

Martin Byrnes continues his nostalgic essay on growing up with Shannon Airport . . .

THE PLANES of the Fifties, being turbo-props, were liable to be affected by head-winds to a far greater extent than were to be the jets that supplanted them. This caused some of the truly extraordinary delays.

Then there were the innumerable and insurmountable delays due to technical problems. It often became increasingly infuriating for our adults as plane after plane came in off the Atlantic, refuelled, and headed off to London — while the plane which we had booked on was delayed due to technical problems. In fact, we often speculated how a machine with so many technical problems could conceivably be air-worthy at all!

However, a delay of up to a full day was not a frustrating experience to a wide-eyed exuberant pre-teen. It was heaven.

The airport was a place of wonderment for a young boy. It was big, busy, noisy and bright. Few images abide in the memory as profoundly as that of the dawn breaking, and the outlines of Woodcock and Keeper hills emerging in front of the viewing balcony, with the dolphin's-back-shaped silhouette of Knockfierna to the south, to be glimpsed from the top of the stairs.

And then breakfast. Full Irish breakfast. Curiously, then as now I was not a breakfast person, but I managed to develop a voracious morning appetite when at Shannon — or when travelling by train.

I had my first taste of real coffee there, and liked it. The caffeine kept the system in top gear — as if I were not hyperactive enough already. It was there too that I got my first sight and whiff of a really good cigar.

And the place was special for another reason — it had exotica of the highest order, unobtainable at home at any price — a complete magazine-stand-full of DC TM comics from America!

As luck would have it, I had been taught to read fairly competently by the age of three — a tribute to the serene patience of a saintly mother and to the big lettering on cinema posters on which I had been schooled. So I was able to allow my boyish astonishment its full rein as I made my way through the amazing world created by my DC TM comics. That awe stayed with me during many subsequent visits over the following few years.

Superman's Gotham City and Batman's Metropolis fascinated me. The strong illustrations, showing skyscrapers, plush cars and an American lifestyle, were literally foreign to the mind of a small-town child;



Some of the seven inner airstands are occupied in this late 'fifties picture. There were stand-off positions to augment capacity.



The wide-eyed youngster who grew up with Shannon Airport . . . Above: Martin Byrnes, aged 6. Below: As he is today.



# When everything changed in Shannon

Heathrow west of London, were out of the question at Shannon, presumably because of the cost and because of the low lying land with its potential to flood. So a new road was needed to take traffic away from the jetway skirting the other side of the airfield and close to the shore embankment of the Shannon Estuary. A gentle curve to the left was put where the back road to Ennis meets the original straight road, and a new concrete roadway continued on toward Tullyglass (crossing the path of the present-day road), and eased gently around the base of Drumgeely Hill to enter the airport along the route still in use today. It was widened by a few feet in later years, but is still in service after thirty years with its original surface intact.

The present Stonehall road link, which passes through the array of approach landing lights at the '24' end of the new jetway, was created then too, but clearly not at the same standard as the main road. That is the road to the Honk, an institution of a pub which was cut off from the airport when the jetway was built, but which is seeing a new lease of life serving the workers at Shannon Aerospace.

And it was about then too that we saw the starting of Drumgeely flats. Futuristic in design for their time they rose like a crown atop their little hill. (I was to live there for a while myself, many years later). And being built too were the factories which were to sustain their occupants. The factories had begun to appear from the late Fifties, after the industrial estate had been proclaimed and had been given full status. The designation and construction of the industrial zone, by the way, entailed shutting down two of the airport's two original runways — 09/27 and 18/36, as the factories were going to be in their way.

A new town was in the making, though nobody then dared utter the words.

The airport lost its enormous international prestige with the passing of turbo-prop power. True, its main radio complex at Ballygirreen (near the Clare Inn) still had traffic command of the skies, but the airports own approach frequencies were silent for lengthy stretches. All the big traffic was five miles up — and it wasn't stopping.

This reflected itself in the operation of the airport. Suddenly, there seemed to be ample room in the available indoor space. Flights to London, being just short BEA or Aer Lingus hops, left punctually ninety per cent of the time at least.

And they flew by day. Gone were our bumpy midnight drives through the rain, fully reconciled to a mere

ican lifestyle, were literally foreign to the mind of a small-town child; and reading about characters who could fly and perform great deeds of strength and valour — the teeth of adversity and the catastrophe was reached into the archaic realms of fantasy. Yet here we were in an airport, where people did fly, and where many of the characters and events going on all about us were larger than ordinary life as we knew it. We were mingling with some of the very people to whom all this comic-book glamour was, I sensed, almost an everyday normality at home in America.

In an era before Irish television, and to a boy to whom cinema was to be rationed to very infrequent visits, and then only to extremely 'suitable' films, these comics were a revelation and a provocation to the mind. At home, I had been limited by availability to the likes of the Beano from Britain, which was hardly intellectually rigorous, even for a three-year-old.

DC TM comics (It was always written as DC TM) were brash; they were self-assured, and they were written in a language which was assertive and extremely individualistic. This was powerful literature in the hands of a slightly anarchical, energetically insomniac pre-teen with a vivid imagination — at what was then a truly international airport. And it did not cost me a thought to walk straight up to any person with an American accent, perhaps flight-crew in uniform, and seek information about some aspect of what I was reading — often to the mortification of the adults in our group — and to give the Americans their due, they almost always indulged me, sometimes at length and in detail, even if they were a little bemused by the whole episode.

They don't send the American DC TM comics to this side of the Atlantic anymore it seems, which is a pity. What are available instead are rather inferior English-produced, printed-under-licence versions, without many of the features which had so impressed themselves on me. And today these imitations are sold at about £1.20!

Gone are the adverts for BB guns and roller skates and other sports equipment, all of which offered items at so-many-dollars — plus 99 cents. And most of which had a small order-form at the bottom of the page which began breathlessly: "Yes! Rush me your whatever-it-is at the absolutely phenomenal and unrepeatable price of . . ."; and the order-forms uniformly assumed that everyone lived (a) in the USA and (b) in a city. And gone too are the adverts which wanted to turn every schoolchild into an aggressive door-to-door salesman of some cosmetic

item or of a new magazine ('Make \$\$\$s from your own home').

But Shannon was first and foremost an airport, and the only place in the country in direct and constant contact with the whole of the Northern Hemisphere, or so it seemed. The planes, and their glamorous occupants and ground attendants were bringing the world to me, and I wanted to make as much of each occasion as possible. I became something of a little aviation buff, I think; or a travel enthusiast at second hand.

I recall vividly the Pan American Airways Super Constellations; those of TWA, Belgian planes in Sabena colours, the Dutch KLM DC4 Sky-masters, Swissair, the different generations of DC7s, along with the transiting fleet of the British Overseas Airways Corporation. How I pestered for the sixpence needed to operate one of the grey metered telescopes when, in the early sixties,

they were installed on the upper level of the viewing balcony.

And to hear announcements about, and to read on the arrivals and departures boards the names of destinations deep into Europe; places such as Amsterdam, Hamburg, Frankfurt and Dusseldorf; and the very sight of the roaring planes in their distinctive livery were a fascination to an aggressively inquiring young mind.

Often, in the course of one of the marathon delays at Shannon, ground crew would take pity on my jaded adult handlers and spirit me off to see some aspect of the airport's operation. A guided climb up the control tower remains one of my earliest childhood memories. Because most of the traffic was at night; the tower would be relatively free by day.

Now I had noticed from an early stage that aeroplanes and ships had much in common — each was called 'liner,' had a captain, crew, stewards and stewardesses. For those who travelled in them they were each constructed, by the provision of opulent luxury, to compensate as far as was possible for the inevitable discomforts and occasional hitches which imperfect travel entailed. Indeed, as I was later to discover, flying-boats at Foynes, which had operated barely a decade earlier, had been registered by the local harbour-master as vessels-at-port, just like ships.

That opulence, with its touch of cosmopolitan style, permeated Shannon Airport. It had been hard to create such a sense of international class within and around a set of ill-suited buildings, but it had been managed. The dynamo for the place was, of course, Shannon Sales and Catering

— Aer Rianta was not to take over Shannon for several further years. This home-grown organisation seemed to view everything as being possible, and its people baulked at nothing. As with Gotham City, great challenges existed merely to be overcome. There was a certain sense of quality about the place too, which started with the people; those in the restaurant and at the bar, the baggage handlers, in fact, everyone. I even admired the serene fortitude of the poor lady at the information desk who had to relate — yet again — that there was a further delay on our flight.

Maybe some of the elegance of the place had to do with the amount of people in uniform. Ground hostesses were in uniform, as were all kinds of officials; and, of course, so were the various flight crews whom one saw from time to time. Smartly designed uniforms, fully up to the fashion of

required. World-famous kitchens produced splendid food and drink, served in elegant surroundings by an international-experienced staff. (Remember, post-war Britain rationed some food items well into the 1950s) and Shannon specifically had much of what Americans, then the richest people on earth, best preferred. Quality Irish spirits, tweeds, knitted, crystal, linen and lace were tastefully displayed in illuminated glass-cases along the walls of the upstairs lounge and at other strategic points. And there were ceramic items — garishly-painted thatched cottages and the like — which we felt were in questionable taste; a bit 'stage Oirish,' you might say.

Then, of course, there was always the possibility that someone of

## A major essay by MARTIN BYRNES

the day. To have a daughter an air hostess was becoming every mother's dream.

And the waiters and bar-staff were in formal attire. And, let's be quite blunt about it, most people who went to Shannon in those days — travelling or not — treated the occasion as something of the special event, and dressed accordingly. And that little bit of extra style communicated itself.

Even the styles of architecture in the place were exciting — who remembers the open-step timber staircase to the viewing lounge which scaled three bare side walls? That was in an area behind what is now check-in desk area no.10 to no. 14. Or the style of the middle landing leading to the lower balcony?

The little enclosed courtyard garden by the restaurant, both of which still exist in modified form, was a novel way to brighten areas which otherwise got daylight only through skylights.

And another feature to remember — at night, in the middle of the lawn immediately outside the main door, a narrow pencil of light shone straight upward so that the height of the cloud ceiling overhead could be determined by simple triangulation.

There was an air of elegance for another reason too — not everyone could afford air travel, particularly trans-Atlantic travel, and those who could were usually well off. An Atlantic flight was still prohibitively expensive for most. Those were still the days when the average person going to America went out by boat and rarely, if ever, came back. Shannon supplied many of the facilities which international travellers

importance would pass through Shannon — a film star or well-known singer, perhaps. Not being a film *cognoscente*, for reasons already stated, I have no recollection of every having been particularly impressed.

In those heady days, the Super Connies, Stratocruisers, and the others rolled — no, roared — to their places on the apron. There were no sound deflectors in the early days, and engines continued to roar until the plane was well in final position on one of the half dozen or so designated parking marks.

Then there would be calm; and propellers would whirl and stutter to a final stop. Only then would a door open and steps be rolled into place; simple, rickety-looking sets of steps, put in position by an ordinary-looking tractor. Soon a uniformed hostess would lead an elegant little procession of passengers into the terminal building. Apart from the few tourists or native Irish who were ending their journey at Shannon, these might be Americans, Canadians or be from one of any of a dozen European countries. The duty free shop took dollars then too.

As soon as any plane would touch down, the announcement of its arrival would be made — in English and, if necessary, in the language of the plane's native country. A plethora of languages was also used in the "now boarding", "final departure" and the frequent "regret the delay" calls, as well as the inevitable "will the last remaining passenger . . ." please.

And then everything changed. Firstly, the newer DC-7s could overfly and, a few years later, the

earliest commercial jets came along. One by one they all abandoned — Lufthansa and Sabena and Air France; and all the others. The face of aviation was changing utterly.

But it must be remembered that, even when the new DC-7s (C series) and the Starliners were overflying — from 1956 or 1957 onward, Shannon remained as busy as ever. This is because there were still lots of shorter-haul planes in service, and growth in flying was more than keeping pace with the world's overall fleet expansion. Aer Lingus' sister company, Aerlinte Eireann, perceived an opportunity and started on the Atlantic in 1958.

Up to that time, either Shannon, or its twin gateway, Prestwick in Scotland, had dealt with everyone who had headed out over, or who had come in from the Atlantic. But no more. Prestwick has had a tragic recent history — losing out to the

city airport at Glasgow.

The gateway at the other side, Gander in Newfoundland, has had as grim a fate.

Shannon changed to meet the challenge. Resilient and indomitable, it adapted and it fought.

It became fully jet-compatible.

In fact, it had already been quite capable of taking Boeing 707s. Its 2,300-yard main runway had handled quite a few. (This was runway 05/23 magnetic orientation, nicknamed *The Washboard*, a name bestowed by passengers and crew of many a plane, who had had the imprint of its uneven surface shudderingly implanted into their consciousness at every take-off and landing).

Also, because westbound flights were into the prevailing wind, many jet operations still found it prudent to refuel at Shannon on the way to America. The DC-8, the main rival of the 707 was also a common sight, and Shannon was to continue to be used for some of the very long hauls, such as Chicago to Frankfurt. The Swiss still found Shannon very convenient, and increased usage. And I am told (but don't specifically remember) that Pan Am continued a service off the Atlantic via Shannon to Paris.

In 1960, the new runway went in. Planning for this had made further physical change at the airport inevitable.

To begin with, the new two-mile runway was going to cut across the airport approach road in two places. Underpasses, such as were already incorporated into the main road into

And they flew by day. Gone were our bumpy midnight drives through the rain, fully reconciled to a mere twelve-hour delay if we were lucky. Everything was predictable now. And far more ordinary.

Gone too were the strange languages; the frenetic bustle, the colour, the excitement — the DC TM comics.

Aer Lingus and BEA (later BA) lunchtime flights were as predictable as clockwork — in fact, in Limerick city, above which the London-bound climb-path passes, people did in fact take a quick glance at their watches as the planes rose overhead.

The London route was flown by short-haul aircraft such as the Fokker Friendship, for several years until both airlines changed to such as BAC one-elevens and 737s. (As a matter of interest, one of Aer Lingus' latest acquisitions is a modern Fokker Friendship, used on medium-density UK routes, such as those out of Cork. It is unique in being the only plane in the fleet with a reverse gear — while moving on the ground, of course — so it doesn't require a push-back from airbridge at start-up).

The Aer Lingus 707, the St. Patrick, was the first Irish jetliner on the now highly contentious North Atlantic route. There was much national pride in our acquisition of this, the first of a small fleet of jets with Atlantic capability.

It was when the jumbos were due to come that it was decided that the airport's facilities were too limited to deal with surges of upward of 400 passengers at a time — more if there were to be additional flights. The big, impersonal white block was built to house more or less all the public facilities except the restaurant and check-in. And a direct-access (eventually increased to) twelve-unit pier building was part of this development.

Curiously, the location of this new building, and in particular the length of its pier, meant that *The Washboard*, which ended just beside it, had to be taken out of commission, leaving just 13/31 as the last of the original runways. It is used for light aircraft only these days, and is the one you can look along as you enter the airport — the one infield between the traffic lights.

Even BA has pulled off the London route now, breaking another thread linking us with the past. I still see something romantic in Shannon Airport; perhaps it's only a ghost. But the place has been a part of me, even though I was just one of millions to have visited it.

It will be there, in whatever form and to fulfil whatever destiny, many years after I am gone, and my childhood memories, my childish memories, are long forgotten.