

EDWARD L. BERNAYS FOUNDATION LECTURE ON "EUROPE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION", AS SEEN FROM THE IRISH VIEWPOINT

December 12, 1963
Mr. Kevin Rush, Counselor
Embassy of Ireland, Washington

1. INTRODUCTION. The shadow of the great tragedy of recent days lies darkly across the United States, not least darkly across Boston, not least darkly across Irish hearts. We are still in the period of mourning. It occurred to me in fact to suggest that this lecture might be cancelled. On reflection however I decided that it would be more appropriate to carry through the programme as originally scheduled, in keeping with that spirit of continuity which is the mood of the hour. This is the time for all of us to carry on and to do our job.

2. I should like however, here in his own native city Boston, to pay a tribute to the memory of the late President Kennedy. Indeed, since in his own person he summed up and proclaimed for all time the subject of my talk today, the particular Irish contribution to American way of life, it is only fitting that my poor efforts should be dedicated to his memory.

3. It is generally known that Ireland has made some contribution to American civilization. The extent and significance of that contribution are not so well known. Ireland's contribution has primarily been one of people, of people of ideas and ideals rather than of material things. Irish people, from the earliest colonial days right down to the present day, have come to America on one-way tickets, have travelled across this great continent to its furthest reaches, have settled in every one of the fifty states of the Union. The Irish have suffered & died in every war of the United States. They have prospered in like measure in times of peace and prosperity. They have grown in this great country in numbers and grown with it in stature. It has been estimated that by 1950 there were 14,000,000 persons of direct Irish descent in the population of the United States, that is about 9% of the

total at that date.

4. It will be seen immediately that our subject today is a large one. It would be quite impossible for me to deal with it in any comprehensive fashion. There are, of course, several well-known books on the subject some of which contain extensive bibliographies of other less-known works. Acknowledging all that has been done already in this field, may I, with every respect, express the wish that some day a definitive history of the Irish in America may be written. Perhaps that great work will be commissioned by the American Irish Foundation, recently established, of which I shall have something more to say later.

5. Immigration from Ireland to the North American continent began in the earliest colonial days. Most of these early arrivals are unknown to history as individuals. There were some exceptions. These tended to be Irishmen who became prominent in public affairs. From the earliest days it is a remarkable fact that Irish names occur and recur in the annals of government. Irish names occur also in the military records of the early days. There were Irish names among the pioneers and early settlers and many of these have left their mark as place names right across the prairies and even in the Pacific coast states. In general, however, these earliest of the Irish were rapidly assimilated into the newly growing nation and when Independence came they were transformed into instant Americans. Fittingly then, of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, at least three were born in Ireland.

6. Before Independence however there was a long and weary war waged by Washington. In this the Irish played their part. It was a large and generous part. Accounts of actual numbers differ but the Irish contribution in men and blood was sufficiently impressive to cause General George Washington to establish a military parade on St.

Patrick's Day with which his armies might honour their Irish comrades. The Irish have been parading on the 17th March ever since and, in the meantime, their multitudinous friends have joined in this annual tribute to St. Patrick. While his fellow countrymen served Washington so faithfully on land, a great Irishman fought equally gallantly at sea.

John Barry, born in Wexford, Ireland, has rightly been called the father of the U.S. Navy. Many of the sailors who served in his handful of small ships were fellow Irishmen some of whose names have survived.

7. From its very beginning Congress had its quota of Irish orators. Those whose fame has come down to us were the controversial figures, such as Matthew Lyon, born in Wicklow, Ireland in 1750, who in general supported unpopular causes. There were others more orthodox perhaps whose names only are known. The magnificent building in which the Congress proudly installed itself in January, 1801 was constructed under the supervision of another Irishman, James Hoban, who was even more famous perhaps as the architect and builder of the White House. Not least valuable of the contributions made in those early days was that of the Irish churchmen and educators. Most notable of these was Bishop Carroll of Baltimore. In addition to being the first Catholic Bishop in the United States he was of course the founder of Georgetown University in 1789.

8. As the frontier was pushed westward the Irish went westward too coming in greater numbers now that the nineteenth century had dawned and conditions in Ireland had worsened. They met for the first time serious opposition. Some of the older elements in the population alarmed and resentful at the incursion of ever larger numbers from Europe, resorted to legislative action to stem the tide. Nationality and Sedition Acts were drafted and advocated. Fortunately for the Irish they were seldom enacted. The resistance of vested interests

tended however to direct the newly-come Irish into particular parts of the country where they were more welcome or rather less unwelcome than in the longer established settlements. The drift westward was on and very soon the drift southward also. When the inevitable clash with the Spanish influence in Mexico occurred the Irish once again appeared in a military role. When the Alamo fell and its garrison of nearly 200 men was put to the sword, not less than 10% of the victims were Irish born. Many more bore Irish names.

9. It was, however, in the terrible Civil War that the Irish made their greatest contribution to American arms. They loyally served on both sides and on some poignant occasions met face to face on the battle field. The greatest outpouring of Irish valour and blood was made in the service in the Union armies of Burnside and Meade. An Irish Brigade composed exclusively of Irish volunteers led the assault on the heights of Fredericksburg and paid a terrible price for its gallantry. In this and subsequent battles it was literally decimated. In every subsequent war fought by armies of the United States Irish names were prominent. This glorious military record is best exemplified by a particular army unit, the 69th New York Regiment, the famous Fighting 69th, formerly Meagher's Brigade. Its battle honours summarize the entire military history of the United States.

10. The greatest and most significant contribution of the Irish however was not on the field of battle but rather in the realm of politics. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards the trickle of immigration from Ireland became a flood. The Irish came in numbers hitherto undreamed of. Those who had come earlier were called pioneers or settlers. These were honourable terms. From 1847 onwards however the Irish were called immigrants. In fact they were refugees. Refugees from a national disaster of truly appalling dimensions, the Great

Famine. That dreadful page in Irish history is so dark that Irish people to this very day can hardly bear to contemplate it. It was left to an English writer of great talent, Mrs. Cecily Woodham Smith, to write its definitive history in her monumental book "The Great Hunger". So terrible was the Great Famine that eventually it reduced the population of Ireland by one half. Eight million people or more were living in Ireland in 1841. By 1861, a mere twenty years later, two million had died and two million had fled the country. Of those who left the greater number sailed to America. Over one million of them arrived between 1847 and 1855. That enormous number amounted to about 7% of the entire population of the United States at that time.

11. This mass migration resembled in many ways a veritable invasion. These Irish came crowding in under the strongest possible compulsion, panic. They were in headlong flight from a desperate fate. They arrived to face one little better. In Ireland they were driven from home by hunger, plague, economic oppression and administrative indifference or ineptitude. On their arrival in America they faced similar indifference and ineptitude. Their hunger, sickness, poverty, and misery they had brought with them as their travelling companions. It is small wonder that they were not welcome. It is understandable that they should have been resented. They were reviled. Worse still, they were exploited. It is surprising only that they survived.

12. Survive they did, however, and within one generation they had established themselves at least economically. They were still however underprivileged in social and political terms. They had become an underprivileged minority, the first of many such minorities to darken the pages of American history. Hot on their heels came another national group, the Germans. In general they arrived in less unfavourable circumstances than the Irish. They carried, however, an additional handi-

cap. They spoke a foreign tongue. As the nineteenth century reached its close and the new century dawned still other national minority groups appeared on the American scene. These came at the first from the northern European countries and then from the southern European countries and in their turn became the most depressed and underprivileged element in the growing population of the United States.

13. The Irish minority, despite its heavy handicaps and dreadful suffering, enjoyed at least two advantages as compared with other nationalities. They spoke the language of the country and were already familiar with the system of government and administration which, being essentially British, resembled those in operation in Ireland. Using these assets to the best advantage the Irish moved into the political arena. Within one generation they had made their penetration of the lowest levels. As political party workers at the street level they organized the potent votes of their countrymen and of the other minority groups which shared their low estate. Sheer numbers gave them a potency which they would otherwise have lacked. They soon became a power in the political affairs of the larger cities in which they had mostly settled and especially in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Political power brought its rewards including jobs in the public service. This in turn was a source of further power and influence and so the process continued until, in city politics at least the Irish were supreme in several cities. At the level of state government they never quite established the same ascendancy, partly because of the built-in vested interests of the rural areas. Nevertheless, by virtue of sheer numbers they often played a crucial role in the election of governors of some of the larger states. In the field of national politics their influence was more marked, especially in the House of Representatives. There the concept of "Irish" congressional districts soon became an established

factor in the political equation. The fact that the Irish were, almost to a man and almost from the beginning, Democrats rather than Republicans enhanced the powers of their numbers wherever and whenever the Democrats were in the ascendancy. This combination of factors resulted in the phenomenon of nationality blocs in American politics. This extraordinary phenomenon continues to operate to this very day. There are parts of the United States where to be a congressman it is virtually essential to be a Democrat of Irish origin. The Chairman of the Democratic National Committee is by tradition always a Catholic Irish-American.

Success in the realm of city politics brought its rewards, negative as well as positive. On the negative side the Irish no longer felt the keen disapproval of officialdom which tends to be exercised automatically against underprivileged groups. On the positive side, promising avenues of employment were opening up to them. They took these opportunities eagerly and used them effectively. It soon became evident that their taste for politics was matched by a flair for administration. As administrators and public servants of one kind or another they were, in turn, able to promote further the political fortunes of their compatriots.

It was not only in the field of public affairs, however, that the Irish made rapid progress at this period. Even more spectacular was their advance in the ranks of the Catholic Church. That Church had suffered even more intensively than the nation as a whole from the sudden eruption of Irish immigrant masses from 1847 onwards. Already beset by serious problems of expansion, it was ill equipped to cope with this unlooked for flood of the faithful. Difficulties and disputes there were, at first, as may well be imagined. Within a decade, however, if only by sheer massive numbers, the Irish had come to dominate the Catholic Church in America. By 1860 they outnumbered all other

national elements in that Church but then the native born American Catholics were in a minority position. The flair for administration in secular affairs displayed by the Irish at this stage was shown even more strongly in Church matters. More than one half of the 500 Catholic Bishops in the United States since Independence have been Irishmen and of the first 6 cardinals of the United States no less than four were Irish. That great tradition lives on in the person of his Eminence Richard Cardinal Cushing. The same pattern was repeated at the lower levels. So many pastors were Irish that protests were frequently heard from other immigrant groups within the Church against the domination of the Irish. Serious strains were imposed on the unity and orthodoxy of the Church in the United States but it survived them successfully. Many priests had come from Ireland with the immigrants particularly as a result of the establishment in Ireland in the forties of the first missionary seminary in Dublin. These priests and the Irish-American priests of the second and third generations have liberally sprinkled the map of the United States with parishes named for St. Patrick, St. Bridget, St. Brendan and a whole litany of other Irish saints of antiquity. That phenomenon continues to the present day. A scholar has estimated that no less than 1900 churches have been named for St. Patrick throughout the world of which more than a thousand are in the United States. The loyalty and dedication of the Irish to their church has been one of the brightest chapters of their history both in Ireland and throughout the world. It is seen at its brightest in the United States. The financial burdens of providing not only churches but school as well has required the making of contributions on a truly heroic scale by Catholics in America. In that regard the Irish in America have been outstanding. In their turn they have benefitted greatly from the Church. From the earliest days it was a source not only of spiri-

tual strength but of social cohesion, of education and of social status. In the matter of education alone it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this factor in the success story of the Irish immigrants.

The Irish were, of course, not all Catholics. It can be said, however, that they were all devoted to their religion and to this day protestants of Irish origin are noted for their support of their churches, many of which incidentally also bear the honored name of St. Patrick, In other fields also the progress of the Irish in the second half of the 19th century was steady if not so spectacular. Among the professions Irish doctors and nurses were soon so common as to be taken for granted. In the theatre Irish names were even more familiar. Among writers and especially in the ranks of journalists Irish names are constantly encountered. Not least significant perhaps was the emergence of several Irish personalities among the sports heroes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A student of sociology and of the American Democracy has remarked that minority groups deprived of other outlets for their energies and genius tend first to reach prominence in the field of sport.

As can be imagined many of the Irish of this period went into business and little by little some of them rose to the top. On the whole however it appears that in this particular element their success was less outstanding than elsewhere. This was particularly true of the banking world long a stronghold of conservative elements. Even after the dawn of the 20th century it was a matter of virtually historic precedent when a young Catholic Irish named Joseph P. Kennedy became the first of his race to be elected president of a bank. This young Irish banker of Boston was, of course, to make history in other ways later on.

In achieving so much so relatively quickly, the Irish contrived to

give as well as to receive. In common with the other immigrant groups they made a mighty contribution to the rapid and strong growth of the United States in the latter half of the 19th century. That the United States emerged into prominence on the world stage just at this time when the Irish and the other immigrant groups were emerging into prominence within the United States was hardly a coincidence. Natural ability and a willingness to work hard were perhaps the most common attributes of all the successful immigrants. The Irish shared these virtues but as their particular contribution they brought other qualities also. They were imbued with a strong and active religious faith. It was not so much that they possessed the faith abundantly as that the faith possessed them. This was the basis for a strong character marked by courage, moral courage as well as physical courage, patience, pertinacity and perseverance. More particularly however the predominant religious element in the Irish make-up expressed itself in terms of an especial kind of loyalty. This was the quality known to the ancients as pietas, a loyal and loving devotion to faith, family & fatherland. It marked the Irish out as people bound by the closest of ties to their family and kinfolk as well as to their ancient faith. They were, of course, criticised and ridiculed on both scores, but when this deep sense of loyalty was carried over, as it invariably was, to a high sense of patriotic duty their new fatherland had every reason to appreciate it. This was the real key to Irish valor on the field of battle. It was an important factor also in their vocation for public service whether in the political or administrative spheres. Their veneration for learning which they had brought with them from their Irish heritage was another great asset which served both them and their new nation. Finally, their gift for the spoken word was put to good advantage in the fields of politics and of the law. For the last a certain gregarious-

ness in the Irish character, a desire to be friendly with all mankind, stood these Irish immigrants in good stead, when they found themselves among the greatest conglomeration of nationalities ever known to history.

Such qualities and considerations are difficult to measure but the standing of the Irish, as a group, throughout the United States today is perhaps sufficient testimony to their importance.

Although the Irish had come a long way they still had not reached the top. There were, indeed, clear signs already in the 20th century that they might never be accepted as first class citizens. Their numbers and perhaps especially their universal loyalty to the Catholic faith had made them suspect from the beginning to older and more conservative elements in the American population. A bitter residue of that discrimination survived in the 20th century. Even after World War I when American veterans returned to seek employment in the United States they found awaiting them the ugly proclamation "No Irish Need Apply" in most of their great new country. Gradually such crude discrimination diminished and disappeared. In one realm, however, the most important realm of all and, ironically, the one in which the Irish had first made spectacular progress they were still denied the top place. It was generally understood and almost universally accepted that no American of Irish Catholic origin could expect to be President of the United States. Like all the absolutes of American politics this one was ultimately challenged. The famous Al Smith, the Happy Warrior of New York public life, a most successful governor of that state, was the democratic candidate for President in 1928. He was not merely defeated but in political terms, annihilated. Rightly or wrongly public opinion accepted his defeat as a proof that the presidency was forever barred to the Irish Catholic element of the population.

The rest of this story is current history. It is hardly necessary here in Boston in 1963, to record the fact that an American of Irish Catholic ancestry, all eight of whose grandparents had come from Ireland in the mid 19th century, was nominated by the Democratic Party and elected President by the American people in 1960. In terms of total votes cast his victory was won by the narrowest of margins, but in terms of electoral college votes which is the real test in Presidential elections the victory was a substantial one. Scholars who analyzed electoral statistics seem to be decided already that the victory of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 would have been much greater had he not been of Irish Catholic background. It appears that he was elected President in spite of rather than because of that background. His victory, however, was accepted by the nation as a whole and his bearing in that high office was such in the tragically short period permitted to him, that it seems safe to say the last great barrier to Americans of Irish Catholic background has forever been demolished.

The implications are considerable and most interesting. It is perhaps too soon yet to attempt to measure them with any precision. Suffice it to say now that the Irish have finally arrived in the United States in the full sense of the term. They are classed without question, accepted as first class citizens; encouraged by that fact and inspired by the example of the late great President Kennedy they may well go on to even greater heights of achievement in the service of the United States and in all the many sectors of American life.

Ironically it seems likely that as a distinct and distinctive group they may now begin to diminish and to disappear. It is probable that the Irish in America are at last about to be assimilated. The signs are clear. Geographically they have already lost to a large extent their former cohesion. The Irish electoral districts in certain states,

American Irish Foundation. Its first directors include Dr. Thomas J. Kiernan, Ambassador of Ireland, Washington; John A. Coleman, James A. Farley and Daniel T. Cohalen, Jr. of New York; Joseph Gannon of Boston; Roger Faherty of Chicago and James Cummins of San Francisco. Under such distinguished auspices the Foundation launched an appeal to all the Irish and all their friends in the United States and in Ireland to contribute generously to the notable work which will be a fitting memorial to all the Irish who have ever contributed anything to the United States and to all those in the United States who have contributed so generously to Ireland and the Irish in so many ways down to the present day.

TRIBUTE TO LATE PRESIDENT JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

Today is December 12, 1963. On this date 101 years ago was fought the battle of Fredericksburg. In that battle, to which I have already alluded, 900 out of the 1200 brave Irishmen of Meagher's brigade made the supreme sacrifice. On this date last year the Ambassador of Ireland laid wreaths at Fredericksburg on 7 of the graves of these brave men which had been positively identified. One of those 7 names was John Kennedy. 17 days ago the President of Ireland, Eamonn DeValera, laid a wreath in Arlington cemetery on the grave of another John Kennedy - John Fitzgerald Kennedy of Boston. Author, historian, congressman from Boston, Senator from Massachusetts, President of the United States, world statesman. A hero in war, a hero in the cold war which must serve for peace, a hero in death. Tributes have been paid to his memory by tongues more linguist than mine. Sufficient for me to say that this great Bostonian possessed all of the great qualities of the Irish in America to which I have tried to pay tribute today. I have spoken of the ancient virtue of Pietas, that combination of love, liberty and duty to faith, family and fatherland which is perhaps the outstanding quality

of the Irish character. That quality this great man displayed in its finest form. His untimely death marks the end of an era for the Irish in America. This was the last echo of the last hurrah but it was far more than that. It was the first bugle note of greater and better things to which the noble example of this great hero will inevitably lead the Irish in America. A platoon of Irish soldiers were privileged to honour him at his graveside. They marched away a little taller. All the Irish everywhere will always walk a little taller since this great and good John Fitzgerald Kennedy has crossed the world stage into history.