

DAMIAN BRENNAN, LEITRIM PERSON OF THE YEAR

A Leitrim Man Worthy of High Honour

Michael L O'Rourke

DO YOU REMEMBER the leopard in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* that was found on the upper slopes of the mountain, far away above the general hunting ground of his kind? Why had he gone up so far? Ernest Hemingway speculated that he was a rare member of the species, impelled by some strange force to seek a world above that known to his fellows. It is unlikely, but for Hemingway the story of the leopard in this wonderful novel was a symbol of the quest for the farther shores of experience. He used to talk about his ambition to take writing from algebra into calculus - it was an odd parallel but one understood. Indeed, it is a familiar hunger, if for most it comes in other contexts and then only fleetingly. We all long for a never-ending hinterland, a further outback to be explored. In us there is a constant rebellion against the concept of all being worked out, of all being known. We speak of someone as being the greatest ever in his field, so great that it is impossible that he can ever be eclipsed - and yet, we do not mean it. Within us there is a scarcely-acknowledged hope that someone will come who can at least give grounds for argument that he is even greater. And yet sometimes we almost admit that such hope is more likely a fantasy, that Everest has been climbed and that there are no hidden mountains to be discovered and conquered.

Today in politics we wish for



Damian Brennan (photos by John Keaney)
good politicians as never before. There is a mourning for a time before public

life was infected with naked corruption, deception and abrasive self-aggrandisement. The subject of my article is a politician who bestrides his field with decency, innate honesty and integrity. He too has climbed his Everest and has reached the upper slopes. His very ordinariness, his modesty and affability are distinguishing features of his personality, a guarantee in itself that no overvaulting personal ambition would lead him to take shortcuts or abuses of power in the work that he loves and adores. His dedication to duty and service, his care and interest in his constituents are truly remarkable features of his persona - in short, he has what Americans call 'character' and there is no doubt that this important quality will be greatly valued in present and future politicians. It can be stated that he has a tolerance that is born not so much out of liberalism as out of a gentle and humane consideration for others.

Day in, day out, he gives of himself in the service of others from dawn to dusk. He endures a work schedule and discipline that makes the regime of a Trappist monk seem like an exercise in self-indulgence. We are thankful and blessed that we have such a man as our local representative and can only hope that his values and standards will shine forth like a beacon of light on the political seas in the years ahead. In short, a gentleman - the word conjures up forgotten concepts such as manliness and civility.

Cloone—his Fountain of Youth

Damian J Brennan was born on 11th July 1951, the eldest of five children born to Mike Joe & Nancy Brennan. Adlerian psychologists remind us that the eldest is always the ambitious type, competitive, responsible and independent-minded. Politician, teacher, school principal, family man, farmer and entrepreneur - his many roles form a rich tapestry of human endeavour and ingenuity. Cloone, his beloved parish has been transformed during his political lifetime. I have no doubt that this 'gleaming jewel' among villages has been changed, changed utterly, by his endeavours and modernising vision. His beloved Cornulla, the townland of his childhood, of his first universe, nestles peacefully amid the drumlin hills of the surrounding countryside. It is typical Leitrim landscape. You could be in another world. Those fields and



Damian & Olive

Full well the busy
whisper, circling
round,
Conveyed the dismay
tidings when he
frowned.

Yet he was kind; or if
severe in aught,
The love he bore to
learning was in fault.

OLIVER GOLDSMITH,
THE DESERTED VIL-
LAGE.

These beautiful
lines of Oliver
Goldsmith are a
fitting reminder
of the important
role of the vil-
lage schoolmas-
ter in village and
parish life. A
teacher is the
most subtle
being that there

Whenever I visit Damian in his classroom, I am never less than impressed with the openness, freedom, compassion, dedication and love of learning that soon becomes apparent. His past pupils speak of his encouragement to them, of his respect for each individual pupil, and of the dynamism, energy and enthusiasm that imbues his work in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities on the football field. There is here a realisation that the task of the educator is nurturing relational capacities - the relation in education is one of pure dialogue, of building up self-esteem and of giving young pupils an emotionally secure base in the classroom. On all of these counts, Damian has given of himself unflinchingly over the years. His record is one of service and dedication.

The Entrepreneur

We must also refer to Damian, the entrepreneur, the adventurer who sees a business opportunity and takes the risk to sail forth into the unknown. Michael Smurfit was once asked to give a definition of the entrepreneur. He remarked 'that the entrepreneur is like the eagle, he soars alone, he flies alone and he hunts alone.' In other words, enterprising people tend to be independent and self-reliant, more determined and enthusiastic than others. They tend also to be risk-takers and above all else, they are winners whose lives are guided by the principle: 'I must, I can, I will'. The elimination of the killer phrase is also part of their mental adaptation, and how often we hear of those killer phrases: 'let's give it more thought', 'We are not ready for that', 'It's too radical a plan', 'It's too ambitious an idea'.

Damian's entrepreneurial spirit was soon to be harnessed in the interests of his parish with the development of two major community projects in the eighties. As

hills were the environs that nurtured the first yearnings for success and enterprise in the young psyche. All of us in Leitrim know that the harsh sociological landscape of our county requires us to energise the commitment to make a success of life in the big world outside the native habitat. Not so with Damian - he remained in his native parish and made a success of his various roles. The Holy Grail was obtained on native soil among his people. As a born leader, he knew wisely that people who share a common direction and a sense of community can get where they're going quicker and easier because they're travelling on the strength of one another.

Damian: The Master and School Principal:
Beside you straggling fence that skirts the way,
With blossomed furze unprofitably gay,
There, in his noisy mansion, skilled to rule,
The Village master taught his little school.
A man severe he was, and stern to view;
I knew him well, and every truant knew:
Well had the boding tremblers learned to trace
The day's disasters in his morning face;
Full well they laughed with counterfeited glee
At all his jokes, for many a joke had he;

is. A really good teacher is a very highly developed, subtle person because, he or she has to be in tune with so many intellectual possibilities. There are so many things demanded of a teacher. A teacher has to be the most highly developed kind of person that there is - much more than a parent even because he or she has to be a parent to forty or fifty people during a day. I'm quite convinced that teaching has to do with certain forms of intensity. You cannot be a dull talker and a good teacher. It has to do with a certain kind of excitement and enthusiasm is very important. In teaching, I think the most important thing is to communicate your own vision of things with as much eloquence and enthusiasm as you can muster and to be a really good listener to objections to your vision of things and to reconcile always. It's a pattern of expression and reconciliation, of coaxing out the egos of young people and of bringing them out into the light of day. I think that's truly the core of it.

chairman of Cloone Park Development Committee, he presided over the construction of a £200,000 project and a beautiful new grounds and club-house were officially opened in 1980. This great success story was followed by the completion of a spectacular Parish Community Centre which was opened in 1985. Damian Brennan was the driving force behind this committee also. Apart from these major developments, he found time to establish the first factory in Cloone in 1984, known as 'Leitrim Signs' which continued to manufacture quality products up until 1997, when the company was subsumed into the business expansion programme of his brother, Kieran. These are remarkable achievements which were brought to fruition by the enthusiasm and unremitting perseverance of one man in a hurry with impatience and vision. An impatient man is always poised for flight. In the case of Damian, he knew what the flight plans were, he took the controls and the final landings were smooth and assured.

Damian the Footballer and Sportsman

The career of many a footballer is like a short story. That of Damian Brennan has the amplitude of a novel. He was simply a great footballer. He could approach every game with astonishing freshness; he was born again every time he ran onto the field. He knew that there was only one way to play football - to give your all. Although small in stature, his steely determination, agility and sharp intuition, were key components of his style as a great player.

In his early years, he won major honours and was a member of a victorious Leinster winning St. Mel's team. He won a Sigerson Cup Medal with University College Maynooth. He played inter-county football for Leitrim at Under - 16, Minor and Senior Lev-



The Brennan Family: Donal, Aisling, Lorraine, Olive, Damian, Colette, Niall & Sinead. At the front is Declan. Inset: Eldest daughter Gillian who is now in Australia

els. His contribution to his club, Cloone, have been legendary. Like Hemingway's leopard, he assaulted the impossible in 1980 as Captain of a Senior Championship winning side - the first Senior Championship title for Cloone in decades.

In more recent years, like Oisín in Tír Na nÓg, indeed like Napoleon, he donned the jersey of his beloved Cloone at an age when others might consider hill-walking to be a safer pursuit. In 1998, at the age of forty seven, he came on as a substitute for the last fifteen minutes in the Junior Championship Final, much to the delight of the Cloone fans and the amusement of the opposition, Bornacoola. The teams were deadlocked on equal scores. In less than five minutes he had scored a point and set up a goal, and another Championship Cup was on its way to Cloone. Moments of beauty in sport are all the sweeter because they are so hard to attain. Damian Brennan has contributed many such moments. He has shown a keen interest in coaching in more recent times. He will be an outstanding success for there are many shining elements in his armour acquired on the battlefield of life over many decades.

Damian the Farmer

'But I cannot deny my past
To which myself is wed,
The women figure cannot
Undo its thread
Though yet her name keeps
ringing like a bell
In an under-water belfry'

The above lines of Louis MacNeice remind one of roots and of the importance of one's first universe. Damian's closeness to roots is best exemplified in his interest in farming whether in hay-field, on turf-bank or among his cattle in the green pastures that run parallel to the Keeldra Road. Farming, perhaps, is his therapy, his centre of healing and of rejuvenation after an arduous and challenging day at the chalk-face. It is in a sense a return to the enchanting world of his youth, 'to pools among the rushes that scarce could bathe a star', a world best remembered and captured in the lines of the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas:

Now I was young and easy under the apple boughs.
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green.
And I was green and care free, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home.
All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house.
Nothing I cared in the lamb white days, that time
would take me.

Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand.

Time held me green and dying

Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Leitrim Person of the Year

It is with great joy then that we learn of Damian's nomination as Leitrim Person of the Year for 1999. It is richly deserved and all of his family, wife Olive, three sons and five daughters, his many close friends and constituents, will likewise be greatly honoured. Olive too will be greatly overjoyed with this prestigious recognition. She has been Damian's North Star, his loyal lieutenant, his confidante and friend over all these years. The final year of the century, 1999, has been an annus mirabilis for this worthy recipient—he was re-elected to the county council; he established a new company—The Natural Health Company of Ireland; he presided over the spectacular

success of the Cloone/Aughavas Welcome Home Festival as a dynamic chairman, in August and finally he and Olive celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

He believes resolutely in the rejuvenation of his native County Leitrim. He sees a bright, shining future for the county and reminds this writer that 'anything that can be done anywhere in Ireland can now be done just as effectively in Co. Leitrim with the help of Modern Information Technology Systems. The major difference is that people can perform these tasks, run IT businesses etc., in an idyllic setting, stress free and far from the madding crowds of queues and traffic jams.' His faith in the future is well founded. Seamus Heaney's lines are appropriate in context:

'And next thing, suddenly, this change of mood
Books open in the newly-wired kitchens

Young heads that might have dozed a life away
Against the flanks of milking cows were busy
Paving and pencilling their first causeways
Across the prescribed texts. The paving stones
Of quadrangles came next and a grammar
Of imperatives, the new age of demands.
What looks the strongest has outlived its term.
The future lies with what's affirmed from under.

In looking for the best in others and in giving the best he has, Damian would surely concur with Goethe's vision of what constitutes quality leadership. For he himself is the very embodiment and essence of this noble vision:

'If we take people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat them as if they were what they ought to be, we help them to become what they are capable of becoming'

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