

Dr. Brendan O'Regan Disk 12

JH: You have a few gaps that we have noticed and one of the gaps I would like to talk to about it would be the Kennedy visit and to ask you for your memories of that time and of the visit. It was quite a high point I'd say in the history of Shannon and maybe we could touch on that this morning?

BO'R: Yes, well my memories of it of course are like anybody else. Exciting memories, we suddenly realized that we were being visited by an American who was running the greatest country in the world and who had a great feeling for Ireland and we were most anxious that his visit would go off very well and it did go off very well. It was a most exciting visit. When he came to Shannon, he referred to it in kind of affectionate terms. He had a memory of an old song, which I haven't got now, which was "to see ole Shannon's face again". His mother remembered it. Every place he went, including Shannon and Limerick, it was a most exciting situation and it helped us at that particular stage because we were being described by some writers as the nation that had failed to achieve its aims and was gradually dying we were gradually losing our population and we had a steady flow of emigrants out of the country and we were beginning to feel badly about that. There was always coming from British periodicals there were references to the Irish that we were decadent and backward. But here was a sudden burst of glory coming from the greatest country in the world and very, very proud of being Irish. So, it was a great boost for us.

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JH: The visit must have presented great opportunities to Shannon Development at that time, that you must have viewed the visit as an opportunity as a certain degree of exposure for Shannon certainly in the American media, in the world media indeed it must have been a great opportunity.

BO'R: Well Shannon had set out the world's first export free zone as we called it and we were very anxious to make it succeed. To make it succeed we really needed the wealthy Americans to regard Ireland as a good investment position. The first really successful factory that we got, which was actually making parts which were used in the American adventure to land on the moon, the nuts and bolts of...and Tom Holloway was the chief executive of that and he did an extraordinary thing. He came over and looked at an artist's impression that we had made of the first airport industrial free zone as we called it. It showed factories laid out and it showed a town growing up alongside it. He said "and who is going to do that?" I was with him with Tom Callanan and Jack Lynch who were two very active executives in the promotion of those days? He said "who is going to look after these factories"? I said "well the team who have created the best airport restaurant in the world because that's what it is". It is the best airport restaurant in the world and that is looking after thousands of air passengers right round the clock because it was indeed the busiest airport restaurant in the world at that time. He hesitated for a while and then he said, "I'm in then" which was an extraordinary decision for him to make and there was no checking up or

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anything else done. That gave us a wonderful first factory, which became a kind of a seedbed for managers of factories in many parts of Ireland because it did a great training operation for its staff.

JH: Could I just take you back again to the time of the Kennedy visit and the advance planning for that visit. I believe you had a visit from Pierre Salinger at that particular time. Would you recall that at all?

BO'R: Yes, I remember being extraordinary impressed by the amount of coverage that the American civil servants gave the visit ahead of time and being very impressed by it. In other words, nothing was left to chance and before he came all of the possibilities seemed to be checked out so we suddenly felt like we weren't just dealing with an ordinary visitor but a visitor who had a whole machine looking after everything that he did. His importance was emphasized.

JH: When you say everything checked out, you say the security dimension of his visit?

BO'R: Yes, absolutely we were made to realise that we were playing host to the world's most important politician. I think all of this kind of thing was extraordinary valuable for the morale of the Irish and certainly for those at Shannon whom I knew this was endorsing that we were no mean people and this is a very important thing for success at any stage.

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JH: Would you have any memories of the day, the actual event. Now I know the day would be full of content for you on that day but did you actually meet the President himself on that day?

BO'R: I did just very briefly and I walked back with Lemass after saying goodbye who was obviously highly relieved that the event was over. It was a local event dominated by the Chairman of the County Council. The president in talking about it and his mother and Shannon's wave romanticized Shannon in the few words he said. He was saying goodbye to Ireland in his little speech and he was enormously pleased at how well his trip had gone and I could say that Lemass was enormously relieved it was over.

JH: Of course, Kennedy had promised to come back in springtime

BO'R: Yes, he never did of course....

JH: The aftermath of that visit of course as you refer was that Kennedy was not to return and that he was assassinated four or five months later. That must have had a cataclysmic effect in the area as it did all over Ireland and in the world.

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BO'R: The Old Ground hotel which I used to spend some time in at that stage and American crews were staying there and I remember one of them saying something uncomplimentary about Kennedy. He was obviously not on his political side and I was so annoyed about it that I felt like having him told not to stay in the hotel any longer. I decided it wasn't a nice thing to do but I almost did it.

JH: *That he was insulting one of our own*

BO'R: Yes,

CO'C: That was very, very important, I wasn't very long in Shannon at the time and the whole security thing was quite extraordinary. It really was. There is a painting actually in the airport still of the County Council and so on. They sort of took it over in way and they weren't relevant to it really. That was the way it was I suppose it was political event and I think it was very interesting that television was quite new in Ireland too so that was a very big challenge for them to actually put it across. I remember Gay Byrne did the commentary from Shannon.

JH: But of course, in the days previous when he was in Limerick Frances Condell had made a huge impact.

CO'C: But she did speak for a longer period than he did. That was a big thing and Frances Condell worked for the company at that time

BO'R: She was a very good speaker.

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CO'C: She was a very impressive lady altogether. She would have worked in the early days settling in families, families that had come from other countries and so on. They wonder about schools and all those kinds of things. She worked a lot on that

BO'R: She was very good, a very good mayor.

JH: You must have considered that the visit would present opportunities for Shannon, publicity, and public relations opportunities. Could you recall if those were filled in your view? That you felt that there were aspects of those that..

BO'R: Well the question reminds me at the time of the visit of de Gaulle and how much de Valera interfered at that time because we were told not to utilize him for promotion. The number one man for promotion in our group was John Dilger and he said this is a worldwide possibility for promotion but the President has said "No" but he pressed me so hard that I eventually said "I'll ask him". Not to embarrass him I went through his lead man and I said would you ask him? I'm under pressure and the answer I got back was from de Gaulle "tell Dr. O'Regan that he can use his own judgment in the matter". I didn't do it; we didn't publicize him at all but that was a little bit relative to the same kind of situation that you are asking me about Kennedy.

There were a few imaginative Irish chefs that we had and of course we had a great French chef and I remember the French

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chef being under query from de Gaulle. de Gaulle came and had a meal in Knappogue. A very good meal too and he asked to see the chef. I said to Andre the chef what was he asking you? Well he said he was very interested in how I was over here and it wasn't too easy for me to answer some of those questions he was asking. I said I am surprised he is even asking you. That was de Gaulle. I don't know whether you knew Cian that Andre had fled France when he had come out.

CO'C: He had come out in some very difficult circumstances and there was a security check on everyone who was in the castle that day including myself but they forgot to talk to André

JH: Was he a Breton by any chance?

CO'C: André Fernon was his name but he wasn't a fan of de Gaulle's at all.

BO'R: Not at all (laughing)

CO'C: So, it was potentially a very interesting situation.

JH: Would that have been in the late sixties when de Gaulle would have resigned would that have been that period?

BO'R: He came for holiday here and they had to give him a very long bed in Connemara because he was such a long fellow and

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de Valera had issued a statement that they hoped he would be respected wherever he went as a great man.

NOTES:

1. Speakers on disk:

BO'R: Brendan O'Regan

JH: John Heuston

CO'C: Cian O'Carroll

2. ***** indicates breaks between tracks on the disk

3. This manuscript may contain errors in transcribing from the disk and in the interpretation of the spoken word. For external quotation the text above should be checked against the original recording.