

## Donogh O'Malley Proinsias Mac Aonghusa

Donogh O'Malley was born into a well-off Limerick middle-class family in January 1921. He received a typical conservative middle-class education at two Jesuit schools, at Limerick and at Clongowes Wood in Co. Kildare, and later at University College, Galway. His family keenly supported Cumann na nGaedheal but turned against that party in the early thirties. When he died in March 1968 he was the most popular Fianna Fáil Minister . . . Contrary to many appearances he had used his time and energy to advantage and his 47 years were far from wasted.

Donogh O'Malley came to Dáil Éireann for the first time in May 1954 with the reputation of being 'a holy terror'. His capacity for alcohol was staggering and his desire for it more than equalled the capacity. Stories of some of his more colourful exploits preceded him to Leinster House so that the staff, if not the members, had some idea of what was in store for them. The stories were far from being exaggerated; the reality was quite as terrifying as any Limerick-based tale of his past activities. Some of his activities within weeks of the election would put Brendan Behan in the boys' place: O'Malley when involved in serious drinking never looked as if he were a boy on a man's errand. As with so many of his other activities, when he was truly drinking he gave his mind and heart to it and was highly impatient of any interruption . . .

But whatever was being said and seen in Dublin, Limerick loved him and he developed a real hold on people's affections as well as on the city's Fianna Fáil machine. In June 1961 he became Mayor of Limerick — amazingly the third O'Malley brother to hold the office. The late Desmond O'Malley was Mayor from 1941 to 1943 and Michael O'Malley held the office in 1948–49.

Seán Lemass succeeded Éamon de Valera as head of the 26-Counties Government in June 1959 and two years later Fianna Fáil, under his very forceful leadership, won a General Election: no viable alternative was on offer. To the expressed surprise of a great many people he placed Donogh O'Malley in charge of the Office of Public Works as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance. It was a gamble, perhaps a typical Lemass gamble. It ultimately paid off but there were great growing pains, coupled with a many-sided incident, which brought discredit upon the administration of justice in the state. One evening O'Malley had a good many refreshments. He then got into a car and drove it up O'Connell Street. Unfortunately he drove on the wrong side of the street. When ultimately the car came to a stop a Garda approached and asked him if he had not seen the arrows. The Parliamentary Secretary's contemptuous reply is said to have been: 'If I had seen the arrows sure I'd have seen the \_\_\_\_ Indians!' The law was not amused. A prosecution was initiated and, in spite of fantastic and desperate

pressures being brought to bear upon him, the Garda refused to withdraw the summons. His point was that every man was equal before the law. Late one afternoon when the ordinary courts at Chancery Place had closed for the day and the public and, more important, the reporters, had gone home, a court-house was quietly opened and Donogh O'Malley, member of the administration which controlled the courts, was surreptitiously tried. He was convicted and fined. A week later the Garda in the case was dismissed from the force. Certain Ministers, though not O'Malley, went to considerable trouble to blacken his character and to ensure that the matter received as little public notice as possible. So many members of the Opposition had had cases 'fixed' for themselves and their friends that they were not in a position to raise too loud an outcry about the matter. It was as shocking an example of the realities of Mafia-type politics in the 26-Counties as had been seen for many years. There were no further prosecutions of Ministers or Parliamentary Secretaries. The message had been clearly put across to the police that certain men regarded themselves as being above the law and were in a position to enforce that belief.

That terrible happening led to a change in Donogh O'Malley's life that ultimately had the most fortunate consequences for thousands of young people and will have great good consequences for hundreds of thousands of young people yet to be born. O'Malley achieved the near-impossible and in so doing showed what tremendous willpower he possessed and what amazing strength of character he had. He gave up the drink. It is practically impossible to overestimate the change this wrought upon his life. Much of his time for many years had been spent with a bottle, now the bottle was finally set aside and a new life started to be built. . .

He knew there was no point in opening up long-drawn-out discussions about the feasibility of free secondary education for all capable of availing of it. He used the *fait accompli* method of getting his way and he succeeded. His threat to leave the Government if his scheme was not in operation for the following school year startled people. But he meant it. It is a credit to O'Malley and to Fianna Fail and to hard-working civil servants and to thousands of teachers, that there was no necessity for him to carry out his threat. If many thousands of Irish children are now getting more extensive education than they would otherwise have received they can thank Donogh O'Malley for it, and also spare a kind thought for the far-seeing Seán Lemass who saw O'Malley had vision and ability and took a chance on him. His schools transport system is another monument to him which has changed the whole Irish countryside and, by and large, changed it for the better.