

Quinn, Pat (Patrick)

by Terry Clavin

Quinn, Pat (Patrick) (1935–2009), businessman, was born 1 July 1935 in Cloone, Co. Leitrim, the eldest of the surviving four sons and two daughters of Bernard Quinn, civic guard of Cloone, and his wife Annie (née McNamee). His mother ran a combined grocery, hardware store and pub, while his father left the guards to operate an undertaking and taxi service, later hiring a truck as a mobile shop. Similarly, five uncles and all his brothers pursued business careers. When not assisting the various family concerns, Pat was an undistinguished student at Cloone national school and at St. Mel's College, Longford town.

Disregarding his parents' wish that he attend university, he determined on a retail career and, through representations made by local TD Gerry Boland (qv), secured a much prized job with Woolworth's in 1952. Starting as a stockroom hand in the Limerick city outlet, after nine months he was sent to Ballina, Co. Mayo, rising to the sales floor as trainee manager. In 1953 he moved to the branch in Henry Street, Dublin, gaining experience in all departments before serving as assistant store manager in Galway (1955–7) and Limerick (1957–8). Off duty he played Gaelic football, soccer and rugby, and promoted dances as an extension to his social life.

In 1958 his uncles John and Peter Quinn persuaded him to establish and manage for them a Woolworth's-style, cash-only variety store in Longford town. When the 3,000-sq.-ft Quinnsworth shop opened he overcame resistance to the unfamiliar 'walk-around' layout through slashing prices and cheeky advertising, once displaying a sign declaring: 'Leave the wife and buy a bottle'. His price reductions led some suppliers to boycott him, but he secured his stock through friendly retailers. He organised elaborate Miss Quinnsworth competitions, in 1960 hiring showbands to perform in the heats and grand final, including the Drifters, a newly formed ensemble featuring Joe Dolan (qv).

Following his 1961 marriage to Anne Blake from Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan, he sought foreign retail experience by emigrating to Toronto, Canada. He worked briefly in the Eaton's store before joining the new Sayvette chain, being so intrigued by its discount-store concept that he accepted demotion to the stock room. His obvious expertise meant he was soon running the 150,000-sq.-ft department store's top floor, and in 1962 was appointed manager of a new 120,000-sq.-ft outlet in London, Ontario, where he availed of the local media and the giant car park for his spectacular promotions.

He staged dances in the ice hockey arena across the road, progressing to hiring internationally renowned acts such as the Dave Clark Five and the Rolling Stones. These events generated intense local excitement, yet Quinn saw his profits for the

Dave Clark Five shows consumed by extravagant promotional expenses; likewise, the April 1965 Rolling Stones concert ended prematurely when fans rioted and the venue's owners seized the gate receipts to cover the damage.

Returning to Ireland soon after, Quinn became purchasing manager for the Dublin-based H. Williams grocery chain, the most profitable in Ireland. Its management's complacency encouraged him to leave and establish his own store, thereby fulfilling a long-nurtured ambition. Backed by his uncles, in summer 1966 he signed a lease for a 15,000-sq.-ft retail space in the shopping centre under construction in Stillorgan, Co. Dublin. The first such in Ireland, the Stillorgan Centre struggled to attract tenants due to its suburban location, enabling Quinn to negotiate a low rent, but to his dismay Dunnes Stores immediately announced plans for a large supermarket nearby at Cornelscourt. He opened his Quinnsworth variety store in December 1966 and enjoyed a brisk Christmas trade before sales collapsed, as the half-unoccupied Stillorgan Centre suffered from Cornelscourt's popularity.

Quinnsworth was facing liquidation in April 1967 when Quinn quadrupled turnover by stocking food. This contravened his lease, but he warded off threatened legal action by citing the contract's ambiguous wording. Handicapped by its unsuitable premises, Quinnsworth struggled for another year, flourishing only after annexing the adjoining 6,000-sq.-ft store in January 1969. Helped by the long queues at Cornelscourt, Quinn developed his trade by devising assorted special offers and giveaways of occasionally dubious legality, which he would proclaim excitedly over the speaker system. Prior to Christmas 1968, he opened on Sundays and subsequently traded on bank holidays and Good Friday for which the neighbouring parish priest denounced him.

Inspired by 'Honest Ed', a flamboyant Toronto retailer, he spent heavily on radio, television and newspaper advertising from 1969, basing these campaigns around his brash but appealing personality. Like many who effect change, he combined elements of the old and the new, simulating through sheer ubiquity the traditional personal relationship between grocer and shopper lost in anonymous supermarkets. Newspaper ads prominently displayed his photograph and many included an open letter by Quinn to his customers. The radio spots where he teamed up with comedian Hal Roach had the biggest impact, their broad banter chiming with the general public if not with the more pompous advertising gurus.

In May 1970 he simultaneously opened with great fanfare two new stores in the Dublin suburbs of Ballymun and Rathfarnham, emerging as a national supermarket magnate capable of squeezing suppliers for store deliveries, shelf-loading services, extended credit and promotional subsidies. Self-service grocery chains had proliferated in Ireland from the late 1950s, but their shops were small and located in declining urban locales, thereby creating opportunities for new entrants like Quinn situated in large, cheaply rented suburban premises. So too did his receipt of ten to twelve weeks' credit from suppliers, which, given that he turned over his stock every

two to three weeks, enabled him to accrue interest income and expand aggressively on a slender capital base. Furthermore, the budding supermarket sector lacked sophisticated financial controls and consumer analysis, placing a premium on his flair for grabbing market share through showmanship and gimmickry.

Pushing the supermarket model further and faster than his competitors, he inaugurated a period of intense price competition upon opening the Ballymun and Rathfarnham stores by selling food staples as loss leaders. All supermarkets lost money but benefited from the 'price war' publicity. Doing more than anyone to sell the supermarket concept to the Irish public, Quinn was the scourge of small traders, and in autumn 1970 the independent retailers' groups forced some manufacturers to stop supplying him with goods for below-cost sale.

Meanwhile, malicious gossip made much of his social drinking and his unwise decision to advance cash to suppliers for the duration of a bank strike underway since April 1970. He called a meeting of his suppliers and bankers to calm nerves and appeared on television to explain that, although temporarily overstretched, he was owed more money than he had borrowed. Supply problems were overcome by importing goods, or in the case of bread by baking his own, and he signalled his viability in 1971 by opening stores in Dundrum, Co. Dublin, and Douglas, Co. Cork, and by committing to another two premises.

Short and pudgy with large glasses, boyish features and a receding dome, he further distinguished himself by embracing polo-neck sweaters as a sartorial trademark and became an instantly recognisable figure. A regular at glamorous parties, he met groups of housewives twice weekly, obsessively cultivated journalists and enthusiastically raised funds for charities, being renowned for his prodigal generosity towards friends, family and employees. His yearning for social validation reflected a guileless streak that was integral to his personal appeal. It also represented an extreme manifestation of the populism traditionally adopted by rural traders to ameliorate their inherently fraught credit-based relations with an assertive peasantry.

Under his management, Quinnsworth peaked at 400 employees and a £200,000 weekly turnover, but was unprofitable once it grew beyond Stillorgan, not least because of Quinn's uncertain administrative skills. The Ballymun outlet, being in a deprived area, was a big loss-maker, while his preference for leasing rather than buying sites exposed him in the long term to swingeing rent reviews. He failed to balance the barely (if at all) profitable food trade with enough high-margin drapery and hardware sales, and was so uncertain of his ability to move non-food merchandise that he delegated much of his floor space to concession traders. Furthermore, cash-flow pressures caused by rising rents in Dublin and a general tightening of credit forced risky expansions into the teeth of strong opposition at Dundrum and also into the provinces with all the control problems entailed therein.

In early May 1972, his decision to absorb the turnover tax instead of charging it at the checkout was widely interpreted as a desperate last stroke. These suspicions were confirmed three weeks later when Quinn sold 80 per cent of Quinnsworth to Canadian retail magnate Galen Weston for £425,000 and a five-year contract as Quinnsworth chairman on a £15,000 salary. This characteristically sudden decision contradicted his earlier claims to be defending Irish retail from foreign predators and betrayed a failure to grasp his company's worth; Ben Dunne (qv) suggested, perhaps mischievously, that he would have paid £1 million.

Losing interest in Quinnsworth, in autumn 1972 he joined a consortium that successfully bid for the J. G. Mooney pub chain. Quinn played a decisive part in wooing shareholders, but as the price rose from £1.3 million to £2.07 million, he diluted his stake from 50 per cent to 20 per cent. During 1972–3, he bought three Dublin pubs, having earlier acquired an interest in two others, and also a hotel in Co. Wexford. He maintained a high profile thanks to his charity work, hectic socialising and extravagant lifestyle, driving a telephone-equipped Rolls Royce and buying a palatial abode in Killiney, Co. Dublin. An imprudent gambler, he owned several racehorses, including one that cost him a small fortune by finishing second eight times.

Likewise, in summer 1973, his incorrigible rashness led him to buy the Opperman's Country Club at Kiltiernan, Co. Dublin, for an admittedly knockdown £450,000. Intending to transform an exclusive sport and leisure resort into a playground for young middle-class families, he spent another £450,000 developing attractions such as Ireland's only artificial ski slope, selling certain assets to finance this. The Pat Quinn Club opened in September and drew Ireland's top cabaret acts, but haemorrhaged cash. Not helped by oil shortages and an ESB strike, the venture was misconceived and incompetently managed, and lacked the capital needed to survive the inevitable winter losses.

Frantic attempts to salvage his personal finances by finding an investment partner failed narrowly, and the hopelessly insolvent club was forced into liquidation in February 1974. Having loaned £230,000 and guaranteed a £400,000 secured bank loan and some of the £500,000 in unsecured current liabilities, Quinn was stripped by lenders of his remaining wealth and assets, including his house and Quinnsworth minority stake. Many creditors went unpaid, and his reputation was further undermined when it emerged that the Northern Bank Finance Corporation, as banker for the J. G. Mooney purchasing consortium, had committed fraud by allowing Quinn to renege secretly on cash commitments made to his fellow investors during the 1972 takeover.

Doggedly pursuing his lost fortune, he briefly sold funfair machines before enjoying modest success as the proprietor of three pool halls from 1976 and of a nightclub in Bray, Co. Dublin, which he opened and sold in 1978. In 1977 Quinnsworth recalled him to promote a planned chain of discount stores called PQ Discounts, but

shoppers were averse to stark warehouses offering a limited range. Only two stores were opened before PQ Discounts was shelved and Quinn sued Quinnsworth for breach of contract in 1979, apparently receiving a £25,000 settlement.

Thereafter he managed three bookie shops for a syndicate (1979–80), and then a thriving chain of Dublin snooker clubs as a 25 per cent owner. He also promoted the singer Josef Locke (qv) and fund-raised for Fianna Fáil, until he repudiated the party in 1982. In 1985 new investors in the snooker businesses initiated legal proceedings against Quinn, alleging irregularities. He sold out and rented a 25,000-sq.-ft premises in George's St, Dublin, for sub-leasing to small retailers, but the scheme quickly unravelled and he closed it in January 1986 after two-months' trading. Discredited, cash-strapped and despairing of Ireland's economic prospects, he moved to Toronto in summer 1986 with the proceeds of a high-powered benefit dinner.

He struggled initially, selling potato chips and then remaindered books while occasionally promoting touring Irish performers. By 1989 he had bookselling concessions in most Toronto supermarkets and eventually earned enough to buy the Irish Embassy Bar & Grill in 2000 and P. J. O'Brien's pub in 2002. Both thrived, despite his liberal free drinks policy. Once more a wealthy man, he opened another Irish Embassy in Montreal and an Italian restaurant in Toronto.

A popular Toronto figure, he died there on 23 November 2009 from kidney failure and was succeeded in his businesses by his five sons and two daughters.

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GRO (birth, marriage certs.); *Longford Leader*, 15 Oct. 1960; *Ir. Press*, 4 Oct. 1966; 11 Mar., 14 Oct. 1970; 16, 18 Feb. 1971; 13 May, 19 July, 13 Nov. 1972; 7 Jan. 1977; 19 Nov. 1982; 22 Jan. 1986; *Sunday Independent*, 11 Dec. 1966; 11 May 1969; 5 June 1972; 23 Nov. 1975; 29 Feb. 1976; 24 Oct. 1982; 22 Aug. 2004; 29 Nov. 2009; *Checkout*, Dec. 1968; Apr. 1969; Jan., June, Nov. 1970; Feb., Oct., Nov. 1971; June, July 1972; Mar., Apr. 1977; Oct., mid-Oct., Nov., Dec. 1979; Jan., Mar. 1980; *Ir. Independent*, 3 July 1969; 21 Apr., 9 Dec. 1970; 5 Jan., 5, 7 Feb., 1974; 19 Feb. 1977; 22 July, 27 Dec. 1978; 21 Feb. 1984; 16 Feb. 1985; 22 Jan., 23 June 1986; 9 Jan. 1988; 20 June 1989; 22 Sept. 1994; 25, 28 Nov. 2009; 23 July 2011; *Ir. Times*, 9 July 1970; 1 Jan., 19, 20 Oct. 1971; 27 Mar., 13 May 1972; 27 July 1973; 5 Feb. 1974; 11 Apr. 1977; 11 Feb., 22 July 1978; 11 Oct. 1985; 28 Nov. 2009; *Business and Finance*, 9 Oct., 6, 18 Nov. 1970; 18 May, 15 June, 12 Oct. 1972; 29 Mar., 14 June 1973; 7, 14 Feb. 1974; 11 Aug. 1977; 31 Mar. 1983; 17 May 1984; 15 Aug., 12 Sept. 1985; *Sunday Press*, 29 Nov. 1970; 29 June 1975; *Grocery Review*, 1 Dec. 1970; *This Week*, 25 May, 8 June 1972; *Report of enquiry into the conditions which obtain in regard to the supply and distribution of grocery goods for human consumption* (1972), 87; *Management*, June 1973; *Hibernia*, 22 Nov. 1974; 23 Aug.

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