

A LIFE LONG INFLUENCE

Does experience as a young member of the Society help to form one's thinking on social issues and influence one's response to these issues in later life? Three former Presidents of Ireland - Éamon De Valera, Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh and Mary McAleese - all members of Youth Conferences at one time - certainly thought so and have spoken about the positive influence their Society experience had on their thinking. Seán T., for example, has written that as Minister for Local Government in the 1930s his experience as a young member visiting the tenements in inner-city Dublin shaped the major programme of social housing for which he was responsible.

An example from the sphere of economic and social development, is Brendan O Regan, the former Chairman of Shannon Development, whom Mary McAleese has described as *"a true visionary who leaves a legacy that permeates throughout all levels of economic, social and cultural life in Ireland"*

In a recently published biography of Brendan O'Regan, (Irish Academic Press), the author, Brian O'Connell, describes the work of the school Conference in Blackrock College (of which O Regan became Secretary in his final year in 1935) when Fr John Charles McQuaid was College President.

"Visiting the poor in their own homes was a special object of the Society....and O'Regan's group in Blackrock College paid weekly visits to Emmet Square, a development of labourers' houses not far from the school, where they had three families under their care .They also visited Linden Convalescent Home and, in cooperation with members of the Catholic Seamanship Institute, met with merchant sailors on ships in Dublin Port."

It is interesting to speculate that this early contact with people in need may have influenced O'Regan's later career which was devoted to creatively generating sustainable employment. O'Regan established Ireland's first industrial estate at Shannon; attracted export-orientated industries; created a New Town; founded Ireland's first hotel management college; developed the first "duty free" business at Shannon Airport. In his later years, O Regan worked tirelessly for reconciliation and social justice, establishing three peace organisations, including Cooperation Ireland.

In O'Connell's biography, O Regan's daughter, Carmel, remembers something that her father had learnt from his social work that she believes guided his thinking on the development of Shannon.

"He was involved in the Vincent de Paul (in Ennis) and he would do the church collections and stuff like that, but I remember him telling me that he began to realise very quickly that just getting money for people and giving them handouts wasn't going to help the country and that what was needed was more fundamental. So, I think his whole move towards bringing industry into Shannon....came from realising that handouts weren't going to make the difference".

It's not often that we are privileged to get a glimpse of what drives people who make a real difference in the life of their community and country. In Brian O'Connell's biography we see in Brendan O'Regan someone who did just that and whose experience in the Society, both as a young man and later, influenced his actions for the common good.

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