

Frank McCourt 1930-2009

New York mayor leads tributes to 'Angela's Ashes' author

Resolution introduced in US Congress to honour writer

DENIS STAUNTON,
Washington Correspondent

NEW YORK mayor Michael Bloomberg has led tributes to *Angela's Ashes* author Frank McCourt, describing him as a great New York writer who captured the heart of the city.

McCourt, who had spent almost 30 years teaching in New York's public schools, died at a hospice in the city on Sunday aged 78. He had suffered from meningitis and metastatic melanoma.

"Frank arrived in New York from Limerick with nothing and - like so many Irish immigrants before him - worked to build a better life here," Mr Bloomberg said. "He shared his gift for teaching with thousands of New York City public schoolchildren and when he retired, he shared his gift for storytelling with the world."

Congressman Joe Courtney, a Connecticut Democrat for whom McCourt campaigned during a tight election race in 2006, yesterday introduced a resolution in Congress honouring the writer.

"His perspective on two of the most important issues facing the country, immigration and education, have so much meaning for our country and it's very appropriate that the US Congress recognises him," Mr Courtney said.

His brother Malachy said: "He had lost his hearing and his eyesight was a bit wobbly as well, but the sense of whimsy was intact.

with his family at the age of four but moved back to New York when he was 19, working in a hotel and as a labourer before a brief stint in the US army as a dog trainer and a clerk in West Germany.

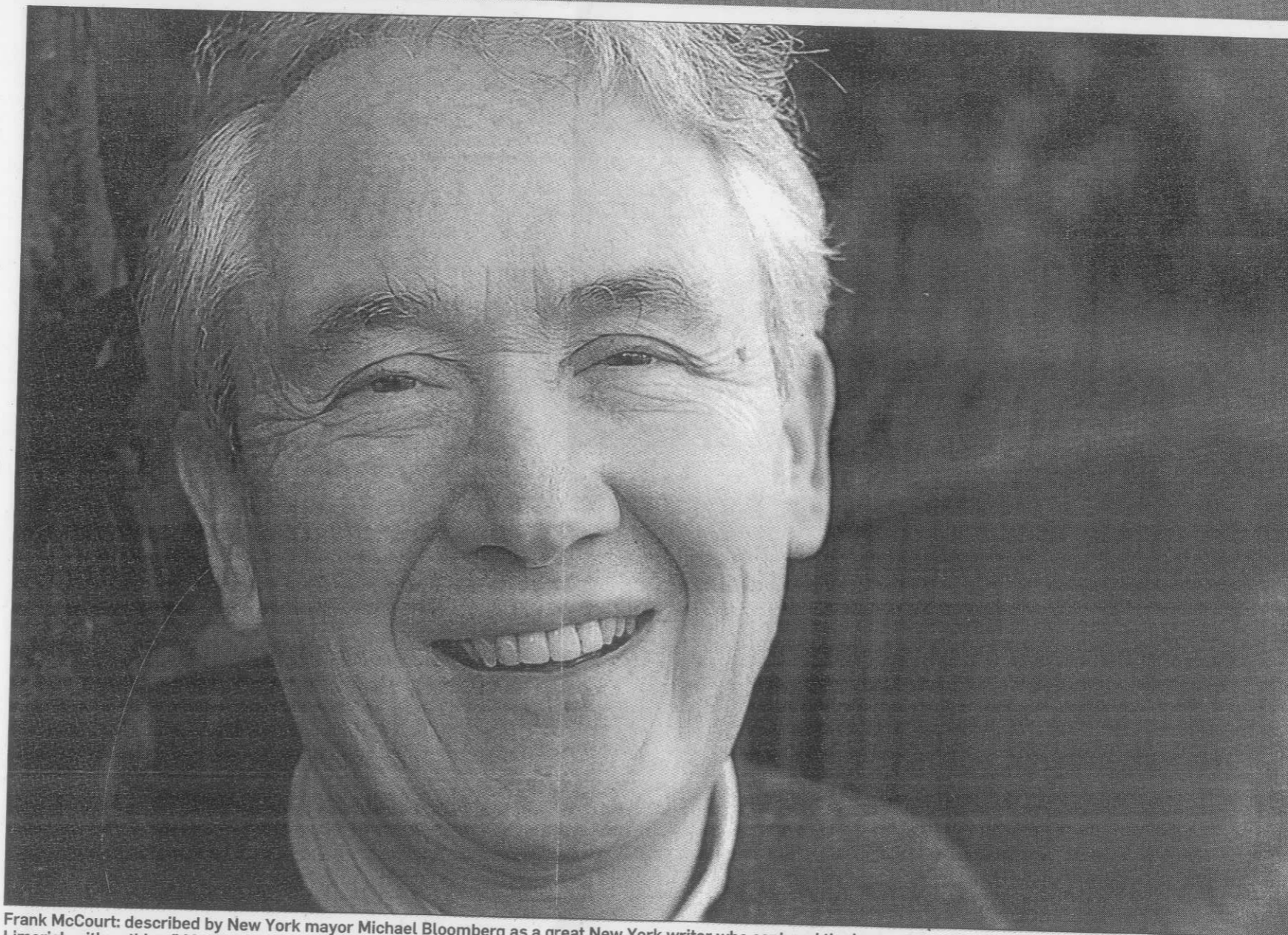
He started teaching in the late 1950s after earning a degree in English from New York University, using an unorthodox approach that encouraged pupils to grade their own work and urging them to draw on their own experience to write creatively.

It was not until he was in his 60s that McCourt took his own advice by telling the story of his tough upbringing in Limerick in *Angela's Ashes*, which sold more than six million copies, was translated into 32 languages and was made into a film. Two further best-selling memoirs followed - *Tis* in 1999 and *Teacher Man* in 2005.

In a full-page obituary yesterday, the *New York Times* said critics were "enchanted by McCourt's language and gripped by his story", delivering ecstatic reviews that turned him into an instant celebrity.

"The wonderful thing about Frank is that it didn't change him at all and he became a hugely beloved figure in New York, really because of his work on behalf of other writers," *Irish Voice* publisher Niall O'Dowd said.

"I think what he was best known for was just being Frank, with this incredible, low-key, deadpan humour, a wonderful supporter for



Frank McCourt: described by New York mayor Michael Bloomberg as a great New York writer who captured the heart of the city. "Frank arrived in New York from Limerick with nothing," Mr Bloomberg said, "and - like so many Irish immigrants before him - worked to build a better life here."

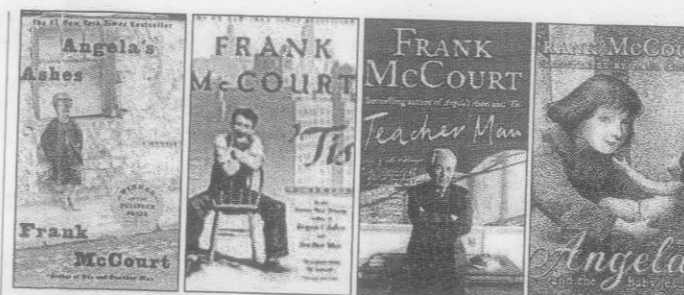
A simmering rage and a sense of justice lay at the heart of McCourt's writing



EILEEN BATTERSBY

Literary Correspondent

him in 1996 he was still in shock at the idea of international publishers at the Frankfurt Book Fair having days earlier been out-shouting each other, frantic to secure the rights of what some observers had categorised as yet another miserable childhood. McCourt would grow into a public personality; he enjoyed talking and could tell a good story. His initial bewilderment settled into a sense of having righted wrongs. If the wrongs were committed against him - his siblings and his



McCourt started writing at 60 and became an overnight sensation with *Angela's Ashes*

his father, a former IRA man whose favourite book was John Mitchell's *Jail Journal*, regretted not dying for Ireland and tended, when drunk, to quiz his sons on the question of their aspiring to political martyrdom.

Balancing the drunken rages was the extravagant affection McCourt senior displayed. Kindliness and warmth are qualities McCourt always noticed: "Even as a kid," he remarked to me in that 1996 interview, "I

Writer's ashes likely to come home

ALISON HEALY

THE ASHES of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Frank McCourt, are expected to be scattered over the River Shannon in his native city in accordance with his wishes.

The McCourt family are meeting today to discuss the final arrangements for the writer's funeral which is expected to take place in New York.

It is expected that Limerick, the city that McCourt captured so vividly in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*, will be represented at the funeral by the mayor Kevin Kiely and an official from Limerick City Council.

In an interview with the *Limerick Leader* in November 2007, McCourt's thoughts turned to mortality and he said he did not want funeral services or memorials when he died.

"Let them scatter my ashes over the Shannon and pollute the river," he said.

Mr Kiely said he was deeply saddened to learn of the death of one of Limerick's most successful and talented sons. "Limerick is very proud of, and will never forget, Frank McCourt."

Minister for Arts Martin Cullen said the writer was an inspirational character.

"As a teacher in New York he instilled and encouraged a love of literature and creative writing in his students and as a writer himself, he was a master storyteller," Mr Cullen said.

The Arts Council described McCourt as "an outstanding and talented writer".

Its director Mary Cloake said he had made a unique contribution to Irish literature and its popularisation, despite being published relatively late in life.

"Unquestionably, *Angela's Ashes*, his most famous work, is a stunning, affecting piece of literature that made a deep and lasting impact on its readers," she said.

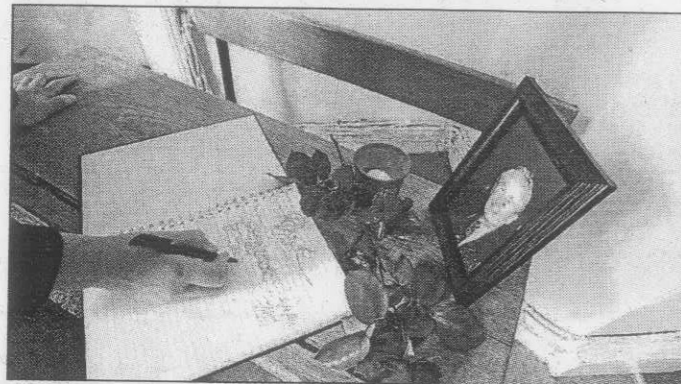
"Mr McCourt's lyrical and crackling prose, coupled with his

that the US Congress recognises him," Mr Courtney said.

His brother Malachy said: "He had lost his hearing and his eyesight was a bit wobbly as well, but the sense of whimsy was intact. Until the end of his days he had that whimsy and it was great."

His brother would like to have been remembered as "a teacher with a sense of humour" and he would have been "vastly amused" by the huge outpouring of tributes that greeted him on his death.

Born in Brooklyn in 1930, McCourt returned to Limerick



A book of condolences for Frank McCourt on a bench at the site of the school he attended in Limerick. Photograph: Brendan Crowe

other writers," *Irish Voice* publisher Niall O'Dowd said.

"I think what he was best known for was just being Frank, with this incredible, low-key, deadpan humour, a wonderful supporter for young writers. Success actually improved him, which is highly unusual in this world."

McCourt was cremated yesterday and his family will have a private gathering in New York this week, followed by a public celebration of his life in September.

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BATTERSBY

Literary Correspondent

EVEN IN the mind-boggling world of overnight literary sensations Frank McCourt's candid memoir took some beating. Anger was the motivation; a simmering rage combined with McCourt's abiding sense of justice and graphic recall did the rest. Long years of teaching high school in New York left him with a passion for seeing lives begun well. His hadn't.

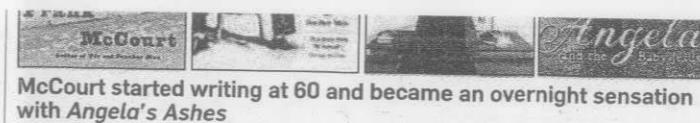
Never a cynic, kindly, gentle McCourt was a realist from the beginning - he had had no choice. He considered *Angela's Ashes*, the story of his childhood, as a cautionary tale. For others it is a valuable piece of Irish social history, a history that in Ireland with its litany of abuse, secrecy and poverty invariably sits closer to horror than romance.

There was nothing romantic about his book which took two years and all his life to write. Nostalgia did not encourage him to sit down in his 60s. It was his old familiar anger that provided the pressure. When I first met

personality; he enjoyed talking and could tell a good story. His initial bewilderment settled into a sense of having righted wrongs. If the wrongs were committed against him, his siblings and his mother, he never saw his father as a villain, merely a victim of his drinking, an addiction that destroyed him and hurt his children.

McCourt was an outsider; not quite Irish, not quite American - more of a New Yorker, the city he loved. His parents, both Irish, had met there and married. Their marriage was destroyed by McCourt senior's unreliability and relentless drinking. Frank McCourt had been born there and was brought to Ireland when he was four years old. His Catholic, despairing mother had given birth to six children, including twins, in five and a half years. The poverty the family knew in New York was very different from the hardship they discovered in Limerick. The twins died within six months of each other.

On arrival in Ireland the children met their Catholic maternal grandmother who was not pleased with the demands about to be made on her. McCourt



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remembered having "Yank" spat at him like a curse. Poverty was seen as shameful, a form of failure. Sitting in that Dublin hotel, high on the success of his book and long years before the recent publication of the Ryan report, McCourt was true to himself, calmly announcing with due regard to the historians he mentioned "the worst things that happened to Ireland was the coming of the Catholic Church and the incredible power it was to enjoy for such a long time".

"All the lives it ruined with its bullying. It left a legacy of retarded sexuality. You can't forgive damage like that".

By age 13 his education was over, and he began moving through a succession of jobs including, ironically, writing threatening letters on behalf of a debt collector. When he was 19 he returned to New York and appeared destined to continue a haphazard pattern of employment. The Korean war intervened. He was stationed in

Germany where he was in charge of army dogs. Being in the services proved lucky for him as he was able to avail of the GI Bill and finally had the education he had always wanted. More irony, a constant in his life, in common with Hardy's Jude, McCourt's idealism continued to be tested. McCourt entered university in New York to discover academics more interested in discussing the books they wanted to write than in teaching students, particularly students such as McCourt who was anxious to be inspired.

He studied English and a world opened up. He was to teach for 27 years. He learned as much as the students did. Above all, McCourt learned how to hold an audience. Having written *Angela's Ashes* in a non-literary style, McCourt made no secret that he was not aspiring towards Joycean prose. His conversational, emphatic voice was far closer to that of Gorky. For all the darkness there was much black humour. McCourt felt

McCourt senior displayed. Kindliness and warmth are qualities McCourt always noticed: "Even as a kid," he remarked to me in that 1996 interview, "I noticed the differences. The Italians and Jews in New York were warmer, they were not inhibited. The Irish were hard, tough, there was no affection being handed around." At 40 he became a father. At 50 he took up running. At 60 he began writing.

Frank McCourt enjoyed the life of a writer, he always liked offering an opinion. The citizens of Limerick were none too pleased about the image which emerged of their city. Would Dubliners have reacted differently? After all, prior to McCourt's internationally celebrated memoir, Limerick's strongest literary portrait had been provided by Kate O'Brien's astute studies of the aspiring middle classes. Frank McCourt was an observer, a witness and most of all, a truth teller who having examined his anger over many years, drew on it to dramatic and lasting effect.

An interview with Eileen Battersby on Frank McCourt's legacy is available at irishtimes.com

stunning, affecting piece of literature that made a deep and lasting impact on its readers," she said.

"Mr McCourt's lyrical and crackling prose, coupled with his innovative approach to dialogue, exerted a significant influence on the memoir as a genre, and on literary writing more generally."

Fine Gael's arts spokeswoman Olivia Mitchell said McCourt's life and work would continue to inspire people worldwide.

"Frank McCourt was an author of rare ability whose vivid prose and creative ability captivated millions.

"However, it is his life, and not just his literary work, that will rightly be celebrated," she said.

"His Pulitzer Prize winning masterpiece, *Angela's Ashes*, shone a light into the dark recesses of Ireland's past but it was Frank's ability to overcome such adversity that will continue to inspire thousands all around the world," she added.

Irish Voice publisher Niall O'Dowd said McCourt was a "quiet, unassuming guy despite becoming a worldwide celebrity" and that he had helped many good causes and dozens of young writers.

Another Dublin City Council member leaves Sinn Féin

MARK HENNESSY,
Political Correspondent

SINN FÉIN'S operations in the Republic have suffered another blow with the departure of the latest Dublin City Council member from the party's ranks.

So far, it is not known which party Cllr Louise Minihan will join on the city council, or whether she will sit as an Independent. She had been co-opted in 2002 to fill the Ballyfermot/Drinagh seat vacated by Tony Smithers.

However, Mr Minihan does have ties with others who quit Sinn Féin in recent months and years to form Éirigi, arguing that Sinn Féin has abandoned its socialist republican roots.

Last night, Dublin South Central TD Aengus Ó Snodaigh sharply criticised Cllr Minihan, pointing out that she had been happy under the party's flag in the June local elections.

"She had an opportunity to run as an Independent but chose not to do so. She should now return the seat to Sinn Féin so that we can continue to represent the people of Ballyfermot, Chapelizod, Drinagh and Inchicore as we were elected to do," he said.

The haemorrhage of Sinn Féin

councillors is a serious worry for many members of the party. Cllr Killian Forde is now the only Sinn Féin councillor in Dublin elected in 2004 to still represent the party.

Early this month, Dublin councillor Christy Burke left, saying he had resigned in protest at what he described as a lack of support from the party during his Dublin Central byelection campaign. However, relations between Mr Burke, the Cabra-based, 25-year council veteran, and the party have been cool for some time, party sources told *The Irish Times*.

Confirming that she will remain on the city council, Ms Minihan said she "no longer" believed that Sinn Féin remained committed to its stated objective "of ending British rule in Ireland and the establishment of an Irish democratic socialist republic".

Rejecting Sinn Féin's demands to return the council seat, she said: "It would be hypocritical of me to hand over my seat to a party I no longer support or believe in."

"I know from speaking to people in my constituency that many of them voted for me on the basis of the politics I promote and my track record of community activism."

Meeting on Lisbon Treaty concerns

MARIE O'HALLORAN

IRISH FEARS about neutrality, Irish family law and taxation within the EU are "legitimate and genuine concerns" but there is nothing in the Lisbon Treaty "that makes any of those concerns likely to come about", a meeting on the treaty has been told.

Prof Gráinne de Búrca of Fordham University law school in New York said EU law had "very little, if anything" to do with Irish abortion law. The changes that occurred in Irish law on this issue "have come not from EU law but from the European Court of Human Rights" which is part of a separate set of commitments undertaken by Ireland.

At a meeting of the Institute of European Affairs in Dublin, Prof de Búrca said nothing in the treaty threatened any of the areas of concern to the Irish electorate, including neutrality, social policy, family life corporate policy. The guarantees confirmed the treaty did not change those issues.

Minister of State for European Affairs Dick Roche and Prof Brigid Laffan, principal of the UCD College of Human Sciences, also addressed the meeting.

Auction of Dr Karl Mullen's memorabilia in Kildare

MICHAEL O'REGAN

MEMORABILIA MARKING the career of international rugby players Dr Karl Mullen goes for auction in Kildare today.

Dr Mullen, who led Ireland to its first Grand Slam victory in 1948, and captained the Lions when they toured New Zealand and Australia in 1950, died in April. He was predeceased by his wife, Doreen, a year earlier.

The collection includes Dr Mullen's notification from the IRFU's headquarters, in Westmoreland Street, Dublin, on December 22nd, 1947, that he had been picked for the Irish team to play France in Paris on January 1st.

It noted that it would be glad of his early acceptance, and went on to advise, in prominent bold typeface, that "your jersey will be supplied and must be returned immediately at the conclusion of the game."

It added, in a less prominent typeface, that 30 shillings would be accepted "for same".

The IRFU also advised that the organisation would cover the cost of transportation and hotel expenses, "including gratuities to servants", but it would not be responsible for personal tips, telegrams and telephone calls.

Dr Mullen was told "to please note that it will not be necessary for you to bring dress clothes."



Listy McArdle and her mother Ann Byrne, at the viewing of lots at Karl Mullen's collection in Co Kildare. Photograph by Matt Kavanagh

The party, it added, would meet at the Grosvenor hotel, Westland Row, Dublin, at 5.30pm on Monday, December 29th, where "high tea will be served".

Yesterday, rugby enthusiasts gathered at Giltown Lodge, Kilkenny, Kildare, his home for the last decade of his life, to view a pre-auction display which also included contemporary Irish art, glassware and antique furniture.

Dr Mullen's daughter, Anna, explained that his eight children had retained a lot of family material.

"My brothers have the jerseys

and the caps and so on," she said.

George Mealy, of Mealy's Auctioneers, Kilkenny, presided over the viewing of scrapbooks, match programmes, photographs, press reports and autographed rugby books.

There were notes scribbled by Dr Mullen on the back of a menu card for a speech he gave at a Scottish union rugby dinner in 1949.

The menu featured chicken and fruit-trifle, but there was no reference to wine. The toast, presumably delivered with water, was to the King and the Irish and Scottish teams.

Increase in number of girls seeking addiction treatment

GENEVIEVE CARBERY

AN INCREASE in the number of 15-year-old girls seeking drug and alcohol treatment over the last year has been reported by the country's main residential treatment centre.

In the last year the Aislinn centre has raised the number of beds it provides by 20 per cent in order to cope with the increase in demand, the centre's director Declan Jones said at the launch of its annual report.

The Aislinn centre provides the State's only drug-free residential treatment programme for young people aged between 15 and 21 who are dependent on alcohol or drugs.

Aislinn, based in Ballyragget, Co Kilkenny, provided treatment for 135 adolescents in 2008 and has treated 1,141 young people since it opened over 10 years ago.

The culture of drink in Ireland and tolerance of alcohol is a large contributor towards the increasing problem of youth addiction, Mr Jones told *The Irish Times*, adding that the attitude of parents towards drink is very influential.

The young people being treated for addiction are from all socioeco-

nomic backgrounds, he said.

Children in Ireland begin to drink alcohol from as young an age as 11, according to anecdotal evidence from Aislinn.

The centre has found that alcohol is a gateway drug for some young people, who will start to feel "under the weather" with drinking and are then more likely to experiment with drugs.

It is very unusual for 15-year-olds to attend for treatment with just alcohol problems, but they come in with a combination of alcohol, illicit drug and prescription drugs issues, Mr Jones said.

Addiction stops the emotional development of young people, who can spend a long time playing catch-up after they become clean, he said. More than just the immediate aftermath of addiction was at issue, he warned, as there are physical consequences later in life as a result of abuse.

The centre is concerned that the rate of teenage addiction has not been quantified and is only based on anecdotal figures.

"The addiction problem is increasing constantly, yet the State has never assessed the scale of the issue nor put in place a unified approach to arrest its growth," Mr Jones said.