

Byrne, Frankie (Frances)

by Lawrence William White

Byrne, Frankie (Frances) (1921–93), broadcaster and public relations consultant, was born 27 December 1921 in a nursing home at 7 North Frederick Street, Dublin, third child and second daughter among three daughters and two sons of Michael P. ('Sport') Byrne, journalist, of 2 Florence Terrace, Leeson Park Avenue, Appian Way, Ranelagh, and his wife Frances (née McDonald). In her early childhood the family moved to 23 North Circular Road, near the Phoenix Park. The household was unconventional and vaguely bohemian. Her father, racing correspondent with the *Irish Press* and a broadcaster, lived in rooms in the Gresham hotel, close to the Radio Éireann studios. Both parents moved in sporting, literary, and journalistic circles. Emotionally deprived, reared by maids from infancy, Frankie was educated as a boarder for ten years until age eighteen at Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin, a generally happy experience despite unfavourable comparisons to her elder sister, Olive, head girl in the school. She worked for twelve years as a secretary in the Brazilian consulate, replacing Olive who left the position after her marriage. The wide-ranging social contacts to which the position introduced her were an invaluable asset when she moved to the McConnell advertising agency. A pioneer of the public relations industry in Ireland, in 1963 she established her own firm, Frankie Byrne Ltd, and immediately landed a major coup by handling publicity for the visit to Ireland of US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. A shrewd businesswoman, she ran the firm successfully in association with her younger sister, Esther, until her retirement in 1990.

Already a major name in business and society, Byrne became known to the wider public through her career in broadcasting. Contracted to manage publicity for Jacob's biscuit company, in 1963 she began hosting *Woman's page*, a daily lunchtime programme sponsored by Jacob's on Radio Éireann. Initially fielding listeners' questions on matters of domestic science – a subject on which she was barely conversant – she soon suggested a change in format to discussing listeners' personal problems in relationships and life generally. Thus cast as Ireland's first 'agony aunt', she read and answered letters addressed 'Dear Frankie', wittily dispensing advice to the lonely, lovelorn, and perplexed. Forthright in her judgements, she bluntly admonished the foolish or self-deluding. An instant hit, attracting up to 100 letters per week at its peak, the programme (which was produced by Jimmy Magee) ran for over twenty years (1963–85), during which Byrne responded on air to some 5,000 letters. Her clipped, decisive diction and distinctive voice – deep, dark, and husky – reinforced her image as a trustworthy, knowing confidante, kindly if firm, worldly wise but unjaded, who brooked no nonsense, but had one's best interests at heart. The programme was a cultural phenomenon in a traditionally conservative, repressed society that was beginning to ask questions of received wisdom, but lacked reliable answers. The subjects posed and the tone of

Byrne's responses reflected the superficial innocence of the Ireland of the period; prevailing standards did not allow inclusion (even when raised by letter writers) of such taboos as domestic violence, sexual dysfunction, or child abuse. As mores changed, by the 1980s Byrne was discussing adultery, non-marital cohabitation, and contraception, with opinions that challenged traditional morality. Though possessing a huge personal record collection – music being for her a psychic refuge and obsession – on the programme she played only appropriately themed records of Frank Sinatra, whose songs, she said, treated 'every single situation' (*Dear Frankie* (2006)).

Byrne played a key role in the inauguration, promotion, and organisation of the annual Jacob's awards for broadcasting, launched in 1962 and soon a major event in the Irish social calendar. For a time in the 1980s she contributed a weekly column to the *Evening Press*, selections from which were published by Patrick O'Dea (1998).

Unbeknownst to her public, Byrne had a personal life as dramatically problematic as any of her correspondents. A single woman, for thirty years from the 1950s she conducted a relationship with a married man, Frank Hall (qv), initially a print journalist and later a leading RTÉ broadcaster and personality. A daughter born to them in 1956 was placed by Byrne in an orphanage and signed over for adoption. The experience caused Byrne enduring emotional pain and frequent physical affliction, which contributed to her addictions to alcohol and Valium. Byrne briefly met the girl, Valerie McLoughlin (who had been adopted by a family in north Co. Dublin), by chance in the latter's early adolescence, but did not reveal her identity. They were permanently reunited in 1983 owing to McLoughlin's successful enquiries. Through her Byrne had four grandchildren.

Stylish and attractive, with an assured, effervescent public persona, Byrne could socialise as 'one of the lads', while remaining extremely feminine. Said one associate: 'It was impossible to meet her without wanting to open champagne' (O'Dea, 6). Privately she was wracked by crippling self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. She shared a cottage with her sister Esther in Donnybrook village. A heavy smoker and an alcoholic, she was ill several years from 1990 with Alzheimer's disease. She died 11 December 1993 in St Vincent's hospital, Elm Park, Dublin, and was buried in St Fintan's cemetery, Sutton, Co. Dublin.

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GRO (birth cert.); *Thom 1922–5*; *Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Press*, *Ir. Times*, 13 Dec. 1993; Patrick O'Dea (ed.), *Dear Frankie* (1998); *Dear Frankie* (Mint Productions television documentary for RTÉ) (2006)

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