

Innovator who refused to take 'no' for an answer

Biography: Brendan O'Regan: Irish Innovator, Visionary and Peacemaker, Brian O'Connell with Cian O'Carroll, Irish Academic Press, hardback, 552 pages, €29.99

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The legacy of a singular man who helped transform the nation as a member of the first generation of 'free Irishmen' is set out in a fine new book.

In the late 1960s, a senior executive working for Brendan O'Regan observed his boss painting a harbour scene in Connemara, a thatched cottage nearby. O'Regan's wife Rita was not impressed.

"Isn't he awful - a blob for a door - a splat for each window - he doesn't bother to put in detail," she said.

This observation reflected O'Regan's management style, his former colleague suggests.

"In the executive world that is precisely the way he operated - outlining the big picture and letting others fill in the detail," a new biography Brendan O'Regan: Irish Innovator, Visionary and Peacemaker by Brian O'Connell with Cian O'Carroll notes.

Born in Sixmilebridge in Clare in 1917, O'Regan had an astonishing influence both nationally and internationally.

He opened the world's first duty-free shop at Shannon, creating a global industry. He established the world's first industrial estate, the Shannon Free Zone, which played a fundamental role in the economic development of the mid-west (and China); founded the Shannon College of Hotel Management, was involved in Shannon Heritage which is among the largest operators of heritage sites in the State and also played a valuable role in the peace process through Cooperation North, now Cooperation Ireland.

There were other strings to his bow, too: Chair of the Shannon Free Airport Development Company which established Shannon Town while promoting

regional development, serving as chair of Bord Fáilte, and sitting on the first executive board of aid agency Trócaire. He also ran a successful family hotel.

It's hard to overestimate his influence, and he appears to have been driven by a deep sense of obligation.

"O'Regan was conscious that, as a member of what he regularly referred to as the first generation of free Irishmen, he was taxed with justifying the nation's hard-won independence," the book notes. "This could only be done by creating employment and better living standards for his fellow citizens, so as to reverse the economic and population decline of the century since the Famine."

Based on more than 90 interviews, as well as 11 hours of interviews with O'Regan in 2004 when he was 87 years old, this book presents a picture of a man who spent much of his career "finding ways to overcome the dead hand of bureaucracy", aided by his contacts in the upper reaches of the civil service.

The son of a hotelier, O'Regan trained in Wales, Germany and London, moving on to manage the Falls Hotel in Ennistymon and the Stephen's Green Club in Dublin where his ability was spotted by Seán Lemass who requested he take over the catering supplies to the flying boats at Foynes in Limerick for £1,000 a year, plus a share of the profits. He later moved to the newly-developed Shannon Airport.

At the time, transatlantic airlines had to stop in the mid-west to refuel and by 1945, the restaurant was recognised as being among the best in Ireland as O'Regan employed individuals who "shared his own drive to produce the finest quality food and present the best aspect of Ireland to the world". The most important appointment was that of head chef.

"I had put an ad in the papers which said 'Chef required for an international restaurant. The best man in Ireland is required', something like that," O'Regan recalled. "A letter arrived which said 'Dear Sir. I am the man for the job. Yours, Joe Sheridan'."

Sheridan cooked for heads of State, royalty, celebrities and movie stars who passed through, with both men agreeing that food had to have "eye appeal" which led to the creation of the Irish coffee to warm up passengers who endured a 10 to 15-hour journey across the Atlantic.

Waiting staff were employed in a manner which would not be tolerated today - on the basis of their education and looks.

"I can teach them how to handle the meals all right but the important thing was 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," O'Regan said.

This is a weighty tome, running to more than 500 pages, but it rattles along with little superfluous detail, painting a picture of a doer who never let officialdom hamper his vision of growing the mid-west, promoting peace and improving the lot of his fellow citizens. That said, aspects could be shorter, particularly around his role in the peace process.

Unlike O'Regan's supposed management style, this authoritative biography not only sets out his achievements and legacy in great detail, illustrated with pictures from the time, but also paints a picture of the evolution of Irish industry, aviation and tourism as the nation began the slow process of modernisation. For that alone, it's worth a read, but it offers much more besides.

The citation from National University of Ireland, which presented him with an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, perhaps sums him up best: "Rare is the man of whom it can be justly said that he transformed the social, economic and industrial life of a whole region."

This book does a fine job in setting out how he achieved that.

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