

EDITORIAL

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Editorial: Tel. (061) 214503. Fax (061) 401424
Advertising: Tel. (061) 400400. Fax (061) 401422
Administration: Tel. (061) 214500. Fax (061) 314804.
Email: administration@limerick-leader.ie

Men mainly

MEN continue to dominate local statutory bodies in the Mid-West. This is in keeping with national custom. Indeed, this week it was reported that only 27% of appointments to State boards since 1997 are women.

The Government should hang their heads in shame. So should the Opposition. A 40% gender balance has been the official policy of successive administrations since 1991.

Admittedly, changing the gender culture is rarely if ever easy. Progress towards equality in business and the professions, for example, has been painfully slow. Moreover, removing the obstacles to women entering a particular sector is one thing; removing the glass ceiling which keeps down those who do gain entry is another—and sometimes even more difficult—matter. But that is no excuse for the failure to appoint sufficient women to State boards.

The truth is that none of the political parties involved has bothered to take the subject seriously.

The idea of a compulsory quota is rejected on the grounds that, while giving the appearance of equality it would in fact create discrimination. This can certainly be the case. In normal circumstances in the workplace quotas could lead to the appointment of less qualified females, for example, at the expense of better qualified males; quotas can be sexist, when what is needed is appointment on merit.

But the circumstances in which government make nominations to boards are not normal circumstances in the workplace. At issue are not full-time career jobs but part-time political appointments. In these circumstances, therefore, a quota in favour of women would not entail the risk of workplace discrimination against men.

But the failure, nine years later, of the politicians to achieve a gender balance on State bodies is hardly surprising. Political parties are well used to preaching equality but not practising it. The low proportion of women in Leinster House remains a scandal to the world.

Politicians can complain about the difficulties of changing the culture of society but it is not society which has rejected women as TDs and senators; it is the political parties, who have consistently refused to recruit sufficient women candidates. Members of the all-party political Establishment are obviously prepared to change everything except themselves. In that case, it is difficult to see how full equality can ever be achieved nationally without quotas not only for quangos but for the Oireachtas too.

Democracy?

BETTER late than never, Fine Gael leader John Bruton has at least implicitly recognised the electorate's right to know in advance on an election the party political make-up of a coalition government. This of

Where rugby is taken as seriously as in Limerick

RUGBY, once a winter sport, this year seemed more like a summer one, with Munster starring in Europe in late May, immediately followed by Ireland's Limerick-laced tour of the Americas as late as last month. But we are not the tardiest. The French season is ending only about now, with their national cup final.

Moreover, the campaign has been fought with a passion reminiscent of Munster, provincial as well as Young Perpignan in Catalonia attracted the most fervent following of all.



Left: the day of the Euro soccer final—but rugby dominated the news. Right: the day after—only when France had won Euro-2000 did soccer oust rugby from the front page



When they were pipped by a point in the quarter-finals some of their fans rioted.

Clearly, rugby in Perpignan is taken almost as seriously as it is in Limerick.

BRENDAN HALLIGAN

Frank McCourt cracks it



Only now is his true greatness emerging: Frank among friends in Limerick

The mystery of French kissing

A KISS isn't just a kiss, according to a card in my holiday mail backlog. Maura Duffy of Hospital and the Parish, mother-in-law of jovial Limerick and Clare poet Johnat Dillon and champion of the Jews in Limerick, refers to the famous Caravaggio picture of the Judas Kiss repeatedly featured in this column.

"Judas gave Jesus that kiss so that the soldiers would know who he was but Jesus knew that he was being betrayed," she writes. "So that is why Jews kiss now on both

cheeks."

So what about French-kissing? No, not the lusty Limerick tongue-poking but the genteel multi-peck greeting customary in the land of l'amour. If Israelis in view of Christian history quite reasonably plant an extra birdie to protest their sincerity, don't the French with their endless kisses protest too much? Sacre bleu!

Could that Gallic romantic who only had eyes for you on holidays in Biarritz in fact be just one of countless French Iscariots?

LIMERICKMAN Frank McCourt's greatness as a writer is only now beginning to emerge. He may have proved himself a literary genius with the publication of Angela's Ashes. Certainly, apart from a little local difficulty in Limerick, he has been acclaimed as such all the way from the groves of Plassey to those of the Ivy League.

But one best-seller doesn't make a best-selling author. The acid test is book number two. Admittedly, the phenomenal success of Angela's Ashes was unique, making it an impossible act for even McCourt to follow.

But by any standards of success other than his own, his second book's performance is well-nigh miraculous.

Have you noticed that the hard-back edition of 'Tis has been in The Sunday Times top 10 best-sellers for no fewer than 35 weeks? Last week, almost a year after its publication, it ranked 5th.

Is that, considering the over-exposure of Frank and the depression rained on the international public by the film of the first book, arguably not an even greater achievement than even Angela's Ashes? 'Tis indeed.

But McCourt, for all his magic, is not infallible. In 'Tis he recalls using nursery rhymes to stimulate the creativity of his upper-crust students in Stuyvesant High

In the daily newspaper L'Indépendant, which circulates in this rugby region in the lee of the Pyrenees, Perpignan's progress repeatedly overshadowed even that of Les Bleus in Euro-2000. On the day that France appeared in the soccer final against Italy, pride of place on page one went to a preview of the rugby quarter-final.

France actually had to win Euro-2000 and Perpignan had to lose before the soccer team could score with the Catalans.

Beautiful beautiful Perpignan!

School. For a whole class period there was a heated discussion of Humpty Dumpty.

Who says it's an egg? I ask.

Of course it's an egg. Everyone knows that.

Where does it say it's an egg? ... I'm not destroying. I just want to know where you get the idea that Humpty is an egg.

Because, Mr McCourt, it's in all the pictures and whoever drew the first picture musta known the guy who wrote the poem or he'd never have made it an egg.

All right. If you're content with the idea of egg we'll let it be but I know the future lawyers in this class will never accept egg where there is no evidence of egg.

In fact, as an eagle-eyed Mid-West journalist testifies, there is just such evidence. Ron Kirwan, who specialises in McCourt controversies, highlights a passage in Lewis Carroll's book Through The Looking Glass in which a sheep in a shop sold Alice an egg.

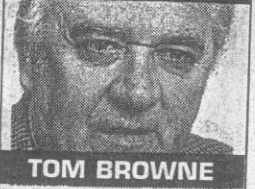
The closer she got to the egg, the larger and more human it looked—until "she saw that it was Humpty Dumpty himself."

So McCourt got it wrong? Well, not quite. As Kirwan observes, Carroll can be read not only as a fairytale but as satire.

Perhaps the salient point isn't that Humpty Dumpty is—or is not—an egg but that appearances can be deceptive.

McCourt, in short, was trying to get his pupils to think, not to jump to conclusions. The lad from the lanes who taught in New York may have lacked a high school diploma but he was and is an egghead, however hard-boiled.

FEAR TUATHE



TOM BROWNE

DURING the past few weeks with the rivers and lakes lower than they would have even been during a good summer level, it was interesting to investigate some of the debris and weeds on the floor. In one lake where the gravel and stones on the bottom were just covered by very shallow water there was a thick veil of algae of a sickly shade of green. Here I found a dead elver, about four inches, one of this spring's run of fry from Sargasso and by its fresh appearance it hadn't long expired. In fact, it was in perfect condition and as there was no visible sign of injury it must be assumed that death was caused by the condition of the lake. Up to a few years ago this lake had crystal-clear water at all times of the year with a large stock of trout, perch, pike, eel and rudd, which were confused with roach. The shoals of perch have disappeared, only a few trout survive, but the lake even in its filthy condition, is as swim with pike, despite a thoroughly organised campaign over the years by the local anglers' club to control the ruthless predators. Are pike tolerant of these conditions? It must be asked. There's no sewage scheme here or cruiser waste to smother the lake in pollution, so the runoff of farm fertiliser must take most of the blame. It arrives no doubt by way of the feeder river. During the shafts of sunlight most of the shallow bed of the lake was visibly covered by algae, some of which had surfaced and was spread out in thick blobs along by the shore. It's not long since this lake was a bathers' paradise. It appears the only time the conditions of which I write are ever highlighted is