

O'Doherty, (Michael) Kevin

by Terry Clavin

O'Doherty, (Michael) Kevin (1912–2006), public servant, was born 29 June 1912 in Dublin, the eldest son in a family of four sons and two daughters of Séamus O'Doherty (see below), revolutionary, and his wife Kitty (see below). His youngest brother, Feighin O'Doherty (qv), was a catholic priest and distinguished academic and psychologist. Kevin's early education was disrupted by his parents' republican activities, which necessitated flight to America (1920–23): as a result, and to his regret, he did not go to college and never spoke Irish fluently. After the family returned to Dublin, he was educated at St Enda's in Rathfarnham. He was sporty, in particular a good hurdler. Aged 17, he joined Fianna Éireann, the IRA's youth movement, but his father's quiet insistence that there could be no military solution to partition soon persuaded him to leave.

On finishing school he worked with the publishers Messrs Cahill and Co. Ltd, selling schoolbooks. He undertook an evening course in advertising at Rathmines Technical College and later received a diploma from the British Sales Managers Association. In 1935 he joined the Department of Industry and Commerce, where initially he found the work dull. An unexpected respite to boredom occurred in 1936 when his part-time work as a freelance sports writer earned him accreditation on behalf of the GAA to the Berlin Olympics.

He became private secretary, first to Seán O'Grady (parliamentary secretary to the minister for industry and commerce from February 1943), and then in June 1944 to Seán Lemass (qv), minister for supplies, industry and commerce. Lemass governed a vast, sprawling department that dominated Irish economic life due to the need for wartime rationing. O'Doherty admired Lemass for his rapid decision-making, efficiency and discipline, noting that in his department workers and management remained in personal contact, thus moderating bureaucratic excesses.

Seeing little prospect of further civil service promotion, he applied in 1946 for the position of secretary of Aer Lingus. He was interviewed by Jack O'Brien, chairman of the Irish Tourist Board (ITB), who asked him to become the ITB's secretary instead. Having acquired some knowledge of tourism through Lemass's passion for aviation, O'Doherty accepted. O'Brien was a controversial figure but O'Doherty would later praise his vision and dynamism, particularly for acquiring five upmarket hotels to cater for the British visitors who flocked to Ireland during 1946–8 to escape the austerity prevailing at home. However, this initiative was criticised by the opposition, private hoteliers and the media as an intrusion by the state into the private sector and as Fianna Fáil cronyism. Bolstering this political and commercial opportunism was the widely held belief that tourism was a disreputable business that exposed the

country to corrupting foreign influences and entailed the sacrifice of national dignity in pursuit of material gain. Due to these attacks the ITB lapsed into passivity.

Nonetheless, O'Doherty successfully integrated Ireland into international tourist structures. Contacts made during his presence at the foundation of the European tourist organisation in Paris in 1947 facilitated his appointment as vice-chairman of the European Travel Commission in 1948. He also established cordial relations with his British, and then in the early 1950s with his Northern Ireland, counterparts, though cooperation with the North over tourism was curtailed by politics.

In 1948, the newly elected inter-party government, regarding the ITB as a nest of Fianna Fáil supporters, forced it to sell the hotels it had acquired and starved it of funds. O'Brien having become *persona non grata*, the burden of defending the ITB fell on O'Doherty. A convinced proponent of the Lemass-inspired notion that government departments and state bodies should act as economic development corporations, in 1949 he helped draft proposals to the cabinet which argued that an innovative national tourist service was urgently needed and that it required more and better-paid staff. The Department of Finance rejected these arguments.

At O'Doherty's invitation, Col. Theodore Pozzy of the Economic Cooperation Administration (the body responsible for implementing the Marshall plan) visited Ireland in summer 1949 to consider the country's suitability as a holiday destination for Americans. Ensuing American pressure, orchestrated by Pozzy, for Ireland to become a tourist outlet for US dollars, forced the inter-party government to re-assess its official policy. O'Doherty wanted to see Ireland portrayed in America in a more progressive and modern light than that cast by the traditional ethnic stereotyping, though in practice it proved difficult to avoid playing to this market's preconceptions. In 1950 he spent three months in America as part of a delegation of Irish tourist officials sent to appraise US standards of hotel service and accommodation. This impressed upon him the progress that needed to be made in Ireland. The regressive attitude of private hoteliers (who preferred cultivating their existing British customers to wooing more demanding American ones) undoubtedly reinforced his belief that state direction was needed.

The ITB was reconstituted in autumn 1950; O'Doherty was appointed general manager because he was not only efficient but also the only candidate with any grasp of the industry. Possessing a ferocious work ethic and a commanding presence, despite being of medium height, he was liked and respected by subordinates. However, he was stymied by a lack of funds and by the presence on the ITB board of unqualified political appointees whose tactlessness undermined O'Doherty's attempts to maintain goodwill with hoteliers.

In 1952 the Fianna Fáil government, which had been returned to power in June 1951, divided the ITB in two: An Bord Fáilte, with O'Doherty as general manager, was responsible for tourism development, while Fógra Fáilte handled publicity. The

new arrangement proved unworkable due to the personal animosity (deriving from the civil war) between the two bodies' chairmen. Throughout his career, O'Doherty never became disheartened, responding philosophically and constructively to the manner in which his initiatives were often either diminished or thwarted outright by a combination of politicking, localism, vested interests and indolence. Frustrated in his wider vision, he focused on smaller tasks, which suited his hands-on approach. During the 1950s he helped preserve the historic sites of Clonmacnoise and Newgrange, both of which had fallen into considerable ruin. From 1951 he directed a much-needed signpost installation programme in conjunction with the Automobile Association. Despite the indifference of the local authorities responsible for installing the signs, some 10,000 were erected by 1956 (though the local authority engineers, disgruntled at having to perform this non-routine activity without receiving additional pay, placed a significant number in the wrong location, leaving Ireland with a notoriously eccentric road sign network).

The most ambitious project undertaken in the 1950s was An Tóstal, a nationwide festival held annually during 1953–8. Designed to attract more tourists to Ireland and to lengthen the tourist season, the first two Tóstals were run on a shoestring budget by O'Doherty and General Hugo McNeill (qv) and were reliant on local voluntary groups to organise various pageants, competitions, festivals and displays. These events focused strongly on Gaelic life, history, language and culture, outlining a nationalist narrative of Irish history. The highlight of the 1954 Tóstal was an elaborate pageant staged near Drogheda telling the story of St Patrick's peaceful conversion of the Irish to Christianity and featuring a cast of 1,500 (mostly volunteers), 500 costumes, 1,000 pigeons, 24 wolfhounds and 30 horses as well as assorted deer and games; some 50,000 spectators attended. Though An Tóstal failed in its stated goals, suffering from a lack of professionalism and from the wet climate, the venture instilled a sense of civic pride into the Irish public as well as making it more tourist-minded. It also left a legacy in the form of the Tidy Towns competition, the Rose of Tralee festival, the Dublin Theatre Festival, and the Cork Film Festival.

When the Fine Gael–Labour government amalgamated Bord Fáilte and Fógra Fáilte under the Bord Fáilte Éireann (BFÉ) banner in 1955, O'Doherty became administration manager under the new chief executive, Tim O'Driscoll (qv). Thereafter BFÉ was markedly less subject to political encumbrances and the invigorated body oversaw a tourist boom from the late 1950s. O'Doherty, presumably tired of a purely bureaucratic function, in 1956 was given the more congenial role of travel facilities manager. Responsible for facilitating passenger-carrying concerns operating into and out of Ireland, he devoted particular attention to shipping and car transport. Car hire dealers praised him for his efforts as motor-based tourism thrived. The one criticism O'Doherty had of Lemass was that his obsession with developing civil aviation (at a time when the overwhelming majority of visitors to Ireland arrived by sea) retarded the development of car ferry facilities, which remained primitive into the late 1960s.

In early 1963 O'Doherty was directed to oversee the establishment of eight regional technical organisations (RTOs) for Bord Fáilte Éireann. The prevalence of inter-county rivalries made this a delicate responsibility but he was equal to it thanks to his skilled diplomacy and encyclopaedic knowledge of local politics and tourism. The eight RTOs were up and running within eighteen months. During the 1960s he was also active in promoting Ireland as a destination for fishing and boating holidays and served as a member of the Inland Fisheries Trust, which furthered the development, conservation and optimum utilisation of Ireland's fisheries.

By the late 1960s, O'Doherty was frustrated by the government's lack of direct financial support for BFÉ and by the subordination of the tourist industry to the interests of semi-state transport companies, in particular Aer Lingus and CIÉ. More fundamentally he believed that many semi-state companies were too large and unwieldy and that an added element of private competition needed to be injected into the transport market.

In 1969 he left BFÉ to become managing director of Shannon Travel and Airborne Travel Agency, the tours and travel division of a new company, Hibernian Transport Companies Ltd, an amalgamation of the Limerick Steamship Company and the Palgrave Murphy Shipping line. Shannon Travel was the largest Irish-owned independent travel and tourist business in the state and O'Doherty intended to expand aggressively and to challenge CIÉ's dominance of Irish bus routes. However in autumn 1970 the Hibernian Transport group collapsed and was liquidated following the discovery of hidden losses. This was a serious personal and financial setback for O'Doherty and compelled his return to BFÉ in a more junior position than he had previously held, requiring him to take orders from former subordinates. Until his final departure in 1977, he served variously as a field officer in Donegal, manager of Leisureland in Salthill, Co. Galway, and coordinator of marketing campaigns in Britain. Thereafter, he worked in a travel company and as a manager of a building society branch office before serving as chief executive of the newly established Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland from 1981 until his retirement in 1991.

In retirement, he remained an active member of St Vincent de Paul, in all giving seventy-five years' service to the charity. In 1999 he wrote and published *My parents and other rebels* (1999), an account of his parents' activism during 1914–23, which downplayed their support for political violence, more convincingly in the case of his father than of his mother; he also included his recollections of the many prominent republicans who frequented the family home during his childhood.

He and his wife Patricia (née Roche) had two sons and four daughters; they lived in Sandymount, Dublin. He died in Our Lady's Hospice, Harold's Cross, Dublin, on 8 May 2006 and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery.

Kevin's father, Séamus O'Doherty (1882–1945), revolutionary, was born in Derry city on 11 June 1882, the second son of Michael O'Doherty, butcher, of 23 Creggan

Street, and his wife Rose (née McLaughlin). His father was wealthy, owning a number of butcher shops. Séamus studied at Newbridge College, Co. Kildare, before entering the Dominican house at Tallaght, Co. Dublin, to test his vocation for the religious life. While at Tallaght he studied for an RUI arts degree until he realised that he did not have a vocation and returned to Derry. There he served as honorary branch secretary of the Gaelic League. His interest in the Irish language (which he never spoke fluently) reflected his nationalist family background.

Séamus settled in Dublin where he was employed from 1904 as a commercial representative for M. H. Gill & Son Ltd, publishers, which involved constant travel around Ireland with occasional excursions to Britain. The company published books of a catholic and Irish nationalist persuasion, and also had a trade in ecclesiastical furnishings and equipment. Many of Séamus's colleagues engaged in separatist activities. He shared lodgings in Phibsborough with Patrick McCartan (qv), an IRB member, who in 1910 swore him into the brotherhood. He regretted the IRB's successful infiltration of the Gaelic League, which by 1912 had transformed a formerly apolitical cultural movement into a radical nationalist organisation, inducing many protestants to leave and undermining its efforts to revive the Irish language.

His wife, Katherine (Kitty) O'Doherty (1881–1969), advanced nationalist, was born at Tyrrellspass, Co. Westmeath, on 3 March 1881, the daughter of Edward Gibbons, RIC sergeant, and his wife Anne (née Crossan). The family lived at Collinstown, Co. Westmeath. Her brother, a priest, was chaplain in a public school in Yorkshire and arranged for her to be educated there where she became fluent in German. After studying at the Loreto convent in Navan, and then in a teacher training college in Belfast, she worked as a national school teacher in Dublin until 1912. She and Séamus O'Doherty married in 1911.

A supporter of radical and nationalist causes, Kitty was a member of the Gaelic League and active in the suffragette movement, being friendly with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (qv). During the 1913 lock out she assisted the workers, helping out in the soup kitchens organised by Countess Markievicz (qv). Soon after its formation in 1914, she joined Cumann na mBan, becoming quartermaster of the Ard Craobh branch, for long the only one. She admitted that although they drilled regularly, they had no guns and dowdy uniforms.

Séamus joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and was involved in the planning of the 1916 rising, storing arms in his house; Kitty was also active ferrying weapons around Dublin and organising fund-raising concerts for the Volunteers. Though detectives watched their house, Séamus's work as a travelling salesman provided cover as he liaised with fellow conspirators throughout the country. Prior to the rising the IRB military council ordered him to detain Bulmer Hobson (qv) – a prominent IRB member who opposed the planned insurrection on tactical grounds – under armed guard until the rebellion had commenced. After releasing Hobson on the evening of

Easter Monday, he reported to the GPO where Tom Clarke (qv) instructed him to lie low and reconstruct the IRB after the rising was crushed.

He avoided arrest in the aftermath of the rising and benefiting from the support of Clarke's widow (Kathleen Clarke (qv)), re-assembled a temporary supreme council of the IRB in May 1916. During this period the council meetings were held in his home at 32 Connaught Street, Phibsborough. In September his authority as caretaker leader of the supreme council was acknowledged by John Devoy (qv), secretary of Clan na Gael. Aware that many who had fought in the rising were grumbling that virtually all the volunteers outside Dublin had failed to participate, he conducted an inquiry, which exonerated the officers in question.

Meanwhile during 1916–17 Kitty worked full-time in a voluntary capacity as a secretary and trustee of the National Aid Society Office, a well-funded charity that provided relief to the families of republicans either imprisoned or killed after the 1916 rising. Partly due to her, Michael Collins (qv) was appointed the paid secretary of the organisation in February 1917, an important step in his ascent up the ranks of the republican movement. The O'Doherty household became a meeting place (and later a safe house) for republicans.

From his northern background, Séamus appreciated that Ulster unionists could not be coerced into an Irish republic and that military action would at best lead to the partitioning of Ireland. Favouring a strategy of civil disobedience, he opposed further violent resistance to British rule (excepting an attempt by the authorities to introduce conscription), instead urging the IRB to secure an electoral mandate for an Irish republic, which could be used to seek international recognition. In early 1917 he proposed that a republican candidate stand for the imminent North Roscommon by-election, but a majority of the IRB supreme council retained their distaste for politics and refused to allow IRB funds to be used for such purposes.

However, individual sympathisers provided financial support and canvassed on behalf of the republican candidate Count George Noble Plunkett (qv) in the Roscommon by-election. O'Doherty acted as Plunkett's campaign manager and with Fr Michael O'Flanagan (qv) improvised an electoral machine that won a momentous victory, helping eventually to unify the disparate advanced nationalist organisations under the Sinn Féin banner and to convince militants of the efficacy of constitutional methods. O'Doherty's prominence in the Roscommon by-election drew the authorities' attention and he was arrested on 22 February and briefly deported to Leominster in Wales, where he had to report daily to the local police. He escaped to Ireland and participated in the successful Sinn Féin by-election campaign in South Longford on behalf of the imprisoned Joe McGuinness (qv). Kitty devised the inspired slogan: 'Put him in to get him out.'

McGuinness's victory in a nationalist party stronghold further enhanced O'Doherty's prestige but during 1917–18 he was marginalised by more bellicose elements

due to his unassuming nature, lack of personal ambition and ambiguity towards violence. He withdrew from the IRB, regarding the continuance of the oath-bound secret society as inappropriate following the culmination of its mission to enact the Irish Republic through the 1916 rising. Though his period of influence was brief, it persuaded his comrades of the need to secure democratic endorsement, which once obtained in the 1918 elections proved crucial in their eyes to the success of their guerrilla war and to the subsequent legitimacy of the Irish state.

In 1917–18 Séamus contributed anti-conscription material to two underground journals and hid arms and ammunition in his house with which to resist conscription. He was arrested in May 1918 following the so-called 'German plot', spending a period in jail; as a result he did not, as intended, stand as a candidate in the 1918 parliamentary elections. That same year Kitty ran as a Sinn Féin candidate in a Dublin corporation election, missing out by four votes; soon after she was elected a poor law guardian. Arrested again in June 1919, Séamus was charged by court martial with possession of a rifle and ammunition found during a raid on his house. He was imprisoned in Mountjoy jail where, in protest at the authorities' refusal to grant them political status, he was one of a number of republican prisoners to go on a hunger strike that autumn. After nineteen days he was released and transferred on 30 October to the Mater hospital; though in poor health he discharged himself later that day and went home.

Despite the likelihood of re-arrest, he declined to go on the run. In late November, a bullet narrowly missed him as he entered his house, a response to the IRA's killing of a detective the previous July. Although this detective had led the raid on his house that resulted in his arrest, O'Doherty had no part in this assassination and was troubled by the IRA's recourse to ruthless guerrilla tactics during 1919. Fearing another attempt on his life and hoping that diplomatic efforts in America could bear fruit, he left for Philadelphia in December. His family joined him in August 1920.

In Philadelphia he worked for a firm of church furnishers and contributed articles to the *Irish Press*, an Irish-American newspaper that was edited by his old friend Patrick McCartan and provided a republican commentary on events in Ireland. In 1920 he succeeded as editor of the *Irish Press*, which closed down in May 1922 due to lack of funds. Meanwhile Kitty, who had busied herself contributing and editing articles for the *Irish Press*, established an American branch of Cumann na mBan (though under another name), participated in anti-British protests and organised supplies of medicines, food and clothing to be sent to distressed families in Ireland.

Séamus was horrified by the partitioning of Ireland in 1921 and the immediate descent of the new state into civil war in 1922; he tried to remain above the fray while leaning somewhat towards the anti-treaty viewpoint. Kitty, due to a strong sense of personal loyalty towards Éamon de Valera (qv), whom she knew prior to the 1916 rising through his wife (Sinéad de Valera (qv)), supported the anti-treaty cause more emphatically, travelling to Ireland in summer 1922 to deliver \$50,000 to

the hard-pressed republican forces. In 1923–4, she ghost-wrote Dan Breen's (qv) autobiography, *My fight for Irish freedom*, based on her conversations with Breen and on notes he provided, in the process moderating his bloodthirsty statements. It proved one of the most popular first-hand accounts of the 1919–21 Anglo–Irish war.

In August 1923 the O'Dohertys returned to Dublin where Séamus resumed work as a commercial representative for C. J. Fallon Ltd (1923–30) and Messrs Bull Ltd (1930–40). Ceasing all involvement in political affairs and retaining friendships on both sides of the civil war divide, he opposed all post-1923 manifestations of physical force republicanism. He declined an invitation to join the Fianna Fáil party in 1932 and the offer of a senior appointment in the stationery office by the Fianna Fáil government in 1934.

Contrastingly, Kitty remained a devoted adherent of de Valera. She was present at the La Scala theatre in Dublin in May 1926 for the formation of Fianna Fáil, and was subsequently an energetic member of the party's Glasnevin cumann. In 1957, and in collaboration with de Valera, she wrote and published an account of de Valera's time in America during 1919–20: *Assignment America: de Valera's mission to the United States* is a dry, factual narrative that outlines de Valera's justifications for his actions during a controversial period of his career.

Séamus and Kitty had four sons and two daughters and lived latterly in Claude Road, Drumcondra. Séamus died in the Mater Hospital, Dublin, on 23 August 1945, and Kitty in a convalescent home in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, on 23 March 1969. They were buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. Some of Séamus's personal papers and memorabilia are in the National Archives of Ireland (NAI 2000/58). Séamus's brother Joseph O'Doherty (qv) was an IRA officer in counties Donegal and Derry during the Anglo–Irish war (1919–21) and subsequently a dáil deputy, first for Sinn Féin (1922–7) and then for Fianna Fáil (1933–7). Kitty's sister Mother Columba of Loreto Convent in Navan wrote the popular republican ballad 'Who fears to speak of Easter week?' immediately after the 1916 rising.

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**Michael Kevin O'Doherty:** *Ir. Press*, 6 Sept. 1946; 17 Feb. 1949; 20 Oct. 1952; 19 Apr. 1954; 3 Oct. 1955; 7 Aug 1959; 3 Oct. 1963; 4 Oct. 1969; 18 June, 18 Sept. 1970; *Ir. Times*, 1 Oct. 1947; 4 Oct., 2, 16 Nov. 1970; 21 May 1981; 24 July 1982; 3 June 2006; *Ir. Independent*, 5 Dec. 1953; 12 Sept. 1956; 25 Feb. 1957; Irene Furlong, 'Tourism and the Irish state in the 1950s' in Dermot Keogh, Finbar O'Shea and Carmel Quinlan (ed.), *The lost decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (2004), 164–86; Eric Zuelow, 'The tourism nexus: national identity and the meanings of tourism since the Irish civil war' in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Ireland's heritages* (2005), 189–204; Eric Zuelow, '"Ingredients for cooperation": the role of tourism in North–South relations', *New Hibernia Review* (spring 2006), 17–39; James Patrick Byrne, Philip Coleman



and Jason Francis King, *Ireland and the Americas: culture, politics and history*, ii (2008), 103–05; Eric Zuelow, *Making Ireland Irish* (2009); Irene Furlong, *Irish tourism: 1889–1980* (2009); Michael Kevin O'Doherty, 'Working for Sean Lemass: reflections of a private secretary', TCD seminar paper, 15 Oct. 2003; interview with Patricia O'Doherty (daughter of Kevin O'Doherty)

**Séamus and Kitty O'Doherty:** Kitty O'Doherty, witness statement, Bureau of Military History (WS 355); Séamus O'Doherty papers, NAI (2000/58); Patrick McCartan, *With de Valera in America* (1932), 1–10, 135, 212; Katherine O'Doherty, *Assignment America: de Valera's mission to the United States* (1957); C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish revolution* (1971), 111–14; DIB files, correspondence with Michael Kevin O'Doherty (son), 17 Feb. 1997; Michael Kevin O'Doherty, *My parents and other rebels* (1999); interview with Colm de Barra (grandson of Séamus and Kitty)