

Carson, Frank

by Linde Lunney

Carson, Frank (1926–2012), comedian, was born Hugh Francis Carson on 6 November 1926 in the 'Little Italy' area of Belfast, around Great Patrick Street, one of six children of John Carson, a binman and messenger, and his wife, Josie (née Augusta), originally from Dublin, whose family claimed Sicilian ancestry. Always known as Frank, he attended the local St Patrick's elementary school, leaving at the age of 14. He was deeply affected by the loss of his much loved older brother John, who was killed serving with the merchant navy when his ship was sunk by a German torpedo in the Atlantic in December 1940. Josie Carson moved her family to Dublin for a short time to escape the German bombing of Belfast in April 1941, but they experienced the accidental bombing of the North Strand area in May of that year, and returned to Belfast. Frank was apprenticed to the electrical trade and worked as a plasterer, but as the war ended he moved to England in search of work.

Called up for national service in 1945, he volunteered for airborne duties and managed to pass the arduous training and selection procedures which eliminated over 95 per cent of applicants. Described by an instructor as 'boisterous' and 'an unhesitant jumper', he went on to make forty parachute jumps. He served three years with the 3rd battalion of the Parachute Regiment, mostly in Palestine during the Zionist insurgency. He narrowly escaped death in a bomb that destroyed a cinema and killed seven RAF men, and had to search through the rubble of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem after it was bombed by Zionists (22 July 1946), killing ninety-one people. Carson later claimed that he had shot and killed an escaping Zionist prisoner, and he himself suffered a gunshot wound in the leg.

After demobilisation, he returned to Belfast and found a clerical job. To supplement his income he began working at night in bars and clubs as a comedian, and found the money better and the work more to his liking. Noted for his comic travelogues, by 1954 he had made appearances on BBC television locally, and was already developing a style of incessant patter and rapid-fire jokes. Most of these were one-liners on traditional themes such as mothers-in-law, henpecked husbands and medical conditions, and went down well in the raucous setting of workingmen's clubs.

From the mid 1960s he was working increasingly in England, and in 1968 won three times on the nationally telecast ITV talent competition *Opportunity knocks*. From 1969 Carson lived mostly in Blackpool, Lancashire, where he made many appearances, his old-fashioned gags appealing strongly to holiday audiences. During the late 1960s and 1970s, he was almost ever-present on television variety shows, such as the BBC's *The good old days*, Granada Television's *Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*, and the ATV children's programme *Tiswas*. From 1971

he appeared in every series of the long-running ITV programme *The comedians*, an ideal vehicle for club comics such as Carson. This made him well known throughout the UK. From the 1980s, his television appearances were fewer, although in 1985 he was the subject of *This is your life*, hosted by Eamonn Andrews (qv), and he appeared in the Royal Variety Performance in 1986 and 1993. (He claimed to be the queen's favourite comedian and to have met her over one hundred times.) In addition to his television career, he toured widely and successfully, often topping the bill in clubs, cabaret and theatres; at the height of his popularity, he performed an estimated 240 live shows a year.

With his thick-rimmed glasses, strong Belfast accent, raucous laugh, and famous catchphrases – 'It's a cracker' and 'It's the way I tell 'em' – he became one of the most recognisable Irishmen in Britain. Never too concerned about the originality of his material, he believed – as he so often told his audience – that his unique delivery breathed new life into old jokes. Irrepressible on or off stage, he loved making people laugh and kept up a constant stream of jokes to all comers. Interviewers who tried to broach serious subjects were overwhelmed with salvos of gags. One result of this was that many of his friends, and even members of his own family, never really felt that they knew him. Another was that the producers of live chat shows were often reluctant to book him, knowing that he was bound to interrupt and upstage other guests. His act divided opinion among Irish people in both Britain and Ireland: some saw it as harmless self-mockery, and believed like Carson that there was nothing offensive in an Irishman telling an Irish joke; others claimed that his garrulousness and reliance on jokes about dim-witted Irishmen pandered to English prejudices and reinforced anti-Irish racism.

For many years, Carson was associated with the town of Balbriggan, in north Co. Dublin, where he spent his honeymoon and owned a pub. He lived there for much of the early 1990s and once described it as his 'favourite place in the world' (*Ir. Independent*, 28 February 2012). A popular figure locally, he served two terms as the town's mayor between 1990 and 1996. He even recorded a song, 'Lovely Balbriggan', included on his album *It's a cracker: 30 non-stop Irish party sing-a-longs* (1990).

He devoted much of his time to fund-raising for various charities. Between 1962 and 1969, he was the resident comedian in ninety concerts and four pantomime seasons in Derry's St Columb's Hall, helping Fr Edward Daly (1933–2016) raise money for the church-building fund and local schools. He was also particularly helpful to local charities in Blackpool and Balbriggan. He regularly appeared in shows to raise money for Variety Club charities, and was a member of the entertainers' benevolent organisation, the Grand Order of Water Rats. In 1987, for his work on behalf of catholic charities, he was made a knight of the Order of St Gregory the Great by Pope John Paul II; Carson, a devout catholic, was deeply gratified to be invested in the order, the highest honour of the catholic church. Alongside his support for causes such as the children's cancer ward in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast

(for which he helped raise £130,000 in 1986), Carson also generously supported integrated education in Northern Ireland, hoping that this would help end the province's divisions and troubles. In 2008, along with his business partner, his son Tony, he launched the Carson Awards with funding of £100,000 to support art and creative endeavour in the integrated schools, and bequeathed another £50,000 to the fund in his will. Although careful to stay out of Northern Ireland politics, in May 2009 he declared his support for UKIP, claiming the UK should leave the EU and ditch its human-rights legislation.

He first had heart surgery in 1976, but continued to work. Thereafter, he was often dogged by health problems and had several serious operations, including one in Spain that went wrong and nearly killed him. His declining health forced him to ease off working in his latter years, and he often relaxed with his family at his holiday home in Estepona, Spain. However, he continued to work, mostly in cabaret and pantomime, and in September 2009, at the age of 82, appeared in a run of 'The comedians' in the North Pier Theatre in Blackpool. By this time his popularity had greatly declined. Early-twenty-first-century sensitivities made some of his material objectionable, and his style of manic, non-stop jesting had become dated. However, he could still draw a crowd: he was never very vulgar, nor very racist, and his ebullient personality made amends for some of the 'cringe factor' in his old jokes. Some of these jokes and his enduring catchphrases continued to be quoted, in varying contexts, long after his departure from the comedy circuits.

Eight months after being diagnosed with stomach cancer, he died on 22 February 2012 at home in Blackpool. He was survived by his wife of sixty years, Ruth (née Campbell), and their two sons and one daughter. After funeral mass at St Patrick's church, Donegall Street, Belfast, he was buried in Milltown cemetery on 3 March 2012. Mourners included Martin McGuinness (1950–2017), Dennis Taylor, Lenny Henry, Barry McGuigan and Dana Rosemary Scanlon.

Fellow entertainers contributed in 2012 to a television biographical tribute, *It's the way he told them*, which described Frank Carson as evincing the warmth and energy of working-class Belfast and its characteristic wry humour, which helped people there get through the bad times of the NI troubles. The Belfast actor Dan Gordon donned Frank's trademark glasses to appear in a one-man show, which Gordon wrote himself, drawing on extensive unpublished autobiographical material. 'Rebel without a pause' was performed in several venues, including the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Gordon's research and performance featured in a BBC television documentary made by Gordon, *To be Frank Carson* (2017), an affectionate tribute that suggested that Carson's public persona masked a more sensitive and reflective temperament that used manic humour to block out the trauma of his brother's death and the horrors he witnessed in Palestine.

Ir. Examiner, 21 Mar. 2007; *Fermanagh Herald*, 17 Sept. 2008; Simon Weaver, *The rhetoric of racist humour: US, UK and global race joking* (2011), 101 ff.; *Telegraph*, 23 Feb. 2012; *Sunday Independent*, 26 Feb. 2012; *Ir. Independent*, 28 Feb. 2012; *Ulster Herald*, 1 Mar. 2012; *Belfast Telegraph*, *passim*, esp.: 5 Mar. 2012; 22 Sept. 2016; 'Roll call: Private H. Francis Carson (Frank)...', paradata.org.uk/people/h-francis-carson (accessed Feb. 2018)

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