

New book chronicles airport's development

BUILT on the glaucous mud-fields of Rinneanna in the 1960s, the very foundation of Shannon Town and the industrial estate were rocked at times by bureaucratic red-tape.

With vision and ingenuity, Dr. Brendan O'Regan was, however, able to manipulate the bureaucracy and steer the project through the rough terrain of its infant years.

And it could have been in County Limerick.

The Shannon story is chronicled in a new book, *Shannon Departures* by Bernard Share, launched by Cathal O'Shannon and published by Gill and MacMillan.

The development of both the town and the estate has been researched by Mr. Share, mainly it would appear through SFADCo, the company responsible for the development over the past 33 years.

His tale will resurrect memories for men like Bill Jones, one of the first settlers.

The pages of most interest are those that reveal the almost constant interference by Government departments.

It wasn't all plain sailing, and Mr. Share tells us there were political problems: "The Minister for Local Government, Neil Blaney, wanted the housing to be the responsibility of the National Building Agency, which constructed the high-rise flats in Ballymun".

Any time I've flown into Dublin Airport and looked at these flats, I immediately associated them with the Drumgeely flats. There is another reference to Neil Blaney, and the Lichfield report "was seen by some interested parties as an attempt by the Minister to pre-empt the development of SFADCo", Paul Quigley is quoted as saying, "essentially to put us down. It didn't".

There was a time when there was a little group of workers in SFADCo, known to outsiders as "Blaney's men".

Brendan O'Regan had always an open line to the late Sean Lemass and this resulted in many of the difficulties being overcome.

The clash with the IDA and the taking away of some of SFADCo's responsibilities are also mentioned, including a speech by Desmond O'Malley: "I could never accept that it (Shannon Development) had a role in promoting that

region abroad against the remainder of the country. To take out one tiny region out of a tiny country and ask it to promote itself, the remainder of the country in a world, half of which doesn't even know that the country exists anyway, just made no sense".

There's also mention of Status and fly-direct-Dublin and one wonders if this campaign would ever have emerged if John Dilger's warning at the first meeting of SFADCo in February 1959 was heeded by the Government: "All the airlines he had contacted on recent US visit stressed that the principal reason for cutting the Shannon service was that Aerlinte had captured the traffic which previously had made the Shannon landing attractive and worthwhile".

This, of course, has been the crux of Shannon's failure — a point Sean Lemass, never conceded.

Mr. O'Shannon said: "It's appropriate that now — right now — someone should have attempted to tell its tale, to record in one neat volume the history of a place which for more than half-a-century has been the shining example of what this country can conceive, plan, execute, administer in original thinking and to a grand design.

"Bernard Share makes it plain that the conclusions he draws in this book are his own — and they are mostly favourable. A good thing, this, because most of those I have known at Shannon have been modest and diffident about their achievements.

"His narrative goes back to 1935, when men like Sean Lemass and John Leydon urged that a base be found for trans-Atlantic flying boats, and the Foynes terminal was born. It moves over the river to the Clare coast and Rineanna, picked out, not by Charles Lindbergh and the Americans, as I had always thought, but by two junior officials, one from the Irish Air Corps, R. W. O'Sullivan, and the other a minor civil servant in the British Air Ministry.

"I was fascinated by the fact that once the construction of Rineanna got underway and was into cost overruns, the then Minister for Finance, Sean MacEntee, got the wind up and tried to persuade the Government to re-site the new land airport at Askeaton. What an opportunity missed for County Limerick".