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McCarthy: 'Labour is tarnished'

On Friday last I finally found *The Corkman* in Porter's on Patrick Street. As Bill Browne, news journalist for the paper, was to explain later, the weekly covers North Cork, not the city. I met Bill at my brother's in Rathcormac - they are neighbours and friends - at eight and asked an obvious opening question.

He came from London to Ireland when he was twelve. Returned to England at twenty as a qualified chef. "Cheffing is one of these f--king things you either love or you hate". In the mid to late '80s they were "treated like s---". He worked at the London Ryan hotel and was head chef at the Slug and Lettuce, a Cirencester, Gloucestershire, gastro pub.

He went back to London and worked as clerk and then wages controller for a recruitment agency. He and his wife managed pubs for Fuller's, then returned to Ireland in 1995 when his wife became pregnant. After recovering from a car accident he worked at FOTA Island golf club as a part-time barman. The job was seasonal so he went to Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa on Cork's Tramore road and did media production. He had actually gone to apply for a greenkeeper course (FOTA-influenced) but missed the interview. He thought he might like radio but had never seen himself as a writer. He got a placement on the weekly *Northside/Southside News* (which became *Inside Cork* and is now the *Cork Independent*). The paper brought him back. He was there two and a half years. With a second child and a third on the way he left and took an assistant bar manager position at FOTA for the money.

In a rut he did a two year PRII-run PR diploma course at night in CIT. Why PR? He thought there was a well paid job there but at course end he was still at FOTA. A diploma presentation picture made *Inside Cork* and editor Eddie Lyons offered him a job. Three days a week. He created features - *Cork Lives*, interviews with well-known Cork people, and a seven day news digest. He ended up doing "five days at *Inside Cork* for three days wages", took on more shifts at FOTA and had a Friday night bar job in the city. He was thirty-three or thirty-four and "f---king exhausted."

Bill was with *Inside Cork* for about a year when a newsman at the *Evening Echo* left for the *Independent*. He got the position, left his other jobs on a Friday and started at the *Echo* on the Monday. Within a year he was covering murders and such. Bantry, Ballydesmond, Tramore. He was good at the work - not embarrassed about asking questions and able to

ring copy in over the phone from pages of notes which was "quite a good skill to have". The first thing the news desk looked for was a photograph. A 'head and shoulders' of the deceased, preferably current. "You can write ten pages on a dead person but a photograph is key because it personalises the whole thing." He explains it in even simpler terms - people look at a picture and say "F--k it, I know him. It's your man".

He recalls his first murder, a drug dealer shot in Ballydesmond. He went to a local shop, bought a coffee, mentioned the *Echo* and the owner "sang like a bird". Then added "you know who you should talk to now"! If people didn't want to talk? Keep going. You always get someone. "If you don't go down to a scene you'll get nothing". People wanted the personal touch. You can ring the guards or a priest. A priest will either talk to you or they won't. "Some priests are great, some priests will literally tell you to f--k off".

Bill says he will never forget the Mitchelstown brother and sister killed in a car crash coming back from Oxygen. The *Echo* news desk hounded him for a photo, asked him to ring the family. Eventually, under pressure, he did. "Sorriest f--king thing I ever did". He spoke to the father. "Are you for f--king real? I just buried my two children. F--k off." Says he never did the death knock again.

We talk more about photographs. Local GAA clubs are a good source. "It sounds callous and it is callous" but if it's a young person the first place they go is to Facebook. He has based a story on Facebook comments. I feel it necessary to point out that I'm not judging. "And I'm not justifying it. That's what people want to read and that's what I do".

I return to his *Echo* history. He started in 2003. A circulation of about 44,000 then, maybe 16,000 now. He was given a region - Midleton, Cobh, Youghal and up to Mallow. He was the *Echo's* first entertainment correspondent. How, I ask? In 2005 Cork was European Capital of Culture. Andrea Bocelli played Collins Barracks and Bill did an Internet Q&A with him. He was asked to do an eight-page supplement to come out the day of the concert. The supplement, wrapped around that day's *Echo*, went down well and he began covering entertainment full-time. Gigs and a weekly page. Live At The Marquee started in 2005 so he reviewed those gigs and got the interviews.

He got to know Peter Aiken (Aiken Promotions) well. The day Elton John was announced Peter called. "I'll tell you ... but it will be late". We talked print deadlines. How late could you go? Ten to fifteen past 11. What did 11am mean? Everything into the editor by 11. The presses were below them then on Cork's Academy St. so you could write something at five to 11, go down at five to 12 and watch the paper going out. Peter Aiken rang back at ten to 11 and told Bill it was Elton which was "huge for Cork." What did he do between ten to and a quarter after? First picture, then bio. The when came from Aiken. Ticket prices too. The venue was known. He checked to see if Elton had any links to Cork. I'm impressed. Bill tells

me it's not a lot to do when you're focused. He knew he had to write 300-400 words. About a quarter past he had enough. Big splash.

Bill has to take a call so we break and I nervously check my recordings.

He's filing ten to twelve stories a day for the *Echo*. Features too. We discuss opinion pieces. "If I'm reviewing a gig it's what I think of that gig ... it's quite easy." News on the other hand is facts, it isn't opinion, it's the straight telling of the facts laid out in front of you.

In November 2007 a friend left *The Corkman* to take a position with Cork TD Sean Sherlock. Bill says he had the job before he met Brendan Malone the editor. There are only three news people on the paper - the editor, Maria Herlihy and Bill, and they, along with a sales executive, are the only ones in a big Mallow office. The sports section is two guys in Kerry. The INM regionals, eight or nine, are printed in Armagh. When Bill started there were times when they had the paper done on a Tuesday evening. I note the eighty-six pages and Bill tells me it was maybe one hundred and six when he started. Staffing. I've seen his byline on multiple stories but a lot of the untagged are his also. Bill believes the reason for lack of attribution may be that they don't want the lack of staff known. There are fifty or more pages of community notes written by "local people ... curtain twitchers ... it's desperately local". Bill is increasingly involved in copy editing. He does a 'ten things upcoming' page, briefs of maybe 150 words, and an entertainment page with perhaps four stories on it - he started the entertainment section - which he usually completes early Thursday. Thursday afternoon he might do a couple of run of the mill stories. Bill describes his weekly news list, how he and the editor put pages together using a system of 'templates' and 'boxes', and how he writes first in Word for fear of losing copy in a system he doesn't fully understand.

Bill writes copy, spellchecks it, writes a headline, sources the picture and writes the caption. "That's the way the industry is going ... sub-editing is a dying art." Once he has the copy "it has to be looked over once". At the *Echo* it would have gone to the sub-editor, then to the news editor, back to the sub-editor and finally to the editor. Three people. "Now there's one if we're lucky." His editor? Doesn't always have time. There is a subbing group in Wexford. He's never met them. He only knows if his copy's been changed when he sees it in the paper. "They've taken away all the safety nets." Make a mistake with a name in a court case and you're libelling someone else. "It's about the bottom line now... they don't give a s--t. The people who are running INM are not newspaper people, they're accountants." The new chief executive for the regionals is from Tesco. Denis O'Brien, INM's majority shareholder, has no newspaper background. "They'd close us down in the morning if it wasn't making enough money". They have lost staff and use freelance photographers. Bill's boss wants him

designing pages. A bit of him welcomes the challenge but another bit thinks "f--k it, it's another rod for my own back."

He has done thirty stories a week, full length and briefs. Sometimes fifteen in a day. He travels little now. That day he has been in court all day - Friday is district court sitting in Fermoy - and he will spend the following Monday typing it up. Maria does Tuesday's Mallow sitting. They don't have staff to cover Macroom and Killmallock so they just ignore them. "You can't rewrite stuff if you haven't been in court ... very unsafe". He will ask to 'lift' a piece on occasion if he trusts the reporter - Ralph Riegel from the *Indo* for example - and he will return the favour. An article in the *Examiner* under someone else's name. Bill says it's been that way forever. "Cork's very incestuous ... the media's very small and if you upset someone you've upset everyone".

The circulation of *The Corkman* is about 6,500. When Bill started it was about 8,500 and previously was up to 12,000 or 13,000 which "wasn't bad for a regional". He thinks *The Corkman* is reasonably healthy.

Would he go to the *Independent*? "Maybe not ... but certainly the *Examiner* or the *Times*". He says he's "very comfortable with *The Corkman*." He is not primarily money motivated but has three kids and "they are expensive" so if someone offered him more to go into PR or communications he'd look. The music industry or sports perhaps. "You can't do PR for something you've got no interest in."

My sister-in-law came in to say that she and my niece were leaving for the theatre in Fermoy. Time to bring the interview to a close. I mentioned a drink and we walked to the Rathcormac Inn at the top of the road. Talked about journalists, column inches and the frequent lack of substance. The name Brendan O'Connor came up. The *Sunday Independent*'s ongoing war of words with Sinn Féin. Bill told the backstory to his *McCarthy: 'Labour is tarnished'* piece on the Avondhu edition's front page and why he had worded the headline as he had. Over a couple of quiet pints we talked national and local politics - Bill genuinely loves the local. Court stories followed including one about a local who arrived at the courthouse on his horse. Bill got the only photo.

P.S. Bill mentioned that he is currently teaching an adult night course in journalism, certified by the Irish Academy of Public Relations (IAPR), at the Mallow College of Further Education. One night a week. Worth a look for aspiring journalists.