

## THOUSANDS FOR TEA



Wherever I travel around the globe, I never miss the opportunity to paint a picture of my own wonderful part of the world, County Donegal and its breath-taking beauty. It's my haven. It's my retreat. That's where I disappear to after a long concert tour to recharge my batteries. I return to my roots to walk the hills or fill my lungs with the pure sea air. Coming back from a long stint on tour, the magnificent view of the Donegal landscape immediately rejuvenates me. And I'll never lose my grip on reality once I maintain that contact with the place and the people who helped to make me the type of person I am today. It's not that I have any fear of my personality ever changing, but my family, neighbours and friends from my early days around Kincasslagh will ensure that I keep my feet firmly on the ground. It's great to go back there and just be plain Daniel Bosco 'from up the road'. Just like the old days when I was a youngster growing up there, I can saunter up the road and drop in unexpectedly on the neighbours for tea and biscuits. We chat about old times and it's rarely that the subject of my career will occupy the main thrust of the conversation. The people up in that neck of the woods are not the type to be impressed by stardom. I know they're proud that one of their own has achieved so much, and it doesn't have to be stated.

Of all the awards that I've received – I'm lucky enough to have received many – the one I treasure the most is the trophy that marks my selection as 'Donegal Person Of The Year' in 1989. That was a tremendous honour for me because it came

from the people and the county that I hold dear to my heart. The citation read: 'Daniel O'Donnell is a perfect example to the youth of our county and country. Success has not gone to his head. He has never forgotten his roots. He has not forgotten his mother and his family. He has not forgotten his beloved Kincasslagh and Donegal. And, above all, he has not forgotten the people who have put him where he is today – his loyal fans. He is never too busy to stay behind after shows to talk to them and sign autographs. Many are the stories that could be told of his visits to homes and hospitals to visit sick fans, even when this meant interrupting busy schedules. One story which aptly displays his concern for his fans is the one which tells of an occasion when it came to his notice that some fans who were itinerants were being refused admittance to his show. He refused to go on stage until they were admitted. Daniel never loses an opportunity to lend his name and his services, if possible, to worthwhile charities. A non-drinker and non-smoker, his clean-cut image in his dress and in his living standards does not meet with approval from some of the gurus in the media, who seem to wish he were otherwise. But they meet with the approval of us here in Cumann Tir Chonaill (County Donegal).'

The people who select the Donegal Person Of The Year felt that I was a great ambassador for the county on my travels and in my videos. The 'Thoughts Of Home' video includes many scenes of picturesque Donegal. But it's not that I've decided I'm going to do the job of the Irish tourist board. It's just that I'm so proud of my county that I want all my fans to come and see it. And to come and see Kincasslagh where I grew up.

During my concert tours I regularly tell audiences that if they're ever in Kincasslagh they're welcome to drop in for a cup of tea and a biscuit. I'm a great man for drinking tea. Now, as you know, I'm rarely at home in Kincasslagh, I'm usually off on

tour around Britain and Ireland. Or else I'm in my new home outside Dublin. So, I'm not there to put on the kettle and entertain people if they decide to visit. And they do call all the time. They come over on holiday and track down my home. It must be the most photographed council house in Ireland at this stage. They knock on the door to see if Daniel is at home, and, of course, it's seldom that they strike it lucky. It's a wonder that my sister, Kathleen, and her husband, John, who live there with their young family, and my mother, haven't strung me up. It's lucky that they were always used to dealing with unexpected visitors. And they handle the situation very well. If I'm not there, my mother is the next best thing for the fans. And I think that she secretly enjoys all the attention. She certainly never hesitates to pose for a photograph.

The town of Dungloe, which is a short run by car from Kin-casslagh, has an annual festival called the 'Mary From Dungloe', which has been running since 1968. It's a great excuse for a full week of partying and in recent years it has been attracting crowds of fifty thousand or more into the area. It's like the 'Rose Of Tralee', with girls representing many countries taking part in the 'Mary' contest. There is week-long dancing to top Irish bands and there's street music and everything else that goes with summer festivals of that ilk. I love being part of the whole event and I usually do a number of shows in Dungloe that week. In the months leading up to it, I remind fans right across Britain and elsewhere that I'll be at home during that week if they wish to call and see me. And I always nominate a day that they are guaranteed to meet me. In 1992, a total of three thousand people queued for hours along a narrow, rural road leading to my home. I was flabbergasted. I couldn't comprehend why people would queue for up to five hours to see ME. After all, I'm not in Loretta Lynn's league. But that's exactly

what happened. My sister, Kathleen, and her merry band of helpers were busy that day dishing out the cups of tea! It's okay, she's still talking to me.

Some members of the Irish media who turned up to witness the strange event in a remote part of Ireland at the end of July, later commented that it looked like the type of scene you might expect to find outside the home of a faith healer. Well, I'm no faith healer. I have no powers like that. And nobody asked me for a cure. They just wanted to shake my hand, have a quick chat and, in most cases, a souvenir photograph of the brief meeting. But I was overwhelmed by the number who came to see me. They came from the thirty-two counties of Ireland. They were there from England, Scotland and Wales. And there was even a lady who travelled over from the Falklands.

I suppose fans like to catch me in my natural environment. They normally see me on stage when I'm Daniel O'Donnell – The Performer. The 'open day' at my home gave them the opportunity to judge me away from the spotlight. I wasn't dressed the way they'd normally see me during a performance. I didn't even shave on the day. They saw me in a relaxed home atmosphere. A wonderful aspect of the day, which is now an annual event, was that all the people there met new people. I encountered Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland who were travelling together and that is great. It's wonderful to see that there are no barriers when it comes to music and entertainment. That people can be united through their common love of song and dance. My own neighbours around Kincasslagh dropped in and mingled with the visitors and I was pleased with that. Sometimes I feel guilty about the numbers I attract into the area. I often wonder if I have interrupted the private lives of the locals and opened this remote part of the world to something that should not have been. But I don't think so. I

think the people from my native Kincasslagh will never be swayed by anyone who arrives, but those who come will definitely be swayed by the local people. I believe that the people I grew up with have strong character and as long as they remain like that, the outside world will not affect them.

Without the people who called to my home during the 'Mary' festival, or the people who come along to my concerts and buy my records, Daniel O'Donnell – The Performer would not exist. And I don't know what I would have done if my singing career hadn't worked for me. So, I feel I owe all those people a debt of gratitude. They have given me all this success. They are responsible for all the good things in life that come with success. They have made me a very happy and fulfilled person, playing a role in life that I have never considered to be a job. Yet, the fans seem to think that they owe ME something. They shower me with gifts on tours and even the people who called to my home brought some beautiful presents and flowers. I could have set up a florist's shop in the village after they left that day. They really spoil me. On tour, I get everything from gold chains, bracelets and rings, to roses, teddy bears, tea bags and apple tarts. If I know that a person who gave me a particular item of jewellery is going to be at a specific show, I try to wear it for him or her to show my appreciation.

Their devotion to me is just incredible. I recall reading one story about a woman from Northern Ireland who has set up a mini shrine to me in her home. She has every tape I ever made and all the videos. And she has a scrapbook full of stuff about me. And mugs and cups I've drunk from. She said that when she's eventually called to meet the good Lord, she plans to be interred with one hundred photographs, wall charts and calendars of me, plus a flower I gave her, which she has pressed and preserved, and a bow-tie that I wore on stage. The story

claimed she has given strict instructions to that effect to her bemused minister and family!

A question I'm often asked is, 'Why, unlike other performers, do you stay on for hours after a concert meeting the people who go to your shows? Is it not a terrible ordeal for you?' I can only smile at such a suggestion. What many people in showbusiness can't understand is that meeting the fans after a concert is one of the most satisfying aspects of my career. It's not gruelling for me. On the contrary, it helps me to wind down and relax after a couple of hours on the stage. Because I don't drink, I have no interest in rushing off to the bar or to a trendy nightclub. That's not my style. I love people. I love being with them. And I think that that can be attributed to my roots in Donegal. The fact that everyone around my area as a child ran an open house and there was a lot of interaction between neighbours. Naturally, because I meet so many people at the one time, I don't get to know a large number of them very well. But there are some that I'm very familiar with because I would see them at four or five shows (and in some cases nearly every show) during the same tour. There are people who travel hundreds of miles to my shows. I'm sure some of them clock up thousands of miles following me every year. I'm very fortunate to possess a really sharp memory, so I can recall a lot of people when I meet them again.

But if you ask me what it is about me that can command such devotion, I wouldn't be able to tell you. I don't dwell on it. I don't question it. I have never tried to analyse it. I'm just happy that there are people out there who like what I do and the way that I do it.

So who are the fans? And what do they think of me? Journalist Eddie Rowley, who has worked with me on this book, spoke to some of the visitors who called to my home in Kincasslagh during the 'open day' on 30 July 1992. This is what they told him:

SHEILA DALZELLE - CUMBRIA

*I had a very serious car accident back in 1985. It left me semi-disabled and unable to work. My world had collapsed around me. Then I discovered Daniel and life took on a whole new meaning again. I was always very fond of Irish music and I used to have tapes sent over to me from Ireland. One day a tape of Daniel O'Donnell arrived and from then on there was no one but Daniel for me. His music is very soothing and I got a lot of comfort from it. And, to me, Daniel was a bonus when I first met him. He was so nice and so friendly. He has filled in a big gap in my life. He has helped me to do things that I don't think I would have had the courage to do otherwise. I wouldn't have travelled long distances on a bus or train, for instance. But Daniel gave me the courage and motivation to do that because I knew he was going to be at the other end. Now I go on the bus down to London, which is a long way from where I live. Before that, I hadn't the confidence to travel. So, I have gained a lot of strength just from knowing Daniel and his music. He has visited me at my home and I just think that Daniel is everything that is right. Whenever I'm feeling down, I put on one of Daniel's videos, pull up a chair to the television and then I'm oblivious to everything around me. Daniel has helped me to accept what has gone wrong in my life. I had always wanted to take a trip on Concorde. So, in 1989, when I finally made up my mind to do it, I took Daniel to dinner on Concorde! And we had a ball. It was my way of saying thanks for everything he has done for me.*

ROSE ORRIS - WALTHAM ABBEY, ESSEX, ENGLAND

*I first heard Daniel O'Donnell's music on Radio 2 in England and I immediately fell in love with it. My youngest boy bought me one of Daniel's videos for Mother's Day. Daniel was marvellous in it, so I went out and bought all his tapes and videos. Then I joined his Fan Club and found out where all his concerts were on. Now, my husband, Tony, and I go to as many of his concerts as we can. We often travel two hundred miles on public transport just for one show. But it's worth it because he's such an exciting performer and he gives us so much pleasure. We are both totally hooked on his music now. This is our very first trip to Ireland and we travelled all the way over by*

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*car, even though my husband only started driving three weeks ago! We wanted to see Daniel in Ireland and nothing would stop us. My son, Stephen, did a lovely portrait of Daniel, which we have framed and we have given it to Daniel as a present for his new home.*

### THORA ALAZIA - THE FALKLANDS

*I heard Daniel O'Donnell's music for the first time just after the conflict and I thought it was wonderful. I immediately joined his Fan Club and I got all his cassettes. He has a lovely voice and his music is beautiful. All my walls are now plastered with Daniel's pictures. He's very pleasant on the eye. And I have travelled over eight thousand miles to Ireland to see him. Everywhere you go in the Falklands, you hear Daniel's music being played. People are going to be really envious when I tell them that I've met Daniel. Daniel is all that I ever thought he would be ... and more. He's such a friendly young man. I'll never forget this visit to Ireland, even if I never get back again. It will be the one thing that I'll always carry with me.*

### ANNE RONAN - SEDBURY, CHEPSTOW, GWENT, WALES

*I started going to see Daniel O'Donnell in concert in 1987 and he was such an exciting performer. He brought me so much joy. Later, when I was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis, Daniel was very kind and very caring to me. And we have become great friends. Even though I'm incapacitated, I follow him everywhere. I have wonderful friends who take me to his shows all over Britain. On his last tour, I saw eighteen of his twenty-five shows. I follow him to Scotland, England, Wales, Cornwall, Ireland – he's my whole life now. One day, I saw a van pulling up outside my home. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Daniel. He was on his way to a concert in Cardiff and he called to see me. That day will never be taken out of my life. He said, 'Where's the tea, Anne?' I kept saying, 'I can't believe you're here!' He made his own tea, bless his heart. We had a little chat and off he trotted. I don't think I'll ever forget it. That's the kind of person Daniel is. People don't realise what he does behind the scenes. He has a heart of gold.*