We are deluged by tidal wave of radio stations on the air

BYRNES AT THE WEEKEND

HAVING changed cars lately, I find that I have excellent radio reception once again. The previous machine, for all its loyal service, was a little deficient in the radio end of things.

As work takes me out and about quite a bit, and the radio relieves the annoyance caused by bad roads and traffic, I have found myself wondering whether we now have too many radio stations.

Radio was never as controlled or as controllable as television was to become. I grew up on a diet of BBC Light Programme on long wave and Radio Luxemburg on 208 medium wave. We were able to get American Forces Network and a few other hissy English language stations as well, but the short wave signals in particular tended to whistle and fade annoyingly. But with radio we were able to access a world beyond the suffocatingly mind-controlled Ireland of my youth.

Radio Eireann broadcast at breakfast time, lunch time and for a few hours in the evenings. It operated from the legendary long corridor in the Henry Street side of Dublin's GPO and was closely supervised by civil servants of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. If you didn't like Radio Eireann, then sorry! It was the only Irish radio channel and even the short-lived Cork-based sister service, 6CK, had lasted only a few years before being reassimilated into the Dublin station.

In the long corridor they had three studios, one for music, one for drama and one for announcers. And Radio Eireann operated as though no other radio station existed anywhere. It convinced itself that it had a monopoly and acted accordingly.

When Erskine Childers became Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, with his office in the GPO, he visited the long corridor and was astonished to find that there were no teleprinters clattering out stories from the wire services such as Reuters, AP and UPI. He asked how the station got its news, only to be told that they waited to buy a copy of the Evening Herald and worked from there.

This one-channel radio situation continued even after RTE2 television had been established. This was because, before satellite technology, one almost had to have line of sight to a transmitter in order to pick up a TV signal. Radio could be picked up much more easily.

The clamour at the time was to have BBC1 television rebroadcast across Ireland from the RTE towers. Ironically, this was at a time when nationalism in the 26 counties was at its most fervent, but people seemed to be capable of singing the goriest of rebel songs while watching two English soccer teams play. The eventual compromise was to create RTE2 which carried some soaps, but the outcry regarding radio at the time was of a different kind.

As entertaining and instructional as the BBC's radio output was, and as brash and gutsy as Radio Luxemburg was, neither provided content which was that relevant to the Irish household.

Radio Eireann, of course, although its hours had been extended and its programming improved, was perceived, by younger people at least, to be a stuffy schoolmarm-ish custodian of all that was deemed good, a kind of janitor to a cultural museum, a self satisfied oracle.

The fact that none of this was actually true didn't change that perception and it must have been infuriating to those in Radio Eireann who were doing amazing work in cultural preservation and development that their work was not only not recognised but was ridiculed.

So the pirates came along in the middle to late 1970s. The one to which I was attached, the second one to be started in Limerick (by a week or two) opened in June 1978. We didn't last long because we actually expected that we would be in the running for the local broadcasting license when such would be legislated for any day soon.

In fact, any day soon was several years down the line and our team had long dispersed to many parts of the globe before any law providing for authorised local radio was enacted.

But we have local radio, community radio, regional radio aimed at specific age groups, RTE's Lyric FM in Cornmarket Square brings classics and world music to the nation, and we have Today FM, Newstalk and good old Radio One and Radio 2. And, of course, we still have the BBCs and almost limitless stations available on the internet.

But the local and community stations don't confine themselves to the precise outlines of their designated counties or parts thereof. By the very nature of broadcasting there are overlaps and the car has picked up clear signals from Waterford and Galway as well as all the stations in between. I'm absolutely spoiled for choice as I drive along.

But, whereas we were almost prisoners in single channel land, apart from what came in from beyond the sea, I now wonder whether there are enough people in radioland to justify the number of stations we have now provided.

For a population of four and a bit million people we have 26 local commercial stations and 21 local community stations. That's well over 50 stations of one kind or another broadcasting at us, and the overlaps must be huge. When I mentioned population, the further questio must be asked as to how many peop actually listen to the radio at any give time. One in five, one in eight?

If RTE Radio1's market share is 21 pe cent, RTE2 is at 13 and Today FM is a 12, that's half the listnership gone ther and then, especially if you add in New stalk and Lyric as "nationals". The res is spread among the 26 commercial sta tions and the 21 unsurveyed communit operators.

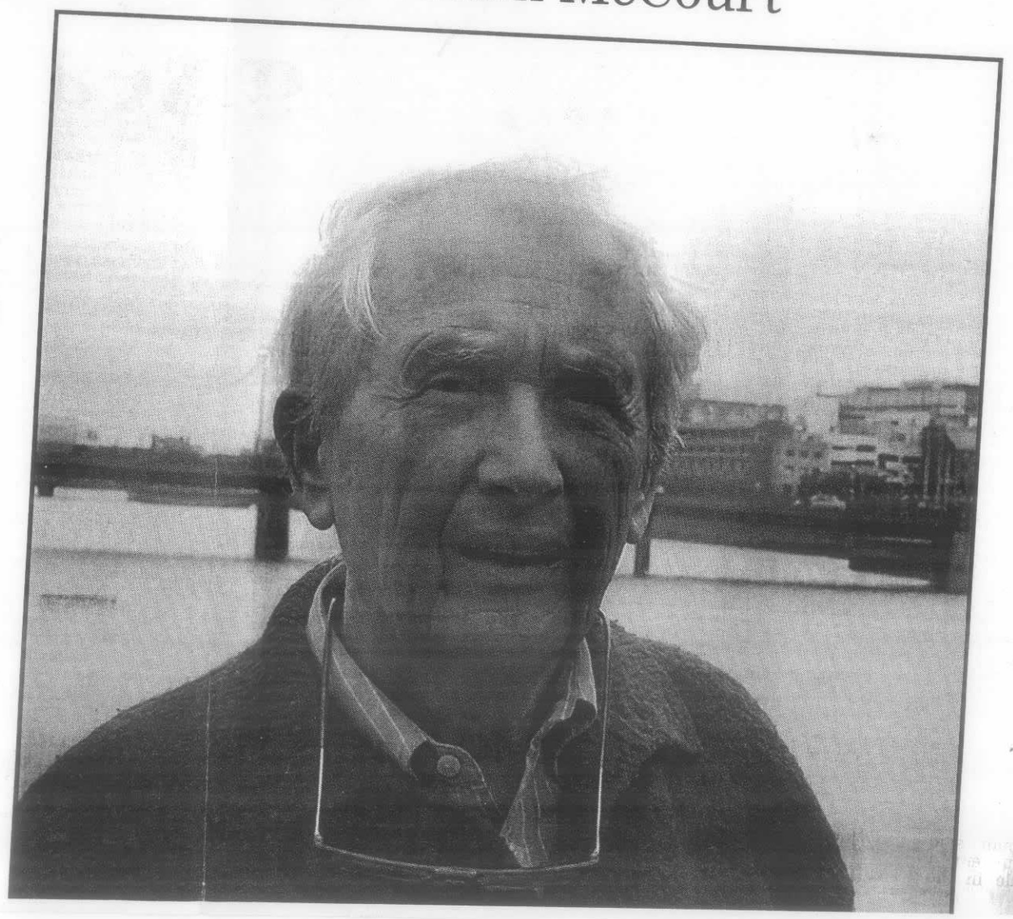
But the investment market doesn' seem to think that the Irish commercial radio market is oversupplied at all. The capital cost of setting up may be fairly high, but, unlike a newspaper, there are no printing and distribution costs; true, there is no revenue from sale of the product, but advertising more than makes up for that. That, I assume, is why local radio stations, where they have changed hands, have done so for multi-million sums.

Radio is the simplest of media, requiring just a small set and an ear to participate. We are all told that websites will soon be the medium of choice for disseminating information and entertainment. But I'm convinced that radio will be alive and well long after I have ceased to be a listener

The Leader Interview: Frank McCourt

At 77, Frank McCourt believes he is entering the fourth act in his life. As a new book inspired by his mother Angela is published he tells **ANNE SHERIDAN** what he thinks of the new Limerick and reveals he'd like his ashes scattered over the river Shannon

McCourt Frank and forthright on subject



FEAR TUAITHE
BY TOM BROWNE

Rabbits on the rise after last trace of disease dies

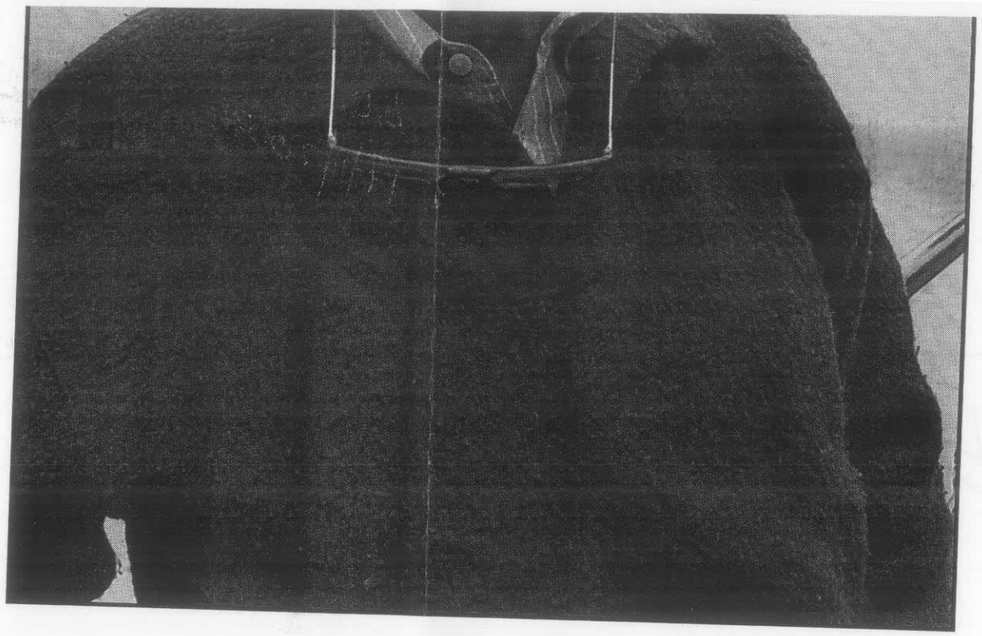
There are 45 million rabbits in England, according to the latest official release. This number in the last few years increased at a rate of one million annually and is still rising according to the report, with fresh outbreaks of the dreaded myxomotosis down to a minimum.

Elsewhere across the English countryside, the badger population, to the annoyance of the farmers, is also rising and grey squirrel numbers are now beyond control, it is also claimed. Farmers and game keepers have now declared war on the badgers and the squirrels.

Although, like here and in England the rabbit population will never again reach its pre-myxomotosis numbers there is still a steady annual increase.

In those days before the disease was introduced here in 1954, there were rabbits in every haggard. At that time, a staggering 99.8% of the rabbits were killed by the disease which has been developed in Australia and imported here via England and France.

forthright on subject of himself



Final destination: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Frank McCourt stands by the River Shannon, into which he hopes his ashes will be scattered when he dies

A LADY with a Southern Californian twang and a glamorous splash of red lipstick cups her husband's face with her hands.

"Frank, you're freezing. Will you have a hot toddie?" she asks. He looks at her incredulously and shakes his head in a child-like fashion. In a day full of promotional activities for his new book, Frank McCourt returns to the warm lobby of the Clarion Hotel, after posing for photographs overlooking the River Shannon.

"Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick," he wrote in the opening pages of Angela's Ashes.

And now, even in the absence of rain, he is still mesmerised by the scene. His gaze drifts towards the Shannon, as he touches the liver spots on his face and his thoughts turn to mortality.

"I wouldn't like to be incapacitated, or handicapped, or die of a slow disease. I don't want to be beholden to anyone or have anyone wiping my mouth if I'm drooling. I'd just like to go. I don't want funeral services or memorials. Let them scatter my ashes over the Shannon and pollute the river."

He shouldn't even be here, he tells me; he should be six feet under with worms crawling up his nose. But perhaps there is a reason why he has been allowed to live to such a great age.

"If you live past 65 you're responsible to the rest of humanity to pass on your insights, that's why you're allowed to live a little longer. So if I'm here, there's a reason I'm here."

Dressed in an old brown jumper, a green shirt and dark pants, Frank remains unusually quiet in the presence of his second wife, Ellen, who chats diddily with Frank's press officer about her new reversable jacket and does a little twirl in front of the bar.

"Frank, we're off to Brown Thomas. See you later," she cries out. "But you won't be long," he questions sternly, and the girls laugh, and head on their merry way.

It has been a tiring day for the author, with one interview slotted in after another. That night he will be launching his new book, 'Angela and the Baby Jesus', in O'Mahony's, where 11 years previously one of his former classmates famously tore up Angela's Ashes in front of him.

"Yes, it's hectic but there's nothing as fascinating as me talking about me. Although after this I won't want to talk about myself any more," he says.

His fourth publication could see the author finally put his past to bed and his next book, a novel, will see a departure from his previous endeavours.

His children's story focuses on his mother, Angela, who stole the Baby Jesus from St Joseph's Church as she feared he would be cold at night. She is the real author of this story, he says, and Frank is but the ghost-writer, chanelling her story through to millions of children this Christmas.

While he was back on his home turf last Friday for little more than a day, the city is again raking up memories for the author whose fortune has been made by that miserable, Irish Catholic childhood.

His links with Limerick, though it is no longer home, keep him "drifting back" in an attempt to disentangle his childhood.

"There's something about coming back to Limerick that's very moving, I've had such a turbulent relationship with the city. The city doesn't know it.

> 'I wouldn't have been satisfied if I hadn't written Angela's Ashes - that was the one thing I wanted to do. I would have died howling if I hadn't written it, and asked God for just one more year'

It's what I had to write about when I finally started writing after teaching for 30 years. I had to get it out of my system, but you never do. People say it's a catharsis, but it's not. Look at me, I'm back here again."

At the age of 66, McCourt was launched into the literati stratosphere with the publication of his first book - the Pulitzer Prize winning Angela's Ashes. Literally overnight, his life changed and suddenly he became "a big-shot and a celebrity".

"My life is like something out of a movie. I wrote Angela's Ashes and boom, my life changed overnight. I have money for the first time in my life," he says bursting into life.

It still takes him by surprise that the little boy from the back lanes of Limerick has become a best-selling author, albeit a controversial author in his home town. But success, as they say, does not always bring happiness.

"Like everyone else I think I succumb to misery and emotional gravity from time to time. The world gets me down and certain parts of my life are not completely satisfactory. But I have a lot to be thankful for."

As for the disputed accuracy of the book.

"Every little detail didn't actually occur. Of course you embellish and of course, you have fill in the blank spots of conversation. I keep quoting Gore Vidal, who said a memoir is your impression of your life," he says.

The Limerick he depicted in that book – and many have argued with that depiction – is dead and gone, and in its place "a riverside city" has been resurrected.

Like thousands of other Yanks who come here in search of their ancestry, Frank himself is still trying the navigate the past and reconcile it with the present.

"I'm looking around like someone who just landed from Mars. There are foreign voices everywhere. I'm looking at the construction everywhere, but at the same time moaning inwardly because the Savoy cinema is gone, the Central is gone.

"I wander around in this state of awe over the changes in the place. I delight at the new atmosphere and freedom; it seems like a very youthful city, buoyant, optimistic, bursting with energy. I envy the people who are young and growing up in this city. I would have loved to have grown up in a city like this."

But had he grown up in the city of today, there would have been no Angela's Ashes, or 'Tis, or possibly Teacher Man. Nonetheless, he is confident that he would have found inspiration from somewhere.

"I wouldn't have the same material, but there's always material. I'm sure there are contradictions within the city, and there are tensions. There's despair, there's a high suicide rate in Ireland ... These are all symptoms of what's going on in society. If you're observant enough you will find something. Or feel it. First of all you feel it and then you write about it."

After 30 years of teaching English and literature in New York schools, Frank set out to disprove the old mantra that "those who can do, and those who can't teach".

Likewise, he takes pleasure in refuting F. Scott Fitzgerald's belief that "there are no second acts in American lives". He refused to settle for a one act existence and now believes he's entering into life's fourth act. Growing up in Limerick was the opening act, cutting it in the land of opportunity was the second, and finally sitting down to write Angela's Ashes brought him into his third act.

His story of triumph over adversity is surely one Hollywood will find hard to resist, and McCourt's "second act" as a New York teacher could reach the big screen before long.

The film script for 'Teacher Man', his third book, has just been written by the Oscar-winning Ronald Bass of Rain Man fame.

Simultaneously, McCourt is approaching writing his first novel, which will focus on the modern woman, and will hone in on Irish-American women and their relationship with men. He has also begun to rewrite a play he wrote several years ago – 'The Irish and How They Got That Way'.

The temptation to sit on his laurels, or "on the beach in the south of France" and ponder his new found wealth and good fortune, has never been an option. He needs to keep "the writing muscles alive".

"I enjoy it, I'm very lucky in that sense. I wouldn't have been satisfied if I hadn't written Angela's Ashes, that was the one thing I wanted to do. I would have died howling if I hadn't written it and asked God for just one more year."

Yet his natural aptitude as a teacher has not yet left him. His advice to "aspiring and despairing" writers is to find their own style. "If you don't," he warns, "you're dead.

"There was only one Muhammad Ali in the ring and other people tried to imitate him, but it didn't work. Don't try to write. Just scribble, scribble, scribble. If it demands it, it will be born. It will come."

PERSONAL FILE

Home: New York
School: Leamy's School, Limerick, NY University, Brooklyn College
Family: Second wife Ellen, children, three grandchildren
Favourite authors: PG Wodehouse and James Joyce, who "had a liberating affect on me"
Life lesson: Get rid of your fears, whatever they are
Favourite food: Italian
Favourite holiday destination: New York, because I don't visit home that often
Favourite motto: I tried to be respected but failed

Although, like here and in England the rabbit population will never again reach its pre-myxomotosis numbers there is still a steady annual increase.

In those days before the disease was introduced here in 1954, there were rabbits in every haggard. At that time, a staggering 99.8% of the rabbits were killed by the disease which has been developed in Australia and imported here via England and France.

Today, if there is an outbreak, it is less virulent, confined to an area and does not spread like wild fire like it did originally. We never have had an official rabbit count in this country and recovery of the population hasn't been as strong as it has been in England.

Farmers, however, recall, that in those days there were rabbits in every field as described by Padraig Pearse in his poem. 'The Wayfarer': "Little rabbits in a field at evening, Lit by the slanting sun..."

Whatever about the rights of wrongs of introducing the dreaded disease, it is agreed now that rabbits were causing devastation to crops in the years after World War II.

They had been kept in check during the war years when a brace of grazers fetched between ten to twelve shillings - mostly for export to food-starved England where both their flesh and their fur was in great demand.

At home too rabbit flesh was the choice of many housewives. Old Mrs O'Halloran was renowned for her rabbit recipes and she often exclaimed that it was the best flesh of all. Her meals of boiled, baked or roasted rabbits were the talk of the parish.

Nowadays, the introduction of myxomotosis would not be tolerated. It's a disease that causes terrible pain and suffering but in those days more than 50 years ago, people were rather careless about charges of cruelty to animals as could be seen at coursing meetings when hundreds of hares were killed each season without a murmur. At that time, the greyhounds were not muzzled.

Highly contagious, the myxo is spread by a fly and it is characterised by skin tumours that gouge out the victim's eyes. After it was first introduced the roads of County Limerick were littered with dead or dying bunnies and one bus driver on the Shannon to the city run has since recalled having to stop near Cratloe to remove the infected creatures that were blind with their eyes falling out.

I have noticed that for the past five years bunnies that are born in Donaile in February seem to disappear after a few weeks, although the fact that there is a new crop the following spring is proof that some breeding stock survives.

There was a rabbit hunter once in our area who had no trouble at the height of the war earning €25 when a bank manager's salary was some way short of €7.

The rabbit man was an expert at his job and he knew where every burrow was located in the parish. He set snares expertly, was skilled at trapping with his brace of ferrets and his dogs Lily and Jack, caught every rabbit that bolted although he insisted in putting nets at the entrance to every burrow.

At the end of the year he bought a small farm and settled down. During the spread of the first myxo, all the rabbits on the farm were killed by the disease. He later established a small colony in a field by the river and to this day the corner of his farm is never without a brace of fine grazers.

When field trials for cockers were first held in this country in the 1930s, rabbits were the main quarry. The cocker is essentially a rabbit dog. At that time some very good dogs earned their championship titles on rabbit trials.

At a trial the dog is tested on all aspects that would be encountered during a day's shooting. When rabbits got scarce, the heyday of the cocker faded as the springer spaniel was much better at hunting pheasants. Now that rabbits are available, once again, cocker trials are becoming popular. In this column, I am hoping to review some of the cocker trials that will be held in this region during the coming season.