



Now that the world's media, chasing a good Angela's Ashes story, have come and gone from Limerick, author, GERARD HANNAN, concludes that there is only one winner in the war of words, between FRANK McCOURT and himself - Limerick.

Limerick, you're the winner . . .



I HAVE no doubt that I am not being lied to when I am told that some people are sick to the back teeth of the by now internationally famous Ashes debate.

The row, that has filled many a column inch in practically every newspaper of note in Europe, America and the rest of the world is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. I had no idea in autumn 1997 that what started as a heated debate on a small time local radio chat show would develop into a major international row.

No one need bother mocking or pitying the people of Limerick; it's clear from Angela's Ashes they do such a good job of it themselves. —Richard Corless (Time.com).

Nobody warned me that this debate would soon have me eyeball-to-eyeball with such famous people as Ed Bradley (60 Minutes); Melvyn Bragg (South Bank Show); Pat Kenny and Frank McCourt himself (Late Late Show) and a posse of US and international reporters representing such highly prestigious papers as USA Today, Boston Globe, Sunday Times, Evening Standard, The Independent, LA. Times, Philadelphia Inquirer and The Australian to name but a few.

I have long lost count of the number of journalists who rang my office for an "exclusive, interview" with the guy who dared to take on the great Frank McCourt and the one lesson.

I have learned from all of this is that the media love a good dogfight.

American hacks here to defend their highly esteemed Pulitzer Prize winner and open their "unbiased" interviews with such lines as "I must say I loved that book".

Japanese telling me in broken English that I am an "opportunist"; Germans warning me that McCourt is much loved in Hamburg and even a Danish lady who compared me to some child in her fellow countryman's Hans Christian Andersen's tale who screams that the king is naked.

I can feel it in my bones that the big fight is now over and the world's journalists have gone on to bigger and better things and in a matter of weeks the question will be Gerard who?

But, for now, there is one final question that needs to be answered: who won the dogfight? The answer to that question can be found in the thousands of column inches given to Limerick as a result of the big show down. That winner is clearly Limerick itself.

"People in Ireland are obsessed with anyone who is even half successful. What you have is probably one of the most beautifully written books of the last 30 years from any country and you should be proud of it," said Alan Parker. Angela's Ashes director. Limerick's economy is thriving. There are many examples with quoting but the spirit of the

commentary is best illustrated in a recent article on the Washington Post where the international journalist Tara Mack writes: "The basic geography of the city of Limerick has changed little since McCourt, who was born in Brooklyn, moved here with his family at the age of four. The powerful River Shannon splits the city into three sections that are tied together by a series of bridges. Georgian brick buildings line the neatly gridded downtown streets.

"But to someone from 1930s Limerick, the character of the city today would be almost unrecognisable. McCourt's Limerick was poor, wet, malnourished, filthy and miserable. He lived with his parents and three surviving brothers in "the Lanes," the city's crowded slum district. "An Ireland during the Depression is what made America look wealthy," said Frank McCourt on CNN.

Consumption and fleas were rampant, and the communal toilets overflowed with waste. An economic boom in Ireland, fuelled by subsidies from the European Union and growth in the high-tech sector, has radically altered the fortunes of the city.

Now Limerick's economy is thriving.

The city's residents, many of whom are employed at a Dell computer plant, are confident and prosperous. O'Connell Street, the main retail thoroughfare downtown, bustles with pedestrians and traffic.

The tenements have been torn down, and locals love to tell visitors that when the movie was made the filmmakers had to travel to Cork to find slums.

Indeed, the controversy over whether or not the film gives a good impression of present-day Limerick is somewhat misconceived, since Angela's Ashes offers no more comment on the modern town than a film about Wuthering Heights does on contemporary Yorkshire. Edward Dock—The Express.

Limerick's other, famous son Richard Harris, writing in The Sunday Times elaborates on Tara Mack's main points when he writes: "Far from being backward and suffering from boredom, Limerick is one of the most progressive cities in Ireland. It is after all one of the great centres of industrial development, now housing one of Ireland's most prestigious universities. The nearby Shannon Business Park, with its airport and tax-free status, is singularly responsible for Ireland's financial bonanza."

It is a great pity that Frank McCourt couldn't leave well enough alone and retire as a memoirist after his stupendous success with Angela's Ashes.

A thoroughly used favourite phrase in 'Tis is "not giving a fiddler's fart". Reading this book can push you to just that point. Paul Gray—Time Magazine.

Frank McCourt is in agreement with Harris' observations when speaking to Jim Daah of the extraordinarily popular American Literary Website UNOMAS (<http://www.unomas.com>) he gives his impression of modern Limerick: "I'm more inclined to go back now because Limerick has changed so much. One of the reasons it was such a grim... or the grimmest of all towns was that it was the only large city or town in Ireland that didn't have a university."

"So they put in a university about 20 years ago and it has changed the whole atmosphere of the place. Brought young people in and changed the atmosphere intellectually. So you see the University blooming and the church beginning to recede."

"In Limerick—Ireland—I lived in dire poverty with children dying all over the place, three of our siblings died. Eleven of our classmates died

and my mother went into a deep depression. My father went off on the booze, and school was miserable. All the institutions failed us; we were hungry and we were miserable and cold and I left school at the age of 13 and had no education—no formal education as such, and I was always aware of that."

So when I came here to America, and because I read a lot, I was able to pass myself off as being educated. So I've been doing that ever since," said Malachy McCourt on CNN.

The Guardian newspaper is not sparing in its praise of Limerick in an article headed "Raking over the Ashes." Limerick today is a different place from McCourt's era. It is a much more modern, vibrant city. Ireland's economic boom has turned the city's fortunes around. It buzzes with a new energy and the population is predominantly young and increasingly prosperous.

Much of the movie was shot on location in Limerick, which is seeking to shed an image for knife-related violence that has earned it the unwanted modern-day nickname of "Knifetown." Kevin Smith (Fox News) said: "The movie sings our praises and vividly expressed Frank McCourt's life in Sunday terms we are all familiar with enough."

He writes: "The trickle of people already heading to the west of Ireland to follow the story of Angela's Ashes looks set to become a rush."

"But Limerick is not a mere narrative trick here. In the end, it has sense, in the interest of this literary heritage tourism, it would rapidly refurbish a convenient tenement in Forties style, complete with a rag-tag McCourt-esque family quaffing tea out of jam jars (their standard drinking vessel) with dad-four sheets to the wind on the beer-betting out maudlin republican ballads.

"The locations in the book come to life most vividly in the surprisingly elegant Georgian area around The Crescent. Interestingly, the smart public school here, Crescent College, was attended by the youthful Terry Wogan (one wonders if the Wogan family were won't to drink tea from jam jars).

"Here you will find South's pub where Frank's dad boozed away the little money the family had. The pub, which does feature in the film, has been tarted up (the exterior had to be de-tarted for the film). But inside, while a display of photographs records a Frank McCourt visit, more space is devoted to a newspaper report of the great day in 1978 when local rugby team Munster defeated the mighty All Blacks."

The author may have moved from the picturesque poverty of Limerick to the bright lights of New York in 1949, but 'Tis does as much for the American dream as Angela's Ashes did for the image of Irish Catholicism—Melanie McDonagh, London Lifestyle.