

**JH:** Dr. O'Regan at the end of the Second World War there was a major development with the transfer from Foynes to Rinneanna

**BO'R:** The period of transfer from seaplane crossing of the Atlantic to landplane crossing. We had a few years of traditional air exploration and strangely enough, coinciding with a war on one side of the Atlantic and of course, some of the world's most important people going through Ireland at the time. The vision of the Irish government of the day, de Valera and Lemass was very clear because they had decided... they would decide Ireland was going to have aviation, whether it was seaplane or landplane. In fact they had decided to go ahead with a terminal building at Foynes which I ran subsequently for a few years, as the Foynes Country Club and they had decided to go ahead with a rapidly constructed timber building at Shannon where we were ready for the American decision. The Americans made the decision greatly out of their war experience that the landplane was the one that really mattered. The seaplane was important for Britain with its empire and so on. The Americans won through with its landplane and Shannon was ready for the landplane. I found myself involved in the move over, from one position to the other even while that was happening there was a jockeying for a decision between the Americans and the British. The British were of course bringing people into the landplane and then ferrying them by bus to the seaplane base. The confidence hadn't yet descended to use to cross the Atlantic without a seaplane. Although the idea that one was safer in a seaplane really didn't mean very much, because if it

landed anyway it would go down after a few hours. We the Irish, were in the middle of this struggle between two great peoples, the British and the Americans. I remember how exciting it was when the first American aircraft arrived and they decided it was important enough for the whole crew to march down the middle of the lounge for their lunch which was then a fillet of steak, good Irish steak, and led by their captain. How rapidly the whole thing began then, with all the people being VIPS of one form or another. They were excited, because it was like an original flight for many of them. We suddenly found we were not a restaurant coping for meals at the usual hours but that we had to cope for them right round the clock. So, we had not just one lot.

So, the handover was good, the handover from Foynes to Rineanna was also fortunately very good. Although it began with a telephone call from Tim O'Driscoll to me we have just been informed that the British are going to bring in landplanes on Monday and if you are not able to look after the catering by then we are going to have another handover situation which won't be so easy. Well, I said: "we can do it from The Old Ground there's no facilities there but we can do it from The Old Ground" and we did it from The Old Ground using Maggie McCardle, The Old Ground chef, who really was a wonderful, wonderful woman.

**JH:** It was the time of bringing food in the laundry basket?

**BO'R:** It was, yes, she didn't realise the laundry basket would ever be revealed as a way by which the food was transferred. I had said to her: "the best meal you have ever made now Maggie has got to be the

lobster salmon. Anything you want just provide it, there will be about thirty people sitting down for lunch." The thirty people, of course, were nearly all BOAC or British Airways personnel with Lord Headford sitting at the head of the table. I don't know what they expected but they were very surprised. Anyway, as I think I may have mentioned it to you before, he said to me: "Mr. O'Regan that was a wonderful meal, may I congratulate the Chef?". Well I said: "he's not on duty today". "My goodness" he said, "you can do that when he is off duty?" I daren't produce Maggie McArdle as the chef at that stage. (Laughing)

**JH:** Can I just ask you about that particular period at that particular time, it was the end of war, a war-time period? So that was the post-war period, all...? It was the beginning of aviation, of international aviation and Shannon, as has been written, was the entry point into Europe and the exit point from Europe to America.

**BO'R:** Yes

**JH:** That awareness must have been very much to the fore at the time, that sense that it was the first point of Europe that people from America would come in contact.

**BO'R:** It was a very important time really because the aircraft were just about able to cross the Atlantic and of course the fact that they were seaplanes, during the Foynes days made it feel less dangerous, so you can land on the sea and so on. The Americans who produced them and had their minds made up I think, that the seaplane was not

going to be the way to cross the Atlantic and they had these powerful Boeing aircraft.

**JH:** The 'Super Fortresses'?

**BO'R:** The Super Fortresses, which had done the bombing and had defeated Germany really and they arrived and I remember the first ones arriving and the crews were like people from outer space really. They were a wonderful aircraft, even at that stage before the jet had come but it was the final victory of America over Britain in regard to aviation when that happened and it was a very anxious period, between these two great friends really. I know that there was an exchange of letters between Churchill and Roosevelt. Churchill had reminded Roosevelt that we hadn't been in the war and this was related to Shannon. The reply contained a sentence which said: "but we are now dealing with post-war". I think that the Americans had used Shannon during those days to win out in regard to the British. Without the availability of Shannon, they might have had to make a different kind of bargain.

**JH:** Was Shannon almost like a toehold for them in Europe?

**BO'R:** I think it was, it certainly was and of course for Ireland, which was neutral, it was a gesture we were neutral and wouldn't take part in the war, which was right I think? We were pro-American, pro-link with America and we were pro-British.

**JH:** Certainly, the sentimental attachment to America would have been strong, and strong in the region of Shannon because of the long association over the years.

**BO'R:** It is still so, and the recent event, which involved Shannon with American planes landing was well handled by the government they couldn't do it otherwise. The important thing was that we were handing it in a way that was right by the United Nations. I think if we didn't maintain our loyalty to the United Nations it would be a great mistake. I was just going to say to you at any stage if I'm not giving you the right kind of interview...

**JH:** No, no this is grand. I think that Lemass, the Irish government, de Valera indeed they had been very cogent, they were waiting to see how things would develop after the war in relation to aviation

**BO'R:** Yes, they were

**JH:** They played it very coolly for a while

**BO'R:** They didn't know, nobody really seemed to know whether the seaplanes would succeed and eventually Lemass said: "let's do both. Let's have a seaplane anchorage as well". They built what is, I think should be called 'The Lemass Lagoon', which is that seaplane anchorage that is there. Which is really an unused part of the airport and during the Cold War I felt there was a great opportunity with Russian planes and British planes and Americans landing side by

side, for something to be done that would help bring the Cold War to an end. I went Moscow...

**JH:** Of course, you have to remind people who fly today, that it was a very different time. People could be delayed by weather conditions, that the planes of course were much smaller, might be about 50 passengers on a plane and half dozen crew. Very, very different way of travelling, also a very different clientele of travellers. You made a point they were usually very rich people or highly placed people. Planes would be coming at various times of the day and night and this made for a very elastic day for staff. It has been said that you might sign on at 8 in the morning and might sign off at 1 in the morning.

**BO'R:** Regularly

**JH:** That was a regular occurrence?

**BO'R:** Yes, there had to be, in the beginning we had just one staff who worked there fulltime and then we had to have two, and then we had to have three because the place was as busy during the night, as it was during the day. As well as being busy in the restaurant we became very busy in the hostels. The hostels were two hundred bedrooms, which we had built, which I ran also to avoid the embarrassment of planes that were delayed for mechanical reasons, maybe the weather, whatever it might be, hundreds of people would be stranded in Shannon, just for the night. Two hundred bedrooms helped to relieve the pressure on the hotels in the region which

would be in Limerick and in Ennis, The Old Ground, where my family hotel expanded itself three or four times. The people would have to go to Tipperary for hotels, so it was a very unusual situation in that a plane could have broken down and held for maybe 24 hours or maybe 48 and the people would be... So even though in the beginning Shannon was just a transit stop, eventually terminal traffic grew and that's how the Bunratty idea began. So, the idea of a banquet, medieval banquet arose.

The transit operation and the introduction of the disembarking traffic are now the main operations of course in Shannon.

**JH:** There were some notable incidents as well of course; plane air travel wasn't as safe then as it was today. I believe you were eyewitness to one particular crash, not eyewitness but the after-effects of it, and the aftermath of a crash I think it was called "The Spirit of Cairo" was that the name of the plane? "The Star of Cairo"

**BO'R:** Yes, it crashed on the outskirts of the airport and I remember arriving at it. It was in flames and there was at least one, probably a member of the crew who had broken through the nose. He was surrounded by flames, he was dead at that stage. It was a terrible sight. There was another one on the Fergus on one of the islands in the Fergus. I know I was one of the first who went to the spot and I had to go knocking at farmers' houses to find out where there was a boat so that one could get across to the island. They were 27 people killed in that and they were buried in Ennis graveyard. I remember the moving scene when they were being buried and they were all various religions of course and the ministers of various religions

were saying the prayers at the graveside. My memory is not very clear on either of those things now.

**JH:** During that period as well, there would have been... was quite a transit of people from Europe after the war in '47. I remember coming across reference a large party of Germans, who stayed, would you have any recollection of them? They were on their way to Venezuela I believe?

**BO'R:** Well I remember, mainly I can remember the Jews who were coming through, who were going to South America and America. I remember them well because we set up a kosher kitchen, section in the kitchen. We gave them kosher meals that meant that we had to have the Jewish religious leader from Dublin had to come down to help us make the arrangements. I can remember discussing with him this question of the rules that I have in regard to how their food is cooked. The battery of copper pots that we had there were ones that we had brought over for Queen Victoria's visit which I had succeeded in getting out of government storage. I don't think we had any difficulty in regards to the kosher services. During that period, there was tremendous pressure upon the chefs in regard with unexpected planes arriving and so on. One day I was going through the restaurant and I heard one passenger saying to the other: "Do they shoot their cattle here?" I looked down and I could see that he was, on his plate, putting to one side a few pebbles which were obviously from a shotgun. Immediately I went into the kitchen I said: "Chef", "what?." "They are supposed to be having beef!". "We didn't, we couldn't, we have been so busy all day that we had some deer which were very



good. Very good meat.” “Somebody thinks that we are shooting our cattle now” (Laughing) it wasn't serious anyway. They were refugees, a refugees' plane I suppose he felt like he had some liberty, he shouldn't have used anyway.

**JH:** Of course, the food and standard of food in Shannon at that time was in great contrast to what was available anywhere else in the UK or the continent.

**BO'R:** It was very good; we had a very good team of chefs and a very good team of waiters too. The place became very efficient too. Once the spirit was lighted that they were doing something of great importance for their country. That is a tremendous force amongst Irish people. We are very patriotic really, when it's put up to us and it certainly was put up to the staff in Sales and Catering that they had an opportunity that Irish people never had before to make a good name for their country in one spot.

**JH:** Actually, in the country when so many had to leave it.

**BO'R:** Yes, they were leaving, the phrase was that we had found liberty after many hundreds of years but we weren't able to use it. The Irish were leaving the country. That statement alone was a great driving force in those days in Shannon and of course we saw a lot of them leaving in those early days in Shannon as they called it, the Irish wake, tears and bitter farewells.

**JH:** I suppose that would have been a time where people left without much hope of return

**BO'R:** Yes, it was Goodbye, Goodbye. Fortunately, that began to change I think the coming of the jet age made a big change. It changed rapidly really and we are in danger of running into again now, because of the closure of factories Crossing the Atlantic was a big, big event and big people were doing it and they were saying things about it. I remember Maeve Fitzgibbon, who was one of the publicists we had, had produced a small brochure to say, "What they say about Shannon Catering". And a whole lot of comments, very good comments. So that the people running the catering side and they were fortified once we got into liquor and the first duty-free shop in the world. We were very proud of what was happening and we were anxious to make a go of it. So, in this situation that Shannon is now threatened, this is what has to be done again. The staff have got to be excited about doing something that most people aren't prepared to admit can be done. They have got to find a way of making it almost a must. People used to ask: "we want to go enroute to Europe, but we want to stop down at Shannon". So, there is, we have had such a tragic negative...

**JH:** Could I put to you something, just to get your view on it? If you look at travellers' accounts in Ireland going back into the 1800s, even before certainly the 1800s the beginning of what we would call tourism. There were people who were tourists in those days, very much an elite, but travellers' accounts invariably refer to Irish hospitality and that idea, almost an innate trait in Irish people of the

time of hospitality and welcome. Would you say that might have been a factor, that people still retained that sense of welcome?

**BO'R:** Yes, I think that was a major factor in what happened in Shannon, a basic quality of the Irish and once they were organised to handle it, then it became a powerful factor, I think that came evident again during the recent international games for the injured people. That was a remarkable changeover from the greed of the Tiger Economy to the recognition that we had something else within us. I think what helped in our particular case was that we, the management team of Sales and Catering began to recognise that equity between management and staff, was part, a vital part of the human Irish person and any good manager can touch it. I believe Cian, and there are certain human things that you can only find out by experience. You had as your secretary the woman who is assisting me now.

**JH:** Just to carry on a little bit with that idea of hospitality it would strike me to what was a sort of informal aspect or element that idea of hospitality, which would have been in individuals but somehow Shannon harnessed that or somehow almost institutionalised it through the School and that became a feature that became a driving force, Would that be accurate to say?

**BO'R:** It would if the management that has power act the right way towards those that who they are managing, that would be the automatic response they'll get, and management who fail to do that are just bad managers. There is a pile of stuff over there on a chair

and at some stage you should look through it at least to know what you are trying to do now is to hand on whatever has been learned through this thing that I'm talking from. It's a bit late in that I have not the clarity of mind that I did have before but I mean I think it's very important that it should be passed on and I'm already engaged in an enormously important...Well where have you got me now?

**JH:** Well that's is a good place to discuss or touch on the whole topic of tourism in the 30s in Ireland, and as I have said to you there were certain people who... highly placed people as well eventually, who would have had a very jaundiced view of tourism and the whole idea of Irish people, serving the tourist needs of foreigners or people, and I suppose a very large proportion of tourists at that time really of foreign tourist would have been British tourists it was very close to our... It was only 15 or 16 years after...

**BO'R:** Our enemies?

**JH:** And some people said that this really wasn't a job for Irish people, that those attitudes, would you have been aware of those attitudes?

**BO'R:** Yes, I was aware of it definitely. I think that we changed that and I would say that during the period I was Chairman of Bord Fáilte with Tim O'Driscoll appointed as the Director General. The name Director General alone, he really was a wonderful Director General. We went after some big hotels, the international hotel idea. That shook it out, that and I think the fact that we got, we went after a

hotel for Dublin, Limerick and Cork. We got the three we had got of course, and I can't remember what they were now, incentives I know I didn't get them anyway for the Old Ground because they hadn't come into operation at that stage. But tourism became important economically and people realised that, we were existing on farming. We really had no industry, tourism came to be recognised as an industry and the idea went out that it was shameful. That's what it was, it was shameful to be serving other people. There was something menial about it. It was never very strong, I was aware of it alright, but I didn't feel any of it. I felt that, and at Shannon the staff there did a tremendous thing for the concept of Ireland because they came to recognise that the stream of passengers passing through it, it was a transit airport. The most important people in the world were crossing the Atlantic and they were streaming through the lounge into the dining room at Shannon, and they had very little disembarking and the staff knew the only impression they would get of Ireland was what they got at Shannon and they reacted to it. So, it was a very friendly airport. I remember telling them on one occasion I went to Los Angeles, I had an Uncle out there and that I decided that I would go across the Atlantic, across America stopping in small airports getting out and having a quick look at the airport. I think it was in, I don't know which airport it was in, but I was in the lounge, the main lounge and a big American came in with a Texas hat and, he said: "Welcome stranger, where do you come from?" shook my hand. At that stage I was feeling a long way from Ireland. I remember telling the staff at Shannon that lifted my heart and if they could do that to Americans then they would be great. A lot of them did it.

**JH:** Absolutely, absolutely

**BO'R:** They were fun. I remember getting very fierce, at an early date in regard to one English, well he wasn't even a senior person, telling off John Creed, and John was one of our greatest waiters. That was really in the very early days, I mean I wouldn't do it now, I mean I said to him: "I understand you were in Africa before you came here, you may have spoken like that to Africans but don't ever do it to one of my staff again". He had been, I can't remember the details now but he was one of the very few. I mean the English I have great regard for the English. I married one of the them. But they can be difficult sometimes and that situation at Foynes particularly, where we took over from them and did better than they were doing was a great spiritual uplift, I can tell you for the Irish. Then we knew we were as good as those who had, who were empire builders, that we were as good as them. Although Foynes was almost like a British colony. There were three or four hundred people working for them when I went there in the beginning.

**JH:** You have spoken before about an inferiority complex at that time, I suppose we hadn't had that time to prove ourselves as a country?

**BO'R:** No, no and we were for part of the uplifting days in Shannon we were being written off as the vanishing Irish. They've fought for hundreds of years, eleven hundred years or something like that, and they have got their freedom but they are not able to use it. They're emigrants to England and to the U.S.A. and of course the Tiger Economy turned it around but it was aviation, it played a major part

in that. There is no doubt about that, including Shannon. The fact that we were going through a kind of negative.

**JH:** To that response locally?

**BO'R:** Well in the beginning the local response was an embarrassment because there were lots of people from Sixmilebridge, Cratloe and Ennis and of course from Limerick who would pour in to see the planes coming. At that stage we had just one lounge which had to do for both passengers and visitors. I remember writing a letter to John Leydon to say that we had started well but we were getting, and had gotten a good reputation but we were losing it rapidly because the public were making it impossible for passengers to find seats in the lounge. Within a question of a week he had started...he had reacted and we had another lounge being built. So that we had a second lounge, a second lot of toilets and so on. So, there was an immediate reaction to maintain the good name that we had got. Since the buildings were timber buildings they went up fairly fast. The buildings were supposed to last for three years, they are still there.

**JH:** Was there some question at that time that your own father used to be there at the door turning away some local characters, did I read that somewhere?

**BO'R:** Yes, well my father was a friend of the airport manager they had worked together at some stage in a different enterprise. He was also an elder statesman in the region and they all knew him and

respected him and when it came to making a decision about how to keep seats for passengers, he took it on himself. I don't think I asked him, I might have encouraged him alright. (Laughing). He did it anyway and he would say: "John don't go in, there's a plane coming in now and seats will be required." "Alright sir". So, he was well regarded in Cratloe and so on. He ran into trouble on one occasion with a pressman, who really was making a killing because he was coming in to interview VIPs who weren't expecting to be interviewed. That was, he got the better of that and that was settled alright. I think it was fairly important for passengers to see locals as well. I mean, crossing a few thousand miles of the Atlantic and landing down without any evidence of local people, wouldn't have been so good, so it wasn't such a problem. Irish people are very...and this has helped our tourism, are very relaxed with tourists anyway. That was an exciting time for people out of America coming down and they wanted to talk to local people. I remember saying to staff at that time...

**JH:** At that, would you have any recollection to the public response at that time, to the Shannon development idea?

**BO'R:** I told that story to staff I remember, so that very often they would welcome an American who had just come, gave him things to do, like: "I hope your flight was alright, sir" and "did you have a good meal?" In other words, friendship, is the most important ingredient that can be given to tourists. I think. Shannon as a friendly airport is one of its strongest possessions.



**JH:** But that contrasts today with so many airports today, that they are just functional places where you are rushing through and you have no contact with anybody apart from the immigration man or woman. You go right through and it's a very impersonal thing but Shannon learned to pick up...

**BO'R:** To relate to, yes

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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.