

## FRANK BRENNAN

*Sean Murtagh*

FRANK BRENNAN missed the Annual Festival in Ballinamore, for the very first time, in August 2015. The many hundreds that attend each year take home different memories from it, having participated in different activities as they grow older. I am not sure if Frank was ever in the Fancy Dress or the Slow Bicycle Race as a teenager, but he certainly was a keen participant in the social side of the Festival. In the last number of years he was very much involved in both the John McGahern Tour and also in a number of historical talks in the Library. Sadly, after failing health for the last twelve months of his life, Frank passed away peacefully on September 1st, 2015.

By profession Frank was an accountant and economist. In his professional life his achievements were staggering. Having qualified from UCD with a degree in Economics and Political Science, he worked for some time with the Revenue Commissioners, moving on to some of the large Accountancy firms and eventually setting up his own business as a tax consultant. Frank always played down his achievements, but he was awarded a Doctorate of

Economic Science by UCD in 1997 for his work and research in taxation. At the time, he and Dr T K Whitaker were the only two recipients of that honour.

Throughout his career he wrote more than thirty books on taxation. Five years ago he retired from active business, but up until shortly before his death he acted in an advisory capacity to some of Ireland's leading companies.

In spite of all these achievements, in his own mind he saw his life as one seamless adventure between his business and personal activities. Everybody was his friend and he was everyone's friend.

He operated in his own orbit and if you tuned in on his frequency, you had access to a fountain of knowledge. Anyone that knew him well would know that Frank worked in a different time zone than most. If you did fit into that zone you would be on a magical journey. Frank did not measure time by the clock, rather by the length it took to enjoy someone's company or finish what he was doing. This aspect of Frank's character impressed many people, but there were also those that it frustrated.

Frank lived most of his working

life in Dublin. He travelled extensively, but seldom to sun destinations or on the normal tourist trails. In his student days he spent his summers in New York and, as he would say himself, "when there was a few more bob around" he travelled a bit further. In spite of his failing health, he had, in recent years, travelled to Hong Kong, Russia, Egypt and Cuba.

Some would say Frank lived a nomadic type of life, spending time in Dublin, Limerick & Cavan, but despite all his travels, it was Leitrim he gravitated to mostly. He had a small cottage near Drumcong, overlooking Lough Scur on the Shannon-Erne Waterway and it became a refuge for him. No landline and not great mobile phone coverage—perfect for Frank.

After the death of John McGahern, Frank was keen to keep the writer's legacy alive. Having always been a fan of McGahern's writing, he felt that it was essential that McGahern's folklore and writings would be remembered in County Leitrim and in the Ballinamore area. His guided tour around Ballinamore became a regular event during the annual Festival. Anyone who attended the tour

will know it was both entertaining and informative, visiting some of the real and fictional locations from McGahern's life and writing. Just like a crossword, it could be enjoyed on a cryptic or simple level. Frank's hope was that the McGahern name would be as synonymous with Ballinamore as the Shakespeare name is with Stratford on Avon. He had many ideas for a themed pub that would be a focal point for the McGahern legacy. Indeed, he also felt that there was a business opportunity for someone to have a themed venue that would focus on the Cavan-Leitrim Narrow Gauge Railway. I hope that if either of these become a reality, that Frank would be remembered for his vision and enthusiasm

I spent a lot of my youth around Ballinamore and for a short time I went to primary school there. On the way to school I crossed three bridges, but as a child I had no idea where the rivers below came from or went to, I just threw stones into them. Remnants of the old narrow gauge railway line were still round the town. As a young teenager, Frank brought it all to life for me as I realised that Ballinamore was a very important transport town and hub, with an important legacy. A walk through the town was like a trip back in time, I could almost hear the whistle of the locos and the whoosh of the steam trains as he

described yesteryear in a mixture of fact and humour. As a man with vision, he explained how a time came for the railway to replace the Canal. Equally, and in the same way, a time came when road transport became more effective than the railway, leading to its demise. Of course, as I got older these walks became more interesting as we stopped for some "refreshments" on the way. In the 1990s, when it was announced that the old Ballinamore-Ballyconnell Canal would be refurbished and opened as the Shannon-Erne Waterway, Frank was very excited for the prosperity he felt would follow. For a time, Frank and his brother Brendan operated a passenger pleasure boat on the canal. He became part of a business group that lobbied extensively to have the area along the canal and some of the areas in proximity to the upper regions of the Shannon, receive tax designation so that the local economy could benefit and thrive from the waterway.

One of the features of Frank's business was organising conferences to brief clients on the Finance Act and various developments in the world of finance, normally published after the budget. Whenever possible, he steered them to Lovely Leitrim for these briefings, which always had a social dimension. Frank certainly subscribed to the notion that "all work and no play made Jack a



■ **IFrank Brennan**

dull boy" In fact, as recently as May 2015, he hosted a group on what would be his last tour of the area. Those that accompanied him said he certainly finished the touring side of his career on a high perhaps he knew it would be his last. At the end of these trips he loved nothing more than to finish up a day's touring in some of the local pubs, Prior's, Reynolds's, The Commercial Hotel or McGirl's in Ballinamore or in Conway's in Drumshanbo. These were the places where people saw him as the charmer he was.

Frank always had a keen interest in sport. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge on all things GAA. His success on the field of sport was varied, but it is a fact that he won a Connacht Minor Hurling Championship medal for Leitrim in 1963 a story he loved to tell to his relations and many friends in Limerick. Never a stranger in Croke Park, he enjoyed all levels of games. His interest in college football and schoolboy sport in general was

intense. It is a little ironic that the last game he attended with my father was earlier this year in Nenagh, between Dingle College and St Pat's, Cavan.

Over the years Frank spent a lot of time in Limerick and he charmed, beguiled and impressed my friends with his knowledge of Limerick Hurling and Munster Rugby. He also claimed to have been one of the now reputed 100,000 people that attended the famous rugby match in Thomand Park, Limerick, in 1978, when Munster became the first team in the northern hemisphere to beat the All Blacks.

One of the many books Frank wrote was about the Co-Operative Movement, in particular the history of Carrigallen Co-Operative. His late father Jack was the manager there for over thirty years, before he came to Ballinamore in the mid 1960's to manage St Bridget's Co-Op, which at the time was a branch of Killeshandra Creamery. Many business people with whom Frank associated regarded the Co-Operative structure as tedious and not very efficient. Although he was aware of the shortcomings and the challenges of running a business by committee, he felt that rural Ireland benefited.

In recent times, he felt that efforts by some of the larger Co-Ops to

remove the element of control farmers had, could have a negative effect on rural Ireland.

On a lighter note, while Frank was researching his book about the Co-Operative movement in the national archives, he came across an incident that drew his attention. It was an account of a dispute between a Co-Op committee, the shareholders and the Creamery Manager in the south of the country. A dispute had arisen over the purchase of creamery cans that seemed to have lasted for thirty years. Surprised, but not sure, the creamery cans were the cause of the dispute, he took a spin down to the area to see if a bit of checking around would give him any clues as to what may have been the real problem.

After one or two visits to the area and a few pints here and there, he had gained the confidence of a local man who eventually told him that the dispute "was more to do with another man's wife than creamery cans". He got a better kick out of that kind of information than revelations about balance sheets or profitability.

Frank had a passion for cars, and a certain weakness for sporty versions. In our extended family, being a good driver is seen as a 'core value'; many of us make our living as drivers. For all his ability

and genius, I don't think I am giving away any family secrets when I say that Frank, much as he tried, never came up to the perceived standard when it came to driving. In his later years I think he finally realised that his hands were more skilful with a calculator than a steering wheel.

Over the days of Frank's reposing and funeral, as a family we met many of his wide circle of friends and heard stories about a kind and generous man, a bit eccentric on occasions, but never boring or dull. It was particular heartening to hear a story from two men who had travelled from Offaly. They recounted how Frank had shown remarkable generosity to their community nearly twenty years ago in a lovely gesture and a very charitable act that changed life for the people in the parish forever. Most of Frank's generosity and kindness was subtle, without any fanfare.

The arrival of his grandson, baby Jack, gave Frank, or Francie as all of us in the family called him, a great sense of joy that he shared with his daughters Orraith and Dearbhla. They and all members of the extended Brennan family, for so many reasons, will miss him terribly.

*The author, Sean Murtagh is a nephew of Frank Brennan.*