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# Saving Lives, Saving Souls

Dominic MacSorley  
CEO, Concern Worldwide

**H**ow do you sum up a life of such extraordinary achievement? I think that the best way to capture Jack Finucane is by looking through the lens of some of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time: Biafra, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Rwanda. There he could be found. These are the places he called home. There his leadership shone.

## Biafra

Jack Finucane's story with Concern began in Biafra as part of the Irish response to the world's first televised famine, when the young John and Kay O'Loughlin Kennedy tapped into the conscience of a nation and channelled the generosity of the Irish people into the strong and assured hands of young priests such as Jack and his older brother Aengus who had brought to their parishes in Nigeria both the grit and grace of a Limerick upbringing.

For both these brothers, saving souls and saving lives were indivisible. They swung into action. Jack was responsible for coordinating the distribution of food and medicine that, under the cover of darkness, was flown in 20 times a night to a makeshift landing strip.

Donald Byrne, journalist for the *Irish Times* recalled: "I had never dealt with priests like these guys; they were a different breed."

It was dangerous and dramatic work – the stuff that Hollywood movies are



Fr. Jack Finucane CSSp

made of, which might be where Jack got his nickname, "The John Wayne of the developing world."

Jack was an unassuming man, quieter than his elder brother but no less compassionate or courageous, no less resourceful.

This was real frontier humanitarianism – no blueprint for how to respond to a crisis, no previous lessons learnt. This was uncharted territory. It was about instinct, compassion and the courage to engage in complex, humanitarian crises, in Biafra, in Bangladesh and then Ethiopia. It is this work that changed the paradigm – bringing the long tradition of missionary work into

what was to become modern humanitarian action. At the centre of this pioneering spirit was Jack Finucane.

## Bangladesh

When Jack went as Country Director to newly independent Bangladesh in 1973, he recognized that there were massive skill shortages – often citing that there were fewer nurses for a local population of 74 million than in any one hospital in Ireland. Mobilizing young professionals – nurses, teachers and engineers from every Irish county, the US, Canada and the UK – within a year he had under his management 76 volunteers, many of them at his funeral today, supporting the rebuilding of the country and creating what was essentially Ireland's version of the Peace Corps. Really groundbreaking work.

One of the very real challenges 40 years ago was persuading Irish mothers that it was OK to send their child to a country on the other side of the world battered by cyclones and war. Yet the trust of Irish mothers was extraordinary – I remember a letter that was sent to a certain Brigid marked c/o Concern, Bangkok, Thailand, Republic of China! It was a different age!

Jack always took care of his volunteers, he understood that responsibility. He also knew the importance of keeping people fit, healthy and focused on the work. Everything was thought through; it wasn't about comfort but about creat-



Concern Worldwide

Jack Finucane oversees emergency aid arriving in Biafra, Nigeria, in the late 1960s

ing a highly functioning humanitarian machine.

His adherence to standards was legendary. We all remember the tour of inspection, that began with the programs but didn't end there. In advance of his visit there was often a major clean-up of the Concern house and, if it wasn't up to scratch, you were in trouble. One nurse in Bangladesh was instructed by Jack to paint the house, and so she did – in bright pink and dark blue; it was pretty awful! Her excuse of "I'm not a decorator, Jack, I'm a nurse" didn't work and the walls were whitewashed the next time he returned! When Jack asked you to do something, he wasn't just telling you to do it, he was telling you to do it right.

## Ethiopia

It was the 1984 Ethiopian famine where Jack's leadership really came to the fore. By the time the famine received worldwide attention, he already had a team of 46 international volunteers and almost 1,000 Ethiopian staff on the ground. For many NGOs and the diplomatic community, he was the first port

of call because of his extensive local knowledge. He was an early advisor to Bob Geldof on how and where Live Aid money should be distributed. Yes, he ensured that a good percentage went to Concern – he was a businessman after

we ever got a glimpse of such a man. There will never be another like him."

Ethiopia was also where Jack took one of his most controversial stands – to work with the 650,000 people who had been forcibly re-settled from the

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all. When Bono and Ali visited, he took them to Wollo, one of the areas worst affected and which made a lifelong impression on them both. Ali is here today. Bono is on tour but he sent a message: "We are so shocked at Jack's passing, yet relieved that he made such a graceful exit and indeed humbled that

north to the south of the country. No other organization would get involved. Jack, however, got into his car, drove south and spent two weeks in the re-settlement villages where he saw people already dying, and recognized the potential for this to be a massive humanitarian disaster. Concern had to respond.



Concern Worldwide

Jack Finucane in Ethiopia, 1989

It was an enormous decision. Jack was initially isolated by the aid agencies and most of the diplomats, but he went on a media offensive – something he didn't do with ease but did well. He travelled to Canada and Europe to tell the world that not engaging with re-settlement would only punish the victims. It worked; he got the funding. Concern's program was effective in saving many lives. Jack's response: "I knew twenty years ago that it was the right decision; I don't need an evaluation to tell me that."

## Rwanda

Jack's humanity gave him clarity and confidence in his response to re-settlement. He was fundamentally offended by injustice.

I saw this first-hand in Rwanda after the genocide. I was Country Director and Jack was my boss in one of the largest relief operations mounted by Concern at the time. Jack would be on the phone every day: "What do you need?" "What more can we do?"

I remember at one point saying "Jack, we are already at full throttle here. We can't do anymore." There was simply silence on the other end of the phone. I never used that line again.

We were struggling with a decision about whether or not we should work in the prisons, which at that time were bursting to capacity with those accused of committing genocide. When Jack and I visited the notorious Kigali prison, he insisted on going into the underground dungeon, or cave as it was known, where thousands of men were crushed into a tiny space. The conditions were horrific.

Jack didn't say much, but his own experience of being in a Nigerian prison must have been very much on his mind. The next morning I found his note pad on the table beside an empty whiskey glass. Written in his distinctive handwriting was a letter to the *Irish Times* that opened with the following line, "In my 30 years of working in Africa, I have never been so ashamed of man's inhumanity to man." There was a sec-

ond note to me, "Dominic, start the work in the prisons immediately. I'll be back to see progress in a few weeks."

## Retirement

Jack formally retired in 2002, but he never stopped working for Concern. In 2004, without hesitation, he abandoned all plans for the summer and flew to Sudan to lead Concern's response to the Darfur crisis. He later went on to oversee our operations in tsunami-affected Sri Lanka. Up to the end he remained passionate and engaged in everything to do with Concern.

Only 4 weeks ago he was on Inishturk island, off the west coast of Ireland, with 70 former Concern volunteers. At the dinner that night he asked me to say a few words: in fact he told me what to say and to keep it short. He then instructed me to go around each table and talk to everyone. As I sat down he said, "That's probably the first good day's work you did in a long time!" He never stopped directing operations!

## Memories

We will all have our own fond memories and stories of Jack:

- The golf clubs that travelled many miles with him;
- The rich voice that, if he had chosen, could have given him a life-time job on radio;
- His pride at being given the Freedom of the City of Limerick.

His stature and presence were evident to all: in every local government office he would go in with a big handshake. I think everyone thought he was a visiting Head of State or an international diplomat. At every checkpoint or border crossing, we would all get stopped. He just got waived through.

When he broke his leg taking Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, around a refugee camp and ended up recovering in Nairobi, away from the Dublin office and closer to the action, we all knew that the cast stayed on that leg a lot longer than it needed to!

Not just a man of substance – but of style. Style with purpose. “Style doesn’t have to cost money,” he would say. He always insisted that, as guests in another country, dressing smartly showed due respect.

And, boy, did he have style, even in the roughest spots! I remember one time that we had to sleep outside in an abandoned village on the Chadian border. As we unrolled the sleeping bags, Jack appeared in his blue silk pyjamas – cost him only \$15 in a market in Bangladesh – with a towel over his arm asking, “Where do we shower?” “It’s a bucket,” I said. Unfazed he responded, “Well, that’s perfectly fine – for now.”

## Nation’s Hero

They say the character of a nation is closely defined by the heroes it chooses. In Ireland we have created a special place for writers, sports stars and politicians, but surely the humanitarian giants such as Jack and Aengus, whose impact extends far beyond these shores, deserve to sit right at the top of that table?

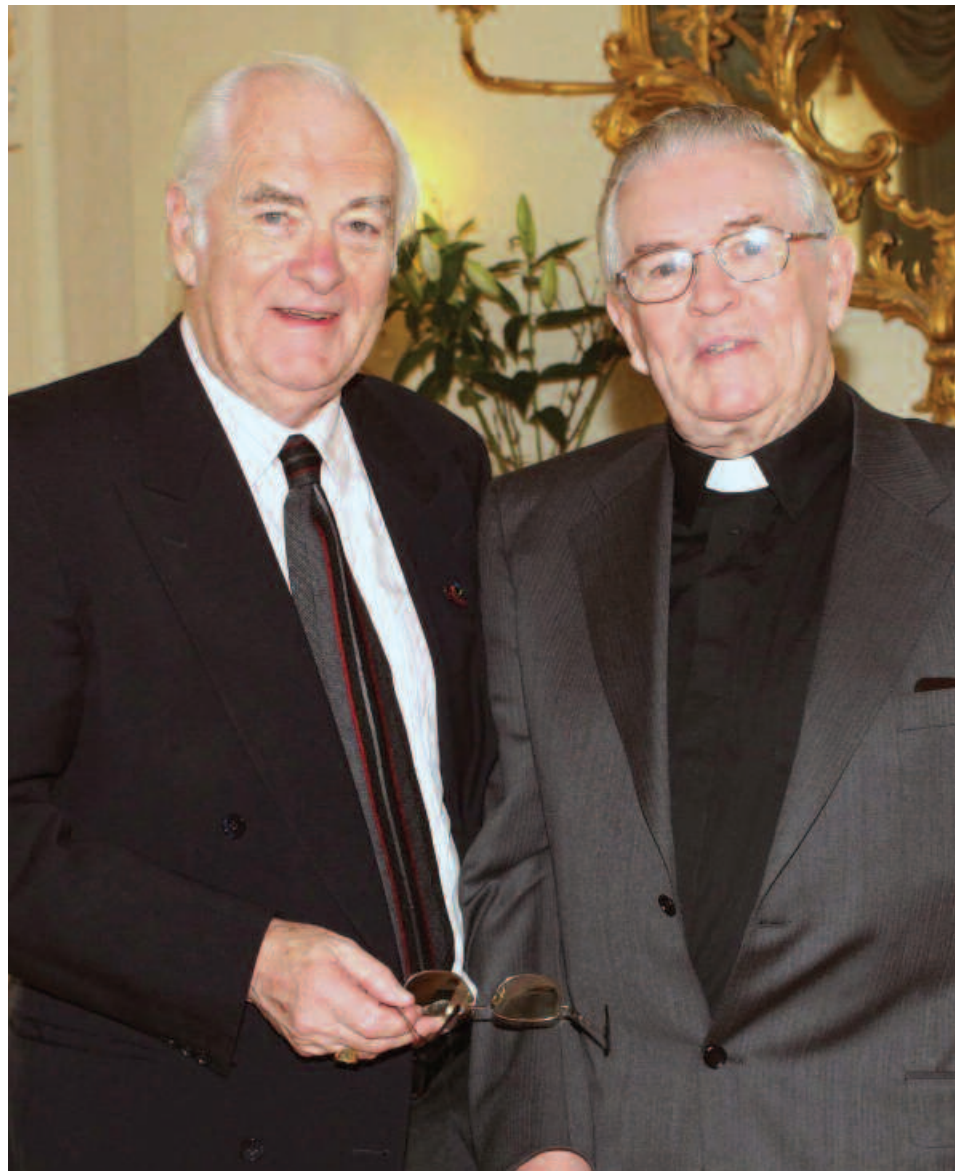
Justice, humanity and action defined Jack Finucane, this giant of a man, who

I remember at one point saying “Jack, we are already at full throttle here. We can’t do anymore.” There was simply silence on the other end of the phone. I never used that line again.

helped carve out the path of professional humanitarian response that we all follow today. What he achieved may never be fully quantified, but it saved and improved the lives of millions of people – bringing compassion to chaos and humanity to the most inhuman

situations. In doing so he shaped us all. Our responsibility is to ensure that his legacy lives on.

On a personal level, he walked with me through the toughest assignments. He was a mentor, a friend and an inspiration. I will miss him hugely. ■



Jack and Aengus Finucane