



Lunch with...

Dr Brendan O'Regan

The date: 27 September 2005

The cuisine: Irish

The restaurant: The Grand Hotel, Malahide

The beverage: 'A small Irish'

In the second of our series in which we talk informally with some of the great influences in the duty free industry, we go to Malahide in the north of Dublin, to visit Dr Brendan O'Regan, the founding father of the airport duty free industry. Dr O'Regan opened the world's first airport shop back in 1947 in Shannon, Ireland and ever since he's been a great campaigner for duty free, aviation, tourism, Ireland and, most of all, peace. At 88 years of age he's still in fine form, his passion and humanity undimmed as The Moodie Report discovered. And he's even working on his next 'big idea'.

By Martin Moodie

"If you're involved in developing an important idea, you have to let it possess you. If you keep knocking on the door, the door will open." – Dr Brendan O'Regan, 1986

It's a lovely autumn day in early October, and the view from the Grand Hotel overlooking the Malahide Marina 15 minutes from Dublin Airport is one of tranquility. The Grand is an elegant old hotel that Dr O'Regan knows well – his family nearly bought it once – just a few minutes drive from his residence nearby.

His father was an hotelier and a "great traveller". Young Brendan inherited both passions and in his youth found himself working as a hotel trainee in pre-war Hitler's Germany. He later managed the Falls Hotel in Ennistymore before famously becoming the Comptroller of the catering and sales organisation at Shannon Airport.

The rest is industry and aviation industry.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks me.

"I'll have what you're having, thank you."

"Well I'm having a small Irish," he says.

A small Irish. A whiskey. Usqueabach, the water of life. And what a life this gentlest and most peace-loving of men has had. It's a life beautifully captured in an archive prepared by Shannon Development that contains rare video material and audio CD interviews, some wonderful old pictures and many tributes to this great man of Ireland.

He was born in Sixmilebridge in 1917, one of seven

children. Over the ensuing 88 years he has become synonymous with regeneration in the Shannon area of west Ireland, introduced the concept of airport duty free shopping at Shannon Airport in 1947, launched a world-famous Hotel School and championed the then pioneering notion of airports as free zones. And through all this time, especially in his later years, he has fought relentlessly for the cause closest to his heart, peace. Peace in Ireland, now seemingly achieved, and peace for the world.

In recent times he has been a driving force behind a programme known as Mankind Must Manage a World Without War – a remarkable project that has garnered the support of many of the world's most powerful statesmen, all lending their voice to the call for the better, more humane society that O'Regan believes so firmly in, and which still drives him forward.

These days his gait is a little slower, his voice occasionally falters. But his memory is sharp, his sense of humour still sparkles and every word he utters resonates with humanity and compassion.

Anyone who is involved in duty free anywhere in the world should understand this: Dr Brendan O'Regan gave breath, not just to an industry, but to a concept. His great achievement was that at its very essence he took commerce and made it a force for good. He transcended business. Not many people do that. And not many ideas do that. Not many people bequeath great notions. He has. And he hasn't finished yet.

He once said "I will fight to the last breath helping to make peace in my country" and he's doing exactly that through his untiring work with the Irish Peace Institute and his beloved Mankind Must Manage a World Without War effort.

Dr O'Regan was and is a man for the 'big idea'. He saw beyond airports being mere people-transporting stations. He saw them as grand meeting places of men and women of all nationalities. He saw the concept of duty free and airport free zones as being fundamental to the development of the airport and tourism business – and as economic lifeblood to regions all around the world.

He recalls the team who followed him in those early days at Shannon: "They recognised their task of creating a new Ireland – a dream that had long filled the hearts of Irish people." They are beautiful words, and even, weeks later, as I transcribe them from my tape recorder in the early hours of a cold grey morning in London, I feel humbled to be listening to them.



The O'Regan legacy – Extracts from a citation for Dr Brendan O'Regan for the Degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa)

By Martin O'Brien, Lay Member of Senate, Queen's University Belfast, 8 July 1999

"He is without doubt one of the most remarkable Irishmen of the 20th century. His achievements as a peacemaker and as an industrial visionary have been immense."

"At Foynes, with his chef Joe Sheridan, he invented that wonderful stimulant to good conversation, the marvellous libation that makes the Celtic tiger sing – Irish coffee."

"He introduced the world's first duty free shop in Shannon, a brilliant idea that saved the airport from terminal decline. Then came arguably the most crucial creation of his professional career, Shannon's tax-free industrial zone, another first in the world."

"He is a practical patriot who has left an indelible mark for good on his country."



Clockwise from top left: Showjumping at Ennistymon as a young man; At the launch of the book 'Leaders, Visions & Networks - Ireland's Shannon Story' in 1999; Opening the 'Rent an Irish Cottage' scheme in 1971; with actress Maureen O'Hara in 2002; at the launch of 'Pens for Peace' in 2001; celebrating recognition of the Shannon College of Hotel Management in 2002; meeting President Mary McAleese in 2002; Shannon Duty Free Shop in 1962; at the dedication of O'Regan Park, County Clare, in 2003



Looking back – and looking forward – with Dr Brendan O'Regan

I suppose you must have done many interviews down the years Dr O'Regan?

I have done a lot. And I will answer any questions you ask me. But I won't guarantee they'll be as accurate as they might have been. Eighty-eight years of age is really the period when one begins to say goodbye.

Eighty-eight is a grand age to reach, and you're still as lively as can be.

I'm very interested in continuing to be lively. The achievement of the airport and the duty free industry and the [Shannon] Hotel School and the fact that I have succeeded in being wide awake while launching the idea of Mankind Must Manage a World Without War is a great consolation to me. As is the fact that it has been adopted so rapidly in so many places.

It's pertinent that my visit should coincide with yesterday's decommissioning by the IRA. That must give you great pleasure?

It does. The Irish peace is an acknowledgement of the giving up of violence by the organisation which steered it for so long. That is really the answer to all wars. They should be given up by both sides without either side claiming a victory. And here you have an organisation that was so deeply involved in the struggle for Irish independence not making impossible conditions any longer.

Let me take you back if I may all those years ago to Shannon Airport. As you look back on your life how much pride do you feel about your achievements in the aviation industry and in the duty free and free zone sectors?

I am proud. I think that duty free shops have a great part to play in the world because they are an extraordinary kind of world link... a very understandable way of equalising the world. Duty free... has become a universal gesture at airports.

When you began did you have any idea what you were creating?

Well the crossing of the Atlantic by air – by seaplane – was

a breakthrough for humanity. And it gave a lead to many of the emerging countries which until that date had not participated in world trade.

When I got a request to go to Taiwan [to discuss airport free zones] it raised possibilities that weren't visualised at the time. That invitation was followed up by other emerging countries at the time. So Shannon gave a start to about a dozen other countries which decided that they would use the airport to begin not just airport shopping for duty free goods but also the export of manufactured goods which had not been contemplated at the time.

At the time you must have almost created a new economic lifeline for Shannon.

Yes. It opened the door to something that was vital if we were to become a successful trading nation, and it created positive thinking in many ways, which helped Ireland's success as a new nation.

And today Ireland is one of the tigers of Europe, with a booming economy.

It's extraordinary.

Do you recall much from those early days? From 1947, for example, and that first kiosk?

Well I can remember the staff particularly, because they were a very animated group of people. They recognised the importance of the task that they were doing as helping to create a new Ireland, a dream that had long filled the hearts of Irishmen around the world.

You certainly started something. And you started something with a distinct Irish stamp that remains to this day. Why do you think that the Irish have been so successful in our industry around the world?

(Laughs) Well I think we should be very grateful to the English for having given us the English language, though those with rebellious streaks would rarely admit it.

Now, of course, we have reached a very important situation where we are no longer enemies with the English; we are friends. And even as we speak, we [through decommissioning] are making a decision that is vital to the future of the world in that we do not want our relationship to be other than one of friendship.

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Dr O'Regan at his home with Martin Moodie; with his dutiful assistant Pauline Taylor at the Grand Hotel, Malahide



And today the major Irish figures in the business such as Colm McLoughlin in Dubai all pay tribute to you as a tremendous influence.

Well we were very lucky that people like him were the ones who led the way overseas so excellently from the very beginning. He's a special guy.

Did you have many dealings down the years with Charles Feeney, who founded DFS, and who was so instrumental in the Irish peace movement? Were you close to him?

He's a very special fellow and he has now taken me onboard in the most important thing I have been involved in during my life and that's Mankind Must Manage a World Without War. He funded the first of its booklets. There are 15 or 16 world leaders writing in there, confirming that mankind must indeed manage a world without war and of course the time is now because the weapons of war are so destructive that if we don't manage it without war we won't have a world.

It is worth mentioning the amount being spent on preparing for war. That amount is capable of wiping out all human poverty and lack of education. Very strangely that figure has been kept out of print – well it needs to be stated now. What are we going to do about the fact that so many people are hungry yet we are spending so much money getting ready for war?

What do you make of America's current approach to the world?

Well I think Americans at the last election were very

close to making a decision that was against war. They kind of slipped into war because of the relationship with oil. It's now greatly regretted.

It's very interesting at the moment to see the relationship between Europe and America. They are having a re-examination of their relationships because of the [Iraq] war. That relationship between Europe and America is very important for world peace. It's going to

be worked out within the next few years – I feel that. There will never be another war, I think, not deliberately.

I hope you're right.

They have to stop it.

It's an important statement. But are you really optimistic about the human condition?

I believe the astonishing difference between us and other living things is the fact that we have been given intelligence. That's an assurance, in my view, that we're going to reject war – and that will happen in our lifetime.

Do you think that the airports of the world should reflect their own country and culture and tradition – A Sense of Place?

Yes I do. It's the leading instrument that a country has.

I'm going to try to get Shannon Airport to be the world's first airport to take onboard the concept of world airports as centres of peace. There is nothing more important for a human being to be involved with than bringing about a world without war. ■

