY

“As a rule,” he told a deeply offended Doyle, “I have found that the greater brain a man has, and the better he is educated, the easier it has been to mystify him.”

David Robson’s brilliant but disturbing study of clever people behaving stupidly shows that at least Doyle was in good company. Albert Einstein is synonymous with genius, but he spent decades pursuing a unified field theory that almost all his colleagues could see was complete nonsense. Steve Jobs led a technology revolution, but refused life-saving surgery for pancreatic cancer because he thought he could cure it himself with herbal remedies and fruit juice.

Moreover, Robson’s work as a science journalist has convinced him that these celebrity examples bear out a wider truth. People with high IQs may get better-paid jobs, but they are also more likely to drink heavily, take drugs and exceed their credit card limits. One study of Mensa found that 44 per cent of its members believe in astrology and 56 per cent think Earth has been visited by aliens.

So what is the meaning of Robson’s title? The intelligence trap turns out to be an umbrella term for various psychological pitfalls, although most of them can be filed under the category “over-confidence”.

“Functional stupidity” is the reluctance to question your assumptions, “dysrationalia” is the ability to come up with elaborate defences when you are proved wrong and “motivated reasoning” is the tendency to use your brainpower only if the conclusions suit a predetermined goal.

Robson’s favourite analogy is the car engine, pointing out that greater horsepower will make you move faster but won’t necessarily take you to the right place. If your mental steering is faulty, then speed can actually make the problem worse. For example, most well-educated US Republican voters think their “expertise” gives them a right to dismiss warnings about climate change without properly examining the evidence.

His technical descriptions can be dense at times, so he wisely peppers his text with pop quizzes to jolt any sceptical readers out of their complacency. Here is a very basic one: “How many animals of each kind did Moses take on the Ark?” Almost 90 per cent of students at the University of Michigan answered “two”, forgetting that the Ark actually belonged to Noah – which explains why “fake news” can be such a terrifyingly effective phenomenon.

Fortunately, Robson offers a few escape strategies too. They include deliberately arguing against yourself, understanding how emotions can be manipulated (job interviewees have a better chance of success if it’s a sunny day) and a technique called “self-distancing” – effectively becoming a fly on the wall and considering your situation in the third person. One notable role model is Charles Darwin, who didn’t seem particularly gifted as a young man but combined intellectual humility with intense curiosity and ended up changing the world.

Robson’s book is essentially a synthesis of other people’s research, which detracts from its originality but allows him to pack a lot into 270 pages. There are outstanding sections on the merits of different education systems (he thinks the east Asian “tough love” approach gets best results) and the concept of “collective intelligence” (which he uses to show why Iceland defeated England at Euro 2016). As a result, *The Intelligence Trap* is far more substantial than most works in the overcrowded popular science genre.

At its heart, however, lies a worryingly simple question. The world may well contain more brainboxes than ever before – but what good is that when so many have hung “Do not disturb” signs on their minds?



An image from *Made In Dublin*, the latest photography book by Eamonn Doyle

Stark portraits of a city’s people down all the days



SEAN SHEEHAN

PHOTOGRAPHY

Made In Dublin

By Eamonn Doyle

Thames & Hudson, €47

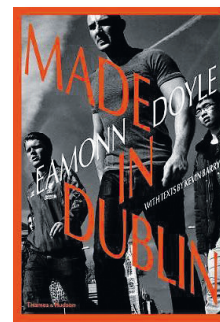
Eamonn Doyle worked in Dublin’s indie music business for two decades until Ireland’s economic meltdown in 2008 changed the landscape. By then in his mid-forties, Doyle returned to photography – the subject of his diploma on leaving college in 1991 – and got some timely attention just as photography was becoming part of the international art market.

The influential London gallery owner Michael Hoppen marketed his work (and still does) and collectors swooped in. Doyle self-published three photobooks – his first, *i*, had a print run of just 750 copies – which demonstrated his talent for street photography: freeze-framing urban pulses in his native city.

With his latest book *Made in Dublin*, Doyle gathers together the imagery that featured in his first three photobooks: *i*, *ON* and *End*, and splices them together with descriptive text penned by the Irish author Kevin Barry.

What was remarkable about his first work, *i*, has since lost none of its appeal. Those photos, taken within a half-mile radius of his north Dublin home, many “within ten metres of his front door”, are portraits of solitary bodies on the street, usually photographed from behind and/or above – women in headscarves and capped men clutching small bags of shopping – their faces expressly not a centre of attention.

They are seen in their existential loneliness, experiencing in silence, as Barry puts it, “the cuts



of memory’s knives”.

Doyle does not pretend we can know anything about strangers we pass on the street: “I won’t gain knowledge of them by photographing them, but maybe something will come from the attempt to, maybe even from the failure to.” Facial expressions are not seen as windows into a person’s soul; and his anonymous subjects, he says, “are hidden, the better to be respected”.

There is an emphasis on parts of the body – a bent arm, stockinged legs, stooped shoulders – that aligns his work with an often overlooked feature of the social documentary photographer Dorothea Lange.

Doyle, too, shares her concern with apparel, like overcoats, jackets, head garb and rainwear, adding a bag of some kind or other as an essential accoutrement.

His second photobook, *ON*, turned to monochrome images of a multicultural and ethnically mixed Dublin that didn’t exist when the subjects of his earlier work were growing up. People

are in motion, faces become prominent and there is a sense of the potential for drama in the quotidian.

Dublin is now seen in a different phase but shaped, clothed and scarred by unchanging socioeconomic realities. The subject is still Dublin’s working-class citizenry, the proletariat of the pavements, but there is more variety to Doyle’s framing. He shoots from ground level, close-ups make their presence felt, and a built environment of lamp-posts, railings and parts of buildings become part of the compositions.

Postures are more animated, pedestrians move in a hurry. There is what Kevin Barry here calls “money singing... the mad song that sends me helter-skelter around these streets”.

The writer Sean O’Hagan, in his introduction to *Made In Dublin*, justly praises a dramatic photo that includes three individuals striding down O’Connell Street with the Gate Theatre’s signage behind them. There is a hint of edgy intentionality in the men’s pace, but all is nonetheless about surface appearance. This is life on the street at the level of the purely phenomenological.

End, completing the trilogy, is a more mixed bag of photographic strategies, more consciously targeting the art world of private collectors. (Signed copies of Doyle’s upcoming publication, *K*, are available through his website for €150.)

Doyle’s work is now the stuff of the international art market. In a way, this is a shame because, as *Made In Dublin*’s title indicates, the photographs’ origins are in the city, and the images are those of its people. ■