

THE CHARITABLE IRISH SOCIETY

Festival of Saint Patrick: 1960

Response to the toast to Ireland.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Officers and Members of the Charitable Irish Society:

When Saint Patrick came to Ireland, the Irish whom he found there were, to put it mildly, not mild-mannered. Their character was changed by the grace of God which they received with the reception of the sacraments. The change wrought in the Irish was comparable to the change brought about in the early converts to Christianity. It was similar to the change made in the Christians of Antioch, who came to be recognized as Christians by their charity. The Irish became by the grace of God, not merely charitable, but warmhearted and sympathetic.

The first people to benefit by the change in the Irish character were the Danes. The Danes, of Irish history, were a people who came down from Iceland to fish off the Irish coast. Woe betide them if they came ashore when the Irish were pagan!

The Irish, after their conversion, saw the Danes in a new light. They saw them as poor fishermen who, when caught in a storm, had to look for shelter. The Dublin Christians were particularly kind to the Danes. The Danes liked the warmth of the welcome which they received in Dublin. Consequently, their visits became more frequent, and their stays more prolonged. At Dublin, the Danes got not only food and shelter and a warm welcome, they got the faith

of the Irish, and something of the generosity of the Irish. They developed the habit, whenever they came ashore, of bringing a basket of herrings for their hosts. This the Dublinmen appreciated very much,- for they, themselves, did not like fishing,- their boats were small and the seas were rough: they liked hunting deer. Their daily food had been venison until Saint Patrick came along and told them to give up eating venison on Fridays. Now they had an idea. They invited Danes to stay with them and do their fishing for them. They would trade venison for fish. Danes came and built up a flourishing business. Dublin became quite a Danish city.

This state of affairs was satisfactory to all concerned until the year 1014. In that year, the Danish king, Sitric,- Sitric of the silken beard, they called him,- came along with a great fleet, and an army, to take possession of what he called his city of Dublin.

"Enough is enough", said King Brian Boru, up at Tara, and he came along with his all-Irish army, and he met Sitric at Clontarf,- a suburb of Dublin,- and he says to Sitric: "These are my domains, and I must ask you to leave, and to take your army with you". "And" says Sitric, "what if I don't leave?" "If you don't leave," says Brian, "I'll be constrained to tell my men to drive you back into the sea from whence you came." "Well", says Sitric, as bold as brass, "I'd like to see them do it". So Brian gave the orders, and it wasn't as easy as he thought, but he and his men drove Sitric and his army right into the sea.

That was a great day for the Irish. But there was a sad sequel. In the méelee, one of the Danish soldiers was hit so hard on the head, that when he ran, he did not know which way he was running until the darkness of night came on, and the stars were out, and he saw the Big Dipper in the northern sky. Then he knew he was running west instead of east. So, he turned around to try and find his way back to the sea. And what did he come upon but the tent of Brian Boru, and Brian sleeping in it soundly. And, why wouldn't he,- for he was an old man, and tired with the days doings? And the Dane saw Brian's big sword lying by Brian's side, and he said: "There's what hit me". He drew his dagger, and dug it into Brian's heart. The morrow was a day of desolation. They brought Brian's body back to Tara for burial, and all Ireland went into mourning, and forgot about Dublin and its Danes.

The Danish fishermen kept doing business in Dublin. But they had learned a good lesson: they had learned that you can't lick the Irish. So, they kept on joining them. And it was the Danes who built the first cathedral in Dublin. It is still standing, but is now known as Christ's Church.

Saint Laurence O'Toole was Archbishop of Dublin, and in charge of the Danish cathedral, when the Normans invaded Dublin. The Normans came in droves and were armed from head to foot. They were bent on taking over the city. But Saint Laurence said to them: "Look here: if you want to stay in my archdiocese, all right, but you'll have to build your own quarters, and behave yourselves like Christian gentlemen". The way he spoke put the fear of God into them, and they did as they were bade. When Saint Laurence died, the Pope appointed

as his successor a Norman who built the fine cathedral of St. Patricks,-  
in the Norman part of the city.

But it was not only to Dublin that the Normans came. They swarmed all over Ireland, like a plague of grasshoppers. The mark and the name they left in Ireland is indelible. Half the family names in Ireland today are of Norman origin. There is not a Burke in Ireland whose forefathers did not come from Normandy.

Now, I must say a word to you about an island to the east of Ireland, which they call Britain. It wasn't a world power, nor the British world-beaters, until the time of the Spanish Armada. The story of the Armada does not read the same in British books as it does in Spanish books. The British tell us that their ships swept down on the Spanish, and swept them off the sea. The Spanish say that their ships were just coming to grips with the English, when the wind changed and blew them away.

If the Spanish story is true, it must have been a powerful wind. Two of the big Spanish ships did not stop sailing westward until they had sailed the width of Ireland. Then they rounded Mizzen Head, in Cork, and sailed northwards. They were hugging the Irish coastline when they ran aground at a point in County Clare which is, to this day, known as Spanish Point.

The Irish rescued the Spaniards, and showed them such hospitality that the Spaniards thought that the Irish were a fine people.

But, when they laid their eyes on the Irish colleens, they were sure that there were no people in the world like them. So they stayed, and married the Irish girls, and raised up their own brood of colleens.

If you ever go to the west of Ireland, you will see these colleens, with their jet black hair, which they got from their Spanish forefathers, and their fair complexion, which they got from their mothers. And if you meet any of them, keep to yourself the knowledge that they are half Spanish. For if you tell an Irish colleen that she is half Spanish, she'll slap your face.

About 60 years after the Armada, Cromwell came to Ireland. He took from the Irish nearly all they owned. They were left with nothing much else to do but to heed the Lord's injunction: "Increase and multiply". So, increase and multiply they did.

The time came when there were 8 million Irish in Ireland. I cannot imagine what it was like in those days. They must have been standing on the little island as crowded as gulls on a rock.

It is no wonder that they took to going abroad. They came to Canada and the United States and South America and to Britain. In Britain, many of them joined the British army.

In the history books you can read of how the British Empire grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Any Irishman reading about the growth of the British Empire says: "And why wouldn't it grow, with the Irish fighting all the battles for the British?" For every Irishman knows

that from the time of Wellington (who was a Dublin man) down through French and Kitchener and Alexander and Alanbrooke and Dill to Montgomery (who was reared in Donegal), there has not been a great British general who was not Irish.

To build an empire it is not enough to win battles. You have to hold what you win. The British were fortunate in having so many Irish to hold down their far-flung empire. Among the Irish they found able administrators of all sorts, governors and judges and teachers. And wherever the Irish were, there were their priests and their prelates, giving them the sacraments, and so the grace of God.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British could say: "The sun never sets on the British Empire". This was just a way of putting it. The fact of the matter is: the sun never set on the Murphys and Kellys and Ryans and Coghlan's, - just to take a few names at random.

And today what do we find? We are gathered here to do honour to Ireland. This morning there were probably half a million Irishmen walking down Fifth Avenue in New York City, with all the traffic stopped in memory of Saint Patrick. Today, there are festivals and parades and banquets in thousands of cities all over the world to do honour to Ireland.

It does an Irishman's heart good to think of it. But, he cannot help asking himself: who are these Irish who earned so good a name for Ireland? If he really wants to know, he has only to take down an encyclopedia and go through it. And, if after he has gathered

all their names, if he wants to know how many there were, he has only to count the number of names. And what will he find? There have been, and are, more distinguished Irishmen outside of Ireland than ever left its shores. Many a great Irishman never put his foot on Irish soil.

My father came from the county of Roscommon, and my mother from the county of Limerick, and I myself was born and raised in Dublin. I don't mind telling you that when I first left Ireland, I found it strange to find real Irishmen abroad, who had either a father or a mother who was not Irish. Today, the most of the Irish in the world are that way. One doesn't have to be a full-blooded Irishman to be a great Irishman. We have, before our eyes, an outstanding example in the president of Ireland, Eammon Devalera, who was born in New York City of an Irish mother and a Spanish father. One can't help thinking that, perhaps, Irish blood is the better for having some other blood mixed with it, and that, if the Irish of Ireland are a great people, maybe it's because their blood has been watered down by the Danes and the Normans and the Spanish.

And, as I think of this, I think: after all, why shouldn't it be that way, for if you take your Irish straight, it does not taste as good as Irish with a little water.

This much is sure: if the good name of Ireland is held in reverence throughout the world, the Irish have to thank the Irish outside of Ireland for keeping bright the memory of an emerald isle shining, like a jewel, in a tarnished world.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, to my thanks for your toast to Ireland, may I add my own prayer: "God bless the Irish, at home and abroad!"