A man of skill and wit who created a classic

JOHN BOLAND

Frank McCourt's book 'Angela's Ashes' created quite a stir by the banks of the Shannon but it was acclaimed worldwide.

I FIRST met Frank McCourt in November 1996. It was just before the publication of 'Angela's Ashes' on this side of the Atlantic and his name was unknown to me, as it was then to most Irish people – including the late and much lamented Limerick Labour Party TD Jim Kemmy.

It was Jim who issued the invitation to myself and two Limerick friends of mine, journalists Michael O'Toole and Karl Johnston, to have lunch with Frank in the Dail restaurant.

"I don't know the man," Jim told me, "but I gather he's written this book that's a sensation in New York and that looks likely to cause ructions in Limerick, even though he left there decades ago and has spent most of his life in America."

At the lunch was Frank, who was 66 at the time, his ebullient brother Malachy (who, cashing in on Frank's success, later went on to write a rowdy memoir of his own called 'A Monk Swimming') and his more reticent sibling Alfie.

The talk soon turned to matters concerning which I felt myself a distinct outsider – the exploits of Garryowen and Young Munster, the escapades of Richard Harris, the distinguishing character traits of Old Crescent alumni and, of course, that inescapable Limerick institution, the Confraternity.

Yet though all the brothers were great company, it was Frank who impressed me the most at that first meeting.

I was much taken by his quietly sardonic humour, his detached attitude to the fame that seemed to be headed his way and his rigorous seriousness, both about the craft of writing and about his literary heroes, who included Joyce, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, as well as many lesser-known writers. I hadn't yet read his extraordinary memoir, but during our chat I glimpsed the fastidious resolve that had gone into its making.

He had just come from the Frankfurt Book Fair, where, despite the enthusiasm of his German publisher, he'd been ignored by the Irish delegation, who – seemingly wary of a Yankified Irishman they hadn't officially approved – excluded him from their functions, which were trumpeted under the grandiose title 'Ireland and its Diaspora'.

Being a level-headed man, this didn't worry him overmuch, he said, but nonetheless he couldn't help thinking: Irish diaspora, how are ye.

That evening he was a guest on the 'Late Late Show', but his encounter with host Gay Byrne was curiously muted and guarded, as if both men were suspicious of each other's intentions.

Certainly little of the impish and wry Frank McCourt whom I'd met at lunch came through, and I was disappointed for him – and peeved, too, at what I considered his host's churlish attitude towards him. I needn't have been. Within a matter of weeks, 'Angela's Ashes' became a best-seller in Ireland and soon afterwards a global phenomenon.

Limerick being Limerick, of course, the book caused an unholy row there, reviled by those self-denying burghers who refused to believe that the conditions described in it could possibly have existed in their sanctified little city.

I suspect, though, that what most outraged these self-ordained puritans was the book's insistence that laughter rather than solemnity was the sanest and most liberating reaction to the poverty and snobbery that dominated the lives of Angela and her irrepressible offspring.

> 'I was much taken by his quietly sardonic humour and his detached attitude to the fame headed his way'

Frank McCourt wrote other books and, as you'd expect from a writer with his scrupulous sense of craft and style, they're far from negligible – 'Tis', his 1999 account of his life as a teacher in New York, is especially good, containing many funny, poignant and truthful moments.

However, it's for 'Angela's Ashes' that he'll be remembered, and rightly so (though a discreet veil should be drawn over Alan Parker's dreary 1999 movie version, which entirely missed the book's mastery both of the demotic and the delicate).

And while one might curse the fact that its huge international popularity was instrumental in creating what's now known as Misery Lit, there's nothing miserable about McCourt's evocation of growing up in Limerick – the circumstances he describes may be dreadful, but his narrator's voraciously child-like openness to life in all its messiness and mayhem transmutes these experiences into something rich and rare.

In short, the book is a classic, and everyone should mourn its author's passing.

Rabobank can't get out of Irish adventure fast enough

SIDE LINE

Japan braced for attack by armada of deep-sea monsters

THEY poison fish, sting humans and even attack nuclear power stations. They are 6ft wide, up to 200kg in weight, pink, slimy and repellent. They sound like rubber monsters from a 'Godzilla' film but they inflict real misery on Asian fishermen.

They are Echizen kurage, or Nomura's jellyfish, an authentic horror of the deep about to launch their latest assault on a helpless Japan.

Four years after they last caused havoc, an armada of the behemoths is gathering in the Yellow Sea off China and Korea. If precedent is anything to go by, it will drift into the Sea of Japan within a few months.

"The arrival is inevitable," Professor Shinichi Ue, a jellyfish authority from Hiroshima University, told the 'Yomiuri' newspaper. "A huge jellyfish typhoon will hit the country."

It was in 2005 that fishermen chasing anchovies, salmon and yellowtail began finding huge numbers of the jellyfish in their nets. When the Nomuras grow larger than a metre in diameter, half a dozen can destroy a fishing net. The fish caught alongside them were poisoned and rendered unsaleable.

So impossible was the situation that salmon boats in northern Japan stopped going out, and in some places fishermen lost 80pc of their income.

Jellyfish

Even some of the nuclear power plants along the Japan Sea coast found that the jellyfish got sucked into the pumps taking in seawater to cool their reactors.

No one is sure about the