

# **A eulogy for Cornelius Patrick O'Donovan**

(17 March 1930 - 11 November 2020)

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We are here to celebrate the precious life of Cornelius Patrick O'Donovan's, or 'Conn' as he was more affectionally known.

Conn was an immensely special person to a great number of people from vast walks of life. From a young Irish lad in a big catholic family to a dynamic Jesuit, his adventurous and influential life in Australia is one worth remembering and celebrating. I pray these words are befitting of Conn and the extraordinary legacy that lives on in his family and friends.

In 2003 I was given a book by Daven Day SJ when he was Provincial. Its title was Heroic Leadership. It was an attempt by the author, an ex-Jesuit, to explain why the Jesuits had survived for the past 450 years while empires and successful corporations have fallen by the way side in that time. He put it down to 4 characteristics that he believes have served the Jesuits over that time: self-awareness, heroic deeds, ingenuity, and love.

Does each of these principals not sum up and epitomise this beautiful man's character and personality and explain how he had such an impact on each person's life that he touched.

Conn was born on 17 March 1930 in Dublin. The keen-eyed among you will have noticed the significance of this date – it is surprising he was not called Patrick Cornelius! As the second born male, Irish tradition states that he would be named after his paternal grandfather and father.

His father was the Land Commissioner Inspector at this time but was famously behind the barricades at the Dublin General Post Office, shoulder to shoulder with Collins, Clarke, Connelly and McDermott, in the Easter Rising of 1916. Conn was very proud of this fact.

Conn had his Secondary education at Roscrea College, Tipperary for one year, and spent the remainder at Colaiste Mhuire, Dublin – an Irish-speaking Christian Brothers School. He entered the Society of Jesus on 8 October 1947, joining the Jesuit Novitiate at Emo, near Portarlinton, where he spent two years of spiritual formation. In the Novitiate he was

encouraged to read widely and to develop an interest in music and the arts, a passion he maintained throughout his life.

Following his time in the Jesuit Novitiate he travelled to Rathfarnham Castle where he studied for four years at the University College Dublin. An exemplary student, Conn pursued a demanding course, taking four subjects in Science and Mathematics. While he certainly could have obtained an impressive degree in Science, Conn's heart remained in the realm of the humanities, and at the end of his first year, he switched to a degree in Latin and Irish. He would, of course, obtain First Class Honours. From here, Conn travelled to Germany to study Philosophy and upon commencement, greatly impressed the demanding German Jesuit professors, who promptly marked him as someone set to become a specialist in Philosophy.

Conn spent the next two years teaching and perfecting his craft at Belvedere College, Dublin, where his interest and ability in sports came to the fore. He was an excellent teacher, popular with the students and possessed an effortless and kindly control in the classroom and on the playing field. He then moved to Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy for four years of Theological Studies. It was Milltown that had a decisive impact on Conn, in large part due to his association with Philip McShane, with whom he forged a personal and intellectual friendship, one that would influence not only the other, but a whole generation of students of Philosophy at the Milltown Institute. His interest in philosophy deepened and matured over these years and the expectations of his German philosophy professors were further realised. After his final year of formation - his tertianship - Conn attended the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome where he obtained a Doctorate in Philosophy which he promptly put to use at the Jesuit St. Louis University in Missouri.

Conn returned home to Ireland where he taught Philosophy for 10 years. As ever, he was popular with colleagues and students, being urbane and gracious as he was. With his Milltown friend, Philip McShane, the pair established a philosophy course grounded in the teachings of the Canadian Jesuit Philosopher, Bernard Lonergan. This decision, however, was not without controversy and painful conflict. The modernisation of religious life was under heavy scrutiny at the time of the change, following the second Vatican Council. Although unknown, many believe that this series of conflicts in the 1960s were what caused Conn to leave the Priesthood and the Jesuits. Conn and the Jesuits remained passionately and eternally in a "benign and mutually appreciative relationship".

Conn met the love of his life, Paddy, sometime after leaving the Jesuits. Paddy was an Australian nurse whom Conn met while she was travelling through Ireland. Conn was besotted with Paddy. Anything that she wanted, Conn was prepared to deliver. The two became inseparable and shared many crazy adventures. His immense love for Paddy endured until her passing in 2003. A beautiful send-off was held for Paddy at St Canisius in Potts Point, arranged by Conn's dear friend, Steve Sinn.

Conn arrived on the doorsteps of St Aloysius College in January 1980. He was looking for a job, as were a number of others who have been part of Jesuit education in Australia for the past 40 years. The first time I met him, Conn was sitting outside Father Bruce's office waiting to go in and get our classes for the year. At Aloysius, Conn was an immediately hit with staff and students (and Jesuits). He played staff football on a Friday afternoon for many years. I did not realise how old he was at this time, probably 50 or close to it, he was easily one of the best players on the field – a great goalkeeper. Off the field, Conn could also hold his own with a drink.

Conn was an exceptional Latin teacher, Latin being one of eight languages Conn had been taught or taught himself to speak. He was also an exceptional Year Coordinator, earning the love of his students whom he loved in return. One of the reasons for this mutual respect was due to the fact that Conn could not bring himself to use the strap as punishment. He opted instead for a slower, arguably more cruel method, to talk them to death! If this did not work, he would refer them to his assistant, Neil Mushan, to sort out matters more... directly. This discipline method did not work when Helen Ephrums became his new assistant, as she also loved the boys to death.

Conn's time at Aloysius is wonderfully remembered in comedian Ahn Do's popular novel, *The Happiest Refugee*, where Conn's passion and commitment to fair play saw him rest Ahn late in a Basketball game when Ahn was desperately trying to get to 30 points to win a new pair of basketball boots. When Conn was informed of his accidental actions, he was reported to have said, "Jaysus! Why didn't you tell me earlier you daft eediot! Ahn, next time out, you're on!" I can hear him saying it! With his right hand on his forehead.

When I first knew Conn, he was living at St Ignatius' College in the old Infirmary. After that, he resided at Pearl Beach and travelled each day to St Aloysius in his green Morris Minor. He also for a time lived in a plush flat in Bellevue Hill, however the only piece of property he

owned in his life, was an old church in the country which he used as a holiday house. Finally, Conn moved to Riverview and lived in a cottage by First Field for many years, a very happy place with classical music always drifting in the air as you approached.

On his departure from St Aloysius in the mid '90s, Conn travelled home to Ireland for a number of years. Paddy had convinced him she wanted to go home to Ireland to live and do a cooking course in France. Ever supportive of her dreams and true to his enduring love, whatever Paddy wanted, Conn was always prepared to deliver. While in Ireland, Conn taught at the Jesuit Belvedere College, Dublin, but both he and Paddy soon realised that with the Celtic Tiger enveloping the nation, Ireland was not the place and home they thought it to be.

Conn returned to Australia, commencing at St Ignatius' College, Riverview, where he would join a number of us who had left Aloysius to start anew. After Paddy died, I asked Conn to come and live at Riverview. With this, a new amazing stage in his life began: that of a Jesuit, mystic and gypsy. Conn did possibly his best and most influential work while at Riverview. As mentor and confidante to the Headmaster, as well as Latin teacher, Conn spent many an afternoon wasting his time on Jennie Hickey and I—who never completed her homework and was inattentive at times—as he tried to get us through the Year 7 syllabus... year after year.

Conn's impact on the formation of young Ignatian men and on those he worked with can be summed up by the outpouring of emotional responses on social media on hearing the news of his passing. Among the many moving tributes, here are two such examples of the widespread and lasting influence of Conn's character.

*A wonderful person and a great and enthusiastic 4th XI soccer coach!*

*Profound intellect, humility, insight, depth of faith, simplicity of life, ease of finding joy... Conn's gift for critical, honest thinking and seeking after truth made a big impact on me and many. I am moved to gratitude for his life.*

*May Conn rest in peace. – James O'Brien*

*A dear friend and teacher who helped educate the whole person – a wonderful teacher of Ancient Greek who, in the course of teaching the subject, taught you also a good deal of literature—particularly the Irish poets—Latin, Gaelic, German, Philosophy and Theology. A great football coach who insisted on character and fair, firm play. But more, just a caring*

*shepherd of people on their way into broader life. My favourite lessons in Greek were when he would turn up with a poem of Seamus Heaney's, because the story of the Trojan wars was also the story of all human struggles. Requiescat in pace, Conn. – Dominic Kelly*

At this point, can I especially thank, from all of Conn's friends and family, the care and love shared by the dozen or so girlfriends who spoilt him and gave him a graceful entry to heaven over the past months and were true friends to the end, especially you Christine, you have been an angel by his side.

In the Book of Isiah there is the story of the passing of a close friend of Cicero and when his wife asks him why do you weep so?

“The earth is poorer” said Cicero. “It has lost a good man, and we cannot afford it”.

The earth will be a poorer place without Conn, at a time when good men are hard to find. Conn touched each and every one of us and has left us with memories we will cherish forever. Conn loved his Irish heritage, and in particular Irish poets. Conn and Paddy attached this poem to a birthday card they sent me in 2002. When you read it, hear Conn's words in your head and heart.

*The One*, by Patrick Kavanagh

Green, blue, yellow and red-  
God is down in the swamps and marshes  
Sensational as April and almost incred-  
ible the flowering of our catharsis.

A humble scene in a backward place  
Where no one important ever looked  
The raving flowers looked up in the face  
Of the One and the Endless, the Mind that has balked

The profoundest of mortals. A primrose, a violet,  
A violent wild iris-but mostly anonymous performers  
Yet an important occasion as the Muse at her toilet  
Prepared to inform the local farmers

That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God  
Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog.