



written by Paul Durcan

Charlie Haughey and Knock International Airport

A few days before Christmas in Dublin city centre in a crowded restaurant at lunchtime, I chanced to bump into Mr Charles Haughey. After a short, snatched conversation, partly in Irish, we went our different ways. Regrettably I cannot call myself a friend of Mr Haughey. I say 'regrettably' because that is something I would have relished - Mr Haughey's friendship. However a long-time ago I did have a brief professional relationship with Mr Haughey, and, as I walked off down O'Connell street, past the first section of the Spire and over the bridge and down the quays, I mused on that piece of business all of sixteen years ago.

1986, March, a cold dark afternoon in my cave in Ringsend, the phone rang. 'My name is Catherine Butler. I am Mr Haughey's secretary. Will you speak to Mr Haughey?' I never had any contact with Mr Haughey, good bad or indifferent, but, being a true born Irish Catholic, an arrow of guilt flew through my soul. What crime had I committed to merit a phone call



from the former and future Taoiseach and Leader of Fianna Fáil?

'Paul, I'd like you to come in and see me.'

Over the phone he offered me no explanation and I made no inquiry. A few days later I found myself sitting in the empty Fianna Fail meeting room, on the fifth floor of Leinster House. I sat facing a wall with a large, dark wintry Paul Henry painting. Mr. Haughey came in and we talked for an hour and what surprised me then but not now, on recollection was his diffidence; his open-minded quizzical, risky approach to the project he had in mind. He informed me that the official opening of Knock International Airport was due to take place in two months' time, on May 30th, and that he had been asked to perform the official opening. He did not say, as I later learned, that he was being invited in preference to the incumbent Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, because the people of Knock and the people of Mayo, including Fine Gael people, felt that Mr. Haughey has supported them through thick and thin to get Knock International Airport in the face of contemptuous opposition from every

quarter, most especially from the pedigree economists, calculators and sophists of Dublin and the Pale.

What Mr Haughey wanted from me was advice about the feasibility of some kind of memorial to mark the birth of Knock International Airport. He said he had been thinking of Raftery - Raftery an file - Raftery the poet of Mayo, but that he had not got any definite proposal. What did I think? Maybe a quotation from Raftery on a slab of Mayo limestone? A quotation from which poem? Or did I think it would be possible to compose original lines? And if new lines could be produced, should they be read out at the official opening, and if so, by whom should they be read out - by the author of the lines? Or an actor, or by whom? The conversation went to and fro, probing here, withdrawing there. Mr Haughey stood at a window overlooking Kildare Street, with his knee on a chair. I thought to myself what a breath of fresh air; to see a politician thinking aloud, trying to open up all the possibilities of a situation. This was a new experience for me, all too accustomed as I was to people in power whose minds had closed up at puberty and who worked only in terms of votes and certainties and who would regard it as a crime to think freely and to take risks.

After a good hour of looking at the problem, Mr Haughey asked me if I would take a commission to write a poem for the opening of Knock International Airport, and to recite the poem from the platform that day. I accepted and Mr Haughey called in Mr Pdraig Flynn who, he said, would give me any help I might need. Mr Flynn was the soul of goodwill and good humour and as we rode down the elevator together I thought how refreshing to be in a lift with a politician who is on his way into the first chamber of parliament to make a speech against divorce - a position absolutely opposed to my own - and who yet treats me with courtesy. Furthermore, looking at the Knock poem project from Mr Flynn's point of view I knew that the proposal could only prove a nuisance to him. I knew County Mayo well - my mother and father were from Westport and Turlough - and I knew that the Knock opening would be hard trucking. But now poor Mr Flynn had to go back to his Fianna Fáil cummán in Castlebar and inform them that the Boss, would ye believe it, had landed us with a poet, and guess who the poet is, one of the bloody free State Durcans! That Paul Durcan lootheramaun; a string of a fella with white Nike trainers and long hair. As Mr Flynn strode towards the chamber, by God but that whoever it was that said that courtesy is the first commandment was right.

On the morning of the big day I was to be at Mr Haughey's residence at Kinsealy for 11:30 am. Mr Haughey himself answered the door, showed me into a drawing room, and asked me what I would like to drink and went away. At 1pm Mr Haughey called me to join him and Mrs Haughey in a car to drive to Dublin airport. The driver had taped the 1pm news and he played it back to Mr Haughey in the passenger seat. The

news was Jim Fahey in Knock reporting that it was lashing rain and crashing gales. No one in the car spoke. At a roundabout a woman driver obeyed the rules of the roundabout and Mr Haughey leaned forward and saluted her. I was astonished that a man whose day was in ruins before it even started should be concerned with such chivalry.

At Dublin airport I climbed aboard a seven seater plane: myself and Mr PJ Mara crouched in the tail, Mr Haughey with his back to me and Mrs Haughey and, facing them Mr Brian Lenihan looking appallingly ill, his face a whiter shade of white, and yet as the small plane was tossed up into the skies over County Dublin, it was he who had the nerve not only to speak but to make a wise crack. Grimacing and glancing down derisively at terra firma, Brian Lenihan sighed: 'The Party can live on our martyrdom for the next hundred years'.

I like flying but this was a hairy flight. We had to fly so low and at such upside down angles that I got close-up views of cattle huddling under hedges, and of the slates on Longford Cathedral. I was terrified, not that we were going to crash, but that I was going to vomit all over Mr Haughey. The pilot shouted: 'Control says we're three minutes early - will I circle or go straight in?'. Mr Haughey murmured 'Straight in.'. The storm was such that half the platform had blown away; yet the plain people of Mayo, drenched to their bones, greeted Mr Haughey as a saviour, just as in the 1880s they had greeted Maud Gonne as a saviour when that pale young Englishwoman attended evictions and stood herself between the cottage door and the bailiff's battering ram.

In the tiny airport building, the crowd was so tight I thought my back would be broken. An unknown hand gripped my hand and it was Mr Haughey, and he insisted on making a way for me through the pack so that he could introduce me to Monsignor Horan, the original beggetter of Knock International Airport. Again, another apparently unnecessary gesture on the part of Mr Haughey. Down the sixteen years that have elapsed I have thought; who else but he would have bothered? As we gathered to return to Dublin, Mr Haughey announced he was taking the helicopter to Inisvickillane. Mr Bertie Ahern was aghast. He remonstrated with Mr Haughey regarding the foul weather. Mr Haughey replied: 'If it gets too bad we can always put down.'

'Put down where?' cried Mr Ahern.

'In a field.' Mr Haughey replied.

In that city centre restaurant before Christmas, as I bade farewell to Mr Haughey in his blue blazer and open necked shirt, I saw again that Mr Haughey is a traveller-king of ship or plane, officially retired, but actually on his feet at the wheel of the open seas, the open skies of life and death.