

Lord O'Neill, Madam President, Mr Chairman, fellow railway enthusiasts, ladies and gentlemen, I cannot tell you what an honour and privilege it is for me to be with you this evening, and to have the chance to pay my own tribute and that of the Heritage Railway Association to one of our movement's greatest and most loved figures.

It was in September 2014 that I first really got to know Lord O'Neill, during that marvellous HRA weekend spent here in Northern Ireland. He invited me to join his compartment on the special train to Portrush, and his table at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration dinner in Belfast City Hall. Although his politics and mine don't entirely coincide – although there are rather more views that he and I share than you might expect – I found him to be the most wonderful company – an impression that was reinforced in Enniskillen last year when with the help of the wonderful Headhunters barber's shop and railway museum we commemorated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of the railways in Fermanagh.

It is no exaggeration to say, ladies and gentlemen, that had it not been for the inspirational leadership of Lord O'Neill, certainly in the early days, the railway preservation movement in Northern Ireland and the republic would have been far, far less successful.

I was intrigued to see a wonderful photograph on the RPSI website taken at the inaugural meeting of the RPSI which was held in the Presbyterian Hostel, Belfast, on 30th September 1964. The speaker was a rather youthful Lord O'Neill, with one Robin Morton peeping over someone's shoulder, also in the picture.

Lord O'Neill was instrumental in helping the RPSI to secure its first steam locomotive – No. 3BG which was presented to the Society in 1965 when it was retired from shunting duties at the Guinness Brewery in Dublin. Appropriately named “Guinness”, this locomotive which was built in 1919, is still operational and is to be seen on Saturdays in July and August offering train rides at Whitehead Railway Museum, one of the gems of the railway preservation scene.

I was delighted to be present when the Whitehead museum won the most prestigious award the HRA can offer at its annual ceremony held in Birmingham in February this year. That was the Manisty Award, named in memory of the late Captain Peter F. Manisty formerly of the Royal Navy. He was the long-serving chairman of the Association of Railway Preservation Societies, the HRA's predecessor, and was almost as great a figure in railway preservation circles on the mainland as Lord O'Neill is here, on this side of the water.

John McKegney, together with Robin Morton and Peter Scott, was presented with a large – and very heavy – blue plaque which says “The Manisty Award for Excellence awarded to Whitehead RPSI for their new Museum and Engineering Facility”. What a wonderful accolade in the year of Lord O'Neill's retirement as your President, and his transition to becoming your Patron.

I am told that at the Society's AGM, Lord O'Neill recalled happy memories of travelling on many of the Society's special steam trains throughout Ireland over the years. He said it had always been important to him that the RPSI should be an all-island body. This is reflected in the official title of the HRA – the Heritage Railway Association of the United

Kingdom and Ireland. I hope that extreme Brexiteers will not be offended by my mentioning that.

It is impossible in the space of a short speech this evening to do justice to everything that he has contributed to public life and to the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland. Lord Lieutenant of Antrim from 1994 to 2008, chairman of the Northern Ireland National Trust, chairman of the NI Tourist Board, and much much more. But it's the first – and up to this year, the only – President of the RPSI whom we are honouring this evening, and to whom we are saying thank you.

The toast, ladies and gentlemen, is Lt-Col Raymond Arthur Clanaboy O'Neill, 4th Baron O'Neill of Shane's Castle – Lord O'Neill.