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Jim O'Donnell

Jim O'Donnell, who passed away in October 2020, was one of the key figures in the development of the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). Jim joined the Institute in 1962, just five years after its establishment, having previously been a secondary school teacher, and devoted the bulk of his career to developing the IPA's Publications Division.

His first job in the Institute was as Information Officer. He later became manager, director and Assistant Director General. Publishing was different sixty years ago. Audiobooks, ebooks, smartphones, podcasts, not to mention Amazon, were all well ahead in the future. Back then, the challenges were to locate authors; to bring texts through the manual processes of physically cutting-and-pasting and of proofing and printing; and, of course, to find markets.

Public administration, as a subject, was a narrow enough field; but it was underserved. Students and interested readers relied on articles in *Administration* dating from 1953 and on Charles King's edited volumes of *Public Administration in Ireland*, some dating to the late 1940s. And there was a dearth of books on politics, education, health administration and local government.

Having identified gaps in the market, he found a succession of distinguished authors to fill them. From Trinity College there was Basil Chubb, Charles McCarthy, John Bristow and Alan Tait; from UCD, Ronan Fanning, John Coolahan and future Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald; from the civil service there was Leon O'Broin and T. K. Whitaker; and in-house from the IPA, Tom Barrington and Des Roche. The result was a series of groundbreaking books on politics, policy and public administration in Ireland.

At the heart of the enterprise was the IPA's *Yearbook and Diary*, now titled *Ireland – A Directory*, which is in its fifty-fifth edition. Jim was its originator and editor. As a unique repository of detail on the legislature, executive, judiciary, civil service, local government, health services, diplomatic representation, the EU, state bodies, financial institutions, major companies and media, it has remained in constant demand each year across the reader spectrum from active public and private sector professionals to armchair enthusiasts, and from journalists to international Hibernophiles. And the reader also gets an in-built diary, forms of address for dignitaries and the high water tides at Dublin, and much more. The *Yearbook and Diary* established itself as a premier reference source and management tool. Not only that, it became a film prop. In the 1983 film *Educating Rita*, largely filmed in the grounds and rooms of Trinity College, Michael Caine can be seen, admittedly in an inebriated state, entering Trinity College's Examination Hall to invigilate an examination, clutching a copy of the IPA's premier publication. The launch of the first edition of the *Yearbook and Diary* on 7 December 1966 was a landmark for the Institute. A family landmark occurred on the following day when he and his wife-to-be, Mary, went shopping for an engagement ring.

Jim was not just an editor and manager, but also an author in his own right. His book *How Ireland is Governed* reflected both his interest in what makes the wheels of government turn and also his desire to communicate occasionally arcane knowledge to the general reader. Similarly motivated, he created the magazine *Young Citizen* for civics education in secondary schools. As an author he is best known for *Wordgloss*, which explored the origin and usage of words and concepts, from A to Z, current in public affairs. This allowed him to combine his own education and interest in classics with his professional interest in public affairs. Located, as *Wordgloss* was, at the juncture where cultural and market forces meet, the book was a considerable commercial success.

These and his other books, *Our Lawmakers* and *Taxation: Fair and Simple*, along with his experience as president of Clé, the Irish Book Publishers Association, and his period presenting radio programmes on RTÉ, testified to his knowledge of the book market and his sense for both what awoke curiosity in the reading public and how to connect with it.

Jim's natural affability, flair and sense of fun were evident in his dealings with media, the book trade and, of course, IPA staff. He was a gracious host at the annual lunch for journalists to launch the

Yearbook and Diary. He was in his element at book launches, where he foregrounded the author, created a conversation around the book and linked the speeches of the author and the dignitary who officially launched the book. He also managed the flow of the launch. On one well-remembered occasion, just as the arrival was imminent of a government minister, he noticed a group of attendees well ensconced in jovial conversation clogging up the entrance to the Institute. Without disrupting the jovial spirit he approached with a request, 'Ladies and gentlemen, might I ask you to cede fluidly to the Auditorium'. And they did cede. Fluidly. The minister was unimpeded on arrival.

Towards the end of his career, Jim brought his skills and versatility to bear on the national stage as Secretary, successively, to the Constitutional Review Group chaired by T. K. Whitaker and then the Oireachtas All-Party Committee on the Constitution.

Jim was supported by a group of talented and committed colleagues in the Institute's Publications Division, among whom his legacy lives on. His role in the Publications Division brought him into contact with other divisions, particularly the Research Division, in publishing reports, articles and books. His presence was felt across the Institute, no more so than as a witty raconteur and congenial colleague at staff gatherings. His loss, therefore, is also felt across the Institute among both current staff and retired colleagues.

Jim is survived by his wife, Mary, and daughters, Jane, Rebecca and Sarah.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

M. M.