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Brendan O'Regan – Irish Innovator, Visionary and Peacemaker, Brian O'Connell with Cian O'Carroll (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2018), xiv + 535 pages

Throughout the entire reading of this book, I was particularly struck by the extraordinary energy and goal-driven focus of Brendan O'Regan, a man who might have ended up as a good and attentive but ultimately forgettable country solicitor (an early consideration of his), but who instead became and remains a very memorable man of Clare, who has left a remarkable legacy for his home county and for his country in a least three distinct and apparently unrelated fields.

Shannon Town and the entire complex that is Shannon is in no small part due to Brendan O'Regan's dedication; later, he made major contributions to the working out of peace, reconciliation and a new measure of cooperation between communities in the north and the south of this island; and when he was in his mid-seventies, starting in 1993, he initiated the establishment of a village-sized organisation to help promote the wellbeing of and employment for people in Newmarket-on-Fergus, an enterprise that is also still thriving. All in all, a fully lived life.

In his later life, he received many well deserved honours –doctorates from three Irish universities, a UK honour for his peace-work and he was made Clareman of the Year and a Freeman of Limerick. With all this, he was a well-grounded family man, dedicated to his wife Rita, with whom he had five children and in whose company he most truly relaxed and enjoyed himself and them. He remained devoted to his Catholic faith, which he lived faithfully and fully. He lived until he was almost ninety-two years old, predeceased by his wife, but active and interested all through.

It must have been very difficult not to turn this fine biography into a hagiography. Yet the author has kept a fair balance, and if he errs in taking the side of his protagonist now and then, he does not do so excessively or in a way that is unfair to any other actor on the stage. And it was a well populated stage, with many well-known national and international figures having a part to play.

O'Regan's *magnum opus*, as regards his national contribution, is the story of Shannon and it is here that O'Connell portrays the drama in full flow, a drama full of action and people, hopes and expectations raised, opposed, dashed, persisted in and succeeding in ways not foreseen. The young O'Regan met two major players in the story when he was manager of the Stephen's Green Club in Dublin in 1943: Sean Lemass, then Minister for industry and Commerce, and John Leydon, secretary of the department. O'Regan was proposed for and duly appointed to the position of catering manager in Foynes, where plans were afoot to take over this function from the British in what was then 'the busiest landing point in Europe for transatlantic seaplanes'.¹ He arrived in early 1944.

O'Connell gives an indication of the uniqueness of Foynes: 'In no sense was Foynes a normal civilian airport. All passengers ... were travelling on war-related business for the Allied forces.'² Later he describes Foynes as 'in some respects resembling a boomtown during the Klondike goldrush ... [where there] was an almost British enclave in the West of Ireland – almost three hundred people. I

¹ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.40.

² O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.52.

can understand why de Valera was worried about the impression it might give'.³ And Ireland was officially a neutral country.

Getting catering and reception right in Foynes and Rineanna/Shannon proved hugely significant in both the medium and long term for tourism. Ireland in the 1940s/50s and even 1960s was not a tourism bonanza and the idea of improving facilities and investing money was resisted extensively – not just by government departments but even by those who would benefit most, hoteliers. These years are well portrayed here and the context is vital, because the lack of emphasis on the importance of tourism at the time is so hard to understand today, with our huge and successful emphasis on attractions such as the Wild Atlantic Way and the standards of Irish restaurants and hotels –so much that we take for granted. It was not always thus.

In 1950 O'Regan paid a six-week visit to the United States as part of a delegation chosen to study tourism. This visit made a paradigm change in his view of both tourism and the approach to encouraging it. He became a great follower of everything American for most of the rest of his life, but yet his innate Irish pride would compel him to add: 'You know all those fellows over there in America think they are the greatest, we're just as good if not better than them, and we can do things that they can't do'.⁴

The Shannon story is the big event in national terms, and it occupies over half of the book, around 340 pages. It is fascinating, and not merely in its gradual revelation of the man and his qualities, and his flaws. Sadly, his inability to see and resolve the major difference that arose between himself and his most astute and brilliant chief executive officer, and friend, Paul Quigley, led to his departure being overshadowed by an unhappy miasma – an episode treated carefully, fairly and extensively by O'Connell throughout chapter 17. Maybe the comment by Frank McCabe, an industrialist and Shannon development board member, gets to the root of the problem in management terms – that O'Regan and Quigley got their respective roles as chairman and chief executive officer confused.

O'Connell quotes Arthur O'Keefe (senior executive in Shannon development who worked with O'Regan for many years) on the legacy of O'Regan: '... he was one of the most unselfish people I have ever met, a man with a missionary zeal to get things done; he wasn't inspired by mercenary motives of self-aggrandisement or anything like that, he wanted to help others'.⁵

This zeal was very evident in the next phase of O'Regan's life – which O'Connell appropriately calls 'Waging Peace'.⁶ Arising from a chance visit to Belfast in 1976 O'Regan witnessed the huge march of 10,000 women, both nationalist and unionist, protesting at the ongoing violence which had just then killed three children out with their mother on the street. This encounter, he said, 'sent me off on a peace trail I've engaged in ever since'.⁷ Over the next decade O'Regan worked with all his energy and other people skills, largely in the establishment and growth of the organisation now known as Cooperation Ireland, a non-governmental body which built up great credibility in both of the northern communities – credited on the tenth anniversary of its foundation

³ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.62.

⁴ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.108.

⁵ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.503.

⁶ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, chapter 19.

⁷ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.404.

with doing more than any other body 'to increase communication and co-operation between people north and south'⁸ – even if the praise seems fulsome, the organisation is still very active and working to the fore in the ongoing work of peace in Ireland.

And there was still more to do – finding himself and his wife in Newmarket-on-Fergus renting a house after the sale of their own house, he got to know his new neighbours, and it wasn't long before the parish priest called to welcome the O'Regans and spoke about a small parish group working on generating employment locally. This was all the encouragement needed by O'Regan, and the result was the establishment of a local body called *Obair*, intended to 'provide an environment which allows people of the parish to work together to achieve common goals', such as bringing 'new thinking and focus to the problem of unemployment in rural Ireland'.⁹ *Obair* is still in being, but O'Regan had hoped the idea would catch on and become a national plan – this did not happen.

O'Connell portrays a man who consistently gave his careful attention to the detail of what makes a thing work as it should – he would understand fully that, in the phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'sheer plod makes plough down sillion shine': he practised this all his life. A mark of the man was his constancy in seeking the good of others – attested to by several people in this work – and his unwillingness to seek out honour or advantage for himself. In the final chapter, the author writes on the source of O'Regan's drive and ambition: 'The two main motivating factors were his sense of Irishness and a determination to create jobs for other people to save them and their families from the social disruption of unemployment or emigration. He often repeated his fathers' maxim: "The most important thing about life is to create work for others, if you can".¹⁰

The course of his life as presented here shows that O'Regan's Catholic faith, while very evidently of import to him, wasn't a doctrinaire faith so much as faith grounded in a commitment to assist and enable the wellbeing of others, and that he was true to that commitment over the years. He had seen poverty and inequality at close quarters while at home in Sixmilebridge and later: he knew that he was privileged. This awareness stayed with him as a spur to aim at changing 'Irish attitudes towards world poverty which he regarded as principally caused by an unfair international economic system'.¹¹

O'Regan's life as portrayed in this gripping story is not just a well-told tale of a fine, virtuous man demonstrating very commendable qualities which are an example to be put before us to admire and even to follow – it is an amazing story of achievement by an ordinary man who at no stage in his life yielded to the temptation (which must often have been offered) to seek self-aggrandisement, whose legendary self-effacing modesty sat comfortably with a dedicated determination to work through all obstacles to the fulfilment of his goals, who was proudly Irish, unobtrusively (but unmistakably) Catholic, and whose constant concern was the well-being of the others in his life.

This well and carefully written book is very readable. Especially in the chapters about the early days in and the growth of Shannon, the story races with all the pace of an unfolding drama.

⁸ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p. 444

⁹ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.474.

¹⁰ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.502.

¹¹ O'Connell with O'Carroll, *Brendan O'Regan*, p.324.

The publishers Irish Academic Press and Copper Reed Studio are to be complimented on the excellence of the design, printing and layout of the book, well suited to the subject.

It is not easy to get too excited about the lives of most business people. Here, however, the author has portrayed a man of whom the words of St Irenaeus in the second century might not be said amiss: 'The glory of God is man alive'. In every human sense, Brendan O'Regan was a man fully alive. I commend this book unreservedly.

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