

O'Malley, Donogh

by Patrick Maume

O'Malley, Donogh (1921–68), politician, was born in Riverview, Corbally, Limerick, on 18 January 1921, one of eight children of Joseph O'Malley, civil engineer, and his wife, Mary (née Tooher). He was educated at Crescent College, Limerick, Clongowes, and University College, Galway (where he studied civil engineering). As a young man he was a noted sportsman who participated in Limerick's popular rugby tradition. In 1930 he won a Munster junior cup medal with Shannon; while at Clongowes he won a junior cap for Leinster, and later he received senior caps for both Munster and Connacht. He was captain of the swimming and rugby teams at UCG, and in 1941 he captained the combined universities team against the Rest of Ireland. Before he retired from rugby in 1946 he played for Malone and captained Bohemians Rugby Football Club (1944–5). O'Malley was one of the founding members of the Limerick-based Blue Star swimming club; he won the Thomond race and several Munster swimming titles. He also represented Ireland in amateur soccer, and at the time of his death he was president of the Football Association of Ireland (in succession to Oscar Traynor (qv)). Furthermore, he owned two greyhounds, had a nomination for the coursing cup, and took an interest in horse-racing. In 1968, when opening a rugby pavilion, he remarked scornfully of the GAA ban on 'foreign games': 'Rugby and soccer people were sick and tired of having the finger pointed at them as if they were any worse Irishmen. When Ireland was asked for sons to call to the colours we were not asked what shape of a ball we used' (Ferriter, 606–7).

O'Malley brought some characteristics of the sportsman to politics, including gregariousness, love of display, and distaste for puritan introversion, as well as a fondness for social drinking. He became a violent alcoholic and was frequently barred from pubs in Limerick, Dublin, and elsewhere; this failing hindered his political career (though his political stature also helped to cushion the consequences of this behaviour; he liked to tell humorous stories about his conversational ripostes to gardai who found him driving down one-way streets or drinking after hours). O'Malley had taken an interest in politics from his student days. In the 1954 general election he became Fianna Fáil TD for Limerick East, where he topped the poll, as he did in the three subsequent general elections he contested. He rapidly acquired a reputation as a witty, flamboyant, able, but unpredictable TD. As an opposition backbencher during the 1954–7 inter-party government he once spoke for eight and a half hours during a filibuster of government legislation. In 1957 he was threatened with expulsion from the parliamentary party for public drunkenness.

O'Malley enjoyed intense popularity among the Limerick City working class, an appeal increased by his stylish appearance and financial generosity; he often spoke of himself as driven by desire to address the dire poverty he witnessed among his constituents. In 1955 he was elected to Limerick city council; by scoring more votes

than any other candidate he became senior alderman, a position which he retained at the 1960 local elections. The following year he was elected mayor of Limerick, a position previously held by his brothers Desmond (1941–2) and Michael (1948–9), but in October 1961 he resigned the mayoralty on taking governmental office – as parliamentary secretary to the minister for finance, with responsibility for public works. In this position he drew attention by overseeing vast programmes of school-building and drainage. He set up a scheme to establish national monuments and established a magazine, *Oibre*, to publicise the board's activities.

As a youth O'Malley produced his own newspaper, the *Corbally Times*, and he sometimes spoke of himself as a 'failed newspaperman'; in government he cultivated journalists to a degree hitherto unusual among Fianna Fáil politicians, and this played a significant role in building his image as a 'can-do' figure. He projected himself well on television, and he was a major source for the 'Backbencher' column in the *Irish Times* written by John Healy (qv), who mourned O'Malley as a lost leader for years after the minister's death. Jack Lynch (qv) privately expressed distaste at O'Malley's habit of staying up until three in the morning to see what the newspapers said. (This reflected his wider habit of intense study of official papers.) Some of his journalistic confidants believed that, despite his bonhomie, O'Malley was fundamentally lonely, and that he wanted to be recognised as being driven by social concern as well as ambition. While many of the older generation of senior Fianna Fáil politicians cultivated a remote and austere image (also favoured by some younger ministers such as George Colley, qv) and deferred to the Department of Finance's Gladstonian distrust of public spending, O'Malley, Charles Haughey (1925–2006), and Brian Lenihan (qv) came to be known as the 'Three Musketeers'. (O'Malley was Haughey's principal ally and campaign manager in the 1966 Fianna Fáil leadership contest.) They enthusiastically supported the Keynesian expansionism of Seán Lemass (qv); they held court in Dublin hotels and restaurants, surrounded by political allies and businessmen; and they presented themselves as men of style and taste, incarnating and revelling in a new air of confidence and prosperity. 'He it was who introduced the mohair suit to Irish politicians – and led it out of fashion again' (Séamus Brady, *Irish Press*, 11 Mar. 1968). O'Malley's outspoken frankness included public defence of political patronage; he declared he had 'no hesitation, all other things being equal, in supporting people who support me or us' (Gallagher). Some sources claim that O'Malley took advantage of inside knowledge of planning decisions about the expansion of Limerick to profit from land speculation.

In April 1965 O'Malley was elevated to the cabinet as minister for health, to the alarm of many observers. He was warned against drunkenness, and despite some drinking bouts he gave up alcohol in the last years of his life, finding an outlet in intense work. The health services, hitherto financed primarily by charges on the rates, were coming under increasing strain through rising expenses. In January 1966 O'Malley produced a White Paper, 'The health services and their further improvement'; this announced the abolition of the dispensary system and the creation of regional health

boards, at a cost of £4.5 million. In June 1966 he announced improved pay and conditions for student nurses (a measure described as 'the Nurses' Charter'); he also provided for time off and study leave for junior hospital doctors. This met with resistance from the Department of Finance, traditionally worried at increases in government expenditure. O'Malley was described as 'the last of the big spenders'; he appealed to Lemass for support against what he described as 'smart-aleck' misrepresentations of his spending plans by the Department of Finance. The general public came to see him as plain-speaking, driven by genuine concern for the public good to cut through red tape. (He privately suffered depression after visiting children's hospitals and institutions.) This impression was encouraged by his habit of discarding his prepared speech texts, informing the audience that it was only Fianna Fáil propaganda which they could read next day in the newspapers, and speaking off the cuff (to the alarm of civil servants). His prominence was further increased by his physical stature (he was 6 feet 4 inches tall.) On 3 June 1965, during a visit to his Northern Ireland counterpart, O'Malley became the first southern minister to visit the house of commons at Stormont, where he sat in the distinguished visitors' gallery.

In July 1966 O'Malley was transferred to the Department of Education – 'one of Mr. Lemass's outstanding acts as Taoiseach . . . which could have a profound influence on Irish affairs for the remainder of the century'. He was acutely conscious of the loss of human resources, and the cost to the individuals involved, brought about by the fact that only one-third of Irish children remained in school past the age of fourteen. On 10 September 1966, while addressing a seminar organised by the National Union of Journalists, he announced that the government would make free secondary education available for all children up to the age of eighteen, with free transportation to school for children living in remoter areas. This provoked private protests from the Department of Finance, which had not been notified. O'Malley later claimed he had arranged matters beforehand with Lemass; in fact it appears that he had interpreted a generalised expression of approval for educational expansion as a mandate for a specific scheme whose extent surprised Lemass as much as anyone. This bold initiative became the foundation for O'Malley's later reputation, aided by his subsequent defiant remarks about his determination to press through reform in defiance of vested interests (unnamed but clearly including the catholic hierarchy). More recent research has emphasised that O'Malley built on foundations established by Lemass's earlier education ministers Patrick Hillery (1923–2008) (who pioneered comprehensive education) and George Colley (who oversaw the controversial rationalisation of smaller rural schools); this, however, should not detract from his role as a catalyst in overcoming bureaucratic obstacles and speeding change. Similarly, his publicity-consciousness should be seen not as mere self-aggrandisement but rather as a calculated (and successful) attempt to intensify public expectations and thereby build pressure for further change.

In April 1967 O'Malley announced plans for a merger in Dublin between UCD and TCD. This met significant opposition from both institutions (each fearing absorption by the other), and the idea petered out after O'Malley's death; however,

it helped to bring about cooperation and rationalisation between the rival universities (incidentally fatally undermining the ecclesiastical prohibition on Catholics attending Trinity). O'Malley hoped this high-profile proposal would catch the public attention and lead to greater public interest in and desire for third-level education. In December 1967 he announced the creation of nine regional technical colleges; these marked a decisive broadening of the Irish higher education system beyond a purely academic focus.

O'Malley suffered a heart attack on 10 March 1968, while addressing after-mass meetings during a by-election at Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare; he died a few hours later at St John's Hospital, Limerick. His death caused widespread shock and grief. Several commentators compared him to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, while the Franciscan priest Fr Simon O'Byrne spoke of his education measures as the twentieth-century equivalent of Catholic emancipation.

O'Malley married on 27 August 1951 Dr Hilda Moriarty (who inspired several poems by Patrick Kavanagh (qv)); they had a son and a daughter. After unsuccessfully seeking the Fianna Fáil nomination for the by-election caused by her husband's death, Dr O'Malley stood as an independent candidate but was defeated by Donogh's nephew Desmond O'Malley (later Fianna Fáil minister for justice and founder of the Progressive Democrats). In subsequent decades Donogh O'Malley was recalled as emblem of the lost promise of the 1960s. Had he lived longer, his limitations might be more widely recalled, but they cannot diminish his role in the long-term socio-economic development of Ireland.

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*Irish Independent*, 11, 12, 13 Mar. 1968; *Irish Press*, 11, 12, 13 Mar. 1968; *Ir. Times*, 11, 12, 13 Mar. 1968; Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour Party in transition 1957–82* (1982); Dick Walsh, *The party: inside Fianna Fáil* (1986); Bruce Arnold, *Haughey: his life and unlucky deeds* (1993); Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (1994); John Horgan, *Sean Lemass: the enigmatic patriot* (1997); James Downey, *Lenihan: his life and loyalties* (1998); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (2004); Tom Garvin, *Preventing the future: why was Ireland so poor for so long?* (2004)