

in government of the only Limerick minister and an old electoral rival of his, Mr O'Malley spoke approvingly of Michael Noonan.

"I think that like good wine, he is improving as the years pass," he said. It was put to Mr O'Malley that he was of a similar vintage and that with only four years between them, he had bowed out a lot younger than the Fine Gael man. "That is true but I started a lot earlier than him too, remember. I was only in my 20s in 1968."

That was the year of the by-election following the death of his uncle Donagh O'Malley. One of the candidates who ran for the Dail that year was the late Limerick sportsman, publican and character Mick Crowe, who Mr O'Malley was aware had recently passed away.

"I remember him at the by-election. He stood as an independent and I asked afterwards why he had stood because I didn't think he was going to get elected. At that time he was manager of some band and if you were a candidate in

"There was over-expenditure at every level, including at government level, particularly from 2000 or 2002 onwards when things got out of control. I was gone but they were in government. What I regretted was that the two we had in government [Mary Harney and Michael McDowell] were in what you would call spending departments [health and justice] rather than ones where they should have been trying to avoid the spending."

Another former PD, Liz O'Donnell, wrote this week that no city was more deserving than Limerick of being Ireland's inaugural City of Culture. Raised in the city, Ms O'Donnell said that while Limerick was all-too-often associated with crime, ghettos and urban blight, there had always been "a parallel universe" at work where outside of localised social problems, the rest of Limerick had "always been home to a vibrant cultural community of artists, musicians, dancers, poets and patriots".

According to Mr O'Malley,

Michael Tiernan; Gerry and Sheila Boland, Castletroy, and Joe Carroll, Croom also attended the book launch

much of Limerick and the region's cultural wealth - as vividly brought to life in Brian O'Connell's book - was down to John and Putzel Hunt, the inspiration behind Bunratty Castle, Cragganowen and the Hunt Museum.

**"These aren't the times to be practising politics if you can avoid it"**

**Des O'Malley**  
Former minister

"Things are changing in Limerick and what will happen next year will be an important part of that change and certainly the Hunt legacy - literally its legacy - is central to all of that and without it I don't think that Limerick could make the claim it now deservedly makes to

become city of culture," he said. Mr O'Malley told the audience in Bunratty on Tuesday that he regarded John Hunt as the equal of the other great benefactors of the 20th century - Chester Beatty, Hugh Lane and Alfred Beit.

"I think his devotion to this country is no less and his munificence to this country is no less."

He hoped that with the publication of Mr O'Connell's biography, the story of the Hunts would be more widely read and appreciated.

Mr O'Malley also supposed that one of the reasons the story of the Hunts was not as well-known as the other three benefactors was because "the Hunt Museum is not on the side of Merrion Square or Fitzwilliam Square or some such place because if it was it would be regarded by those who tell us how to form our tastes in such things that it was very much more important."



Brendan Bracken, Bracken PR; Miriam Stack, Galway and Eamonn Cregan, University of Limerick

# John Hunt biographer praised for excavating rich details

MIKE DWANE

ARCHAEOLOGIST Dr Peter Harbison said that for John Hunt, it was all about the detail.

Founder of Limerick's Hunt Collection and the inspiration behind the restoration of Bunratty Castle, John Hunt's contribution to Limerick, the Mid-West and Ireland has been lovingly brought to life - and in rich detail - in Brian O'Connell's new biography. According to Dr Harbison, that attention to detail is worthy of Hunt himself.

Few people got to know Hunt as well as Dr Harbison, who described himself as the art dealer's amanuensis, driving around 1970s Ireland in a battered old Renault 4 as the pair researched Hunt's two-volume opus on Irish medieval figure sculpture, still the standard reference 40 years on.

"He [Hunt] was a wonderful man for looking at the detail. That was a gift he gave to me, which I have kept

with me. That is where craftsmen of medieval times really did their best work, in the detail," Dr Harbison said at the launch of Mr O'Connell's book at Bunratty.

"And I know of no academic who has gone into the level of research that Brian has put into this book. I would use the phrase that my guest was flabbered," said Dr Harbison, himself an author of more than 20 volumes on art history, architecture and archaeology.

Former minister Des O'Malley also paid tribute to the painstaking work Mr O'Connell had put in as he researched John and Gertrude Hunt's story.

"He must have spent three or four years on this; a real labour of love and something that this region and this country will be forever indebted to him for."

For all the research, both Mr O'Malley and Dr Harbison agreed this was no dry academic tome of interest only to the art historian.

"It is beautifully written - which is terribly important for books nowadays; that you can actually read them - and the kind of book you can take to bed with you that you keep on reading it not until you go to sleep but until you read the very last page," Dr Harbison said.

And Mr O'Malley described as touching Mr O'Connell's dedication of the book to the community around Lough Gur where the Hunts had set up home after leaving wartime England.

Hunt's scholarship in medieval art was "recognised from the V&A to Versailles", Mr O'Connell said, and it "provided him with a passport to a world peopled by lords of the realm; senior churchmen; with names such as Rockefeller, Jackie Kennedy, Guggenheim, Hearst, Winston and Clementine Churchill featuring in personal and family correspondence".

How the renowned art dealer had come to live in rural Limerick - and

how he would end up donating his treasures to the Irish state - were among the questions Mr O'Connell said he had sought to answer in his biography.

That decision had left an extraordinarily rich cultural legacy at Bunratty, Cragganowen, at Lough Gur and at the Hunt Museum.

Mr O'Connell read from a letter from John Hunt to Brendan O'Regan in which Hunt wrote "I shall of course accept no payment" for his work in restoring Bunratty. That generosity had been passed on to John Hunt's children Trudi, who was present on the night, and the late John Junior, whose wife Patricia and children also attended the launch. Nine members of the Hunt family also travelled from England and were hosted by Mayor of Kathleen Leddin at City Hall.

John Hunt: The Man, The Medievalist, The Connoisseur by Brian O'Connell is published by the O'Brien Press and is available in O'Mahony's and Eason's.



Author Brian O'Connell with the Mayor of Limerick Kathleen Leddin, John Ruddle, chief executive of Shannon Heritage and Neil Pakey, chief executive of Shannon Airport