



MICHAEL O'CALLAGHAN 1921 – 2010

Michael O'Callaghan of Geneva, Switzerland, passed away peacefully on St. Valentine's day 2010 at the age of 88, claiming to be "the luckiest, happiest man alive."

He was born in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal in 1921. His mother Maretta (née Molloy) was a linguist and educator who taught at the Berlitz language school in London. His father Michael—a businessman, civil engineer and assistant County Surveyor—built the Burtonport extension railway in 1903, which enabled fish from Western Donegal to be sold the following morning in London. Following his father's death in 1928, the young family moved to Elgin Road in Dublin.

Michael was educated at Coláiste Mhuire and Ring College in Ireland, at Stift Melk in Austria, and at University College Dublin, Heidelberg and the Sorbonne. He spoke English, Irish, French, German and some Russian. Aged 17 at the outbreak of World War II whilst on a travel scholarship from the German government, the Gestapo arrested him at Bratislava on suspicion of being a British spy. On the way home at Dover, Her Majesty's police detained him—on suspicion of being a German spy.

After graduating in Civil Engineering at UCD, Michael spent the years of the Second World War building roads, bridges and harbours in the wild Atlantic landscapes of his beloved Donegal, and then worked with Dún Laoighre town council. In 1949 he married Dr. Fiona O'Doherty of Derry (1921-2003), whose father Joseph took part in the 1916 Easter Rising and was a member of the First Dáil, and later a Senator.

Michael and Fiona moved to Geneva in 1949, where he took up a life-long diplomatic post with the International Labour Office (founded by fellow Irishman Edward Phelan at the Treaty of Versailles). His work involved liaison with governments, employers, and trade unions in the construction, woodworking and forestry industries on both sides of the Iron Curtain in Europe, as well as in India, Egypt, Japan and Venezuela. In 1953, he took part the construction of the world's highest hydro-electric dam at the Oberaar See in the Bernese Oberland of the Swiss Alps. During the Cold War, he helped friends from East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary to secure rare exit visas for travel in the West. He flew to Prague on the first plane following the Soviet invasion in 1968. During the 1960s, he used to invite Geneva's local agents of the CIA, KGB and Chinese Red Guard to his cocktail parties, and gleefully observed them pretending not to know each other's real identities.

Thanks to his neutral Irish passport, he was one of very few Westerners to travel freely in China during Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966, although he got arrested for the crime of buying postcards at the Ulan Baator railway station in Outer Mongolia. During the 1980's, he delivered secret messages from the Dalai Lama to remote monasteries in Tibet.

Michael and Fiona—both fluent Irish speakers—co-founded the Geneva Irish Association in 1975. They were widely regarded as Ireland's unofficial ambassadors in the world's most international city, where they entertained generations of visitors at their lakeside home on the Quai du Mont Blanc.

He is survived by his sons Michael in Geneva, Joseph in Dublin, and Bryan in Fribourg.

Smiling on his deathbed, Michael urged his friends to "Keep your lights on, as it seems mine are fading."