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## Story behind The Battle

What did it take to produce Paul O'Connell's book *The Battle*? Co-author Alan English reveals the inside story to **Anne Sheridan**

**P**AUL O'Connell is standing upstairs in a booksellers on O'Connell Street. In a city where 'Paulie' is God personified, the store is quite rightly packed.

A small section of the media is there to side-step him with a few questions, before the main event.

'What is *The Battle*?', he is asked. 'Is it a battle with yourself, or on the pitch?'

It is all those things, he says, and more, whilst remaining his modest self.

Few could imagine that this titan of rugby at home and abroad, a man of towering physique and presence that they look up to, could himself be wracked with occasional self-doubts.

'Everyone blames themselves when they lose,' he tells reporters when asked 'what a major loss does to a man's mind' - especially when the whole country is looking on, and critiquing you as well.

'It makes you better, and stops you from being complacent. If it means a lot to you, you go back to the drawing

**“ The final transcripts of over 90 interviews ran to about 900,000 words - only 110,000 made the book ”**

**The Battle co-author**  
Alan English

board on Monday and start preparing again, and try to figure out what can make you better. It's tough, but enjoyable. It's great to be doing something you love and trying to do your best at it," said the 36-year-old Freeman of Limerick.

O'Connell is one of the few people who intimately knows the trojan work it has taken to get the much-anticipated book on the shelves.

The other is Alan English, former editor of the Limerick Leader, who co-wrote the book.

Previously sports editor with The Sunday Times, English had interviewed him for two previous books, about Munster's Heineken Cup

journey and Ireland's Grand Slam.

He also supplied a foreword to the second edition of English's much-lauded book, *Stand Up and Fight - When Munster Beat the All Blacks*.

It wasn't a hard call for the publishers Penguin to make the collaborative link, though no one expected the book to be seven years in the making, something O'Connell himself acknowledges in the conclusion.

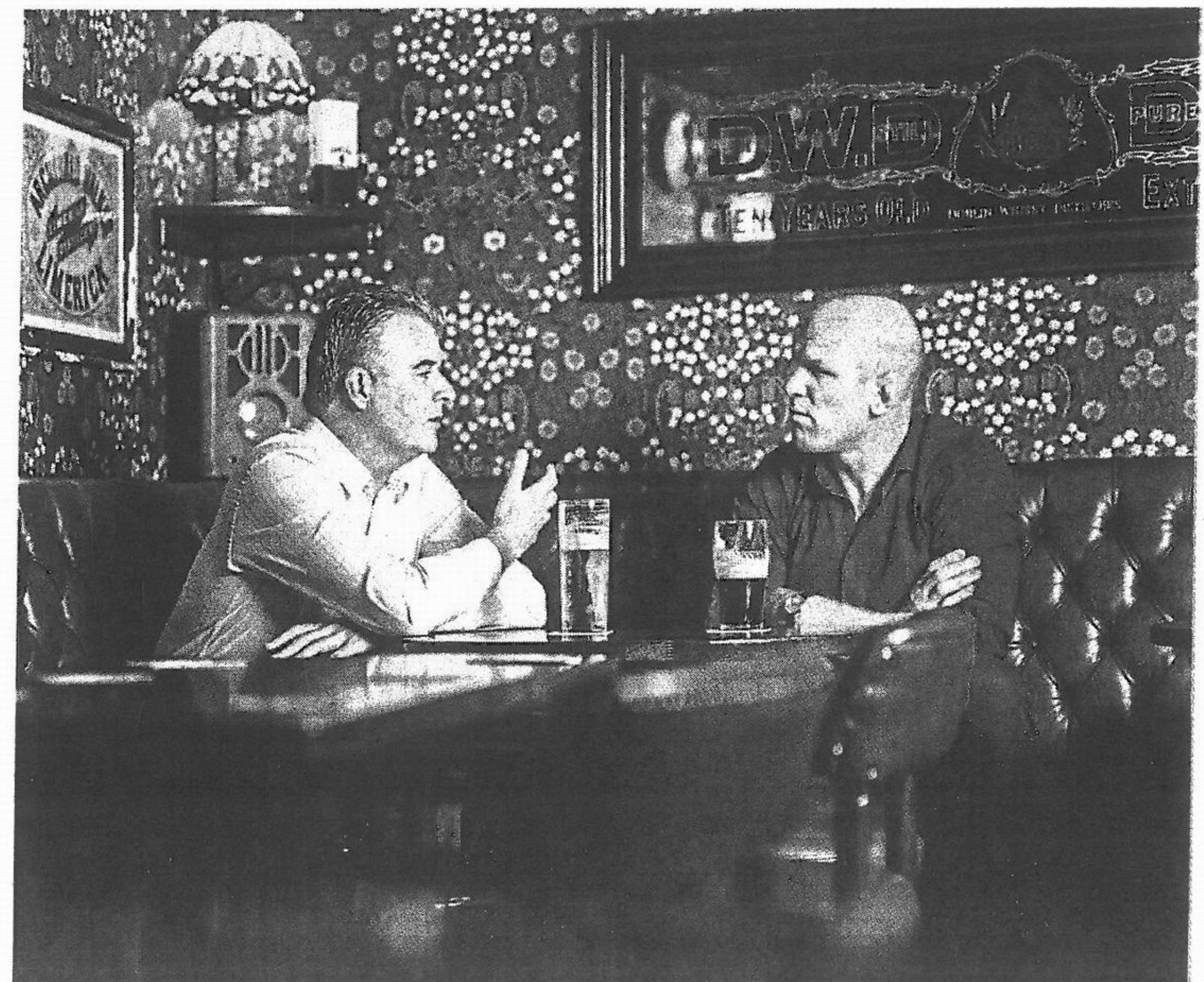
"We thought it might take us two or three years," explains English, now editorial director of Iconic Newspapers, which owns the Leader, as well as 12 other titles.

"Neither of us imagined it would be almost seven years, because Paul never saw himself carrying on for as long as he did. But I think the book is all the better for the length of time we spent working on it."

Over the years, he conducted at least 90 interviews with O'Connell, though he has lost count of the official tally, owing to the final additions and revisions.

Some interviews lasted two or three

➔ CONTINUES ON PAGE 2



Co-author Alan English and rugby legend Paul O'Connell reflect on the book over a drink at Jerry Flannery's bar PICTURE: ALAN PLACE



# Seven-year journey to The Battle

➔ CONTINUES FROM PAGE 1

hours, others were 45 minutes over the phone when he was away, or on the road.

In all the final transcripts for the book ran to around 900,000 words and only 110,000 of those made it the book – a hard call for any editor to make.

"I think, for most readers, what was or is happening on the pitch is interesting, but not nearly as interesting as the stuff going on inside the heads of elite sports people like Paul.

"There's a line in the book where Paul says that people who are struggling in life often feel that others are just sailing through, and it's rarely the case. So, while I did have a sense of Paul's battle from having interviewed him before, I really had no idea of what it took for him to reach the standards he was so driven to attain.

"On the second page of the book, he recounts an internal conversation he had with himself on the plane coming back from London in January 2015. He was beating himself up about how he had played for Munster, and he was trying to figure out how he could retire, and as soon as possible.

"A few months later he was voted Six Nations Player of the Tournament. Nobody who saw how wonderfully he played for Ireland during that tournament could possibly have imagined that he'd been feeling so down about his form just before it started."

The responsibility to do justice to his story given his iconic status, his popularity and continued faithful following, was certainly great.

"I gave it my absolute all. But how could you not?"

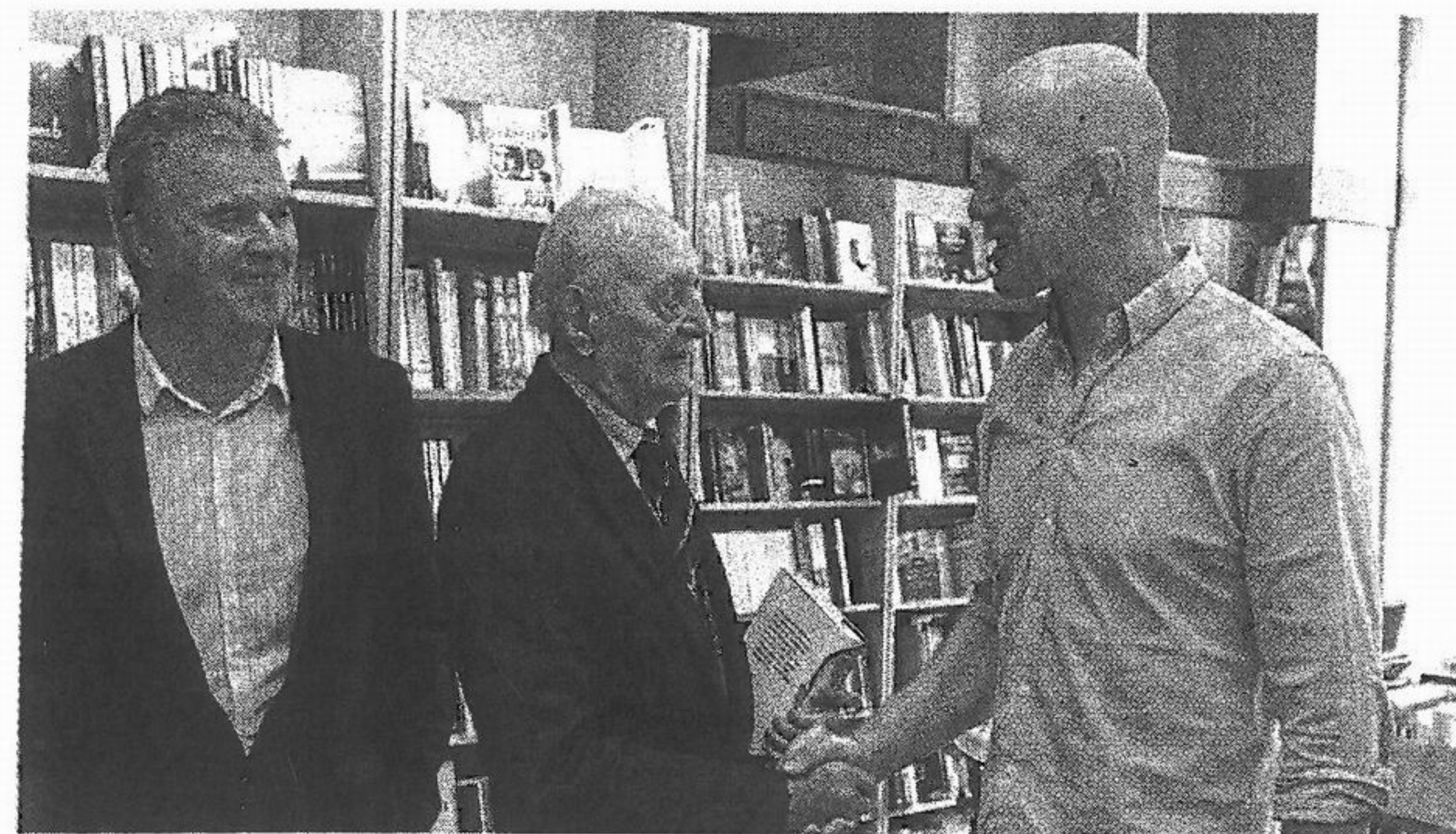
About five years into Paul's book, he was asked to collaborate with Brian O'Driscoll on his autobiography, The Test, after rugby writer Paul Kimmage sensationally dropped out of that project.

They only had seven months from start to finish to complete that book, "which was a long way from ideal".

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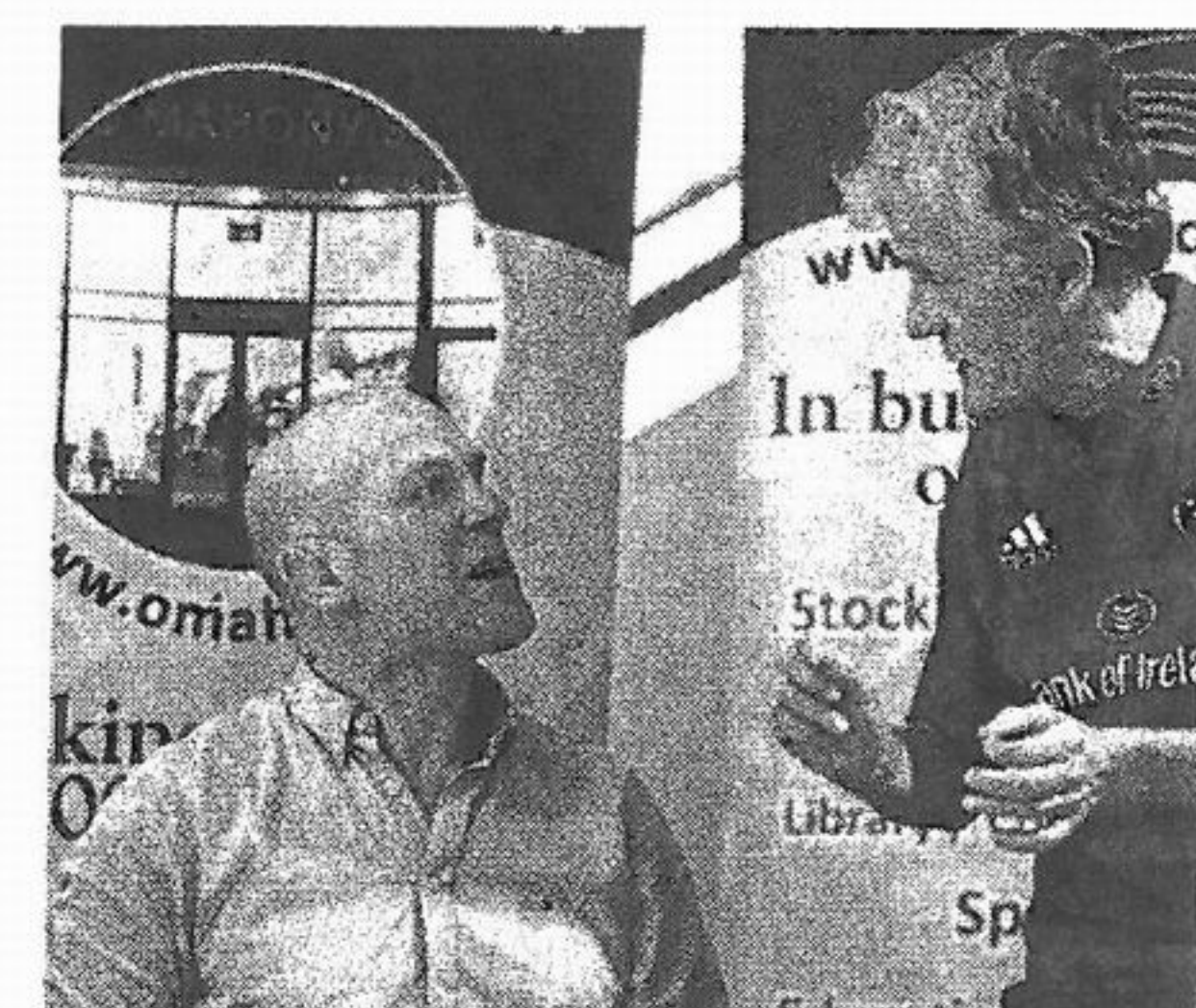
The calm before the storm: Paul O'Connell at the opening of the signing for his autobiography at O'Mahony's booksellers last Sunday. The cover of the book titled The Battle is pictured below



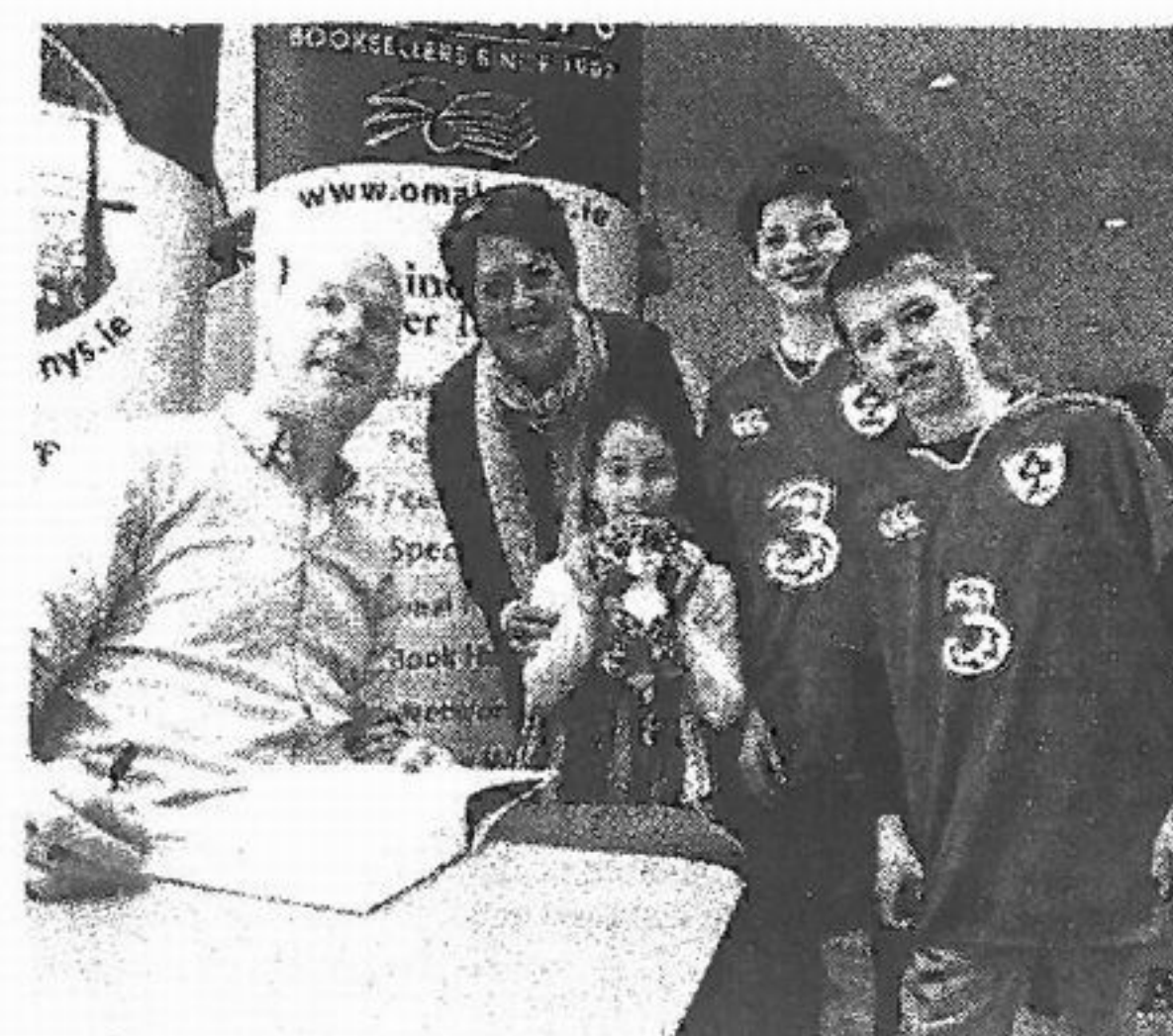
Co-author Alan English, editorial director of Iconic Newspapers, with his father Tom English at the Paul O'Connell signing of his autobiography The Battle



Jim Liston, Darren Liston, Mark Cussen and James Fitzgerald from Newcastle West RFC with Paul



Talking rugby with Paul O'Connell was Gerry Corry, Farranshane



PICTURES: KEITH WISEMAN

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"I feel the break [from Paul during that period] was actually a good thing for his book, because I was able to look at what I'd already produced with fresh eyes. When I read back over it, I didn't really like a lot of what was down on paper. There were a lot of places where I couldn't hear Paul's authentic voice. So the book changed a lot after that, and I think it changed for the better."

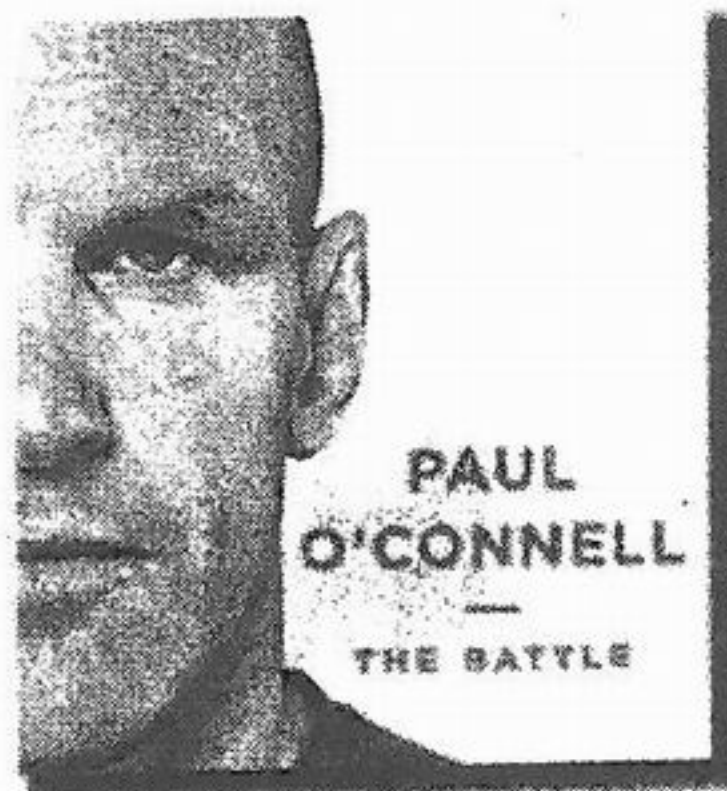
Fans would agree. Matt Cooper, presenter of *The Last Word* on Newstalk, said it's "excellent"; Stephen Jones in *The Sunday Times* described it as

The calm before the storm: Paul O'Connell at the opening of the signing for his autobiography at O'Mahony's booksellers last Sunday. The cover of the book titled *The Battle* is pictured below

PICTURES: KEITH WISEMAN

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*Everyone blames themselves when they lose. It makes you better*  
**”**

Rugby legend  
Paul O'Connell



day. That little chat was lovely for me to witness, before Paul went downstairs to sign books for what looked like half of Limerick."

Half of Limerick was right. Behind the congratulatory handshakes, and anecdotes of days gone by, Frank O'Mahony of the bookstore was observing the growing crowds outside with a sense of nervousness.

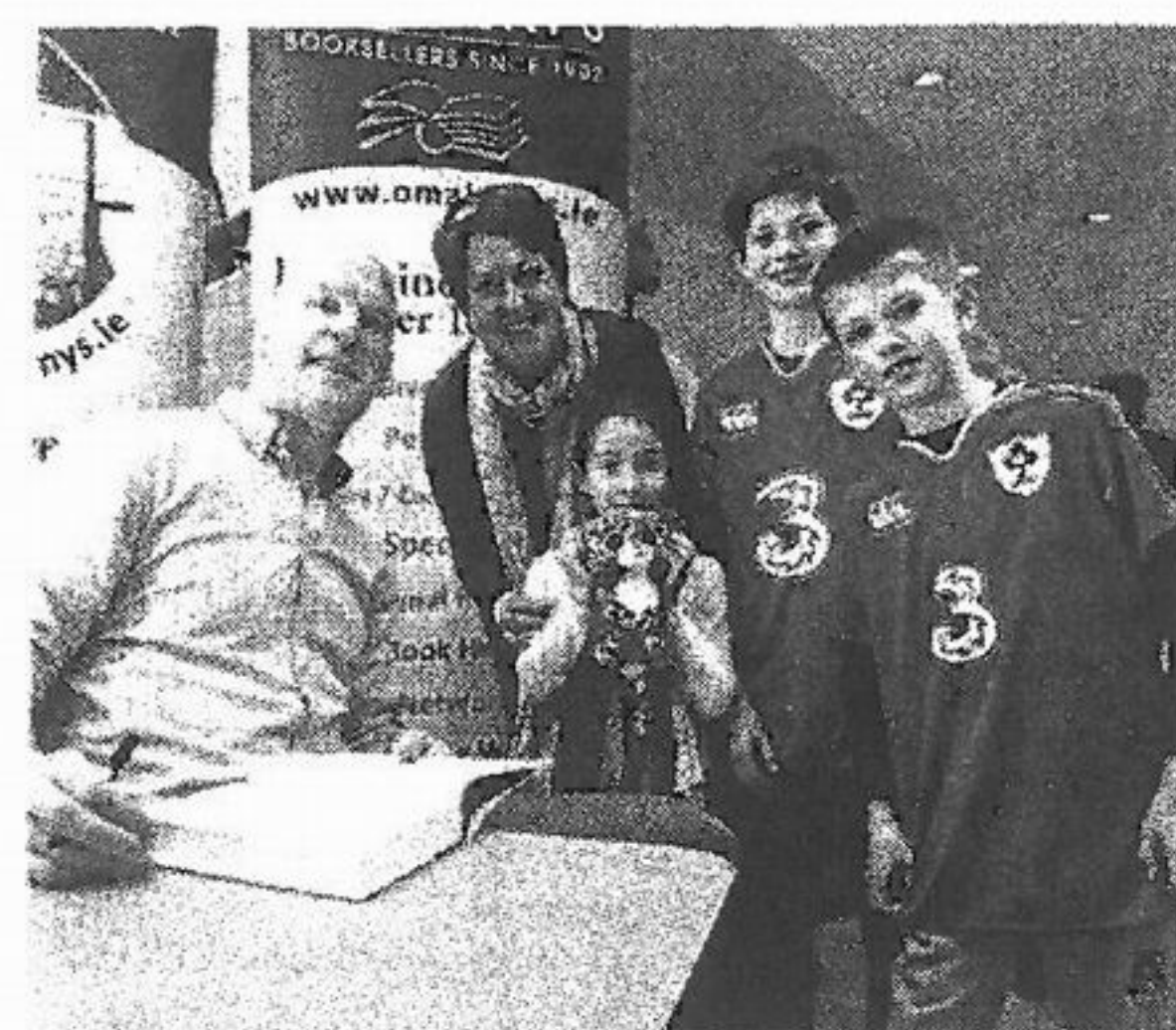
In all more some 800 people enjoyed their 'meet and greet' with O'Connell, with some presenting as many as six copies of the book for him to sign with a personalised message, and pose for a selfie, or family photos.

Not everyone was fortunate to make it inside the door, but Mr O'Mahony was insistent that no

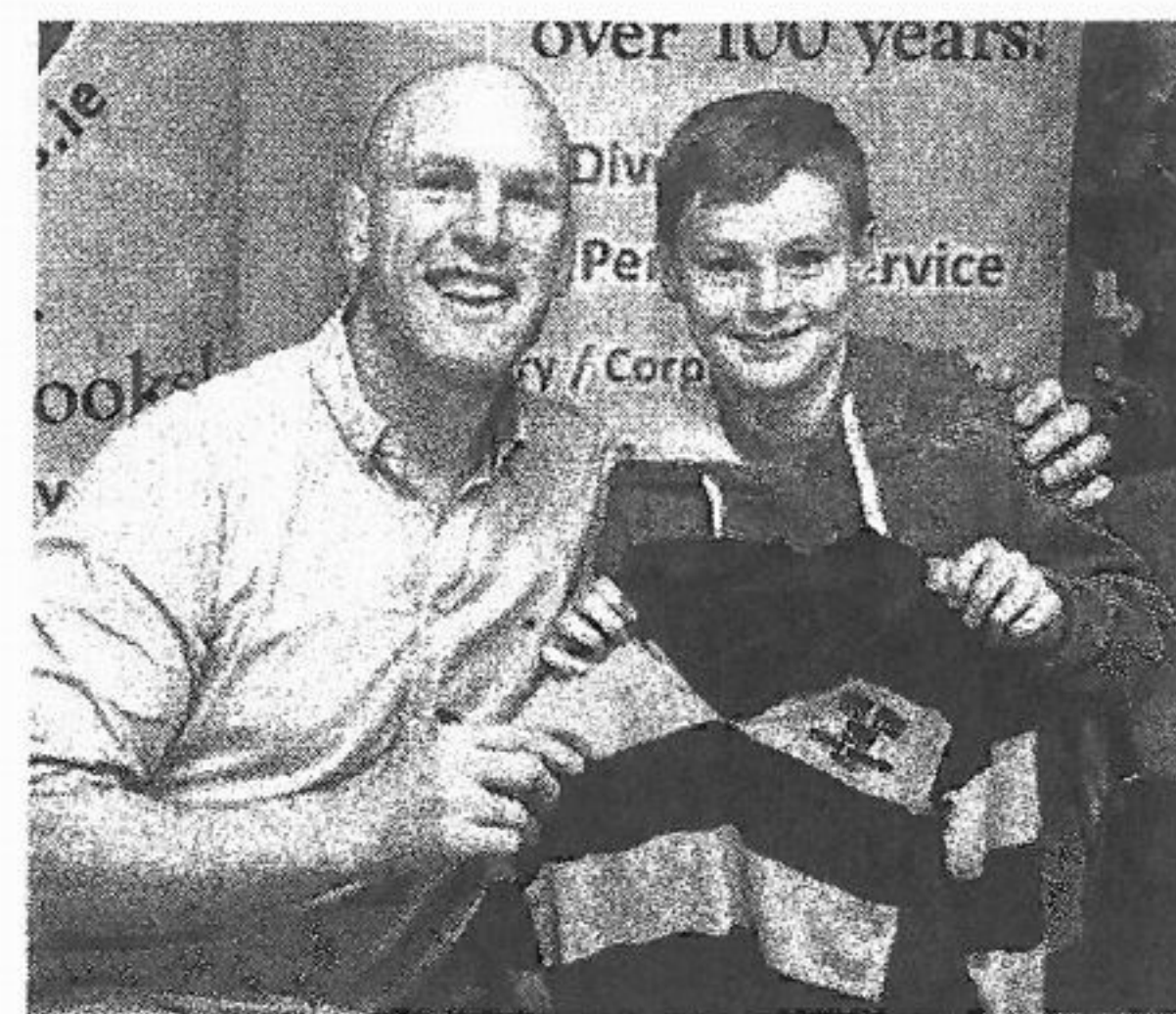
"My dad [Tom, former manager in the Savoy cinema] remembers very well being served his Henri Winterman half coronas [cigars] by a gangly, hard-working 16-year-old red-head at John Gleeson's shop in Catherine Street, back in the

Jim Liston, Darren Liston, Mark Cussen and James Fitzgerald from Newcastle West RFC with Paul

Talking rugby with Paul O'Connell was Gerry Corry, Farranshane



'Come on Ireland!': Rachael, Evelyn, Dara and Rory O'Neill, Ballybricken



Peter Kelly, Clarina with his own Young Munster jersey at the signing

more could be done.

There haven't been crowds like this at a book signing in Limerick since Jack Charlton or Gay Byrne - Paul O'Connell could have been signing books until 12 o'clock that night if he had more time in his diary, he added.

"The queues would have stretched the lengths of three blocks at least, if they were not all inside. Obviously there was a large number of disappointed people, but one of the Kardashians couldn't have done a better job. They'd have 20 minders around them and would barely give a minute to the public. Munster players don't operate like that - they like to meet their fans and talk to their fans," he told the Leader.

"He arrived early and stayed late. Two hours is the norm for book signings; Paul was kind enough to do double that. We'd love to facilitate another signing in the store, Paul's schedule permitting. If we can't we're trying to get more signed copies to people who couldn't get to meet him."

While the book signing was officially due to begin at 2pm, some of his biggest fans were there hours in advance.

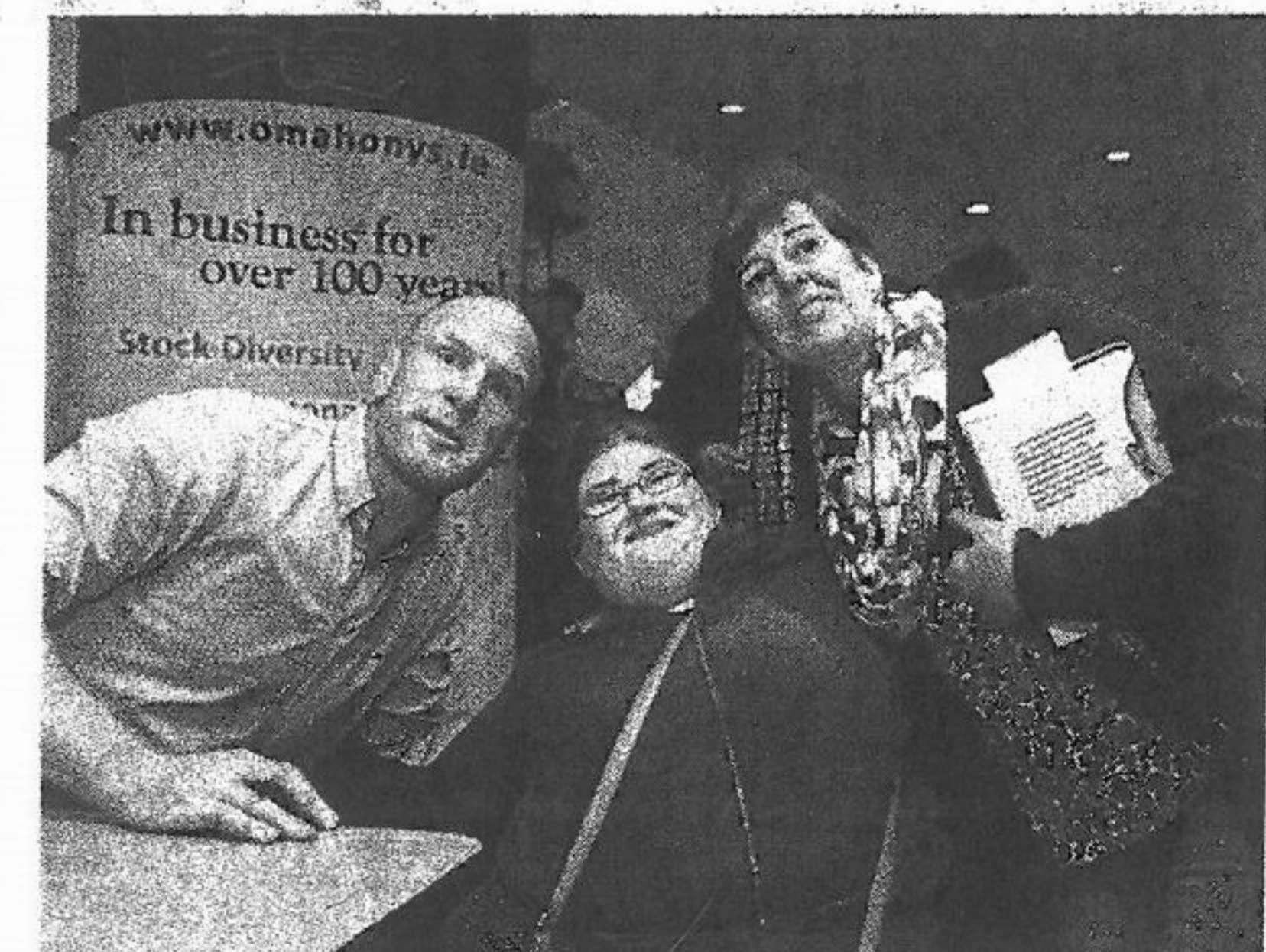
First in the queue at 10.30am was Amanda Dooley, from Clarina.

"I'm just mad about him. He's my number one," she said, having bagged the seat closest to him, and surveying the crowds in O'Mahony's bookstore.

"It's brilliant. It's great for him in fairness. As long as I get a picture and a signing I'll be very happy," she enthused.

She was followed by Bernard Kennedy, from Ballinacurra Gardens, who played rugby for Young Munster in the "amateur days, the old time".

"I used to see Paul's father



Annrea and Bridget Copus, Clonlara getting their copy signed

Mick play. Paul O'Connell has put Young Munster, Munster, and Ireland on the world map.

**“**  
*He could have signed books until midnight if he had the time. We hadn't seen crowds like it since Jack Charlton*  
**”**

O'Mahony Bookseller  
Frank O'Mahony

He's such a nice guy, and is always easy to approach. I've two books to get them autographed - one for me and one for my son Barry," he said.

Darragh Liston, James Fitzgerald, and Mark Cussen, of the under-8 rugby club in Newcastle West, donned their rugby

jerseys for the signing.

"We're just after coming from Nenagh from an under-8 blitz. We'd three games there, and we're taking them in now to see Paul O'Connell. They are big fans. If you're from Limerick, you're a fan of Paul O'Connell," said John Liston, of the club.

Mum Rachel O'Neill, from Ballybricken, brought her sons Pierce, 11, and Rory, 9, who play with Old Crescent RFC, to meet him, and he signed the backs of the Irish rugby jerseys in addition to the book. They were even allowed to stay up late to watch him on *The Late Late Show* on Friday night.

"He's wonderful and a gentleman. He's really a great ambassador for the boys, a real role model," she said.

Paul O'Connell will be signing copies of *The Battle* in Easons in Cork this Saturday, and he will be back in Limerick - this time at Easons - on Saturday, December 3, from 2pm.



Queues down the street: Huge crowds wait to meet Paul O'Connell last Sunday