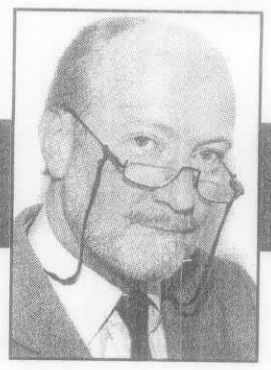


BYRNES ON TUESDAY

Flying 1

SO the British Ministry of Defence has concluded that there are unidentified flying objects, although, by definition, they haven't quite identified what they are.

Probably atmospheric phenomena, the report said.

No intergalactic flying saucers, no little green men, no hyperintelligent slime, none of that. And these conclusions were arrived at following years of top secret work carried out during the 1990s.

And this is 2006.

What a job to have been given. Picture it. The cabinet decides that it needs to put people's minds at rest about UFOs, and gives the defence chiefs the job of proving that they don't exist, or that they are harmless natural illusions or easily explained weather-related events if they do.

So the defence chiefs employ a load of scientists and the like to set about the work. These boffins are sent into a room and are given all the files of UFO reported sightings down the years.

"That could be globe lightening," they say, as the first file is put aside. "A Russian spy plane most likely," and another file is discarded. "Refraction in the cockpit windscreen," and a third dossier is gonged.

The eye-witness accounts, often incoherent, fanciful and alarmist, could also be easily discounted.

In the meantime, high security monitoring stations are instructed to keep an eye on the sky and report anything out of the ordinary, and the team of top scientists decide that the best place for their further deliberations would be a nice hotel in, say, the Bahamas. Scientists think best when well away from distractions and discomforts, they argue.

It is vitally important, when working on reports for governments, not to come back after a few weeks and give categorical conclusions. No, a preliminary report must first be produced in a year or two, setting out several reasons why further time and resources are required. A few years later, an interim report should emerge, drip-feeding a few uncontroversial facts, while the final report should not appear until there have been at least two changes of government so that the new lot won't have a clue as to why the whole thing was commissioned in the first place. A suitable number of knighthoods should then be dished out to give the final report even more perceived gravitas.

I am reminded of the story about the visiting American who met a Trinity student in a Dublin pub. The student claimed to be a genealogical researcher, and offered to trace the American's bloodline—for a fee.

The money was handed over and the visitor returned to the States, only to receive letters at intervals assuring him that the work was progressing well, but that more time, and money, would be required to see it to a conclusion. Gullibly, cheques were sent, again and again.

Eventually, the American became browned off and arranged to come to Ireland and seek out the student, whom he found in the Horseshoe Bar in the Shelbourne, living it up with tribunal barristers.

"You said that you'd trace my family tree, and I've received nothing but bills," said the American.

"True, true," said the young man. "But I had to double check all the facts—Your Majesty."

Flying 2

THE question isn't "are you going?". It's "how are you getting there?".

It is simply assumed that Munster, and Limerick in particular, will simply decant itself into the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff on the 20th, and a motley assemblage of conveyances has been gathered for the purpose, the like of which hasn't been seen since the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1941.

It has long been assumed that all scheduled and even chartered planes are booked out and that available ferries out of Rosslare, Ringaskiddy, even Dún Laoghaire and Dublin, will be weighed down to their Plimsoll lines and beyond. Desperate situations call for desperate measures, and some of the lads are resorting to circuitous plans which involve the Orient Express, the QE2, Wells Fargo and the funicular railway up Montmartre. A few intrepid souls are even talking of hijacking both Tarbert ferries to ensure their attendance at the great event, while others are considering stowing away on banana boats out of Foynes.

Obtaining match tickets is another subject entirely, but even to watch the game on a television screen in a Cardiff hotel is, it seems, preferable to staying at home, and it will be a matter of shame not at least to have stood in the shadow of the stadium on the famous day.

Personally, I'm not going at all. I'll stay at home and mind the province for the rest of you and probably yell my head off with a chilled glass of Chardonay as Mr Foley raises the trophy.

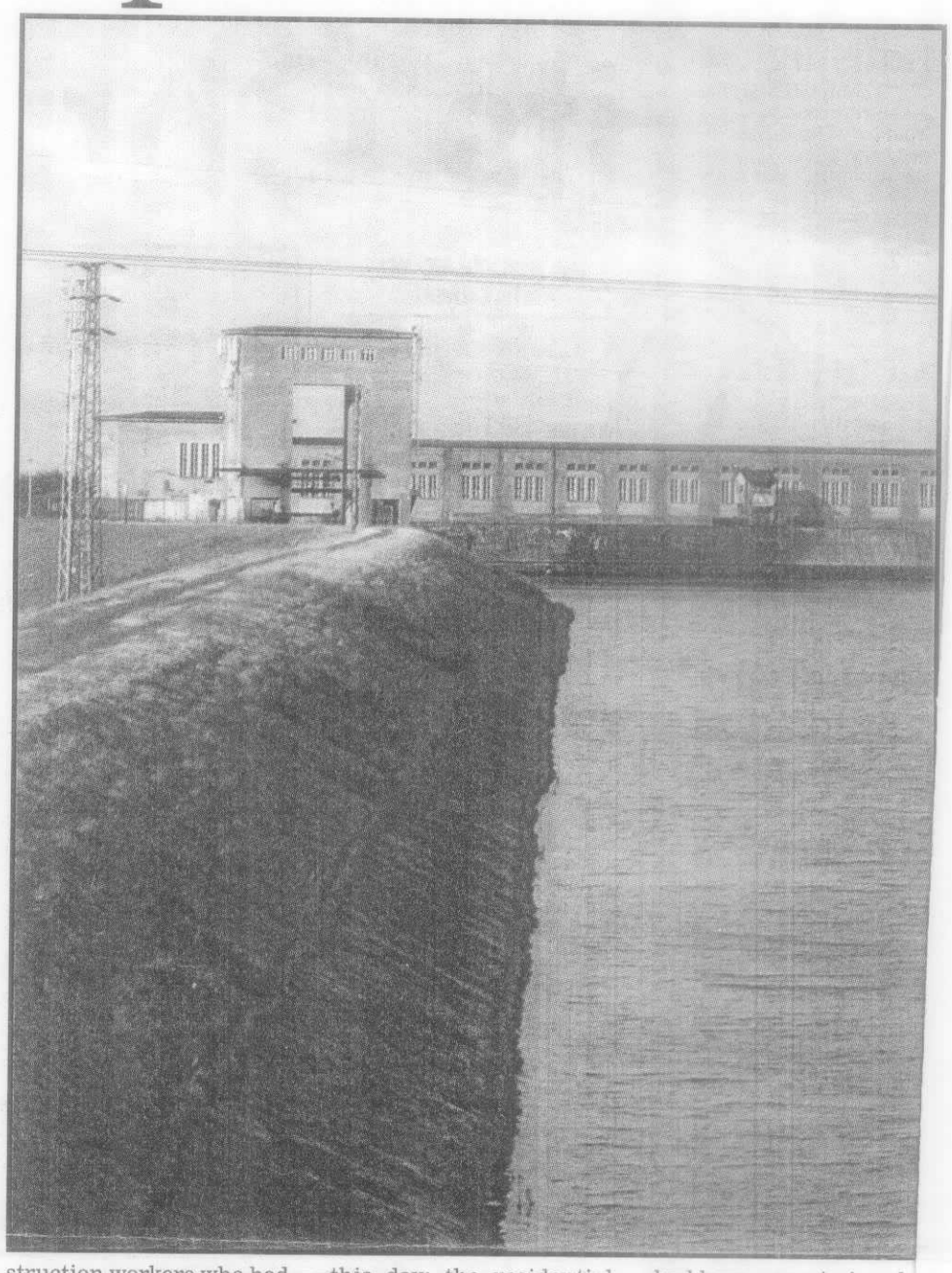
But in the meantime we have the final of the AIB League to think about, and Shannon's bid for another three in a row.

I predict that Shannon will win at Lansdowne Road on the scoreline of 10-14.

In other words, a second Battle of Clontarf.

More power to us

IT is a much forgotten fact that 53 workers died in the course of the construction of the Shannon Scheme in the 1920s.



A couple died in road traffic accidents, and one died of cancer, but most were killed on the job, some in accidents involving the 60 on-site trains which moved the millions of tons of material along the nine mile long project; others were caught in explosions, fell or drowned.

Hundreds of others were injured, many having requiring to have limbs amputated.

Wages for the majority of the 5,000 labourers were low, their accommodation was often squalid, and the early days were dogged by strikes, blacking of various workers groups and services and even assaults were not infrequent. Resentment against the German supervisors was not helped by the fact that Germans, performing seemingly identical jobs to those of their Irish counterparts, received better pay.

And, as the project neared completion, there was much bitterness over the sequence in which workers were let go as the work tapered off.

As soon as the scheme opened in 1929, a further bitter battle began because the Abbey Guild of Fishermen, recognised since the 1700s, were not allowed to fish the tailrace. This culminated with the snap-netters taking on bailiffs, gardaí and even the army in 1932, as the fishermen asserted their perceived historic rights.

It is hard to realise now that, in the 1920s, many believed that the then Minister for Industry and Commerce, Paddy McGilligan, was nuts to opt for harnessing the mighty Shannon, as the country could never require even a small fraction of the electrical output thus generated. A massively expensive white elephant which could bankrupt the new state in its first decade in existence, was how many saw it.

Today, Ardnacrusha contributes almost exactly two per cent of Ireland's electricity needs.

Tarbert and Moneypoint, occupying opposite shores of the same great waterway, burning heavy fuel oil and coal respectively, together produce 1,535 megawatts per annum (620 and 915) to Ardnacrusha's mere 86.

Even Aughinish Alumina supplies 110 megawatts of power outwards into the national grid, the available excess from its 150 MW natural gas fired heat and power plant which came on stream last Christmas. Few could have envisaged, as Ardnacrusha was being built, that a commercial ore refinery at Askeaton would, almost incidentally, supply more electricity than the great hydro works itself.

But Ardnacrusha, more than any other feat, ushered Ireland into a modern age, even if few of the construction workers who had been made redundant and who had returned to poor cottages and dark lanes in all parts of the country, or who had taken the sad mailboat to Britain, would never feel the benefit.

Electricity had not been new to some places even prior to the Shannon Scheme. Private and municipal schemes operated, isolated from each other and with differing voltages and standards of reliability, in a number of places. Limerick city had "the light" in shops and more prosperous homesteads, and two county towns, Newcastle West and Kilmallock had small generators as well. In the case of Kilmallock, the town's power was the surplus electricity from the industrial generator within O'Sullivan's mineral water factory. In the case of Newcastle West, JJ Phelan built a small hydro unit on the Arra at South Quay which powered the equipment of his saw mill and of the county's first cinema overhead. The town's bigger shops and residences fed from it.

At about the same time, directly across the Arra from Phelan's mill, Captain Richbel Curling, agent of the Earl of Devon, installed a discreet millwheel and dynamo on the ornamental stream which flowed through his lavish gardens, and this was sufficient to light his residence, the great Castle itself. The remnants of the little workings remain to this day; the residential castle does not.

Long after the arrival of the ESB many urban houses were still unconnected, and I clearly recall several families in my own street who continued to rely on candles and paraffin lamps for light in the home and on turf in open hearths for cooking and heat well into the 1960s. As my late friend Michael Hartnett memorably wrote a decade later: "Candles and paraffin lamps did not brighten the darkness in kitchens; they only made the gloom amber".

It is hard today to appreciate the impact which the arrival of reliable three-phase alternating current made as the ESB grid was developed and reached out to towns and villages, even if not all could afford to take "the light". The arrival of domestic appliances, at first as humble as a simple cooker or electric kettle, relieved the drudgery of the housewife. Welders, electric saws and other equipment made the life of the tradesmen easier too.

Shops, workshops and factories felt advantages at once.

Rural electrification was to take longer, and it is less than two decades ago since I visited an old man in a mud-walled thatched cottage in the mountains above Broadford who had had electricity installed only the day before, the last residence in Limerick to be connected, fully sixty years after Ardnacrusha had been commissioned.

Rural electrificatio facilitated the installatio of water pumps on farm and this led to the form tion of group scheme Milking machines we also an early introductio as the face of agricultu particularly in the dai sector, was revolutionise

And, of course, the was Micheál Ó Heh whose first radio broa cast was the 1938 Ireland football semi-fin between Galway a Monaghan, which start a legendary career. must have been respon ble for the widespread s of mains radios more th anyone.

Electric irons, washi machines, electric rad tors, refrigerators and v uum cleaners had arrived before the comi of television. But, agai remember houses wh none of these applian had been purchased a where electricity was s only "the light".

We're talking about el tricity again as national consumption energy seems to be s ralling out of control. won't take the nucl option for safety reaso but we won't blink an if we become part o pan-Europe grid i which dozens of nucl power stations in Brit France and elsewhere s ply power.

A good time, I think remember the 53 who d on the Shannon Scheme years ago.

—MARTIN BYRN