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Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2009

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School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology

Articles

Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2009

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BESSON, Kenneth George (1915-1981), hotelier, born in Dublin July 1915 to Paul George Besson and to Joan (née Mc Lean Stewart). Ken's father was born in London, to a Swiss father and a French mother. Having served his time in London hotels, Paul Besson came to Dublin as manager of the Royal Hibernian Hotel, Dawson Street, working for Walter Stuart Tighe, who was the owner at the time. He married the housekeeper in 1906. Joan was Scottish and had been a junior housekeeper at the Shelbourne Hotel prior to joining the Royal Hibernian. The hotel was losing money, and when its' creditors threatened to foreclose; Besson convinced them to let it stay open under his management, promising that he would repay their trust. The couple worked hard and built up a successful business. They bought shares in the hotel and as part of the expansion they bought Evans Chemist shop, demolished it and replaced it with the Hibernian Restaurant. The Royal Hibernian was described to a London Journal in 1914 as 'The most fashionable first class hotel in Dublin' and its ballroom was the venue for a succession of elaborate balls and banquets. The management boasted an 'orchestra daily, free garage and electric elevator'. In 1918 Besson bought the Salthill Hotel in Monkstown and by 1939 he had acquired a controlling interest in the Royal Hibernian. In 1924 the adjoining building at number 49 Dawson Street was added to the hotel and number 50 was added around 1970. In 1945 he sold the Salthill Hotel and two years later he opened the new Russell Hotel on the corner of St Stephens Green and Harcourt Street under the management of Hector Fabron.

The Besson's son Ken lived in the hotel with his family. Educated in Alexandra College and Earlsfort House Dublin, the Rossall School in Lancashire, Ken then went to Lausanne and Grenoble University Switzerland. He completed a tough apprenticeship in Swiss hotels, followed by periods at the Savoy and Claridges in London before returning to become junior assistant manager of the Royal Hibernian Hotel. He was unhappy with the standard at the hotel and sought to bring in French chefs and waiters. He convinced the objecting union delegates of the need to improve standards in Ireland by inviting them to join him on a fact finding tour to Europe. The officials were so impressed that they agreed to have the French come over but on condition that Irish boys would be indentured and trained in the relevant disciplines. Ken is remembered by his trainees as being firm but fair. He paired commis chefs with commis waiters and put a small amount of their wages aside for them all during their training so that they would have enough to

set up a small business when they qualified. Although few if any followed with the plan, it showed his forward thinking. He used to bring the young trainees on educational excursions once a week, to the museums, to art galleries and to the public gallery in Dáil Éireann, the Irish parliament, so they could expand their minds. He was passionate about football and was extremely generous to his teams if they were successful in the Hotels' Football League which was very competitive at the time. Gastronomically his greatest contribution was the introduction to the Russell Hotel of Pierre Rolland as head chef in 1949. The Russell under Rolland was considered to be one of the best restaurants in the world. In 1950, having become managing director of the Royal Hibernian, Ken Besson married Delphine Peard and they bought a large house 'Castlesize' in Sallins, County Kildare. They had one daughter, Caroline.

Ken is described by his friend Cathal O' Shannon as 'an almost Edwardian figure, who will be remembered as much for his mild eccentricities as for his contribution to hotels and catering in the country'. He was an innovator who served for many years on the board of Bord Fáilte and various tourist bodies. He chaired the working group whose report resulted in the foundation of CERT, the Council for Education, Recruitment and Training within the Irish hotel industry. He conceived and financed the 'Festival of Dublin' in the 1950s – a food festival with free shellfish in Moore Street and waterskiing on the River Liffey. He founded the Society for the Preservation of Watering Troughs, and helped with the refurbishment of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin. He purchased the American Ambassador's helicopter and later founded Irish Helicopters Ltd. which was subsequently acquired by Aer Lingus. He suffered from manic depression and following the sale of the Royal Hibernian and the Russell Hotels in the early 1970s, he lost much of his spirit. He was extremely wealthy but was adamant to spend as much as he could before he died. He had an almost obsessive plan to introduce casinos to Ireland, either on land or floating offshore. He lived in Sandymount, South Dublin in his final years. Ken Besson died suddenly on the 28th August 1981.

Corr, *Hotels in Ireland* (1987); *Irish Times* (31/9/1981); Interviews with his daughter Caroline Wilkinson, his friends and colleagues Cathal O' Shannon, Ken Holden, Arthur Magee, Tommy Smith

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