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MONSIGNOR DE BRUN MEMORIAL LECTURE

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IRELAND AND THE AMERICAN IRISH

By

William V. Shannon  
United States Ambassador to Ireland

November 29, 1977

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MONSIGNOR DE BRUN MEMORIAL LECTURE

Galway, November 29, 1977

It is a great honor for me to deliver the lecture that annually commemorates the name of Monsignor de Brun. Priest, mathematician and medievalist, scholar of the Irish language, university administrator and patron of the arts, he was a brilliant member of one of modern Ireland's most illustrious families.

It is traditional for speakers, particularly ambassadors, to find common ground between themselves and their audiences. Tonight, I think it might clarify my topic--the relationship of Ireland and the American Irish--if I call attention to significant ways in which the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in the United States are different. One of Monsignor de Brun's several achievements, for example, was to translate Dante's Inferno into the Irish language. Such an accomplishment might not be beyond the intellectual powers of a few Irish Americans--we have experts in the Irish language in the United States--but it would be an accomplishment almost without meaning in American Irish terms. The revival of the Irish language has been an arduous enough enterprise in Ireland. It has never begun at all in any serious sense among the American Irish.

Indeed, as Professor Cormac O'Grada of University College Dublin--and other writers on emigration have also observed--"Emigration contributed mightily to the decline of the Irish language. ...For many of the early emigrants, illiteracy may not have been such a drawback in the mills and factories of New England, but ignorance of English must have been a real nuisance. Thus, the 'pull' of America was a major factor in the anglicisation of Irish-speaking areas," particularly here in the west of Ireland from the 1840's onward. Since a knowledge of English was indispensable for the ambitious immigrant, Irish-speaking parents made sure their children learned English. It was these ambitious mothers and fathers that insured the success of the British Government policy of destroying Irish culture and making English the uniform language. If it had not been for the powerful attraction of the United States, the rapid decline of the Irish language in the nineteenth century would otherwise be a mysterious development. After all, the Irish people who were Catholic retained their religious loyalties despite intense British coercion. They could likewise have retained their language if there had not been a positive as well as a negative force being exerted upon them.

If the American Irish stand outside the language movement, most of them also stand outside Ireland's significant modern history. The preponderant number of immigrants to the United States left Ireland before 1900. The Rev. Andrew Greeley has estimated that "eighty per cent of the Irish Catholic population in the United States are third or fourth generation, which is to say that their grandparents or their great-grandparents were the immigrants." If one were to include Irish Protestant immigrants, most of whom left Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries, this percentage would be even higher.

What does this mean in practice? It means that they were in the United States--not in Ireland--at the time of the Easter rising, the Black-and-Tan troubles, the Irish civil war, the critical election of 1932, the economic struggle with Britain in the 1930's, the drafting of the Irish constitution in 1937. In short, they were distant spectators of the main personalities and events that make up the pain and the struggle, the burden and the glory of Ireland's history in the last several decades. Names and events that are familiar to every Irish schoolboy and girl are unknown or only foggily perceived by many college-educated American Irish. If, for example, you were to give my fellow

American Irish a short list of five important names from 20th century Irish history--let us say, James Larkin, Arthur Griffith, Kevin O'Higgins, Ryan Duffy and Erskine Childers--and ask for a sentence or two about each of them explaining why he was important, I doubt how many in my own country could pass such a test. Conversely, how many of you could readily identify John L. Lewis, Henry L. Stimson, Calvin Coolidge, Gen. Hugh Johnson, and Henry A. Wallace?

The teaching of history in the schools is of little help in remedying widespread ignorance. In this connection, The (London) Economist recently observed that one reason for difficulties between England and Ireland is that hardly anything about the history of one country is taught in the schools of the other. I have lived in London and I can assure you that is true. Almost nothing about Irish history is taught in English schools. My three sons are now going to school in Dublin and as best I can observe remarkably little history is taught in primary and secondary schools in this country except Irish history. The same reciprocal ignorance prevails in the United States where English history is taught sparingly and Irish history not at all. In recent years, efforts on both sides of the Atlantic have been made to overcome this deficiency, at least at college and university level.

In Ireland, (PICK UP DAVID DOYLE'S LETTER).

In the United States in the last 25 years, there has been a growing demand from students to learn Irish history. This demand arises in part from a new ethnic consciousness among many second and third generation Americans eager to discover their own cultural roots and in part also from the widespread American interest in Irish literature. Students who have read James Joyce's "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" naturally want to know more about Parnell and those who have read Sean O'Casey's "The Plough and the Stars" naturally want to understand more about Ireland's struggle for national independence. Thus, Irish literature is the pathbreaker for the study of Irish history. But the journey toward a widely shared and accurate understanding of that history has still a long way to go.

I read with much interest several weeks ago a series of essays printed in "The Irish Times" and sparked by a speech by the Irish playwright Denis Johnston. These essays addressed the question--What is the true nature of Irish identity? Aside from the small community of Irish Jews who happily have suffered no civil or religious disabilities in this nation, the Irish national identity seeks to accommodate three different strands of the Christian experience--the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian, and the Catholic. Ireland's

problem is that each of them has become identified with a different political tradition and with a different part of the national experience.

All three of these Irish traditions are woven in important ways into the larger American fabric. The thirteen states that formed the American nation were English-speaking communities that reflected this 3-way diversity. The Church of Ireland is known in America as the Episcopalian Church and became the established church in several of the colonies. One colony was founded as a refuge for Catholics--the future state of Maryland. Several, including Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, were founded by dissenting Protestant sects.

Meanwhile, adverse economic circumstances in Ulster in the 1700's sent repeated waves of emigrants from that part of Ireland to the American colonies. Many though not all of these immigrants were the descendants of people imported into Ulster from Scotland by King James I to insure Ireland's loyalty. On their transplantation to America, these Protestant Irish became the most resourceful and implacable enemies of the crown. They were in the forefront of the political struggles leading up to the American Revolution and in the military battles of the Revolution.



"The American War was lost by Irish immigrants," Lord Mountjoy observed in Parliament with some exaggeration.

These Protestant Irish were to play a major role in the political and cultural life of the American nation. Nine of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Irish ancestry, including four who were born in Ireland: George Thornton and Charles Thomson, both born in Derry, and James Smith and George Taylor who were born elsewhere in the province of Ulster.

Fourteen American presidents from John Adams to Jimmy Carter have traced all or part of their lineage to Protestant Irish forebears. Three of them were sons of Irish emigrants. Andrew Jackson's parents were born in County Antrim; James Buchanan's father was born in Donegal, and Chester Arthur's father in Antrim. When President Jackson visited Boston in 1833, he was greeted by the Charitable Irish Society there. He said on that occasion: "I feel grateful, sir, at the testimony of this city. It is with great pleasure that I see so many of the countrymen of my father assembled on this occasion. I have always been proud of my ancestry and of being descended from that noble race."

Place names in America such as Belfast, Maine and Londonderry; New Hampshire also testify to this Ulster influence. By 1730, Pennsylvania had townships named Derry, Donegal, Tyrone, Coleraine, and Fermanagh. Similar names are scattered throughout the American South.

Originally, Catholic and Protestant immigrants from Ireland made little or no distinction among themselves along religious lines. Thus, when the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a fraternal group, was organized in Philadelphia in 1771, the first president was Stephen Moylan, whose brother was a Catholic bishop, and the second president was John M. Nesbitt, an Ulster Presbyterian. In the late nineteenth century, however, perhaps to distinguish themselves from the much larger numbers of Catholic Irish immigrants of the Famine generation, some Protestant Irish began to denominate themselves as Scots-Irish. This is a term of dubious accuracy that obscures as much as it clarifies. As Peter B. Sheridan of the Library of Congress' Research Service noted in his monograph, The Protestant Irish Heritage in America, (July, 1977) "...not all Irish Protestants were of Scottish origin and they did not all come from Northern Ireland." President Arthur's father, for example, came from County Antrim but he was an Episcopalian, not a Presbyterian, and his forebears originated in England.

To measure quantitatively the presence of the Protestant Irish in American life today is virtually impossible. A minority of them survives in discernible communities in the mountainous areas of North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. They are the direct descendants of the pioneers of the Revolutionary War Period. But the greater number of the Protestant Irish have over the generations intermarried with other Americans of English, Scottish, German or other lineages and have disappeared as a distinct ethnic group. It would be erroneous therefore to equate all the descendants of the Protestant Irish immigrants with impoverished mountaineers. Although two Irish Protestant empire builders--Andrew Mellon and Henry Ford--were exceptional figures, many others have been highly successful if less conspicuous.

The predominantly Protestant immigration ebbed after 1820. Immigration from predominantly Catholic areas began to increase. It reached a peak with the onset of the Great Famine in 1845 and continued strong for several decades thereafter. Between the United States census of 1820 and that of 1930--when immigration to the United States almost came to a stop because of the Great Depression--five and one-half million Irish people emigrated to the United States.

The growing strength of the American Irish was influential--though not decisive--at two critical moments in the history of Ireland. One was in the early 1880's. Money raised in the United States enabled Michael Davitt to organize the Land League whose agitation brought about far-reaching land reforms. The American Irish in the same period organized a 10,000-mile tour of the United States by Charles Stewart Parnell and obtained for him an invitation to address the House of Representatives in Washington.

Again in the period from 1916 to 1921, pressure from American Irish opinion was instrumental in persuading British authorities to spare the lives of Eamon DeValera and others involved in the Easter Rising. DeValera in 1919-20 also toured the United States, speaking to large crowds and raising substantial sums of money for the nationalist cause in this country. Finally, in the months leading up to the Anglo-Irish peace treaty of December, 1921, one of the factors influencing Lloyd George to reach a peaceful settlement was his desire to conciliate American opinion.

Two points are worth making about these interventions by the American Irish. First, although they were free with advice--people who give money usually are--they did not call

the tune. Parnell and Davitt and, later, DeValera and Griffith made the critical decisions. That was as it should be because they were the men who were on the ground and knew the facts first-hand. They bore the responsibility for success or failure and they exercised that responsibility.

Secondly, although the American Irish who were Catholics were in the forefront, it would be wrong to assume that support for Irish nationalism was exclusively a Catholic enterprise. On the contrary, many American Irish of Protestant background as well as many other Americans who had no personal or family connections with Ireland at all were deeply interested. Ireland's struggle for national independence was seen as a typically liberal battle by an oppressed people. The same enthusiasm that greeted Parnell had earlier greeted Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian liberator, and--in the later period--welcomed Poland and Czechoslovakia when they achieved independence after World War I.

If we come down to the present to the violence and political instability that now trouble the North, we can first say that the turmoil of recent years has caught Americans,

both Irish and non-Irish, by surprise. As recently as ten years ago in 1967 when I was asked by the editor of a leading magazine in New York to write a traditional St. Patrick's Day article about Ireland, I could not persuade him that beneath the surface calm in the North there was bitterness between the two communities and serious problems that would someday have to be sorted out. He assumed as most Americans did that "the Irish problem" had all been solved nearly 50 years earlier.

Unfortunately, it required the horror of Lerry's "Bloody Sunday" and scores of fratricidal killings in the North to dispel illusions. At first, many American Irish identified the troubles that broke out in 1968-69 as a renewal of the war for independence. The British having relinquished control of 26 counties were now to be persuaded to yield up the remaining six. Bernadette Devlin, you will recall, made a money-raising tour of the United States shortly after her flamboyant entry into the House of Commons. She was at first perceived by many American Irish as another Countess Markievicz or Maud Gonne come to trumpet a call for a fresh crusade. Vietnam was then tormenting my country. Would not Britain have to withdraw from Ireland as the U.S. eventually had to withdraw from Vietnam?

But time and events educated everyone to distrust all facile parallels, both historical and contemporary, and to acknowledge that the situation in the North is complex and that both communities there have valid claims that have to be recognized and reconciled.

The American position today is essentially the same as it was in the days of Parnell and Davitt and again in those of Griffith and DeValera. Americans are interested but only the Irish people themselves can make the critical decisions, in this instance the leaders of the various Unionist parties, the Alliance Party, and the Social Democratic Labor Party as well as the Government in Dublin. As President Carter has said, "The only permanent solution will come from the people who live there. There are no solutions that outsiders can impose."

Secondly, now as in 1880 and 1920, the American interest extends well beyond the visible Irish community that parades on St. Patrick's Day. President Carter who has Protestant Irish ancestors personifies that broader national interest. Unlike President Woodrow Wilson who in 1919-20 unwisely turned his back on the Irish problem, President Carter declared in his August statement: "Americans are deeply concerned about the continuing conflict and violence

in Northern Ireland." Furthermore, he stated that if the two communities in the North with the help of the British and Irish governments could reach a political settlement there, "the U.S. Government would be prepared to join with others to see how additional job-creating investment could be encouraged."

Finally, I would say a word about American financial support for the men of violence in the North. That financial support has declined sharply since the early '70's when Bloody Sunday and other stirring events caused some American Irish to contribute.

The U.S. Government through law-enforcement agencies is doing everything that legally can be done to discourage money-raising that serves to finance violence over here. But this problem has to be seen in perspective. 99 per cent of the American Irish have never given a dollar to support violence in this country. Public figures who urge Americans not to contribute money for violent ends are preaching to the converted.



There is a hard core of Irish Americans who do sympathize with the Provos. They are made up predominantly of two groups.. One is a dwindling band of old-timers who are still fighting the battles of the 1920's. After the Irish civil war ended, it is estimated that in the following years about 10,000 men who had been on the anti-Treaty side emigrated to the United States, mostly to New York. Noraid, the pro-IRA organization that raises money, was founded by three of these veterans, men in their 70's. Secondly, support comes from recent immigrants from Ireland who came to the United States in the 20 years after World War II. many of them from the North. Having come recently from Ireland, they have their own view of events there and are not easily dissuaded by appeals either from Irish or American leaders. Their numbers hardly exceed 50,000, at most 75,000, a tiny proportion of the 15 million to 18 million American Irish.

Yet, paradoxically, it is only with this small group that votes are to be won or lost in the United States on the Northern Ireland issue. The great majority of the American Irish would decide their votes for President or senator or governor on the basis of a wide range of American issues. But pro-IRA voters would change their votes depending on a

candidate's stand on Northern Ireland. And a shift of even 10,000 or 20,000 votes in a close election could make the difference. That is why it took political courage for Governor Carey of New York to come to Dublin as he did last spring and denounce the official and provisional branches of the IRA as the "IRA Marxists" and the "IRA killers." There are disgruntled Provo supporters in New York prepared to vote against him in New York next year for taking that position.

That is why President Carter concluded his August statement by associating himself with Governor Carey. The President said: "I admire the many true friends of Northern Ireland in this country who speak out for peace. Emotions run high on this subject and the easiest course is not to stand up for conciliation. I place myself firmly on the side of those who seek peace and reject violence in Northern Ireland."

The broad majority of American Irish and of Americans generally align themselves with President Carter, Governor Carey, Senator Kennedy, Senator Moynihan and Speaker O'Neill in striving to work for peace and reconciliation in the North. Only in this way can Ireland's long travail in the North be brought to an end.