

John O'Leary

Reflections

My name is Dan McMahon. I've been a friend of John O'Leary since 1960. There is no particular reason why I should be the one to speak about John. For instance, I do not know him as long as Otto Behan or Tony Tracey; they became friends in the forties, somewhere around the time Hitler thought he was still in there with a shout. A long time in other words, and there is Jim Butler who worked alongside John for 30 years; and Pascal Walshe when he moved to Fleet Street for his final years in the ESB. The many people he met through Sportsco who were to become close friends, Ed Harding, Derry O'Malley, Gerry McGough, Cathy Caviston, Iris Hempenstall and Mary McNally.

I'm here because Denis Bermingham told me to do it and you don't refuse Cork men. No matter who spoke of John it would be a singular person that we spoke of. Ní raibh aon idirdhealu idir an duine príomháideach agus an duine puiblí. An fear ceanna áta I gceist i gcónaí. An aingeal ar an sráid agus an dhiabhall sa bhaile, ní mar sin a bhí sé. [There was no difference between the private person and the public person. Its the same man in question at all times. A street angel and a house devil, that's not the way it was].

He had none of that multi faceted protean personality so beloved of the Irish. He was both singular and separate and he needed to affirm his separateness continuously. This separateness and privacy were the characteristics that made dealing with him difficult but it was worth the trouble. Once you knew where his space was and that it was not to be invaded he was a most rewarding companion and loyal friend.

Last Friday night in room 19 of the Palliative Centre of the Hospice in Harold's Cross, John died.

His brother Michael was moved to quote from Dean Swift's epitaph;

*he has gone
"where savage indignation can
no longer lacerate his heart.
Go traveller and imitate if you can".*

I thought at the time that they were fitting and apt words, although having looked it up I prefer the W.B. Yeats version;

*"Swift has sailed unto his rest
savage indignation there
cannot lacerate his breast,
world besotted traveller
imitate him if you dare".*

The reason I like the Yeats version is because of the word "sailed". It describes the way John died; he seemed to glide off silently like a ship on her maiden voyage, slowly down the slipway and gently into the ocean.

I first met John in 1960 and we began sharing a house in 1965 in 33 Windsor Avenue, just two doors from 29 where James Joyce lived as a teenager. You don't need to be told that you get to know someone pretty well if you live with them.

It was about this time that I asked him why he was still a clerk in the ESB when he had an honours degree from Trinity. The eyes, under the great hurled boule of a forehead, steadied on me for a few seconds and he said "you wouldn't ask if you knew the fools I am dealing with". Pe Scéal é, do bhí ana craic agus sult agus sport againn i Windsor Avenue. Bhiomar cosúil leis an logo sin atá ag Bus Atha Cliath don Imp "go minic annseo, go tapaidh annsúd". Ach mo léan, fuair fear a tí bás. Tom Flahive ab ainm dó agus ana cara dúinn abea é. Ní raibh sé ach trí blian is triocha ach lagach é le duodenal scoillte. Nior thaithinn linn fanact san áit a thuille agus scaraimid ag an am sin. [Whatever the story we had mighty craic and sport in Windsor Avenue. We were like that logo that Dublin Bus has for the Imp "often here, quickly there". But sadly the man of the house died. Tom Flahive was his name and he was a great friend to us. He was only 33 years old but a burst duodenal killed him. It didn't suit us to stay on any longer and we split from there at that time].

It was at this time that John first began living in Fitzwilliam Square and he was to live in that area for the next 30 years. He never became domesticated and the hamfistedness I noticed in Windsor Avenue became worse. He seemed to wage war on inanimate objects and came off worse all the time.

Billy Coogan, who incidentally was of great service to John over the past weeks, could have qualified for the volunteer badge in the hospice and I even heard him referred to as Dr. Kildare, anyway, Billy used to bring TV sets to John, tune them in but the next day he'd be told "that set doesn't work". John never got a set to work and he eventually turned it into a virtue saying that "a broken TV was better than a working one" and who could argue with that.

He developed in the seventies what I later called the O'Leary formula for working out holiday expenses. You simply write down all possible expenses for taxis, cafes, bars, tips, etc., and you tot up that figure, when you have your total you double it and that's what you will need. Same system as Goal and the ESB.

On one of the holiday trips, it was to Copenhagen, he found himself in a bar. ní nach ionadh [surprise surprise]. and the bar had a snooker room attached. Now John was a fairly useful snooker player and it would be normal for him to look for a game straight away. However, twenty minutes later John Belotti found him still studying the standard of play. "Are you not playing" said Belotti, "I'm still watching" says John "I wouldn't like to let my country down".

I think that the reason John attracted so many friends was his complete honesty and lack of compromise. He was as constant as the Northern star, not alone did he not change from week to week, he didn't change from decade to decade. He didn't suffer wise men too gladly so God help you if you were a fool. Despite this, he was an extraordinarily shy man, if he was standing here he would be embarrassed at the numbers that have turned out to pay tribute to him.

He didn't want a celebration or presentation when he retired. He put it under the heading of foolishness and believe me there were many things under that heading. He believed that any invasion of his space was a kind of stealing from him. I remember embracing him one time when a 10/1 shot romped home for us at the races and the look I got told me that that was the last of that kind of foolishness. However, when I had bypass surgery in 1986 he brought my wages to the house every Thursday. I hadn't asked him to do it, he just did it and continued doing it long after I was recovered and was able to be out and about myself. When Tony Tracey had surgery in 1992 John called out to Bray every Tuesday and Saturday come rain or hail, along the seafront from the dart station to the Cois Ferraige Hotel. In the old Fianna the strongest bond that could be put on a person was "geasa". Geasa just could not be broken. He put himself under geasa but he did not put anyone under geasa to him. He was embarrassed by thanks, he waved it away with the words "don't be worrying". He did not like attention being drawn to himself. We were coming back from Gowran Park races one evening and the bus organiser sometimes had a raffle for a few tenners. The first person to win asked for the tenner to be raffled again because he'd had a good day. I remarked "that was a decent thing to do". "No", John said, "he's only drawing attention to himself".

If I were to write John's epitaph it would be;

'He always paid the taxi and always bought the first round'.

In conclusion, I would like to be a bit free with W.B. Yeats again. We all have to go through woods that are lonely, dark and deep, and we have promises to keep and miles to go before there's sleep. In the 60's, 70's and 80's, in the woods that I travelled, John O'Leary was the tallest tree, the most sheltering tree, the tree that could not fall. Now that he has fallen, I somehow feel that a covenant has been broken, the woods are deeper, darker and lonelier and it seems too far to go before there's sleep.

***Go Raibh Rath Dé ar a Anam
[God's Blessing on his Soul]***