

## Brendan O'Regan

A quite extraordinary and innovative businessman whose legacy will live on in the success of the Shannon region

**BRENDAN O'REGAN** was an extraordinary man who accomplished many extraordinary things throughout his long, illustrious life; so much so that it is difficult adequately to encapsulate everything in a few short words.

Born in Sixmilebridge, Co Clare, in 1917, after a spell in Switzerland and Germany studying hotel management with a view to managing his father's Old Ground Hotel in Ennis, he returned to take up a post as a manager of the St Stephen's Green Club in Dublin where Sean Lemass noted his enthusiasm and drive and requested he take over the catering supplies to the flying boats at Foynes, Co Limerick. Once Shannon Airport was developed, Brendan made the short journey across the estuary to take up the role of catering comptroller there in 1945 and immediately raised the standard and presentation of meals, both on the ground and in the air.

His next venture was to open a shop that would sell Irish products to passengers in the airport lounge. He then went on to establish the world's first duty-free shop at Shannon, a concept that was quickly replicated in airports across the globe.

He realised that if the Shannon region was to become a Mecca for transatlantic and European visitors more hotels were required, and standards should be improved. Responding to this need, he established the Shannon College of Hotel Management in 1951. Today, many hoteliers and senior managers at top hotels around the world are testimony to the success of the Shannon College. In 1954 he set up a direct mail-order shopping service to expand sales into North America.

His successes at a time of economic stagnation and unemployment created a real boom in Shannon where 800 people were now working on a 24-hour shift basis. He was able to imbue people with a wonderful sense of excitement and adventure and inspired great team spirit throughout his organisation.

In 1957 he was appointed chairman of Bord Failte. A few years later he approached wealthy American Al McCarthy to establish the Shannon Shamrock Hotel and followed this by persuading another American, Bernard McDonagh, to build three hotels in the region and purchase Dromoland Castle.

Recognising the threat that the advent of long-range jet aircraft posed to Shannon, Brendan and his senior management established in 1961 Ireland's only regional development agency, Shannon Free Airport Development Company (SFADCO; later Shannon Development), and the Shannon Free Zone, which attracted industry from around the world and has today the single biggest collection of US industries on the island.

This would become his greatest legacy, having a continuing impact on the economic viability of an entire region to this day.

The growth around the airport and industrial zone led to the development of Shannon Town -- the first town in over two centuries to spring up on this island. He also saw the need for new tourist attractions and convinced Lord Gort, who had purchased and restored Bunratty Castle, to lease it to SFADCO. He set up a new tourist division at Shannon to run banquets in Bunratty and later in Dun Guire and Knappogue and also establish the Bunratty Folk Park. He pioneered the 'Rent an Irish Cottage' scheme in villages across the region.

The northern troubles also had a profound affect on Brendan and, typically, he established Co-Operation North (now Co-Operation Ireland), a non-government organisation.

"He spoke with great clarity of thought of his dream and of how it could be achieved. At that time in his 70s, his enthusiasm remained infectious and he was most insistent with me of the need for succeeding generations to continue with work, which, he said, would take two generations to succeed," said Tony Kennedy (OBE) of Co-operation Ireland last week.

While Shannon and all his initiatives were extremely important, it must be borne in mind that his wife Rita, his children Carmel, Declan, Geraldine, Margaret and Andrew and their happiness and welfare were even more important to him. During all his years at Shannon, Brendan O'Regan, a man of deep faith, remained a very kind and modest person who was never interested in accumulating wealth. He was held in the highest esteem by all who enjoyed working what they considered to be with him rather than for him.

So much of what is vibrant and good in economic and social terms in the Shannon region and beyond is a lasting tribute today to Brendan O'Regan, an innovator, entrepreneur and, ultimately, a great man. He will be missed -- but never forgotten. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Liam Skelly

*<http://www.independent.ie/world-news/brendan-oregan-26422357.html>*