

# McMahon: The Master's voice

By NORMA PRENDIVILLE

IT is an awesome thing to bear the responsibility for shaping the mind and heart of a child.

But even yet, 17 years after he left his classroom in Listowel for the last time, you get the distinct feeling that any young lad would be safe in the hands of teacher and writer, Bryan McMahon. There is a kindness about him, a preparedness to listen, a willingness to wait and wait again until a person finds his or her true centre that inspires trust and confidence.

But as he says himself: "Teaching is in my blood."

He got it from his mother and prompted by her, he launched himself into the world of teaching where a passion for the job and craft took strong hold. And for 45 years, starting out in Dublin as a raw young master and then back home in Listowel, he was first and foremost a teacher.

It is this experience which is the stuff of his latest book, *The Master*.

The idea for the book came to him when he retired, he says. Happily, he had all the raw material at hand - the brown notebook in which every day throughout his long service, he had made a small entry before leaving the classroom.

"It could be anything," he recalls, "a word like elephant or building materials, anything" — but something always went in, something to mark an incident or thought from the day's happenings.

"And I thought to myself, perhaps I have something there," Bryan continues. "I was always writing stories about far away and I thought, maybe I have something under my feet here that has something going for it."

His son, Maurice, also a teacher, taped 40 hours of Bryan's conversation and recollections based on these notes and these were tied up into an immense but unmanageable manuscript from which a 90,000-word book was eventually culled. This, in turn, was whittled down even further and now, at just over 60,000 words, it is, in Bryan's own words, "as bare as an ash tree in the month of May" — taut, spare and honed.

It is, says its author, a book full of anecdotes, because "I am in my anecdote."

It also contains musings on every subject in the school curriculum, as well as criticisms of various issues



The Master . . . Bryan McMahon at the launch, and, inset, his son Maurice.

— such as the revival of the Irish language, where Bryan makes a case for his own, less conventional method of teaching.

It is also peppered throughout with his own philosophical insights, the world view he hewed from his own life and experience and the quotations that gave him hope and inspiration and food for thought.

But more than anything, says Bryan McMahon, it is about attitude,

about what goes on in the mind of teachers as day after day they carry out their job. The book charts what gives them hope or sadness, what causes them despair or marks success.

"I hope," he says, "that what I have to say will find a common denominator, an answering echo the length and breadth of the country."

And in writing the book, he also hopes to exert an influence over

teaching itself.

"I am presumptuous in that," he admits with a laugh, but yes, he does want to influence other teachers, who, in their turn, will influence children. "But," he insists, "I am not being parochial."

The issues are universal ones — and he has a lifetime of experience to draw upon.

Since he began as a teacher back in the 1930s, Bryan has seen many changes in schooling. But he holds himself to the unconventional and to seeking out the secret gift that a child might have and to making it shine. That, for him, is the real art of the teacher.

"Teachers," he says, "should be carefully selected, for their beloved idiosyncrasies, then allowed to exercise their own personality on the schoolroom floor."

But while in some respects, the era of the schoolmaster as powerful wielder of knowledge and influence in a community is long gone, "that is no reason not to record it", says Bryan.

Besides, he insists, *The Master* is not a sentimentalised pen-picture of an extinct type. "I am too tough for that," he says. "Tough as a hame strap."

And in that, he is right. In the incidents he recalls, whether of small successes in getting "the tumblers of a child's mind" to fall into place or of the squalor of the old school (now thankfully demolished) which was described as a "barracks built upon a cesspool" there is a ring of truth that forbids sentimental colourations.

And in setting out his own views for us as we wander with him through his life, there is a trenchancy of thought that demands reflection. Here, you say, is a life, well lived, well battered. Here is a mind that has gone into the small byways and roamed the royal highways of learning, stretching itself, questioning itself, refining itself and there is a joy and indeed a sense of privilege at being able to retrace the journey with him.

At times, the voice that is Bryan McMahon thunders out in rich, rolling cadences as when he says, speaking of the revival of Irish that he will never be reconciled to the "giggle of servility that so often greets the ordinary person's fortitude when he dares in public to speak a single phrase in Irish.

*The Master* by Bryan McMahon is published by Poolbeg Press at £15.99.

## Past pupils pay tribute to their mentor

THEY came in their hundreds to honour Bryan McMahon at the launch in his old school, the Boys National in Church Street, Lisotwel. Farmers, lawyers, scholars, teachers, rich and poor, they came to celebrate the man they have known as the Master for nearly half-a-century.

And it was a rare night, a night to remember, a night of joy and a night of emotion.

"We have waited many years to share this night with you," said John McAuliffe, a former pupil and later teaching colleague of Bryan's who, as present principal of the school, opened the proceedings. He could remember lots of things about being a pupil of Bryan's he said, but not where he kept the stick.

Another teacher, Joe O'Toole, Senator and INTO head, had written three letters explaining why he couldn't possibly be there on the night, but in the end,

found himself inexplicably compelled to abandon two other functions and drive hundreds of miles to Listowel to honour Bryan McMahon.

Mr Justice Hugh O'Flaherty, to whom the honour of formally launching the book fell, said: "In delivering my judgment on this book, *The Master*, I can say that it is a phenomenal, fantastic and beautiful book."

In a wide-ranging speech he paid tribute too to two others, "not in a sad context but as a celebration of great lives which have quickened all other lives: I refer, of course, to Mrs Kitty McMahon as well as to Eamon Keane. I know that their gentle spirits abide with us at this time of celebration."

"When you are a fourth son, you don't often get called upon to get the opportunity to speak," joked Maurice McMahon, who with his wife, Yvonne,

had cajoled and winkled the story of *The Master* from Bryan, who "didn't need an awful lot of pushing. It was a pleasure to drive him," he said.

On behalf of the McMahon family, he thanked the people of Listowel, so many of whom took time to care for, and look after, their father.

But it was when Bryan McMahon himself took to the rostrum that the pent-up and genuinely felt emotion of the capacity crowd really broke through.

Standing tall and erect, dignified yet obviously moved by the welcome, Bryan McMahon said: "I can claim to know every single face here and a story connected with them."

He greeted by name many faces in the audience and thanked everybody for the "signal honour" they had done him by coming to the launch.



Bryan McMahon and Padraig Broderick, Listowel, at the launch.



Kevin Rafter

## Policital Who's Who has local connection

THERE is a big Limerick involvement in a new *Who's Who* book of local politics to be published at the end of November.

The guidebook, which will be launched by An Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, is being compiled by Kevin Rafter, from North Circular Road, and Noel Whelan, a graduate from Wexford. Also involved is Oorla Gallagher from Clareview, who attended Laurel Hill and McNamara High School Secretarial College and worked recently at the University of Limerick.

Blackwater Press, Ireland's leading publishers of political related books, are behind the publication, which will contain details and photographs of the members of Ireland's 26 county councils and five city corporations and profiles of the key decision makers and officials in local authorities. Contact names, addresses and phone numbers are included.

Kevin Rafter was educated at St Clement's College, Limerick, and Trinity, Dublin, where he studied economics. His parents are Bill and Mary Rafter. Kevin says it will be the most comprehensive local elections reference book every produced, and will be a must for journalists, professionals, business people, politicians and local and national officials.

## Warned

JOHN Sheehan, 7, Corney Ring Place, Dromina, was convicted of driving without insurance last January 5 at Dromina, by Charleville Court, and warned by Judge Aidan O'Donnell that he would go to prison the next time if he repeated the offence.

Mr Sheehan was fined £100, disqualified from driving for 12 months with his licence endorsed. A second charge of having no insurance on the same day was taken into account along with charges of having no tax, no tax displayed, failing to produce insurance and having a worn tyre.

## Fined

STEPHANIE Forgan, 3, Broadway, Buttevant, was fined £20 at Charleville Court for driving at 49mph in a 30mph zone at Rathgoggin South last February 1.

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