

'Happily retired' Des king of castle

■ At the launch of Brian O'Connell's vivid biography of art dealer John Hunt this week, **Mike Dwane** spoke to Limerick political legend Des O'Malley on the political scene now and the upcoming City of Culture celebrations

INTRODUCED to his audience at the Great Hall in Bunratty as the TD for Limerick, Des O'Malley was quick to remind them that he was "very happily retired".

"These aren't the times to be practising the profession of politics if you can at all avoid it," said the former minister and founder of the Progressive Democrats as he launched Brian O'Connell's biography of the art dealer and scholar John Hunt.

Mr O'Malley told the Leader that he now followed the political scene "only at a very long distance". He was not at first keen to speak about the current political scene on a night he said should be about John Hunt.

But he was soon offering views on the recent Seanad referendum campaign; on a supposed compact deal between Eamon Dunphy and Mary Harney after Mr O'Malley stepped down as PD leader; and on Limerick's year as City of Culture.

And the proposal to abolish the Seanad was a question that had attracted his attention, he admitted.

"I was interested in that alright, very interested because I had suggested that first 25 years or more ago and I was very disappointed that the present government didn't make the slightest effort to get that carried."

"As it was it was only beaten by a little over one per cent. It was very, very close and if the

a by-election back then, you were entitled to five minutes on television to put across your message.

"He used the whole five minutes with the band playing in order that he might get a few bookings for the band. It was very amusing but he didn't come close to getting elected," he said.

While he had closely studied the biography of John Hunt, Mr O'Malley did not seem too familiar with Eamon Dunphy's recent biography in which the journalist suggests he helped deliver the PD leadership for Mary Harney in 1993. According to Dunphy's account, it was Pat Cox who had the numbers among the members of the parliamentary party but opinion swayed after Dunphy arranged for a poll to be carried in the Sunday Independent on the eve of the leadership election that showed Harney was more popular with the electorate. Mr O'Malley was one of the parliamentary party members voting at the time.

"That reminds me of one of the British general elections when The Sun said 'It was The Sun what won it'. That doesn't quite

"Like good wine, he [Noonan] is improving as the years pass"



Des O'Malley; Brian O'Connell; John Ruddle, chief executive Shannon Heritage and Trudi Hunt at the launch of Mr O'Connell's biography of John Hunt at the Great Hall in Bunratty on Tuesday
Pictures: Liam Burke / Press 22



...over one per cent. It was very, very close and if the government had made any effort at all, the two parties, it would have been carried easily but they made no effort whatever and I think it is shameful that they didn't. Why did they propose it if they weren't going to bother trying to sell it?"

While Enda Kenny's decision not to debate the referendum proposal on TV was widely criticised, Mr O'Malley said that there were "15 other ministers there equally who didn't bother about it".

Asked about the performance 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

as the years pass"

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Former minister

coincide with my recollection of things at the time. However, if it makes Eamon happy, let's leave it at that," he said.

The Progressive Democrats were to remain in government until the party founded by O'Malley dissolved in 2008. The party that had championed fiscal rectitude had been part of a Fianna Fail-led coalition that had gone on a spending spree before the bust.

"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.

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Des O'Malley
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"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."



Des O'Malley chats with Rose Hynes, chairperson of the Shannon Airport Authority, at the book launch



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