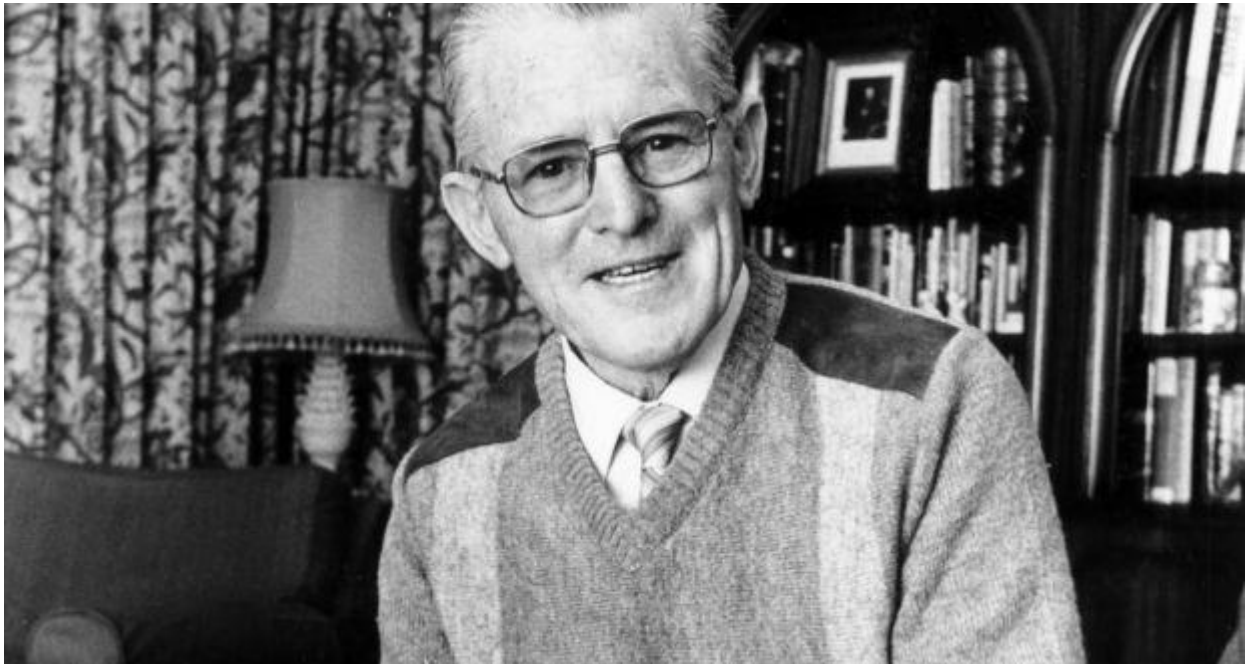


Brendan O'Regan: Irish Visionary, Innovator, Peacemaker

Book is both a history of the economic development of the mid-West as well as a biography



Brendan O'Regan. Photograph: Peter Thursfield

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During my interviews with the late T.K. Whitaker, the objectives of his visionary blue-print Economic Development published in 1958 were, as he told me, mainly taken on board, not by private industry as might be expected, but “by a group of genuine entrepreneurs who regarded what they were asked to do as a privilege and who never betrayed that trust”. In this he was referring to the dynamic leaders of the various semi-state organisations who stepped into the breach to take advantage of the radical change his blue-print proffered on the journey from protectionism to free trade. Leading and, to some degree, pre-empting, that charge is the subject of a new book, *Brendan O’Regan - Irish Innovator, Visionary & Peacemaker* by Brian O’Connell with Cian O’Carroll (Irish Academic Press)

Born in 1917 into a business family in Co Clare, the subsequent War of Independence, followed by the economic and social depression of the 1920s and 1930s, fuelled the young O’Regan, as one of “the first generation of free Irishmen” to shake off the despondency and “the national inferiority complex of a colonial era”, to make his mark as an innovator and entrepreneur on both the national and international stage.

From an early career in catering and hotel management to the establishment of the world’s first duty-free airport and an international shop window for Irish-produced goods, Shannon Free Airport Development Company (SFADCO) – Ireland’s first industrial free zone, to numerous innovative tourism projects such as Bunratty Castle and Folk Park and the Rent-an-Irish-Cottage scheme; Ireland’s first school of hotel management, as well as Ireland’s first “new” town of Shannon, to promoting peace in Northern Ireland and the co-ordination of aid to developing countries overseas; from Flying Boats and the introduction of the iconic “Irish Coffee” at Foynes, to the establishment of Export Processing Zones in six Asian countries, O’Regan’s journey, by any standards, is remarkable. Imbued by the spirit of enterprise and the idealism that (for some) marked 1960s Ireland, he enthusiastically embraced the changes which allowed him develop new ideas and new methodologies, bringing to them a passion and determination that broke down whatever barriers he encountered along the way.

Practical assumption

These barriers, the authors maintain, tended to emanate from within the civil service. As Secretary of the Department of Finance, “keeper of the privy purse” on behalf of the hard-pressed taxpayers, any opposition O’Regan may have encountered from T.K. Whitaker, however, sprang, not from any lack of vision, but from the practical assumption, as Whitaker noted, that “there is no end to the number of things that can be said to be in the national interest but there are definite and critical limits to the capacity and willingness of the community to accept new [tax] burdens”. Such a sentiment, as an astute businessman, O’Regan probably well understood (although not acknowledged in the book). Another reason O’Regan may have encountered, as the authors term, “the dead hand of the Civil Service” towards some of his endeavours was, perhaps, the not unreasonable assumption at the time that (in decades prior to Public Private Projects) that taxpayers’ money risked funding what, in effect, could be considered private enterprise. Obstacles, such as they were, however, were overcome by O’Regan’s pioneering determination, his drive, an ability to motivate those around him, an extraordinary work ethic, fuelled by his belief that “anything man can conceive, he can achieve”.

His innovations were not confined to Ireland. His duty-free-airport-shopping prototype was successfully transferred to other international airports, most notably Moscow and Dubai. His SFADCO development was later adopted by many developing countries from Sri Lanka to Liberia. His experiences at Shannon later fuelled his mission to transform Third World countries by introducing similar vigorous economic development programmes, together with the coordination of the work of state and religious support agencies on the ground. In this

regard his belief that “the needs of the Third World are so great and growing at such a pace that we in Ireland cannot be content to rest on what is being achieved by these methods alone” has a resonance today in view of the enormous and constant outflow of people from such countries.

Pioneering efforts

The search for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland also benefited from his pioneering efforts during the decades of the Troubles and the subsequent long and convoluted search for peaceful co-existence. Working behind the scenes with parties from both sides of the political divide the foundation of bodies such as Co-operation North, the Irish Peace Institute and the Centre for International Co-Operation, in which he was one of the prime movers, helped promote a climate of trust and confidence which eventually led to the Peace Process.

Like every pioneer O'Regan's time at the helm at SFADCO and at the various tourist ventures he established, especially in the mid-West region, was eventually overtaken by changing and, at times, conflicting approaches to their future development and also by the loss of political backing which, especially during the early years, had proved essential to his plans. His legacy to industrial, tourism and educational developments in Ireland in the most challenging of times, however, remains intact.

While the book may well have benefited from a more stringent editorial hand to make it read, in parts, as less of a history of the economic development of the mid-West region and more of a biography of an inspirational innovator and human being, it nevertheless more than fills a niche for both.

Anne Chambers is author of “T.K. Whitaker: Portrait of a Patriot” (Trans World)