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# Tailoring to every taste for 50 years

Gentleman's outfitter Dermot McGovern has measured his cloth and has decided to leave the business after half a century. Closing the famous store will be "traumatic", he says, but he adds: "Nothing lasts forever"

## Anne Sheridan

**D**ERMOT McGovern has seen every trend going - wax jackets, Crombie coats, anoraks, you name it. But for him true style is not about the latest trend. For this 66-year-old, there is only one real champion of style in menswear.

"Bugatti!" he shouts, without a moment's hesitation - and of course he's not referring to the car manufacturers.

What about the craze for skinny jeans on men, as infamously sported by Kerry GAA player Paul Galvin?

"I wouldn't be mad about it now to tell you the truth. But that's probably obvious with the age difference.

"I wouldn't be a follower of fashion, I'm not hugely into labels. I'd be more into classical fashion, rather than yuppie, trendy types of fashion. I go into those shops and the loud music just gets me."

Dermot has been in the clothing business for nearly 50 years, having continued on the family business from his Leitrim-born father and Limerick mother.

Now, there are just a number of weeks to go before the much-loved McGovern's on William Street closes its doors.

Its customers travel from north Kerry, west Clare, even as far as Gort in county Galway and of course benefited from a great "country" trade from its loyal Limerick customers.

But in recent weeks there's only one question they've all asked of Dermot, and it is not about their sales period.

"Where are we going to get our clothes in future? I'd say a thousand people have said that to me. They'll all find somewhere. You have to call it time sometime."

Upstairs, the back-office looks as if it has been pillaged, with filing drawers falling out of their slots, and stuffed animals waiting to be introduced to their new owners, as they prepare to move out. "There are men haunting me for those things," laughs Dermot.

As he rifles through old documents, traces of his life can be seen everywhere, from photos of the horses he had a modest interest in ("I've a leg in a syndicate"), to old Singer sewing machines and biscuit tins full of buttons.

On the hallway leading up to the office there's a photo of the captain of the Titanic (another interest of his), and a horse, the aptly named "Tailored to Taste", which he owned with a butcher, and rode to victory under JJ O'Neill in 1985.

But after 49 years in business, McGovern's is to close on January 22, the third Saturday in the month, he says by way of explanation.

The impending closure of the store is a "sad and traumatic experience", he admits.

Still, "nothing lasts forever" he reiterates again and again, on this quiet Monday afternoon, as if re-affirming that message to himself. "That's the way."

There are a myriad of reasons for its closure - the rise of out of town shopping, the competition of the multi-nationals, the trend for more casual clothing and so forth - but for the most part he feels it's time to go.

"The whole pattern of business has changed. Business is not as good as it used to be. People aren't coming into town to the same degree. People are taking the easier option and shopping in shopping centres."

With Christmas just behind us, he reflects that the tradition of saving in Christmas clubs with favourite stores is gone due to the advent of credit cards.

And there are huge issues with the way the 'powers that be' haven't improved life for the customer - nor the retailer.

He puts forward the following example: "Why would people on cold, wet miserable



Master of his trade: Dermot McGovern at his William Street shop, which sadly is about to close after nearly 50 years PICTURE: MIKE COWHEY

Saturdays pass the lovely comfortable Crescent Shopping Centre and come in to the city, where they have to spend an extra half hour in the car, go through 10 sets of traffic lights, look for a place to park, pay for a place to park and get out into the cold? It's not that people are spoiled, but the ways things have gone have spoiled them."

Paying commercial rates to Limerick City Council is another sore point.

"We get nothing for the rates. I think William Street has been neglected by the City Council through the years. Even though there's still good footfall, the quality of the shops wouldn't be as good as it used to be."

The real kick in the stomach for city traders has been the rise of the Crescent shopping centre in Dooradoyle, which he feels "is too big and too strong to compete with the centre of Limerick."

"I think a huge effort should be made, no matter what way they do it, to facilitate Marks & Spencer in the city. That would have been the saving of the city if it came in. Limerick should have one and it should be at the centre, not out at the edge."

Dermot's life in the shop was in a way predestined. Both his parents worked in Roches Stores - his father in the men's department and his mother in the ladies department.

In the 1960s his mother Maureen ran the family clothing factory where Flannery's bar now stands on Denmark Street, where they exported clothes to the UK and America.

There they made clothing for one of John F. Kennedy's sons and someone "very famous", though he's reluctant to reveal whom.

Carefree was their brand of pants and they made a special elasticated waist trousers, which proved to be "a big take".

McGovern's opened six months before he left school at the Crescent College Comprehensive and on the day of his last exam in the Leaving Certificate his father queried what time he would be finished.

"Half past twelve", said the young Dermot.

"Well, you'd want to be in the shop for twenty-five to," came the reply from his father, Eugene.

He began working there aged 17 on November 27, 1961.

"A Saturday," he adds. The shop will close on the same day of the week he started.

The shop, where the family lived overhead, was forced to close briefly in 1974 after it was

**Personal file**

**Family:** The eldest of five children, he has been married to Rosemary for 36 years. The couple are both from the South Circular Road but now live in Dooradoyle. They have four children: Aisling, Amy Rose, Eugene and John D.

**Favourite meal:** Fillet steak, chips and beans.

**Favourite film:** The Shawshank Redemption

**Favourite song:** One day at a time.

**Favourite holidays:** Inis Oirr in the Aran Islands, and Liscannor in west Clare.

**Favourite book:** Vincent O'Brien: The Official Biography by Jacqueline O'Brien and Ivor Herbert

burned down along with two neighbouring buildings. A cigarette butt left burning in a carpet shop was believed to be the culprit.

However, he said it is a wonder more shops weren't burnt down in those times as "everyone was smoking inside shops, and there were ashtrays everywhere for people that time."

Dermot himself gave up the habit 15 years ago after smoking for 25 years, and later ensured all his children did the same.

"Sure it's all up there", he says, pointing to his head. "It's not hard at all. Forget about patches, forget about everything, it's just in your mind."

It five decades of work about to be brought to a close he reflects there were few aspects of the job he didn't like.

"I enjoyed the game all my life. There was a bit of frustration over not getting to rugby matches that I would have liked to have gone to or horse racing."

He got his kicks from something the larger companies can't afford to do - "the banter, the one-on-one with people."

"I like to get to know everyone, where they're from and what they're into. It meant you built up a relationship with people."

But to be on a real playing field with the bigger companies would necessitate working seven days a week and other unsociable hours. He was already putting six days a week, from 8am to 5.45pm, under his belt.

"To compete with the multinationals now, a family business like this would need to be open on Friday nights and on Sundays, and when it's a family business it means you're there seven days a week. It's just such a draw on your time."

The business logo - 'Outfitters for gentlemen and their sons' - harks back to a different era, in terms of business, societal norms and fashion.

Now, the trend for casual clothing is something that he is stunned by. "It has gone so casual I don't know where it can go," he says, shaking his head.

However, the family trend in fashion is continuing. One of his sons is in charge of the Jack & Jones menswear brands on Bedford Row and the Crescent Shopping Centre.

Yet, McGovern's is one of the last bastions of old-school fashion retailers on William Street, and that makes its closure all the more regrettable.

In fact, it barely stands out amongst the garish, techni-colour of shopfronts, with low-cost stores like Euro City, X-Pose and the Kwik-e-Mart crowding around it.

"The street is unrecognisable from when I started. When I started there were a lot of big shops with 40 or 50 people employed; there's nothing like that left there any more. But it's still a good street."

"We've seen head shops come and go, and two euro shops come and go. Really they [City Hall] should be a bit tighter about what goes in there. The ones there in my time are nearly all gone now."

Within three weeks McGovern's will be gone too. He has no plans for the store, and no firm plans for himself either.

"I don't know, I really don't know [what I'll do]. I'll just sit back for a couple of weeks and see. Nothing lasts forever and I'm not going to last forever either."

Still, there are plenty of books on bird-watching and the Titanic to read, amongst other pleasurable pursuits.

Since he was a boy Dermot has followed the migration patterns of birds.

"If there was an unusual bird in the area I'd spot him straight away. I'd look him up, suss him out and find out why he's in Limerick if he hasn't been here before."

His passion for golf may be revived, after it lapsed when he could no longer take a half day's work on Thursday.

"Sure I'm dying to use the free travel as well."

■ McGovern's, 22 William Street, is holding a closing down-sale with big reductions until January 22