

# Athlone Literary Festival



## **REPORT ON 2008 EVENT**

Compiled on the basis of Committee Members observations, and with the help of reports which appeared in Athlone Voice, Athlone Topic and Westmeath Independent newspapers.

*Edited by George Eaton*

### **The Donleavy Interview**

Committee Member Jarlath Duffy welcomed and introduced to a large audience, the writer J.P. Donleavy and Fintan O'Toole of The Irish Times.

Their live interview on Saturday afternoon in the Prince of Wales Hotel, Athlone, was one of the highlights of the Festival. J.P. Donleavy acknowledged that one of the reasons he continued to live in Ireland was the tax incentive.

During the interview Mr. O'Toole suggested to Mr. Donleavy that it seemed extraordinary that a film has never been made of his famous book "The Gingerman". Yes, he said it was, but emphasised: "There are several who thought of making it into a film. Everybody who went to Hollywood, thought of making the film," he said.

The interview marked trips down memory lane to the Dublin of such literary greats as Brendan Behan and Patrick Kavanagh, to name but two; he has fond memories of his early days in Trinity College where he studied. "Dublin was also pervaded by people in those days who aspired to be writers," he remarked.

Fintan O'Toole said the era was also romanticised with Behan, Kavanagh, other writers and poets and himself and he asked JP if he felt it was a dangerous place to be. "You had to get out of the pub if you wanted to be a writer," he replied.

He also recalled how in his early years when in Ireland he had started writing "The Ginger Man" and had a small cottage in a rural and remote part of County Wicklow. He had been away for a while from the cottage and when he returned he found that the place was in disarray. He had quite a number of shoes in his possession and he noticed they were all missing.

"It was a very isolated cottage and sometime later I heard a man singing coming up the laneway," he stated. When he looked out he saw that his friend Brendan Behan was coming up the lane. "Brendan said he hated the country, hated country people and he needed drink (alcohol) so he had gone off to the nearest pub," he said.

Mr. Donleavy later asked Brendan what he had done with all his shoes and he replied that as it was very wet and the laneway and the road were flooded he had found a large bag and put all the shoes in it. Every few yards when the shoes got wet he put on another pair as he didn't want to get his feet wet!

Later in the room of the cottage where he had the first manuscript of "The Ginger Man" he found it had been opened up. Brendan Behan remarked to him a short time later: "That manuscript will go around the world.". Mr. Donleavy said he always found it quite amazing – even to this very day – Brendan would have taken a look at the manuscript and realised the potential. "I always find that amazing," he continued.

He revealed that "The Ginger Man" was started in Dublin and finished in America.

He admitted that a very difficult part of his life was when the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland managed to have the play version banned from production on the Dublin stage in 1961.

In a question and answer session afterwards with members of the audience, he said he was living in London at the time, but it made him very conscious of the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

When Fintan O'Toole put it to him that he must have been extraordinarily disciplined not to over-luxuriate in the space he had created for himself at his home in North Westmeath, the distinguished writer said he has been here in Ireland for well over half a century.

He also felt that Ireland has become one of the most astonishing places in the world to live. "Few places around the world have reached the heights that this country has," he maintained.

Admitting he has a little bit of nostalgia for some of the eccentric folk who lived in Ireland in the past, Mr. Donleavy accepted that at this stage of his life his partaking in social activities is limited. "Your social life is limited because of age. You rely on nostalgia," he said.

Mr. O'Toole officially thanked Mr. Donleavy for the very fascinating afternoon he had provided for the Athlone Literary Festival and he also acknowledged the wonderful pleasure and privilege of talking with him.

Mr. Jarlath Duffy of Athlone Literary Festival Committee, joined in tribute to Mr. Donleavy and expressed sincere appreciation to Mr. O'Toole.

### **Magan's Travels**

Manchan Magan, a travel writer, who has made over 30 documentaries for TG4, including "No Bearla", his series travelling around Ireland speaking only Irish, writes a travel column for The Irish Times.

In a light-hearted informal and engaging way he outlined to the attendance why he got involved in travel writing and what he considers makes good travel writing, noting that, at the moment at least, it's a mode that's in decline in terms of selling books.

From Killashee in County Longford, and now living in Collinstown, Westmeath, he joked that his background ancestry was of a revolutionary inclination so that, in the poverty stricken 80s, he decided to go to Germany to earn money as he spoke the language. His mother "allowed" him to go provided he would keep a diary of the adventure and so, in a sense, the whole idea of travel writing began for him.

Germany allowed him earn enough money to go on the only serious trip he could afford at the time - in the back of a truck down to Africa. He survived the tremendous cold through France and Spain before getting over to Morocco, leading into a place that showed him that there was more to the world than South Dublin.

Reading it back now he finds the writing in some pages of the diary to be very self-obsessed but there's also a genuine passion to find out where he fitted in through culture. Many in the truck weren't interested in mixing in with the locals, and he managed to overcome that to some extent and learn more about the areas and cultures involved.

After a number of books, years, and TV programmes, he had published a book on that African trip very recently, entitled "Book Fever".

He had travelled a lot since then for example spending months in India living in a hut-like structure and trying to get into the Indian mindset. Then he was asked to get involved with TG4 and this led to a series of programmes, many of them going back to places he had previously spent time in.

While such programmes were great, he was anxious to write in order to describe some of the cultures in a way that a TV programme wouldn't allow, and so the travel books came about.

In a travel book one couldn't just write as in a guide book, one had to put oneself, or at least a perception of oneself, into the books, while matters such as humour and a strong sense of humanity were also crucial.

"If you have a person's book and the person's humanity strongly in it, then that can be beautiful, if the other person can write", he added. Other matters, such as anthropology, geography, history, flora and fauna, and so on, were good additions. As well as that, if you had a strong cultural sense of your own, you could then appreciate the cultural sense of others.

It also helped hugely if you could have a strong narrative as part of the book. Some travel writers clearly used a certain amount of artistic licence in this respect.

Among his favourite travel books he listed Redmond O'Hanlon's book on Borneo, Dervla Murphy's "At Full Tilt", and Tim Severin's "Brendan Voyage".

## **Egan Book Launch**

Athlone's Desmond Egan must be one of the most translated Irish poets, Professor Brian Arkins of the National University of Ireland, Galway, said at the launch of "September Dandelion", the first bilingual Chinese/English poetry book published in Ireland.

The Professor said it was indeed a great pleasure to launch the book for the Athlone poet, someone who had published about 20 volumes of poetry. He added that Desmond Egan wrote the Midlands as Joyce wrote Dublin. The event was introduced by George Eaton of the Literary Festival. He said that Desmond Egan had taken an interest in the work of the Literary Festival from an early stage and was more than welcome back, as he was "a quintessential Athlonian", he added.

Mr. Egan told the gathering, which included up to ten Chinese representatives, that he was personally very grateful to Professor Arkins, who had done so much over the years to maintain standards in terms of both literary criticism and also English criticism, and who had written very authoritative books on Joyce and WB Yeats, and was working on a major one on Shakespeare.

He also welcomed Kaihong Liu, whom he described as a beautiful Chinese translator who is also head of The Poetry Institute of China, and the other Chinese who had travelled with her to be present at the Athlone occasion. After a bilingual reading of a number of the poems, both in English and Mandarin, Kai then addressed the gathering and said that she had a great love of Desmond Egan's poetry, and that it spoke not just to Irish people but to the world. He had a great understanding of Chinese history and culture, she added.

## **Pakenham History**

Another of the speakers at the Festival was Eliza Pakenham, author of "Soldier, Sailor: An Intimate Portrait of an Irish Family". While introducing her, Dr. Patrick Murray pointed out that her father is the historian Thomas Pakenham, who has written an excellent account of the Boer War, while her mother was the biographer Elizabeth Longford.

Her grandfather was Lord Longford, a politician and historian, a rare politician who put principle before expediency, and who had written a great account of the Anglo Irish Treaty negotiations, and who had been a biographer of de Valera.

Eliza gave a wonderful account of the day to day work that goes into writing a historical work – the excitement of unearthing some new primary source material after much effort, being honest about the period concerned, building a relationship with the characters involved, and using methods such as a slice-of-life technique.

## **Displaced in Athlone**

Committee Member Mel O'Flynn introduced dramatist and playwright, Michael Harding, also a columnist with The Irish Times ("Displaced in Mullingar") delighted the attendance with a performance about the life of travellers, followed by readings from his latest book "Bird in the Snow"

- "the story of an old woman whose ordinary life is full of drama, love and passion, though perhaps nobody knows it but herself, because only she remembers everything. This delicately rendered narrative evokes the rural past of Birdie's life in the Irish midlands, using memory to redress her bereavement through a series of poignant vignettes that crystallize into a powerful act of retrieval".

### **From Fiction to Non Fiction**

Paul Kilduff had four works of fiction published in England while he was living there. He gave a most interesting talk on the differences which he found and the challenges he faced when he embarked on a project to write his first non-fiction book. His subject was Ireland's Favourite No-Frills Airline or, if you believe the publicist for the company concerned, who also happens to be the Chief Executive, the World's Favourite No-Frills Airline.

Paul's book, Ruinair sold extremely well having been published in Dublin by Gill & Macmillan, and it is now to be re-published in the near future in England.

This was a most enjoyable segment of the Festival Program. It had a serious side - the fiction v non-fiction comparison, and a lighter side in so far as there were many anecdotes about Ireland's favourite oops sorry the World's Favourite no-Frills Airline.

### **The Great Debate**

We had a lively debate on the motion "that the Cult of the Celebrity Bestseller disparages Literature" which was very skilfully chaired by Oliver Hegarty.

During the debate Desmond Egan made an impassioned plea for more standards in the area of literature, referring to a recent prestigious literary competition which was decided on the casting vote of Jerri Hall, partner of Mick Jagger, someone who had not previously been known for the quality or quantity of her literary output.

He was quite critical of universities and the media for colluding, perhaps, in this whole "dumbing down" process.

Some people from the audience disagreed with what he suggested, some quite strongly, essentially saying that they would like to read what suits their tastes, rather than being dictated to in any way as to what they should read.

Author Kate Hamilton, a member of the panel, said that the point was that people weren't being given the choice as not enough publicity was given to reading material that was of literary value and of great interest to people.

Athlone Voice editor Sean O'Domhnaill, commenting on the interesting debate, said "one of the things I learned myself over the week-end is that many celebrity or sports books are currently selling poorly, perhaps because that genuine market has been abused at this stage, while a talk on travel writing was told that travel books are also selling less at the moment. I suppose it's inevitable to some extent that you won't read about books of literary value on the front page of the national papers – if you look at the Sunday media you're more likely to be told what nightclub Ronaldo's girlfriend was drinking in during the week".

However, he continued, "there are lots of positive things that are happening and could be encouraged. There are many bookclubs setting up, presumably to discuss all kinds of books. I understand Ryan Tubridy has a lot of information of this kind on his radio programme and several papers, such as The Sunday Times for example, would have pretty serious arts sections with book reviews and so on. There are serious discussion programmes in the media on the arts.

As Sean O'Domhnaill wrote a few days after the event, "after all, there's more to life than money. Especially now, when we have flip all of it anymore anyway. So, we might as well find satisfaction in the finer things in life, things that cost a lot less most of the time"

Professor Brian Arkins of NUIG told the debate that while much of John McGahern's books were of a high literary standard, a large part of his autobiography consisted of hundreds of pages about how bad his childhood had been. He argued that such work was really a form of therapy, and therapy could never be art.

Suzanne Kelly said that the cult of the celebrity bestseller needed to be further analysed in terms of populism and modern day global communications.

"It may be a false assumption, but it appears that to achieve political power, you have to be popular first, and, then you have to be competent or able.

The questions I suppose for the modern writer of literature is do you have to be popular and then capable of writing literature or is it sufficient merely to be popular in itself and therefore write popular work?

Populism is the way we do business. We know that Jordan's memoirs will outsell Thackeray's. We know that the actor who played the war hero General McArthur will attract more column inches on his death than the General himself".

Later she added humorously – “When a book goes on to the bestseller list, and up through the ranks, and in some instances tops the list, then the responses might be typically ambiguous as follows:-

\* It must be useless as it is written by a celebrity, but I must buy it to read

AND

\* It must be a great work by a classic writer, I must buy it as a present for my aunt.

After many contributions from the floor, the motion was carried.

### **Relaxation**

After feasts of literature and debate, several participants, committee members and their spouses, partners and friends, adjourned to the Top Deck and enjoyed a convivial dinner together.

## PHOTO GALLERY

Photographs kindly supplied by Ann Hennessy and Katie McCay.



**Siobhan Bigley, J.P. Donleavy and  
Virginia McGillicuddy**



**Professor Brian Arkins with Dr Harman Murtagh**



**Mrs Mary O'Rourke TD with Seamus McCormack  
of the Goldsmith Summer School**



**Oliver Hegarty who chaired the Debate with  
Jarlath Duffy who chaired the Donlevy Interview**



**Professor Brian Arkins in Book  
Launching mode**



**Desmond Egan, Behinn Egan, Joan Brock Browne  
and Viv Egan**



**Jacqueline O'Shea and Jean Farrell  
with Xiao Hui Chen**



**J.P. Donleavy with Fintan O'Toole of The Irish  
Times, Siobhan Bigley and Jarlath Duffy**