sector: Portlaoise Mark II will be leased back and eventually sold to the state. This, we are led to believe, is the shape of things to come.

It must be: it already happens across the Atlantic and across the Irish Sea—indeed, in the US and Britain some penitentiaries are actually privately-run—and, as every schoolchild knows, anything cool there just has to be copied here. Or has it?

At first sight, privatisation of jails seems an attractive proposition. More prison places are urgently needed, it is argued, but the cost would be prohibitive. Private investment saves governments from having to raise the enormous capital necessary. Investors are reimbursed in easy payments and make an eventual killing with the sale of the jail.

On closer examination, however, the proposition isn't so attractive. The investors are the only ones who benefit. Governments—and, more importantly, the taxpayers—lose out.

Leaseback is of no advantage to the community. Governments would be better advised to raise the money in the traditional way. Repaying an international loan, for example, would be as cheap as paying out on a lease. And once the repayments were completed the nation would at least be master of its own jailhouse. Under leaseback, we would still have to buy the place.

The future of the Irish economy might be free enterprise but privatisation isn't always best suited to the provision of essential public services. Often, indeed, it is an impediment. For example, roads financed privately to ease congestion actually cause it by stopping traffic for tolls.

But the argument is more moral than economic. It is obviously in the interests of society that in our penal system human considerations remain paramount, rather than the financial bottom line. It is ironical that, increasingly, governments poke their nose into citizens' private business while increasingly funking their responsibility to provide essential public services. If governments are not for providing such basics—not least prisons—then what are they for?

Cash and ashes

WHATEVER one's opinion of Angela's Ashes, the fact is that the global success of Frank McCourt's book presents the Mid-West with a unique opportunity to enhance its international profile. A story of slum life in Limerick might seem an unlikely hook on which to hang optimism. But that was then and this is now: misery, sanitised by time, can seem romantic.

Just as Joyce, O'Casey and Behan have made Dublin culturally fashionable, so McCourt can put Limerick on the literary map . There is talk of a major Hollywood movie. Already, a tourist trail of scenes of McCourt's childhood is reportedly being organised.

The possibilities from an Angela's Ashes industry are endless. This is not to say that the city should prostitute itself for the sake of tourism or other revenue. The subject must be approached with sensitivity.

Given such an approach by all concerned locally, there is no reason why the Limerick region shouldn't cash in on the burgeoning reputation of one of its most talented sons.

Here's to food

TALKING about intelligent marketing, a classic example is the eight-day Limerick Food Festival starting this Saturday. A Shannon Development initiative, it is celebration of good living. And, unlike other, similar events, it is a festival for the people.

For far too long good food—not to mention

worth £100 million to the economy. The opening day of the two-month season is still traditionally on

Grouse management is of course a very well researched business in the

sportsmen in August and even when the opening of the season was put back to September 1.

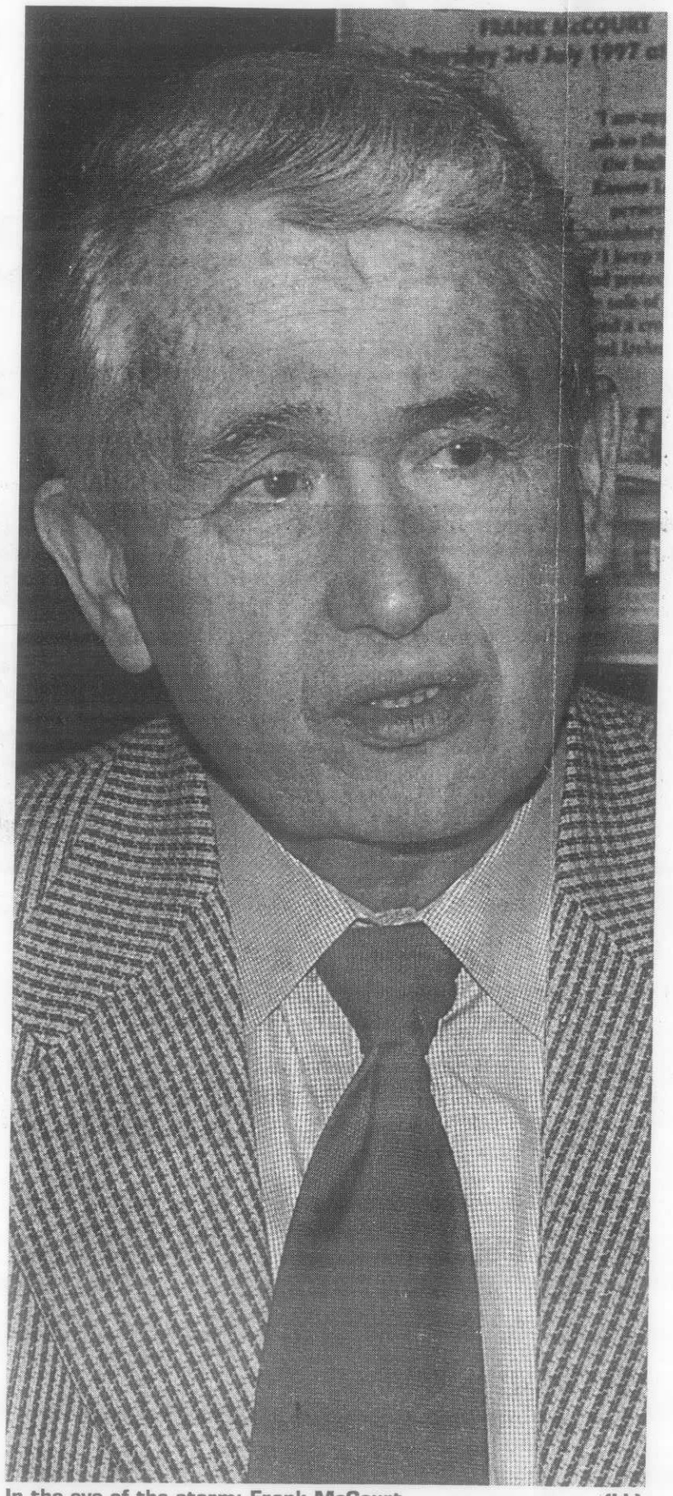
for these, the wildest of birds. Old heather has to be burned off regularly so that the young shoots pro-

once shot a dozen birds on an opening morning was another reliable moor. The late John Nash of Oola,

lived. Not too far away in another remote heather-covered bog was Johnny Lynch's, who confided

cock taking flight crowing kwok-ko-ko, followed rapidly by the pack on the wing above the turf banks.

Stoking up Angela's Ashes



In the eye of the storm: Frank McCourt (LL)

By BRENDAN HALLIGAN

But does the heated row over Frank McCourt generate too little light?

FLAMING controversy continues to illuminate Frank McCourt's path from obscurity to glory.

The Pulitzer author of Angela's Ashes has been accorded universal critical acclaim. But the best-selling book has divided opinion in Limerick. There have been repeated and often heated clashes.

And, on the eve of the accession of the former resident of Roden Street as writer-in-residence at the University of Limerick, the debate still smoulders.

No-one, apparently, denies that McCourt's story of his childhood in Limerick is well told. Why, then, the dissent? The objectors generally make two main points:-

First, they argue, the book is anti-Limerick in that it misrepresents both the city of the Thirties and Forties and its citizens, including several who are either identified or identifiable. McCourt stands accused not only of exaggerating the hardship he experienced but of blaming Limerick for it.

The second major complaint is that the book is anti-Catholic. Defenders of the faith allege that McCourt scapegoats the Church. This prejudice, they maintain, distorts his judgment of clerics and others he encountered here.

Are the protests justified? Is the book anti-Limerick? Is it anti-Catholic?

The two sides in the great debate can and do spend all the hours God sends them testing the historical accuracy or otherwise of Angela's Ashes with a view to proving their respective cases.

Their efforts, however, are largely futile. For whether McCourt is factually accurate is frankly beside the point. What matters is not whether we, the readers, believe what he's saying but whether he, the writer, believes what he's saying.

Angela's Ashes, after all, is a personal memoir. It is not necessarily a report of the situation as it was but of how one little boy perceived it to be. And that's the point: this is literature, not history.

Judged on its own terms, the book is a work of art.

Admittedly, its social significance is immense. The ongoing public argument legitimately addresses this aspect. It is unfortunate that the concentration on such simplistic crudities as the alleged anti-Limerick and anti-Catholic aspects of the tale should divert attention from the real issues on both counts.

Responding to recent condemnation, McCourt denied blaming Church or Government. It is a fine but crucial point. Angela's Ashes is an indictment of the institutional Church's exercise of power, not of the Church as such; an indictment of society's evolving structure, not of any particular administration.

The book may or may not be credible in any or every detail but there is no shortage of corroborative evidence to substantiate the charge that the Limerick of the second quarter of the 20th century was class-ridden; no more or no less so than other cities but class-ridden all the same. The Treaty City was unique in that dark age only in producing a genius to capture the pathos.

What is also indisputable is that the institutional Church formed an integral part of the socio-economic regime. Again, this was not peculiar to Limerick; it was the way things were not just in this country but in many others. Organised religion tended to identify with the Establishment.

AS WITH the rest of society, the schools of Limerick were stratified by class. And so the young McCourt was conditioned to believe that, spiritually and temporally, he was good for nothing. This may not have been what the priests and teachers of the time either taught him or intended to teach him but this is undoubtedly what he learnt.

What he received was not the one true faith but a warped version of Catholicism. Scrupulosity and superstition prevailed over justice and love.

It is hardly surprising that Frankie, the poor, innocent child evoking such sympathy, should grow into the adolescent who resorts to theft, who intimidates the poor and who revels in masturbation and adultery, eventually provoking disgust. He was, for better or worse, a product of his environment.

The relevance of Angela's Ashes lies partly in the realisation that vestiges of that environment survive to this day. The institutional Church may present a more humane face but is still tainted by mammon.

Selection policies of some schools continue to reinforce social apartheid. And where in young McCourt's time there were popular doctrinal misconceptions there is now mass theological illiteracy among all demographic groups.

Meanwhile, in the secular world traditional snobbery and class distinction survive, albeit less obviously so. The lanes of old are long since gone, bad cess to them, but residents of some of the newer townships suffer even today something akin to the discrimination endured by their forebears. It's still a long way from the stockbroker belt to the concrete jungle.

Nevertheless, Limerick life generally 50 or 60 years ago was undeniably far worse. And yet then, as now, the "ordinary" people were extraordinarily wonderful. McCourt might or might not stigmatise the city but Angela's Ashes is as remarkable for its acts of kindness as its crimes of cruelty. Moreover, the plight of Frank and his family was precipitated not by anyone in Limerick but by someone from Antrim, his drunken father.

It is only natural, then, that some citizens should be incensed by any suggestion that they themselves or their parents or grandparents were somehow culpable. They are entitled to their indignation. Their criticism deserves to be seriously considered and comprehensively answered.

Hopefully, McCourt's return to Limerick as writer-in-residence will re-focus the public debate to facilitate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the generations who endured so much so heroically to bequeath us a better Limerick.