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JH: And it was through that you came to look after Foynes?

BO'R: Yes, I was still going back to the Falls after I had finished there. Tim O'Driscoll rang me up, it was very strange since I was after interviewing him, to become the first Director General of Bord Fáilte, but he rang me up and I was interviewed by him. I had already met Leydon and Lemass and the manager of the Stephen's Green Club. So, I got the job, to take over from the British at Foynes without any other person being interviewed against me. Of course, it was a Fianna Fáil government and we weren't Fianna Fáil. A strange thing too happened, is that the airport manager Paddy Maher, who had managed the takeover of Spike Island from the British, had also worked at one stage with my father. My father was involved in sawmills during that epic period of the war, when we were supplying for the trenches. The timber that kept them open for people to die in them. I'm not very proud of that, but that was probably how he made enough money with a small farm and a small public house business and a FIAT agency to get the Old Ground. Where was I now on the question? I must get back to it if I can.

JH: It was Paddy Maher you were saying,

BO'R: Yes, Paddy Maher. So he was very friendly to me from the earliest days. It was he who asked about me apparently. So, everything seemed to be going my way

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JH: So, Dr. O'Regan, as I mentioned to you, I would like to touch on again tonight on the Foynes segment of your story and how that came about? If you could bring us back to that point?

BO'R: Yes, it came about in a rather simple way really, in that during the period that I was running The Falls Hotel, which was five years, a lot of the key people from Dublin seemed to come there, which included key civil servants and while I didn't realise their importance to me at the time, I did later when I was asked during the winter period when The Falls closed down, to do something about the Stephen's Green Club which was losing its merit, for a lot of those who were attending it. Quite a number of whom, apparently felt that The Falls Hotel, who had a young manager and who ran it fairly well. They asked me would I come there for the winter period. I agreed to do that and I think I was there for three to four months. The manageress who was an elderly lady remained on, but I became the manager of it. I was a very hard worker and I think I greatly improved, not just the food but the profitability as well. When I was ready to take up the job, that I was offered as a result of doing this I was astounded really, because there was no interview. I was just rung up by Tim O'Driscoll who was then the principal officer of the Aviation Division of the Department of Industry and Commerce under Seán Lemass that they wanted to know would I accept the position of catering comptroller at Foynes. They were going to take over and they had already begun to make alterations in the building, where the British were running the restaurants. They wanted me to go there and look at it and make recommendations in regard to the changes that were to be made. I was delighted of course, I had been

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interviewed at about that time, for the head catering job in the hospitals, in the main hospitals, which would have been a very tedious job I can see now. So, there was nobody interviewed against me. I heard afterwards that Mr. de Valera had written on a file, after visiting it and had a meal in the restaurant run by the British Imperial Airways, *Bárdas Breataine Aer Theastáil Thar Sáile*, and that surely we should be running the restaurant, something like that. That was an instruction from the top, so I got the appointment. I think I was offered a thousand a year and two thousand of the first profits and twenty-five per cent of the profits thereafter. That last one became an embarrassment and I gave it up and reduced to two or 3 per cent of the profits, but I never got more than £20,000 even with the profits. I really didn't want it, because I was animated by the challenge of the job.

JH: Would your father have had some influence in that contract, did I read somewhere?

BO'R: Yes, yes he said to me: "I have dealt with the civil service, as the chairman of the County Council during a very important period of years before the 1916 freedom fight" and he said: "I have never seen civil servants acting the way they are acting towards your appointment. It doesn't sound like them at all, all you have got to do is make sure that you have sufficient liberty not to be tied up by the civil servants". I remembered that advice later on and succeeded in having the intervention which was inevitable I suppose that I got from the civil service, after we began to run into difficult times and

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we weren't making as much money as previously. The money returned to them, of course, returned to the government.

JH: There are some notable incidents that happened, there were some remarks passed by Lord Headford at the time. Could you...?

BO'R: Yes, Lord Headford was a really a figurehead for British Airways and a very nice person really. He had a great big wolfhound called Sentry. One of the things I can remember most about him is during the sports day Sentry wandered away from him someplace and suddenly over the microphone we heard: "Sentry, are you there Sentry? (Laughs) But he was a character of course. Whether Sentry answered the megaphone or not, I don't know. He had an office almost over the restaurant. Joe Lucey who was my second-in-command, who was really from the beginning my deputy, told me that on one occasion that when he ran out of some particular Scotch whisky I think it was, that all he had to do was go upstairs and borrow it from Lord Headford's little bar upstairs. I was horrified of course. There was a nice relationship between myself and the management of the British side. There were about 300 British staff there in those days and when I went down to take it over, it was like taking over something that was like a British settlement. Which I can understand why de Valera was worried about the impression it might give. From the beginning I remember I had sought to have a certain impact and impression created. I had seen the kind of interior that I had wanted in the house of John and Putzel Hunt, who later gave the University a museum of their artifacts, which are very

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valuable. They were archaeologists but they also had wonderful taste and when I saw the inside of their house, I said: "this what we want". I appointed them as the interior decorators for the restaurant. I remember at the time Garrett Fitzgerald's brother who was the architect for what was being done. I had to make an argument against him because he said it's the architect's job to do the interior décor, but I had succeeded in convincing Tim O'Driscoll that I really had first class advice on the matter so the Hunts decided the interior décor which were red bawneen curtains and chairs and a wonderful Irish quilt on the main wall, that tied in with that and the carpet which was green. You entered and said: "oh this is lovely" and people who got off the flight and got onto a boat. or a small boat anyway, relevant to the big aircraft they had been on, came in usually across the water wanting to be uplifted. They usually were. From the beginning I had the relationship with the chef, Joe Sheridan, who, when I was interviewing for a chef I had put in... my appointment hadn't been announced, so I had put in an ad in the papers which said: "Chef required for an international restaurant. The best man in Ireland is required" something like that. He wrote me a letter which said: 'Dear Sir, I am the man for the job. Yours, Joe Sheridan" (laughs) When I turned it over on the back there was a pencil sketch of a head and B. O'Regan under it. I said: "how does he know?" That was the first thing I said: "how did you know who was going to be interviewing you." "Aw" he said "You are a hotelier, the grapevine" he said. "People like me would know it automatically." He became a very powerful source in the success of that restaurant and we had an agreement that things would not only taste well, but they would look well. They had to have eye appeal and one day as I passed through the kitchen. I saw a

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duckling going out on a tray and I said: "Chef it has no eye appeal" and he looked around desperately for something to give it eye appeal and Mary Downes, who had come from the Old Ground, his assistant, was taking the stems off red currants so he put his hand into the currants: "It has eye appeal now" he said defiantly at me. "Touch of genius Chef, red currants and duck go absolutely right", so the compliment, apparently he wanted another compliment and the following day he came in to my office with what was coffee, black coffee in a glass with white cream on top of it and said: "How's that for eye appeal?" "What's that?" I said and he said: "that is the first Irish coffee you will ever have." It was of course, and it became famous then and we gave it... we offered it to people who got on the launches and crossed the water and came in. They came into this startling restaurant and they were offered an Irish coffee while they were waiting. So, this was great. We continued that when they moved over to the land planes. As they came off their aircraft into the lounge, there was someone at the entrance to the restaurant who said: "would you like an Irish coffee?". I remember passing one day when two ladies had taken two and they sat down in the lounge and one of them said to the other, "desperate coffee, it's desperate coffee" and the other lady said to her "it's got Irish whiskey in it." "Oh its delicious" she said. (laughing)

So, anyway back to Foynes.

JH: Well you are an eyewitness to history there, now you can go into the most remote place and you can find an Irish coffee. Any place in the world.

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BO'R: You can. Years later I went to South America to spot where Irish whiskey was sold. It wasn't known at all in the Hilton hotel, there the operators of it, who were all black, offered a dinner to my wife and myself after I advised them of how things should be done. They sent us out to Robinson Crusoe Island which is off the main coast of, I can't remember the name of the place now. Anyway, while we were there we were drinking, not Irish whiskey but the drink was rum and I had memories, maybe I am repeating myself now, but I had memories of having *had* wonderful rum and tea in Germany when I was there. I was half way up the side of a mountain drinking it with young Germans, who were much better able to handle the snow. I could remember it and I said we will use rum and tea, and we will put an Irish coffee top on it, in other words just a cream. About a year after, I had a letter from the Hilton Hotel saying we are serving it regularly now. Anyway, pull me up if I deviate

JH: Just to return to Foynes at the time

BO'R: Yes

JH: The impression that we would get would be the driving force really was pride, pride in what Irish people could do. Not only do it as well as others but better. Could we touch on that type of, that sort of idea?

BOR: Well the secret of progress in any business is that those who are running it, not just the management but also the day-to-day workers, are interested in it, not just interested, but excited by it. I

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think early on the fact that we were giving food in a lovely setting, actually because of the good situation that we had from the point of view of the interior décor, the uniforms that they had, were báinín jackets, they knew what we were saying through the set up: "This is Ireland and this and we are not ordinary people" and that staff took that to heart. I think that early on and particularly having taken over from the British successfully and having it written because in those days crossing the Atlantic was a big event and big people were doing it and they were saying things about it.

JH: The extraordinary thing about it, as well at the time, which a lot of people wouldn't know now is, wouldn't remember, that you had this almost British enclave in the west of Ireland at the time, almost 300 hundred people. We were just curious about that change over that it changed from a situation whereby the British were supplying, doing all the things making the food and whatever and then you came on the scene and we were wondering if that had been a fairly smooth transition or not or what had happened at the time?

BO'R: Well it was made smooth by the fact that Tim O'Driscoll, who was the principal officer of aviation at that time had already established a very good relationship with the British representatives and it was a very friendly handover and from the very beginning I became quite good friend of the chief caterer for the British who was an older man than I was in fact, I went to London and met him there. I went to his club and so on. There was no... there was friendship from the beginning I had felt that way towards the English anyway, having an English wife. The handover was very easy and of course the

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facilities that I had got by that time, were better than facilities they had. Quite a bit of extra money had been put into the restaurant and I had succeeded in getting my views accepted by Tim O'Driscoll and the other civil servants, because I got as my advisor on the interior decoration John and Putzel Hunt who later became very close friends of mine in regard to the Bunratty project and were in fact internationally famous from the point of view of their ability as interior decorators. The handover was very good, even though it wasn't clear that it would be so, in the beginning they didn't know it would be as good as it was. I remember, I think it was Lord Headford who was there, number one representative saying to me: "Mr. O'Regan have you seen the awful chairs that you have been sent down", and of course I had been responsible for the colours of the chairs and so on through the Hunts. "We had green but you have red". I said: "it's not really red in the usual sense, it's a Connemara concept and that is a kind of skirt that they would wear in Connemara and its toning in with white walls". But from the beginning, what we were doing was welcomed. Hedges was the British head of catering for all their operations, which were considerable, even at that time, throughout the empire. He was from the beginning not an opponent or anything like that. He was a friend of mine. So, the handover was good.

JH: The sourcing of food at that time was that quite a problem?

BO'R: Yes, it was I remember. It was the first problem I had with the civil service, in fact this was why I went to Dublin to see the appropriate civil servant in regard to the supply of bacon that I could

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get. I had of course been told by Tim O'Driscoll as the senior man in touch with me: "everything you want and we will give you all our backing." Then, I found myself dealing with a civil servant, who had to conserve the bacon supplies. He found my demands too much and let me know that. I had been advised by my supplier, who was of the top bacon people, they will give you whatever you want, you just insist. Of course, I have never been that kind of a person, so I acted out of character and in fact tried to insist and I found suddenly strong resistance at civil service level. That was just the only incident I remember I had of that kind. There was of course a problem in regard to petrol as well but I seemed to be managing, I had purchased a van, that I used between Limerick and Foynes for goods. I was very much a working manager I can tell you that. Of course, there was very small staff, but at Foynes I had no waitresses because I said I'd better have well educated girls, who have been at university and are very good-looking. I can teach them to handle the meals alright, but the important thing is to have all these important people who were coming in, making contact with Irish people who would be well-educated and would make a good impression on them. The question of a good impression seems to have dominated a lot of my thinking at that. That there would be people that would be getting a first taste of Ireland in many cases and the taste would be those who served them really. Of course, the chef, who was Joe Sheridan, who was, like myself very conscious of the importance of creating a good impression. Most of the people who were travelling in those days were very...at a very high level of government or very wealthy. Certainly, very observant of everything that we had to do. So, our efforts went down well, but a strange thing happened in Foynes, I

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wanted to have something in Foynes in the pier building which would say: "Ireland" and by coincidence there was an exhibition of work of Peter Grant in Limerick and it included the head of Manannán Mac Lir, God of the wind and sea in Irish mythology. I was very impressed by it because I felt this was... it was a huge head with flying mane and so on, going through the seas, Manannán Mac Lir God of the wind and sea in Irish mythology and I asked him could I exhibit in Foynes. I didn't have the money or anything like that to buy it, I didn't think I could at that stage have tried or was strong enough relative to the civil service to get it bought. "Yes" he said, "if it's going to be there it will get good recognition." Of course, eventually when I wanted him to take it back, he said: "I can't take it back. Now it's been written up as being acquired by the government". So, I had, out of a fairly meager personal account, I had to buy that at that stage because I didn't feel strong enough. Eventually I gave it away to the club in Foynes and it's in the club in Foynes now, Manannán Mac Lir, God of the wind and sea in Irish mythology. I saw one rather devout lady kneeling down to say a prayer on one occasion (laughing) I was never sure who I should be thankful to in regard to the way I was treated; it was very, very good whether it was Lemass or Leydon. I think it was Leydon although I would have met Lemass quite frequently and he eventually appointed me to be Chairman of the Tourist Board but Leydon was the most... was the most involved of course in regards to Shannon although both Lemass and Leydon were very anxious that it would succeed. Of course, the particular job I had, which was related to running the restaurant end of it. There was no question of a shop in those days and the only reason I succeeded in getting a shop, without it being offered to somebody

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else to operate was that when I moved into Foynes I found that I had to handle the catering also in the pier building and in that building the British had a small kiosk, where you could get postcards and little things, chocolate and stuff like that. It was the fact that I took that over as well gave me... because it wasn't in my agreement, gave me the shop position. At the time I remember Lemass or Leydon, I think it was Leydon, said to me: "we had strong competition to take to everywhere, the shopping idea had taken over. We see you doing pretty alright so we will..."

JH: By that he would have meant of course, when he said a lot of strong competition he would have probably meant political pressure to take it

BO'R: I say that was it, a strange thing happened in Foynes. I wanted to have something...

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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.