

Bresnihan, Barry (Finbar Patrick Kevin)

by Turlough O'Riordan

Bresnihan, Barry (Finbar Patrick Kevin) (1944–2010), rheumatologist and rugby player, was born on 13 March 1944 at 15 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin, the only son (as well as three daughters) of Dr Con Bresnihan (d. 1974), GP, chief medical officer to the civil service, and medical advisor to the local appointments commission, and his wife Eileen ('Eily') Frances (née Counihan). Educated at Waterpark College, Waterford, and – after his family moved to Dublin – Gonzaga College, he captained the latter's rugby team (1961/2). In 1962 he entered UCD to study medicine, and was outside-centre on the UCD freshers team that won that season's O'Connell Leinster Cup. A hard-running centre and skilled tackler, he played for UCD and the Mater Hospital (in the Dublin Hospitals' Cup), made his Munster debut in their 9–8 victory over Ulster in November 1964, and first appeared in the Irish trials in January 1966. Winning his first cap for Ireland in a 6–6 draw with England (12 February 1966), he later scored a try in a famous 9–6 victory that denied Wales the triple crown (12 March 1966). After touring Wales that Easter with the Barbarians, he joined the 1966 Lions tour of Australia and New Zealand as a replacement, scoring five tries in eleven appearances (including a hat trick against New Zealand Universities on 22 June 1966); he did not feature in the tests.

During Australia's 1967 tour, he played against them three times in little more than a week: for Ireland, in a 15–8 win in Dublin (21 January 1967); for Munster, in an 11–8 victory at Musgrave Park, Cork (25 January 1967), the first time an Irish province defeated a major touring side; and for the Barbarians in an 11–17 loss in Cardiff (30 January 1967). Although he toured Australia with Ireland in May 1967, a thigh injury sustained against Queensland kept him out of the test team. On the 1968 Lions tour of South Africa, Bresnihan came on to replace Mike Gibson in a 20–12 win against West Transvaal in the opening game of the tour, the first ever substitution in world rugby. Strong in both defence and attack, he was praised for his 'rocklike' tackling (*Times*, 11 July 1968), while his direct running suited the hard, dry surfaces. He appeared thirteen times for the Lions, alongside two substitute appearances, scoring two tries, and winning three Lions test caps (two losses and a draw). Playing a further eighteen consecutive games for Ireland in the centre (January 1968–March 1970), Bresnihan scored the opening try in Ireland's 10–3 victory over Australia at Lansdowne Road (26 October 1968), and toured Argentina in September 1970, featuring in four of the five provincial games and two (uncapped) internationals.

Though he briefly joined Lansdowne FC for the 1969/70 season, his medical training took him to Middlesex Hospital, London, in December 1969. Within a month he had joined London Irish RFC, and captained the team (1972–3), often playing at out-half. Temporarily retiring from international rugby in September 1971 to focus on his medical commitments, he featured for Munster in the autumn 1972 inter-

provincial series. He was an unused substitute for the Ireland v. France five nations game in April 1973, and was selected to play against Argentina that November, but professional commitments forced him to cry off and permanently retire from the international game. Over the course of his international career he won 25 Irish caps (mostly at outside centre) and scored 5 tries. He kept up his links with Irish rugby as coach (1979–80) and president (1993–4) of UCD RFC and president of St Vincent's Hospital RFC (1979–80).

Having graduated MB, B.Ch. and BAO with honours (1969), and subsequently MD (1978), from UCD, Bresnihan specialised in rheumatology at Guy's Hospital, London; he was also a senior registrar at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, Hammersmith Hospital, and an assistant lecturer at Middlesex Hospital. Moving to the USA, he became a research fellow at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, Dallas – working with the famed rheumatologist Morris Ziff – and played rugby with Dallas Harlequins RFC. He then became senior registrar at the UK Medical Research Council's rheumatology research unit, in Taplow, Buckinghamshire, where he was awarded the Margaret Holroyd Prize by the British Society for Rheumatology twice in succession (1977–8). Appointed a consultant rheumatologist at St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin (July 1978), he soon established specialist clinics and care teams to treat rheumatoid arthritis. He headed the St Anthony's Rehabilitation Centre at the hospital, specialising in sports injuries, and established Ireland's first juvenile arthritis clinic in the 1990s. He led world-class research from his arthritis research laboratory, and UCD established a chair of rheumatology for him in 1991, the first such post in Ireland. As chair of St Vincent's ethics and medical research committee through the 1990s, and as medical director of St Vincent's Hospital Education and Research Centre (1992–2000), he led a growing coordinated rheumatology research group at St Vincent's (established in 1986), examining mechanisms of inflammation and joint damage. In June 1989 he was appointed to a medical commission of the Olympic Council of Ireland, chaired by Kevin O'Flanagan (qv), to guide the preparations of Irish Olympians for the 1992 Barcelona games. In recognition of his expertise, the Faculty of Sports and Exercise Medicine of the RCSI and RCPI awarded him an honorary fellowship (2009). He was an advisor to the Nuffield Foundation from 2005 in the establishment of UK centres of excellence for rheumatism, and served on numerous international scientific, medical and professional bodies.

In 1981 he co-founded the Irish Arthritis Foundation (latterly, Arthritis Ireland), and was the body's honorary secretary and later chairman (2003–05). He led a national campaign to raise awareness and improve the diagnosis and treatment of osteoporosis in Ireland (1986–7), and chaired the National Advisory Committee on Medical Rehabilitation, undertaking a systematic review of medical, social and rehabilitative services and care in Ireland (1993–7). Noting the erratic provision of services, especially poor for those aged 18 to 65 suffering from congenital or acquired disorders, he criticised the absence of 'information on the potential savings from comprehensive rehabilitation or preventive policies' (*Report*, p. 6).

Bresnihan stressed the value of a rich and well-funded scientific research culture, and won significant private-sector and EU research grants. He led major Health Research Board-funded studies into the causes and treatment of juvenile arthritis, and established clinical pathways for adolescents suffering from rheumatoid arthritis transitioning from paediatric to adult services. In testimony to the joint oireachtas committee on health and children in July 2004, he criticised the medical and social cost of the incidence of arthritis in Ireland, emphasising the shortage of staff and facilities to deliver treatments and therapies.

In his efforts to examine the autoimmune and genetic facets of the molecular basis of joint inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis, and to understand the immunopathology of this extremely painful condition, Bresnihan wrote over 200 major papers, two monographs, and thirteen chapter-length contributions to specialist collections in rheumatology. He sat on the editorial boards of the prestigious *Journal of Rheumatology* and *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases*, among many other publications, undertook visiting professorships at the Pasteur Institute, Paris (1992), the University of Geneva (1999), Georgetown University (2004) and the University of Kansas (2007), and was fellow of the RCPI (1980), RCP (London) (1980) and RCP (Edinburgh) (1992). The RCPI inaugurated the Bresnihan Molloy International Education Fellowship in his honour in 2008. Appointed a prestigious 'master' of the American College of Rheumatology (2009), he was awarded the lifetime achievement award of the Irish Society for Rheumatology (2009), of which he was a past president (1994–6).

Bresnihan married (13 September 1969) Valerie Thompson at St Patrick's church, Cork city. She was a social scientist, co-founder of the Irish Eczema Society (1981), visitor to Mountjoy prison, and chair of the Irish Penal Reform Trust (1997–2002). The couple enjoyed gardening together and taking walking trips throughout the world. Barry Bresnihan died of a brain tumour on 18 July 2010 in Dublin, survived by his wife and four children. After his funeral at the church of the Sacred Heart, Donnybrook, he was interred at Rooske cemetery, Dunboyne, Co. Meath. UCD established the Barry Bresnihan professorship of rheumatology in his memory (2010).

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GRO (birth cert.); *Ir. Press*, 7 Nov. 1964; 10 Feb. 1966; 18 Jan. 1967; 27 Sept. 1969; *Sunday Independent*, 13 Mar. 1966; 3 May 1970; 4 Jan. 1981; *Irish medical and hospital directory 1966–67* (1966); *Times*, 11 July 1968; 14 Sept. 1971; 13 Apr. 1973; 11 Aug. 2010; *Ir. Examiner*, 25 Mar. 1969; 14 Apr. 1983; 2 Apr. 1988; *Ir. Independent*, 11 Sept., 24 Oct. 1979; *The medical directory* (1980); Edmund Van Esbeck, *The story of Irish rugby* (1986); *Ir. Times*, 24 July 1993; 6 Jan. 1994; 9 Jan. 1997; 27 May 2000; 27 May 2005; 9 Dec. 2008; 20, 24 July, 23 Aug. 2010; F. O. C. Meenan, *St Vincent's Hospital 1834–1994: an historical and social portrait*

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