Frank McDonald was born in Dublin in 1950 and educated at St Vincent’s CBS, Glasnevin, and University College Dublin, where he graduated in 1971 with a BA in history and politics. He started his journalistic career shortly afterwards as freelance New York correspondent for the Irish Press, subsequently becoming a sub-editor and reporter for the paper before joining The Irish Times in 1979. He was its Environment Editor from 2000 until his retirement last January. He is also author of several books including The Destruction of Dublin (1985), Saving the City (1989) and The Construction of Dublin (2000) and joint author with Peigin Doyle of Ireland’s Earthen Houses (1997), with James Nix of Chaos at the Crossroads (2005), which documented the environmental destruction of Ireland during the boom years, and with Kathy Sheridan of The Builders (2008), profiling the developers and others involved in the so-called Celtic Tiger’s casino culture.

Frank McDonald has also reported on UN climate change conferences since 1995, including Copenhagen, Cancun, Durban and Warsaw. A regular contributor to radio and television programmes, he won the Outstanding Work in Irish Journalism award in 1979 for a series of articles in The Irish Times entitled "Dublin: What went wrong?" as well as the Lord Mayor’s Millennium Medal (1988) for highlighting good contemporary architecture in the city, the Chartered Institute of Transport Journalist of the Year (1998), two ESB National Media Awards (1999 and 2003), a Lord Mayor’s Award (2003) and the Green Leader Award (2008). Conferred with an Honorary DPhil by Dublin Institute of Technology in 2006, he was made an honorary member of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland in 2010 and an honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2011. He was also a Press Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge, in 2008, and a founder member of the Academy of Urbanism of Great Britain and Ireland. He has been a resident of the Temple Bar area since 1995.