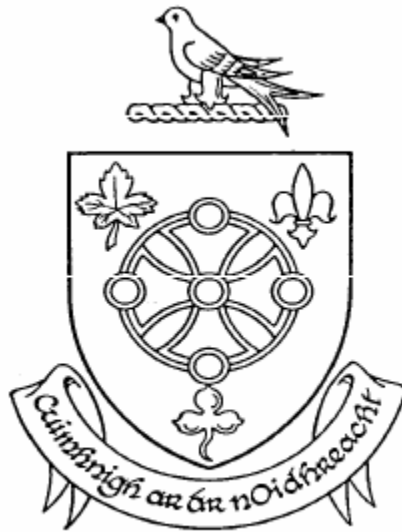


---

# AN NASC

D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia



Special issue in memory of Cyril J. Byrne

Volume 17, Spring 2007

---

---

*Editor:* Pádraig Ó Siadhail

*Layout & Design:* Jenny Kaulback

Versions of several of the contributions in this newsletter featured in the special Tribute to Cyril Byrne at the Canadian Association for Irish Studies Conference at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, in June 2005. We wish to acknowledge the role of Dr. Jason King in organizing that Tribute.

With thanks to Laurie Mireau for providing many of the photographs in this issue.

**AN NASC** was established as a link between the Chair of Irish Studies and those who are involved or interested in promoting Irish Studies and heritage in Canada and abroad. It also seeks to develop awareness of the shared culture of Ireland, Gaelic Scotland and those of Irish and Gaelic descent in Canada

**AN NASC** is provided free of charge. However, we welcome financial contributions which will allow us to extend the activities of the Chair of Irish Studies. A tax receipt will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00.

We welcome letters and comments from our readers.

If you would like to receive **AN NASC**, please write to:

**AN NASC**

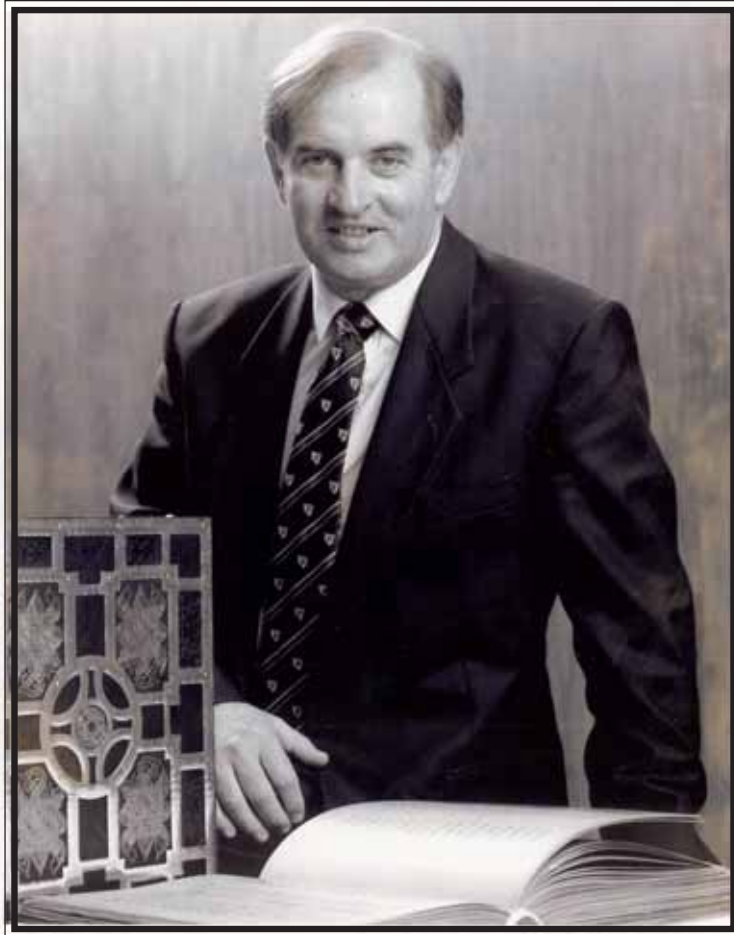
D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Canada B3H 3C3

Telephone: (902) 420-5519

Facsimile: (902) 420-5110

[irishstudies@smu.ca](mailto:irishstudies@smu.ca)

<http://www.smu.ca/academic/arts/irish/>



**Cyril J. Byrne**  
**1940-2006**

---

---

# Elegy on Cyril Byrne, 1940 - 2006

*Sandra Murdock*

The difference to me is not in days nor hours,  
Though few enough were spent in colloquy.  
His perfect patience holding balance; his stories  
Shearing the chill from stone-floored college halls.

Too much to discuss in measured pace from classroom to  
Office, but time for him never so dear as to withhold  
An indulgent ear or meandering gait.  
His love for Ireland's letters bore a stamp from

The country in which we all were born (in spite  
Of blood or nation). And his celebrations  
More than song and dance (no 'O' in Irish).  
The space he'd clear among the toppling files

And cloth-bound books where Apollo and Dionysus  
Dreamt in sheaves slightly foxed — that space  
A kingly welcome. And better yet, a shoulder  
Tipped to clamber up and glimpse —

if fleetingly— the giant's panorama.  
The academic's seat he wrought, placed  
In a wing far left of the Ivory Tower, needs  
No humble apologia (not then, not now),

Though we have lost the one ever ready  
To rush the stable of dour business and "pull out the bolt."  
How strange that expectations, when their framing  
Lips are marble-cold, should leave the onus  
More deeply graven still.

---

(Sleep well, dear professor, among the brethren  
Of past masters, and from the vantage of your  
Faith look proudly on your legacy of wit  
And words, themselves to long outlive the statues.)

Should these few words presume too much, forgive.  
For the difference to me is this:  
He made his peace with leaving;  
I have not made mine with his.

*Sandra Murdock is a former student and friend of Cyril's and a graduate of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University.*



**Ramon Hnatyshyn, the then Governor General of Canada, presents Cyril Byrne with the Order of Canada at Rideau Hall in Ottawa on April 21, 1993.**

---

---

# Cyril J. Byrne: A Tribute

*Pádraig Ó Siadhail*

We made a mad rush to the St. John's airport, as triumphant and giddy as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid after knocking over a bank, but with one wary eye to our backs lest the locals caught us and lynched us as another bunch of gringos who had come to rip them off. It was the morning after the Newfoundland businessman, Craig Dobbin, had hosted a \$1000-a-plate dinner in his home on behalf of the Chair of Irish Studies and Cyril had pocketed a large cheque to add to the Chair's Trust Fund. Despite his euphoria at the success of the fundraising event, the irony of the situation was not lost on Cyril, a loyal son of Newfoundland and one who had long railed against those from away who arrived in Newfoundland, made a quick buck and then cleared off. Call him Butch Cassidy with an enduring

attachment to his roots and a strong social conscience. As for the Sundance Kid, well, I was just along for the junket.

Whatever one's level of belief and faith, one would like to imagine that Cyril and Craig Dobbin, who died on October 7, less than two months after Cyril's death, are now sharing memories not just about that fundraising dinner, but about Newfoundland and Ireland.



**The President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, with Cyril Byrne on the occasion of the conferral on the President of an honorary doctorate from Saint Mary's University in October 1998.**



The occasion of this special edition of *An Nasc* should have been so different. Rather than marking Cyril's death, it should have been marking Cyril's official retirement from his faculty position at Saint Mary's University, celebrating his accomplishments and achievements, specifically in the sphere of Irish Studies, and wishing him the best as he commenced the next stage of his career,

---

---

fundraising for the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, teaching Irish Studies' courses on a part-time basis, and finishing off manuscripts long neglected because of other responsibilities. And, being the wallflower that he was, not merely would he have taken the opportunity to thank us for the tribute, he would have invited us all, if we really thought so highly of him and the work that he had been doing, to make a financial contribution to the Chair of Irish Studies, cheque, *Visa* and *Mastercard* accepted, and a tax receipt available for amounts of more than \$10. That was not to be, however, and though we can use this opportunity to commemorate Cyril Byrne's accomplishments, it is with an abiding feeling of untimely loss.

I worked with Cyril for eighteen years. That is one scary thought because it seems as if it was only a few years ago, rather than 1987, that I arrived at Saint Mary's University to take up the position as holder of the D'Arcy McGee Chair. Strange to say, I had not actually met Cyril before my arrival. It was one of Cyril's colleagues in the English Department, Andy Seaman, who interviewed candidates for the position while on a trip to visit family in Ireland. Andy's subsequent version of events follows pretty closely the plot of *The Dirty Dozen*: he had never in all his travelling come across such a shower of misfits and good-for-nothings. I'm still not sure to this day if I got the job because I was the best of this sorry bunch or the worst.

In the few weeks from the time I was offered the job until I left for Halifax, I was able to pick up a bit of information

from Tom Power, historian and my fellow-graduate of Trinity College Dublin, about the Irish Studies' programme at Saint Mary's University and about a character by the name of Cyril Byrne, a name that had come up at the interview but the importance of which I hadn't understood at the time. First of all, this fellow Byrne was absolutely loaded with cash: he had raised a million dollars for the Irish Studies' programme at a time when a million dollars REALLY was a million dollars. As I packed my bags in my tiny flat in Sandymount, Dublin, I spent a lot of time daydreaming about what I would do once I got my filthy hands on the filthy lucre. Secondly, this fellow Byrne was extremely interested in the Irish language and believed that it was a fundamental part of Irish Studies. This explained why he wished to employ someone whose research interests and teaching experience were in the field of language rather than employ, say, a historian or Anglo-Irish literature specialist.

And as I remarked to Cyril more than once over the years, I'm not too sure that, if it had been he who had come to Ireland to do the interviewing, he would have offered me the job because on the surface we were so unlike each other. However, one thing that we shared and remained unwavering in is a strong belief that a working knowledge of Irish should be part of the training of scholars in the interdisciplinary field that is Irish Studies. What is remarkable is that Cyril promoted this principle at a time in the mid-1980s when few others running Irish Studies' programmes shared it. Of

---

---

course, it is no great surprise that I would have this view about the importance of Irish. It is a tribute to Cyril that he pioneered this view in Canada, although he did not have the opportunity to learn Irish at school. I had Cyril in one of my introductory Irish language classes a few years ago. He was a wonderful student: he attended class religiously, completed assignments punctually, and participated actively. He was so keen. But you know what they say about a person's inability to grasp a command of a language after the age of 6 ... To the very end, he continued to ambush me with conversations in Irish based on the material from that course. I know that it was one of his regrets that he never had the opportunity to immerse himself in Irish.

Cyril's first experience in building a new academic programme at Saint Mary's was as one of the founders of the Atlantic Canada Studies programme which continues to thrive at both undergraduate and graduate levels. His interest in ACS was perfectly understandable due to his own Newfoundland background and stemmed from his belief in the importance of allowing students to explore their own region and in encouraging research that examines the history and culture of Atlantic Canada and frequently challenges stereotypical views of that area. The disadvantages affecting Atlantic Canada and the unequal distribution of economic wealth, political power and employment opportunities within Canada are major issues on which

Cyril held strong views. But when the opportunity arose in the mid-1980s to establish an Irish Studies chair at Saint Mary's with partial funding from the Federal Government under the Multiculturalism programme, Cyril's motivation, as a Newfoundland Irish Catholic, was driven as much by the heart as by the head. There is an interesting article to be written about the history of the thirty or so ethnic studies chairs that have been set up under this scheme — the politics behind the programme, the politics behind the geographic spread of the chairs, the politics behind the definition of the word, 'ethnic' — but what is clear is that Cyril possessed the vision, the political nous, and the energy to ensure that there would be an Irish Chair at Saint Mary's.

From the start, the Chair has focussed on undergraduate teaching. While Cyril had the aim of developing graduate offerings, his view was that our main responsibility was to allow our students access to Irish culture and history and to open up for them aspects of the Irish experience in Canada. Over the last few years the achievements of students from our programme who moved on to graduate studies were a great source of pride for him: to mention a few names, Marnie Hay, recently awarded her PhD in Irish history at UCD; Matt Knight who won a full scholarship to undertake a PhD in Celtic Studies at Harvard; Adam Lawrence who is doing his PhD at Memorial; and Sandra Murdock, who received the Ireland Fund of Canada Graduate Studies award in 2004,



completed her MA at Queen's in Belfast in 2005 and plans to begin work on her PhD next year. Many other former students of Cyril testify to the interest that he took in their careers, to the encouragement that they received from him, and not least of all, to his love of literature, a love that he strove to pass on to his students.

For amongst all his accomplishments and achievements, as professor and scholar and man of learning, as author and res-

earcher, as editor and broadcaster, as founder of the Chair and as recipient of the Order of Canada, it was as a teacher that Cyril stood out. Wickedly funny when it came to some of his colleagues' obsession with

making a book fit their specific school of critical thought and literary theory, Cyril's starting off point was to transfer some of his enthusiasm about a work of literature

to his students, help them understand its context, to get them involved in it and then to encourage them to question the values or the world view that the author is presenting. Students have always related well to Cyril. Last Christmas, I was in Chapters bookshop in Halifax when I bumped into a SMU alumnus working there. How's Cyril? he says. And then he went on to say that he had transferred from Commerce at SMU to English after taking one of Cyril's courses.

He might never be rich, said the alumnus, but he had no regrets about transferring to Arts. Moreover, Cyril always had a major following of female students who took his literature classes offered off-campus in the various Halifax libraries. I call them Cyril's Irish Studies groupies. Though, as I teased him, it was a pity that

their average age was 82! I should add that my mother-in-law is one of those groupies. Any time she would be visiting Halifax, she loved seeing Cyril. 'Oh, he is



**Dr. Terrence Prendergast, S.J.,  
Archbishop of Halifax and Chancellor of  
Saint Mary's University; Dr. Mary Robinson,  
former United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and former President of Ireland;  
Dr. Cyril Byrne; Alan R. Abraham, CM,  
Former Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia.**

---

such a charmer,' says she, 'the way he takes you by the arm and walks beside you, and talks to you directly and makes you feel so special.' I always felt so inadequate when I listened to this guff!

Funny, wonderful company, a great mimic, an inveterate teller of stories and, certainly, no plaster saint, despite the letters that arrived into our office addressed to the Revd. Father Cyril Byrne, Cyril spent much of his time and energy since the mid-1980s fund-raising for the Chair of Irish Studies. While loathing with a passion routine administrative work, he demonstrated from the beginning that he was a talented fundraiser and that he was very successful at making people feel good about themselves as they parted with money for the cause. One of Cyril's favourite stories centred around Archbishop McNally, one time Catholic Archbishop of Halifax. McNally was visiting rural Nova Scotia and was getting an earful from the locals who resented having to finance some Church project in distant Halifax. McNally quickly disarmed the protesters when he declared that as shepherd of the flock, it was his duty to fleece them. When Cyril told the story, you'd always get a strong sense of admiration by one master fund raiser for another. In turn, Cyril's attitude to the spending of money was, if we had a good idea, such as running a conference, publishing a book under the imprint of the chair, or inviting in a guest speaker, we'd proceed with it and we'd find the money somewhere. When we were working on the 2004 Canadian Association for Irish Studies Annual

Conference, I'd wake up at times at night wondering where we'd find the money to cover our commitments. But I need not have worried as Cyril came through with the money. On more than one occasion, he strolled into the office and produced with a flourish cheques in the amounts of thousands of dollars that he had coaxed from various sources. Of course, being Cyril, he'd then proceed to lose the same cheques and there would be panic and pandemonium until they turned up.

But it is the various trips that we took together that stand out in my memory and illustrate Cyril's zest for life, his larger than life presence, and in spite of the cruel illness that eventually wore him down, that he never lost that youthfulness that really has no connection with the number of years chalked up on the odometer of life ... the conference in Prince Edward Island where we ended up on the waterslides at Cavendish time and time again ... that \$1000 dinner in Newfoundland ... the visit to the Isle of Skye where we tried manfully to sample all the local whiskies ... and, out of the wall of rain in the middle of Inis Mór, on the Aran Islands, Cyril turning up as unexpectedly as bright and as welcome as a ray of sunshine.

Cyril, I salute you.

*Pádraig Ó Siadhail is Coordinator of the Irish Studies programme at Saint Mary's University.*

---

---

# Reflections

*Ann MacLean*

After a thirty-year hiatus from studies, I returned to Saint Mary's University to complete a degree in Arts. I was delighted to be welcomed into the Irish Studies programme. I was particularly fortunate because the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies had been established, thanks to Cyril Byrne, giving me the opportunity to study something that was a great personal interest, plus I was able to major in Irish Studies.

Cyril often used the phrase "a slice of life..." to describe circumstances of characters in Irish literature. I could also use that phrase to describe this time in my life – a wonderful time of learning about Irish culture, history and literature.

Cyril played a big part in that "slice of my life" – an outstanding teacher, passionate about his work, and a kind friend. He always offered encouragement

and I am sure many students benefited from his great wealth of knowledge. He and Pádraig Ó Siadhail provided a whole new world of learning for me. Under their tutelage, my interest in and love of all things Irish and Celtic flourished. It's now been ten years since the completion of my degree, and I still keep in touch with the Irish Studies programme at Saint Mary's.

During one of his lectures, Cyril referred to a garden as being a place of quiet serenity, of nature beauty and of peace. I know that he has found "peace" in his own garden, and I am grateful for his impact on me through his own love and dedication to the study of Irish culture.

*Ann MacLean completed her Irish Studies degree at Saint Mary's University in May 1997.*



**Cyril J. Byrne, Pádraig Ó Siadhail, Ann MacLean, Guy Chauvin.**

---

---

# Memories of Cyril—Our years before Saint Mary's

*Ken MacKinnon*

Cyril and I were in the St. Dunstan's Class of '60. I thought then and still think that Cyril would have had a satisfying career as an actor. But that was not to be his destiny. His loyalty to his Newfoundland family got in the way. Instead, an academic career would be both acceptable and provide an outlet for his expressive talent and his love of classic drama.

St. Dunstan's was ideal for Cyril. Newfoundlanders were a relatively new student constituency in mid-1950s Prince Edward Island. Cy, as he was often known then, was both respectful and jolly to faculty and comrades, though to the latter he was at first regarded as somewhat of a curious fellow. Fresh from an Irish Christian Brothers school, he seemed more thoroughly Catholic than we were, and with white shirt and tie he dressed formally in contrast to the careless appearance of the Island boys (women were only ten percent of the student body). If he was not long in acquiring a reputation for academic prowess, which he took seriously, more gradually he became a star performer in the more prominent non-athletic extra-curricular pursuits—in the chapel choir, the Glee Club, the Dramatic Society, the Student Council, and Liberal leader in the model parliament. As well, he wrote short

stories and served with aplomb as editor of the *Red and White*, the campus literary magazine. As a leading extra-mural man (even doing some radio work) he courted many of the town's attractive young ladies. And he made solid friendships with fellow students and a few faculty members. It was a time when he gained the confidence we associate with him.

All went well, then, at St. Dunstan's, though there was that snag just before graduation when he was discovered returning to his room after an evening's entertainment in town: he was charged with being drunk and given the harsh penalty of a month's banishment from campus. This was astonishingly bad luck. He missed the last weeks of classes, though he was entitled to write his finals. At the time, you could get sent home for a week just by skipping off to town without leave. The priest who caught Cyril was—uncharacteristically for St. Dunstan's—officious and obnoxious. While he liked a drink, Cyril was never a carouser. Cy had perhaps been overconfident of his high place in the eyes of the faculty; certainly he was careless in having the young lady drop him off too close to his building. Yes, he was a happy boy feeling no pain as he approached his room in a dark corridor, but an unbiased observer would have noticed more the

lipstick on his shirt than the booze on his breath. The miserable creature that suddenly shone a watchman's flashlight in his face was a heartless dry stick who had probably noted how long the car was parked before a dark figure entered the residence. When Cyril told me that story again in his last months, I reminded him that he wrote me when he taught at St. Dunstan's in 1965, how that same pathetic cleric with subtle innuendo kept casting him in taunts as an Errol Flynn unable to reform his wicked, wicked nocturnal ways.

The St. Dunstan's class revered Cyril as a savant and bon vivant, and he revered St. Dunstan's. He kept up his contacts over the years, especially with Brendan O'Grady, Jim Kelly, and Regis Duffy. In his last year, while on a brief Island visit, a group of classmates who were Charlottetown residents held a dinner to honour Cyril, which I know mattered deeply to him. Other St. Dunstan's people came to see him in Halifax. Father Jim Kelly, his old Classics professor and friend, took three shuttle trips to Halifax to see Cyril in that last year; Father Jim

outlasted Cyril by only a month. During his final illness, other St. Dunstan's people came to see him in Halifax. His Saint Mary's colleague, Roger MacDonald, was one, and Parker Lund, newly located in Dartmouth, was another who saw him regularly. Bob Linegar, his SDU roommate, made a stop-over to see him during a trip home to St. John's from Vancouver.

And my old roommate, Lorne McGuigan, came visiting from Rothesay: I was present for these visits. We laughed again at an old quip in the humour section of a 1959-60 era *Red and White*: "Things we'd like to see: Byrne-Linegar and M c G u i g a n - MacKinnon rooms swept!"

During the 1963-64 academic year, when Cyril had a one-year contract at Mount St. Vincent, we shared

a sub-let flat, rather uncomfortably, for neither of us had much patience for sweeping and basic housekeeping. On weekends, when we weren't out of town ourselves, we would have great feasts to entertain our girlfriends and visiting friends, for even then Cyril liked to cook up either a great Newfoundland scoff, or (depending upon the guests) something



Cyril J. Byrne at St. Dunstan's University,  
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island,  
in 1957.

---

---

he thought European, and he would use every dish and vessel in the house. Usually, we had leftovers on Sunday evening, as we scrambled to prepare for the teaching week ahead. On weekday evenings we still could not face that mountain of dishes, so we ate out until perhaps Thursday or Friday afternoon when one of us would finally start cleaning by soaking the dried food crud off the previous weekend's dishes. The next year Cyril was back at St. Dunstan's, where he taught for a year before heading off to Oxford. At St. Dunstan's he renewed his friendship with his former English professor, Dr. Brendan O'Grady. Even though it was somewhat under Brendan's influence that Cyril went to study at University College, Dublin, in 1960-62, it was not until this year that Cyril began to switch his literary interests from primarily the Medieval field to Anglo-Irish literature.

When Cyril did his doctoral work at Toronto (1967-70) he focussed on Anglo-Irish and wrote his doctoral thesis on playwright Sean O'Casey. Since Cyril lived near me in the university-dominated Annex and worked in the summers as a relief announcer at the Jarvis Street studios of the CBC in Toronto, we were part of the same academic and political culture of the university at that time. It was the time of the Troubles in Northern Ireland; Cyril acted often as a television commentator on Irish affairs, and we had contacts among the Toronto Irish; since I knew little of Ireland, I just listened. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War was feeding Canadian nationalism among the

grad students; the influence of the Toronto scholar-sage Harold Innis had led to a consensus that distinctively Canadian approaches to all the academic disciplines were now necessary and that it was the job of the grad students to demand this of their Britannic majesties, the uncomprehending faculty. Thanks to Cyril's gregarious magnetism, we had dozens of interesting and brilliant friends of all backgrounds. We took over the Graduate English Association (with Cyril as President and me Vice-president) and helped push through lots of curriculum changes and reforms to improve our status (it helped that Millar MacLure, the English Chairman, was a Prince Edward Islander and drinking pal). We began to go to lots of conferences and developed an analytical overview of Canadian academic life that was to help us focus our efforts after we took up our appointments at Saint Mary's in 1970.

Some of the most long-lived legends about Cyril grew from these early conferences and were spread by means of the later ones—with many of the latter being organized by Cyril himself. To be at a conference with Cyril in Newfoundland, as I have often been, was an incredible experience as an exercise in cultural immersion. People who were at the Learned Societies Conferences with him 40 years ago still find Cyril a great common talking point. A few years ago an English colleague from Lethbridge recalled Cyril as "the most uninhibited guy I ever met." I thought when he said this I was about to hear a tale about one of Cyril's amorous episodes. Instead, he told me how he and Cyril were part of a



---

Learners group (including some distinguished professors) who piled on to an overcrowded evening train at Kingston to go to Toronto. With no place to sit, there was no place to sleep. Cyril soon solved his bed problem by crawling up into the overhead luggage racks: he was asleep in no time and the only one of his exhausted fellow travellers to arrive refreshed in Toronto. Propriety, academic or other-wise, was never one of Cyril's concerns.

During our St. Dunstan's years, I saw Cyril in a Greek play. I thought, "Gee, he can really do that."

Cyril felt the drama and he conveyed the significance of the tragedy to the rest of us who sat there gaping, with our mouths open, hungry for the passions that his wizardry would lead us toward. All his life, Cyril would carry the burden of the play, and he touched us, brought us together, and we remember him.

*Apart from time completing his doctorate, Ken MacKinnon was a member of the Saint Mary's University English Department from 1962 until his retirement in 2004.*



**Cyril Byrne in academic regalia (courtesy of Ken MacKinnon).**

---

---

# Leadership and Example

*Peter Toner*

Cyril Byrne was one of the principal driving forces of Irish Studies in the Maritimes. Not only did he pursue his own passion for things “Irish,” but he also took (and delivered) pains to actively encourage everyone with similar academic interests (on both sides of the pond) to pursue these interests with what he considered to be an appropriate level of dedication.

Long before it became fashionable, Cyril’s interest in things Irish was as close to universal as possible. His primary concern with things literary was closely dogged by his enthusiasm for the historical, which itself was in competition with the social and cultural. Where others simply made noises about the Irish language, he took the time (and pain) to acquire a fair first-hand acquaintance, simply to get a better “feel” for Irish society. It is fitting that he acquired his grasp of the Irish language in Dingle, the closest part of Ireland to his native Newfoundland.

And Cyril was a Newfoundlander. In many ways he embodied the confusion of many who would have believed that less than two thousand miles of salt water was enough to rinse the Irishness off those who migrated to Talamh an Éisc. Indeed, I rather doubt he could have loved Ireland so much had he loved Newfoundland less, or vice versa. A few times when he rose into a rhapsody, it was difficult to discern which he was talking about, John Bull’s other island or John Bull’s other Ireland. Not that it would have dulled his lyrics. This sort of thing said, Cyril was charitable in the extreme towards those who could not take such flight: eventually, they would see and be inspired.

We all owe an enormous debt to Cyril’s leadership and example. To describe him as dedicated would be to give him a poor shake. Others to whom we owe less have been remarkably dedicated.

*Peter Toner is Professor of History at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John.*



---

---

# Apples with One P

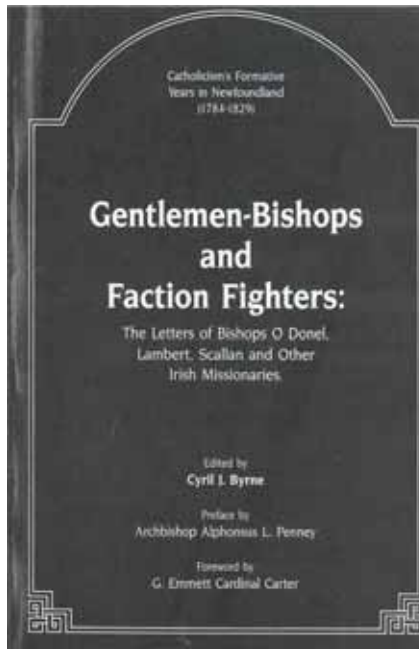
*Margaret Harry*

We really met over Sean O'Casey. This was the early 1970s. Not that I knew much about O'Casey, but Cyril had a doctoral dissertation to submit, and I knew how to proofread. My recollection of the next few years is largely filled with editing and proofreading, first deciphering Cyril's own idiosyncratic handwriting (it's a good thing I was trained as a paleographer), then toiling through the vagaries of other people's writing, as the Chair of Irish Studies was gradually established, and publications ensued. By the early 1980s Cyril was working on *Gentlemen-Bishops and Faction Fighters* (published 1984), and my friendship with him was further enlivened by dim photocopies of eighteenth and early nineteenth century letters, some written in Latin. Cyril consulted me about several problematic passages, and deciding on a proper reading could often be hilarious. Later, I helped him proofread the printed letters. I'm not sure that I ever succeeded in teaching Cyril how to proofread for

himself, but we spent hours reading aloud to each other such memorable passages as “apples with one p which were very good comma ampersand am also thankful to you for your friendly attention to my nephew ampersand the suitan S-U-I-T-A-N you bestowed without ‘on’ him” (see *Gentlemen-Bishops* p. 171). Naturally, such exercises often ended in mirth, since it was one of Cyril's most characteristic traits to regard research and scholarship as serious pursuits in themselves, but never boring, and never altogether to be treated seriously.

In fact, the 1980s and early 90s were full of a kind of scholarly entertainment. Punctuating the lengthy and what could have been tedious organization of conferences

and editing of proceedings (*Talamh an Eisc*, 1986; *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples*, 1992) were parties and receptions, everything from the stiffly formal dinner for Garret FitzGerald, complete with RCMP security officers in dark suits, to eating large bowls of



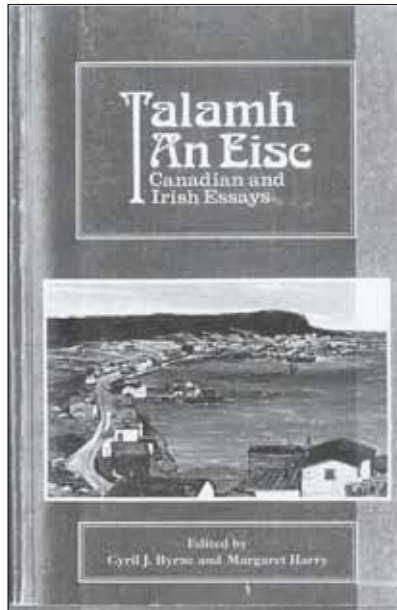
mussels at Salty's at a story-filled lunch with Cyril, and Ken MacKinnon, and Seamus Heaney. In between we arranged interviews with radio and television, promoting the Chair of Irish Studies, and laughing afterwards when we had to field querulous complaints from Ulster Scots that the Chair dared to include them in its definition of "Irish." Meanwhile, Cyril worked on indefatigably to secure both a firm financial basis and an international scholarly reputation for the Chair. Despite some setbacks, he was overwhelmingly successful, giving the Chair a notable presence not just in the academic world of Celtic Studies, but in Irish and Celtic communities locally, throughout Canada, and especially in Ireland itself.

Of course, other things happened. Sometimes, I think we were just hare-brained. Or was it just Cyril's charm and immense powers of persuasion? I vividly recollect steering one of his old VW vans down St. Margaret's Bay Road, with no brakes and no power, attached only by a short line to the car towing me. My only

means of stopping was to let the VW bump (gently, I hoped) into the car ahead. We laughed about it afterwards. But Cyril could also laugh at himself. His comical description of his panic on one occasion when, while attempting to upgrade his electrical box, he discovered that the power had gone out in the whole neighbourhood, was a masterpiece. (Only Cyril would choose to work on his electrical supply at the precise moment a power failure occurred at the local substation!) But this was typical of him in another way, typical of his ability to see the underlying humour of life whatever its temporary ups and downs and difficulties. It made him a very funny man, and the laughter is what I

most remember. Yet the laughter and the joking never concealed his fundamental goodness; like the Fiddler of Dooney he recognized that "the good are also the merry."

*Margaret Harry is Coordinator of Atlantic Canada Studies and teaches in the Department of English at Saint Mary's University.*



---

---

# Remembering a Lad of 20: Cyril Byrne in 1960

*Ninian Mellamphy*

It was the day of the Canadian Thanksgiving in 1960, or perhaps the morning after, when I strolled from a not-quite-convincing lecture on “*The Wanderer*” as Christian poem and spoke some words of cynicism to a chap who walked beside me. He was the best dressed male student (the most clean-shaven too) at Earlsfort Terrace, probably the most mature one, and surely the most confident. Little did I know that I was addressing my Destiny.

Three things happened. The classmate I addressed that morning was a sturdy man of twenty, who had the poise and the patience of someone who had lived twice as long. His defence of the “*Wanderer*” reading showed a tolerance that seemed all the more persuasive for its being delivered in the richest baritone voice I had heard for years. His accent intriguingly insinuated that Waterford, at some date ill-defined, had somehow been translocated to Hy Brasil or, more probably, to another Isle of the West—possibly his native Terra Nova?

In our first conversation I made four discoveries:

1) that this wanderer was one of the Byrnes of the diaspora,

- 2) that he had celebrated his twentieth birthday in early August,  
3) that in June he had graduated (shivering under a load of gold medals) from a British named university, St. Dunstan’s, in an improbably named insular Principality on the new side of the Atlantic, and  
4) that he had come to University College Dublin to spend a pre-M.A. year studying Anglo Saxon and Middle English.

Then I began to wonder about him.

What was the ultimate purpose of his exile? I asked myself. Had he come among us to dig for familial roots in the hills and glens of Wicklow and so to enrich his Gaelic soul? Or, quite the opposite, had he, as a scholar of Middle English, begun a missionary pilgrimage to atone for the reception King Richard II received from the Byrnes of the 1390s—the Byrnes whose idea of hospitality then had more to do with furtive lateral skirmishes than with loyal frontal embraces? Would he later, his M.A. parchment under his oxters, complete his act of Ricardian atonement with a Wildean shift from Dublin to Oxford to have his mind Britannically

---

contaminated, and his accent too—not to mention the shrinking of his historic South Leinster roots in imperial pale cloisters?

Grafton Street coffee at Bewleys provided reassuringly negative answers to my questions. Cyril of Corner Brook would soon strike me as a sort of peregrinary Duns-Scotus-of-the-Anecdotes, whose mission in Ireland was NOT to search for roots familial but RATHER to shake on us leaves from branches of the family tree, leaves that had grown on the shores of Conception Bay and on the banks of the Humber River.

I learned much from him about Irish fossils in the dialects of the Avalon peninsula, about the peculiarities of French speech among the Acadians of Port au Port, about the notorious scandals, imperial, ecclesiastical, and ethnic that colour the history of Newfoundland—and surely I must mention them—about folksongs that have given well-nigh biblical resonance to names like Fogo, Twillingate, Mortons Harbour and the craft-building of ego-centric boasters.

One day in Ottawa, when the same historian was given the Order of Canada, I would remember all of this.

It is a sign of balance in Cyril's life that he should eventually refuse to be enthralled by his Oxford fascination, and that he should become an emissary of



Cyril J. Byrne at St. Dunstan's University,  
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island,  
in 1959.

Irish culture to the Newfoundland of his 1940 birth and to the Canada of his 1949 adoption. And one might wonder if it is ironic, or if it is merely historically inevitable, that his approach to constructing the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies in Halifax in the 1980s had so much in it of the individualism and resourcefulness that inspires "*I'se the b'y that b'ilt the boat.*"

But to return to 1960 and to the wisdom of the twenty-year-old whose maturity was remarkable, specifically remarkable in Cyril's tolerance of strange modes of utterance that not a few of our instructors cultivated. Tom Dunning, the great medievalist, did his best to hide a Tipperary accent beneath tones borrowed from his friend and mentor, J.R.R. Tolkien (our external examiner, by the way.). Joe Pfeiffer tried to hide echoes of

---

a New England and Yale upbringing beneath Oxbridgean rhythms that made his conversation harder on the ear than his *Piers Plowman* readings (readings that must have rattled Langland's bones). Dick Walsh, a linguist and a man of the Waterford Gaeltacht, trying to hide God knows what, uttered English vowels with an exquisiteness that was as rare as it was inimitable. Where most of us Gaels were merely distracted by their noises, Cyril became tonically indifferent or wilfully deaf, finding behind the affected rhetoric the humble reality of three admirable men who could be, and who became, friends for life—two of them frequent and honoured visitors to Canada.

And lastly, Cyril as Destiny, or should I say Providence? One evening in May 1961 as I raced across Iveagh Gardens—the then UCD campus—to meet a pal at Newman House, I ran in to a splendidly dressed Cyril, bound not for a date but for the plane to Gander. (Those were the days when one travelled in style.) Asking what his summer plans might be, I learned that it was his incredible lot to read the evening news, the legendary “Gerald S. Doyle Bulletin,” to the

denizens of Talamh an Éisc (as we once called Newfoundland). I expressed the appropriate amazement of an Irishman whose republic had a sole radio station and offered no such privileges to student employees, however rich their baritones.



Cyril J. Byrne in the 1970s.

I had had plans to spend the 1960s in Florence or Rome or Poggibonsi, and right then he shattered them. He invited me to come to Newfoundland, an island I imagined to be in all seasons as attractive as the back of St. Brendan's whale. When he earnestly told me that for me it would be Tír na nÓg, I answered with the fervent insincerity of a Corkonian in a fix: “Get me a job and I'll go.”

Just then the virtue of Byrne's linguistic tolerance became a vice: He believed me.

Months later I would be received by the headmistress at what would soon be Xavier High School in Deer Lake. Because I hailed from a Killavullen townland, Monanimy, where the eighteenth century Parliamentarian Burke had passed his boyhood summers at a hedge school, next to the townland of Ballygriffin, where his cousin Nano Nagle, foundress



---

of the Presentation Sisters, had been born and raised, the headmistress, Mother Bernard, a Presentation nun, jumped to the conclusion that I was God's gift to Newfoundland—bringing to her students the insight of Edmund Burke and the piety of Nano Nagle. Luckily I did not mention the Nagles' quondam friends and neighbours, the Hennessys of Ballymacmoy, now of Cognac.

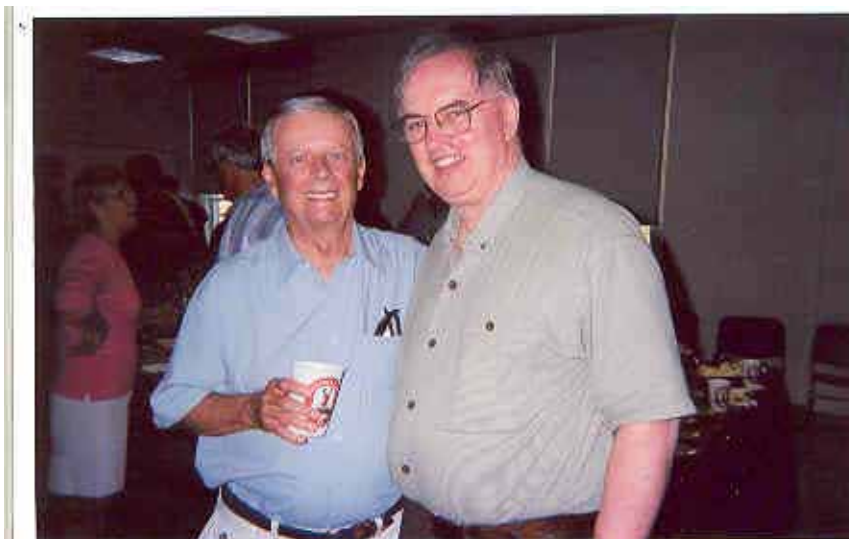
Poor woman. I was not God's gift but Cyril Byrne's.

But, come to think of it, the difference is slight: Both are creative. Both providential. When my son Dan lunched with my favourite Newfoundlander in Toronto a year ago to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of Mrs. Byrne, and when my daughter Janelle breakfasted at his home in Halifax during the 2004 CAIS congress, both had to bow in reverence

before the wanderer without whose intervention in the summer of 1961 they would never have come into being.

My wife, Cécile, has one unanswerable question: What happened in the last 45 years to the best dressed and best groomed male student at UCD? Did God punish him with sense of neatness that she long considered to be uniquely mine? Or, in his Dublin days, did Cyril meet with and steal the carefree style of An Gobán Saor or perhaps the rakish weeds of the Gingerman?

*Ninian Mellamphy is Professor Emeritus, Department of English, the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.*



**Kenneth L. Ozmon, the former President of Saint Mary's University, and Cyril J. Byrne at Cyril's retirement party, summer 2005.**

---

---

# A Man Called Cyril

*Cecil Houston*

When your name is Cecil, the Canadian “long e” version, and you are also interested in the Irish abroad, you have a problem. Your name is unpronounceable to some and unfathomable to others. So you occasionally end up being called “Cyril.” Two former Irish ambassadors to Canada and a few who attend CAIS meetings have called me “Cyril.”

It is a good thing to be called “Cyril.”

After all, I am interested in the Irish and have been driven by motives comparable to Cyril’s to comprehend the impact of Irish culture on Canada and to take a chance to mould a life in academia around a subject close to the heart.

Cyril’s heart is in a good place. He is a migrant from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia, like countless people before him and since. A migrant from what he considers to be Canada’s “most authentically Irish” region.

From his region and from his deep love for it, Cyril has pursued a vision, a vision that has family resonance through that of his cousin Robert O’Driscoll but a wider community value that celebrates the “most authentically Irish” place.

I have the greatest admiration for what Cyril did to make his vision real. Through his actions, he was a model

cultural and community leader. Cyril created a strategy and followed it with constancy and energy.

He established a simple target—an academic chair—an academic Chair of Irish Studies—an academic chair named after Irish Canada’s romantic icon, D’Arcy McGee.

- He lined up a few good and loyal benefactors.
- He created a large network of committed small benefactors who he adored and nurtured.
- And he designed great PR by launching in 1985 with an Honorary Degree to Garret FitzGerald.
- In 1986 he launched the Chair and kept collecting the funds and building the loyalty to that chair.

Cyril gave his people and his region something that his university cannot take away. That is exceptional leadership, rare among academics, and a gift to Irish and Canadian cultures.

To be mistaken for Cyril is a good thing.

*Cecil Houston is Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Windsor*

---

---

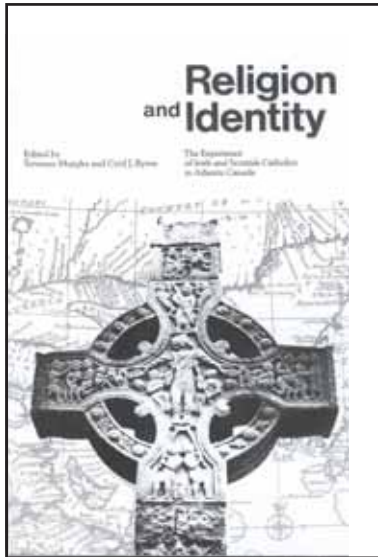
# A Builder of Lasting Legacies

*Terry Murphy*

I had the pleasure of knowing and working with Cyril Byrne in various capacities over a period of twenty-five years.

When we first met, I was a Nova Scotian living in Newfoundland, and he was a Newfoundlander living in Nova Scotia. This inter-provincial connection was significant in encouraging our friendship and collaboration, for we were drawn together by a common interest in the history of Irish migration and settlement in Atlantic Canada. I was newer to the field than Cyril, who already had established a network of knowledgeable friends and

colleagues here and in Ireland. I was in the process of shifting my scholarly focus from the history of British and European Catholicism to the underdeveloped area of Canadian religious history. We found common ground in our interest in the interplay of religion and ethnicity. Cyril suggested that we organize a conference together on the experience of Irish and Scottish Catholics in Atlantic Canada. The conference was held at Saint Mary's in 1984 and soon after bore fruit in a collection entitled *Religion and Identity*.



The idea for both the conference and the book were Cyril's; I did much of the planning for the conference and saw the volume through to publication. I soon realized that the combination of Cyril's vision and my organizational abilities was a pattern known to others who collaborated with him!

Chief among Cyril's visions was the idea of establishing a Chair in Irish Studies. With a combination of tenacity and charm, he not only succeeded in creating the D'Arcy McGee Chair in Irish Studies but also raised what was until recently the single largest endowment at Saint Mary's. His passion for the cause and his powers of persuasion were key in attracting major support from both government and private sources. The Chair has become, as Cyril intended, not only a professorship, but the focal point for the academic program in Irish Studies and ancillary activities that enrich the program and reach out to the Irish and people of Irish heritage in the region. Cyril envisaged and established the Chair in a way that



---

reflected strongly the ethos of Saint Mary's University: the Chair is rooted in the deep tradition of the institution, and it serves not only the academy but also the broader community.

When I returned to Saint Mary's as Academic Vice-President in 2001 (Cyril was among those who encouraged me to do so), it was in time to witness another of his major contributions to the preservation of Saint Mary's tradition. He was a leader in the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of 2002, and worked diligently with other members of the organizing committee to see that events were held, plaques were mounted, and research completed to commemorate milestones in institutional history. He had a special interest in learning all that he could about Bishop Edmund Burke, and was instrumental in telling the story of how Burke's school of 1802 laid the foundations for Saint Mary's University.

In the twenty years between our collaboration on *Religion and Identity* and the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations at Saint Mary's, I was privileged to have many personal and professional contacts with Cyril. I knew him as a warm and charming (not to say witty and mischievous) person, who pursued his scholarly interests as a labour of love and act of filial piety. He was steeped in the traditions of Ireland, the Irish diaspora, his native Newfoundland, and the University to which he dedicated his working life; but he was also progressive, creative, forward-looking and a builder of lasting legacies. We can only admire what he managed to accomplish, and work within our means to ensure that its benefits endure.

*Terry Murphy is the Vice-President, Academic & Research, at Saint Mary's University.*

## We're Online!

You can find all back issues of *An Nasc* on our website at:

<http://www.smu.ca/academic/arts/irish/newsletters.html>

---

---

# Celebrating Cyril's Pioneering Spirit

*Seosamh Watson*

Among Cyril's great attributes was that of being the right person in the right place at the right time. Being in this situation may partly be due to luck, but if a person does not have the necessary qualities and gifts then he or she will not be able to fulfil the vital role required, and that, certainly, cannot be said of C. J. Byrne. For him, strangely, being a 'Newfie', the right place was Nova Scotia, and the role he assumed was a demanding one, for his adopted province is, as much of the outside world has yet to learn, a highly unusual place. Across a comparatively small, but incomparably beautiful canvas, it has painted in vivid colours a tableau composed of New and Old World History. I fully understand, and sympathise with a foreign writer settled there who declared himself willing to adopt Canadian citizenship in order to become a Nova Scotian. Cyril didn't have to go that far and, as we well know, he was as intensely proud of his Newfoundland pedigree as he was of his Irish ancestry. Indeed, his success in uniting these two strands of learning in his academic research has been a source both of knowledge and inspiration to scholars in Ireland whom he visited regularly while health permitted and brought up to date with the ever-expanding Irish scene in Halifax.

For those of us involved in Irish learning Cyril's greatest achievement was

undoubtedly the founding of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's, an institution which has not only provided scholars from abroad with the opportunity to carry out important research projects in the Province but also made significant appointments to the Chair. These include Dr Diarmaid Ó Muirthe and the present holder, Dr Pádraig Ó Siadhail, both of whom have brought much distinction to the position. The types of scholars who hold and have held the Chair tell us a good deal about Byrne's perceptive appreciation of Irish learning. As a result of his own upbringing in Newfoundland he was keenly aware of how long the Irish language had lasted among his native community as a living tongue and he fully appreciated, therefore, its intrinsic importance to Irish learning and culture. The modern spoken language, then, became the mainstay of the new Chair right from its foundation and has remained so ever since, a fact which makes this institution unique in Canada and allows it to feature among only a tiny handful in the world outside of Ireland.

Cyril's understanding of Irish scholarship went further than that of many of his contemporaries in that he understood the importance of the associated study of the other Celtic languages and their literatures. This was well demonstrated by the key role he

---

played in bringing the Second Congress of Celtic Studies in N. America to Saint Mary's in 1989 with the theme 'Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples.' He was a keen promoter of Welsh language and learning and proved over many years to Dr John Shaw, Mr Joe Murphy, myself and others involved in the Scottish Gaelic field a champion supporter of that language in the Province. During my period as Visiting Professor in the Chair as long ago as 1991 Cyril was instrumental in arranging both informal céilidhs and recording sessions with Halifax's resident Cape Breton Gaels, including the late *Mac Éairdsidh Sheumais*, Archibald A. Mackenzie of Christmas Island, of whom he was a particular admirer. These and other materials important to the cultural heritage of Irish and Scottish Gaels are now at Saint Mary's, together with the associated valuable library holdings Cyril was active in building up over the years of his tenure at the university. As we were reminded at the 1967 Celtic Studies Congress in Edinburgh by the doyen of N. American Celticists, Professor Charles Dunne, practitioners of that particular discipline in the continent in question require for the most part to be amphibious. Cyril's other medium of academic life was English Studies, which was equally beloved and cultivated by him. It must continue to amaze that he achieved so very much in the promotion of Irish Studies while working from a base in another discipline and one, in this case, so demanding, particularly in terms of teaching.

C. J. Byrne the man was a true friend and a fine colleague. Though an accomplished researcher, academic administrator and teacher, he was at all times modest – the mark of true scholarship. I cannot forget on the last occasion on which I visited his home how pleased he seemed when one of his sons confirmed to him that his teaching abilities were highly regarded by his students. Cyril's untimely death has left a huge gap in the field of Irish learning in N. America – *gura móide teaghlach Dé a anam uasal!* We had foreseen activity from him for a further two decades with exciting new plans and fresh developments, all designed to ensure that Saint Mary's retains its position as a leading Canadian institution in the field of Modern Irish Studies. For the university to pursue imaginatively and dynamically the trail he blazed so successfully and with such infectious enthusiasm throughout his life will be the most fitting memorial of all to him.

*Seosamh Watson is NUI Foundation Chair in Modern Irish Language & Literature, and former Dean, Faculty of Celtic Studies, University College Dublin.*

---

---

# A Friend of the Nova Scotia Irish

*D. Brian O'Brien*

It is indeed an honour to write about my friend, Dr. Cyril Byrne, and his close relationship with the Charitable Irish Society (CIS) of Halifax. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." Cyril was a great model for this sentiment. While he accomplished much in his short life time and leaves a great legacy, what many of us will remember most is who he was as a person. Cyril was of the Irish and a passionate friend of the Irish. He believed in creating a richer future for this community by learning from and honouring our deep Irish history. And, he was a long-time supporter of the CIS and shared our passion for the preservation of Irish culture in Nova Scotia.

Cyril became associated with the CIS shortly after his arrival in Halifax in 1970. His interests were closely aligned to the society's, which revolved around all aspects of Irish and Celtic culture, including language, history and literature. Many of our mutual interests have made a significant mark on Saint Mary's University. An important point

of intersection was the establishment of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University in 1986, in which Cyril was instrumental and the CIS fervently supported. Other mutual interests included fundraising to provide Saint Mary's University with a facsimile copy of the historic Book of Kells, which now resides in the Patrick Power Library of the University. And, in large part because of Cyril, the CIS annually awards two Larry Lynch scholarships to students in the Irish Studies Program at the University.

Cyril's interests were not limited to his extensive knowledge of Irish history. He was also keenly interested in creating connections in the current world context. In association with Saint Mary's University, he enabled CIS members to meet two Irish presidents – Dr. Mary McAleese, current President of Ireland, in 1998, and Dr. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, in 2003, when each received honorary doctorates from the University.

Cyril was also one of the initiators of an important current effort to document and restore the grave stones of Holy Cross



---

Cemetery, located on South Park Street in Halifax. This historic cemetery, the burial ground of thousands of Halifax Irish, religious, and political leaders, is in a state of significant disrepair. Together with members of the CIS executive and An Cumann, Cyril created plans to restore the site with the cooperation of the Catholic Cemeteries Commission. We will continue to work to honour the contribution of our ancestors and make our combined vision a reality in the months ahead, beginning with a significant fundraising effort to enable the restoration.

Cyril assisted CIS in so many other ways – through exhibits of Irish folklore

at the University's Art Gallery, translation for the Celtic Cross in Halifax and his many enlightening lectures on Irish history. In 2004, CIS presented Cyril with the Community Service Award for his outstanding contribution to Irish Culture.

Through the years, Cyril made a great impression on many of us in the CIS. As his peers, we learned from him. As his friends, we enjoyed his company and great story-telling. As a great friend, he taught me much about the importance of what lies within us all.

*D. Brian O'Brien is the current President of the Charitable Irish Society of Halifax.*

## Irish and Irishness

*Pat Curran*

When An Cumann / The Irish Association of Nova Scotia held its first "Irish heritage evening" in the fall of 1990, the speaker was Dr. Cyril Byrne. Who else could it have been? Who else had done so much to cause us to look deeply into our Irish heritage and not just indulge ourselves with "Top o' the mornin'" on St. Patrick's Day and "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling"?

Cyril Byrne had a life-long interest in Irish history, literature and culture, and in the Irish influence in the Atlantic Provinces, especially in his native Newfoundland. While teaching in the English Department at Saint Mary's, Cyril single-mindedly, and at times

single-handedly, pursued the development of a Chair of Irish Studies at the university. By the mid-1980s his hard work paid off and his dream became a reality. Since that time, all those with an interest in their Irish heritage have been the beneficiaries of Cyril's vision and effort.

The Chair might have been just a comfortable place where we could peer at Ireland from an English-speaking North American viewpoint, but that wasn't Cyril's vision. Although not an Irish speaker himself, he saw that for the Chair to present a true and full view of Irish culture, past and present, its central

---

and organizing theme had to be the Irish language. That single decision helped lead the rest of us to recognize that Irish wasn't just English with a funny accent and that Ireland was something more, and certainly something different, than the caricatures of it in both American movies and old British magazines.

Cyril's topic at An Cumann's first Irish heritage evening was "what it means to be Irish." True to form, he described a much wider view of "Irishness" than most of us were familiar with or perhaps even comfortable with. In recent years, as Ireland has become a multi-cultural society, we have come to see just how apt Cyril's words were nearly two decades ago.

All of this might paint a picture of Cyril as merely a provocative intellectual, but that would be a woefully incomplete description of the man. He was, of course, a brilliant intellectual, but one who thrived on friendship and who loved to entertain and to be entertaining. He

was a born storyteller, with a prodigious memory, a deep, rich voice, an ability to mimic almost anyone and any accent, and a penchant for humour. He was also enough of a rogue not to let the literal truth get in the way of a better story.

An Cumann was fortunate to have Cyril as a member from the beginning.

He attracted a large audience each of the several times he spoke at a heritage evening over the years and he never disappointed his listeners. At the end of one of Cyril's lectures, you could depend on both knowing more and having a smile on your face.

With the death of Cyril Byrne, the Irish communities of Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Atlantic Provinces and beyond have lost a great champion. We won't see his like again.

*Pat Curran is a former President of An Cumann/The Irish Association of Nova Scotia.*



---

---

# A 'Lad of Pairs'

*John W. Shaw*

Ever since we first met back in 1982, knowing and working with Cyril has been not only a memorable, but an unforgettable experience. During that first meeting the conversation quickly went to the heart of things – the need to have a progressive and vital centre for Irish Studies in the Maritimes, the vast potential of Nova Scotia's Gaelic culture, and how these related needs could complement each other. From my own perspective it was a relief to find a scholar who shared my views and was prepared to act. The real eye-opener was a few years later when, employed as a consultant for a nearby university, I called Cyril requesting information regarding federal funding programmes, and was given a remarkably clear, comprehensive and helpful analysis on the subject that would have left an Ottawa minister in the shadows.

From those early beginnings my regard for him as a man, a scholar and an organizer continued to grow. Cyril's vision of the mission of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies that he established at Saint Mary's was hardly a narrow one, and it was no wonder that I gladly accepted an invitation to teach courses in Scottish Gaelic language and folklore, and in 1990, to serve for a term as Visiting Professor. During the summer courses, Cyril, true to form, had already found me

a room nearby with Archie Alec MacKenzie, an exceptional source of Gaelic tradition from Cape Breton, where I was able to record many items of great interest during my spare time in the evenings.

Cyril would be known this side of the Atlantic as a 'lad of pairs' from his wide interests so abundantly reflected in his teaching, publishing and broadcasting activities. His gifts, however, manifested themselves in a way and with a diversity that is highly unusual in an academic, and reveals a social and community orientation reflecting the best that the Maritimes of Canada have to offer in terms of service to a region and a chosen profession. The related themes running through Cyril Byrne's published works, broadcasting and numerous voluntary activities have to do with the value and importance of the Irish and other distinct communities in the Maritimes, the Maritimes as an important cultural and social resource within Canada, and the application of highly professional scholarship to these views. His work in this regard was always characterized by an exceptional degree of intellectual generosity and a strongly constructive approach, and to my mind what distinguished him from so many other generous and capable people was his immense personal charm combined with



---

a total and refreshing lack of self-importance.

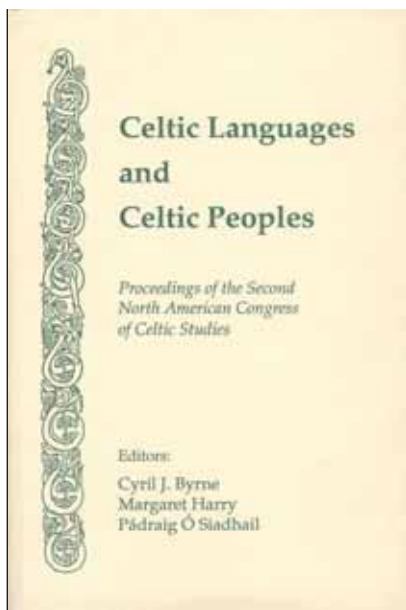
Cyril understood the need for genuine community traditions in healthy communities, and the ineffectiveness of second-hand Anglo conformity in the Maritimes. The fact that fortunate things just seemed to ‘happen’ around him overlay a strong determination and sense of purpose. The raising of \$1,000,000 for the Chair of Irish Studies stands as a remarkable achievement considering the funding context at the time, and owed much more to his wide-ranging sophistication and personal skills than it did to luck. He also had an unusual common touch, and Cape Breton Gaels will remember for many years his initiative in the

award of an honorary doctorate from Saint Mary’s to the storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil. In his role of Convener of the 2nd North American Congress of Celtic Studies Cyril put his considerable gifts as a communicator and organizer to work to ensure that the Congress was a resounding international success, followed by a fine volume of essays. I was present at many of the meetings and was greatly impressed with the tact and skill

he displayed in his handling of a number of delicate and unpredictable situations.

We visited back and forth frequently between Halifax and Scotland. On one happy occasion we drove down to Iona, off Mull, to deliver a facsimile of the Book of Kells (with his unerring instinct Cyril recognized their superlative artwork as an ideal device for providing an effective yet scholarly introduction to the Celtic world for people of all backgrounds) and ended up comparing the merits of various illegal salmon fishing spears with an informed and enthusiastic local.

Cyril was a good and trusted friend, a valued colleague and a rare man: the kind you could discuss serious things with and still come away laughing. I’ll miss him.



*John W. Shaw is Senior Lecturer in Scottish Ethnology, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.*



---

---

# A Mentor and a Friend

*Stephanie Lahey*

By my last year of high school, I had determined that I would study marine biology. I selected this, not out of any particular sense of mission, but because I did well in sciences, and I loved the sea. I had already applied to Dalhousie University in Halifax, when I came across an announcement in the newspaper: in conjunction with the Charitable Irish Society, Dr Cyril Byrne, Chair of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University, would be giving a public lecture.

Like many Nova Scotians, I was raised in a household where my "Irish Catholicness," despite its origins in the distant past, was always emphasized. And yet, I had never heard of Irish Studies. I

was intrigued. I went to the talk, and my world was forever changed.

Cyril's lecture enthralled me. I began to read, avidly, about Irish history, culture, mythology. When my acceptance letter arrived from Dalhousie, I declined. I had always adored books; I read compulsively, but I had never seriously considered studying literature. Yet, here I was, applying late to Saint Mary's, and chewing my nails to ragged crescents as my name languished on a waiting list in the Registrar's office. Finally, the envelope arrived – I was going to SMU. It was the best decision I ever made.

Cyril was an engaging professor from the very first class: he had delightful stage



**Cyril Byrne, Stephanie Lahey, and Adam Lawrence, Irish Studies graduate and now doctoral student at Memorial University, at the Women's History: Irish/Canadian Connections Conference, 21-24 August 2002.**

---

---

presence. As he read (or, frequently, recited from memory), the text began to breathe. Characters escaped from their typographic prison, and stood, paced, leapt amongst the desks. Writers I had never heard of rose up and spoke. Cyril had a genius for oratory, and he made literature live.

However, Cyril was not only a charismatic performer. His learning was extensive, and under his tutelage I was introduced to the intricate continuity of human thought. Like an intellectual virtuoso, he drew together the arts, history, mythology, psychoanalysis, theology, philosophy into a vast homogeneity – demonstrating that they were not distinct disciplines, but merely different languages, alternate ways of articulating experience. Most importantly, he taught me how to explore and approach ideas, introducing me to critical thinking. Before I took his classes, I had had many years of schooling, but Cyril was the first person to *educate* me.

Yet, what truly made Cyril great was his genuine love of teaching. He was both studious and colloquial – his classes were full of laughter. Literature, he seemed to say, was wondrous, and he was thrilled to share it with us. His unbridled joy in his students never ended at the classroom door: our stories were as fascinating to him as the tales on the printed page, and he offered encouragement, advice and comfort. He was both a mentor and a friend.

I have never been able to determine what induced me to unfold the pages of the newspaper that long ago day – chance, perhaps, or fate. But if I had not, I would never have met Dr Cyril Byrne: I would have missed my calling, and my life would lack an irreplaceable richness. I will be forever grateful for his enthusiastic teaching and patient encouragement. Thank you, Cyril, for everything.

*Stephanie Lahey studied English and Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University. She is currently completing an Honours in English, with the intention of commencing graduate school in 2008.*

---

---

# An Impossible Act to Follow

*Heather Laskey*

Stately plump Cyril Byrne, academic, actor, author, showman-impresario, man of letters, eminent scholar, and excavator of largesse from the vaults of corporate Canada and the pockets of Irish hyphenated Canadians, was a familiar sight as he proceeded along the bleak Jesuitical hallways of Saint Mary's.

I followed in his wake, to get material for an article about him and his beloved D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, on an afternoon in early 2001, his passage punctuated with easy greetings to and from janitors, colleagues, students, and canteen staff.

The antecedents of this native of Corner Brook (and apparently unscarred alumnus of an Irish Christian Brothers' schooling) were clear, both physically and, for lack of a better word, culturally. In the early 1960s, Cyril had spent two years studying for his MA in Dublin. I was living in the city around that time and know how easily he would have become part of the scenery and scenario. Sitting in an Irish pub, a glass of the dark native libation with its creamy froth in his hand, the more than 200 years of separation since his forebears crossed the pond to Newfoundland would have been unnoticeable.

Said Cyril, the thick nasal Dublin accent to perfection: "I was in this pub and there were these two 'aul wans' there at the same table, with their half-pints of stout, and they were complaining about the rats in their Dublin Corporation flats.

So I asked why wouldn't they complain to the Corporation. 'Complain!' says the one of them, and the feather on her hat goes bobbing back and forth, 'Complain – a lot of good that would do! You may as well be talking to the f----g sphinx!'” As Cyril spoke, the little finger of the aul wan's evoked glass-holding hand was raised daintily, a sign of refinement, and on his face, the look of her purse-lipped fatalistic indignation.

"It was a great time to be in Dublin," he told me, "the ambience affected all my notions of Irish literature. I met people like Patrick Kavanagh (the poet) and Mary Lavin (the novelist). It was a marvelous experience." It also extended the range of accents, intonation, and phrasing which he used as an occasional actor for CBC radio drama.

That was only one of Cyril's various personae, as well as others, such as author of learned publications, more associated with Academe. Another was as fund-raiser, the role he played with such energy and determination, in order to see the establishment at Saint Mary's of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies. Halifax, he said "was the obvious place for Irish studies ... This region is the most Irish part of the country."

For over a decade he had lobbied, charmed, persuaded, planned and politicked to get the Chair into existence. It was finally kick-started in 1986 with endowments from the city's Charitable

---

---

Irish Society and from Saint Mary's, plus federal multicultural funds. But, in an era of cutbacks to university financing, that was only the beginning: there was the \$1,000 a head dinner held in Montreal, sponsored by Matt Barrett, the Irish-born ex-CEO of the Bank of Montreal – a contact set up by Richard O'Hagan, a Saint Mary's alumnus, and Pierre Trudeau's former press secretary. Craig Dobbin, one of Cyril's 39 cousins and the owner of Canadian Helicopters, hosted another lavish party at his mansion in Newfoundland.

There were the big dinner events in Halifax organized by Irish-born hotelier Joe Gillivan, and Denis Ryan the musician/businessman, and which were usually attended by the Irish ambassador. Donations have also been received from generous individual patrons like Margaret Fallona, an Ontario woman of Irish descent, and more recently from Ann MacLean, an ex-student of the programme.

Cyril brought over Irish eminences like the poet, Seamus Heaney. The current President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, past President Mary Robinson and the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Garret FitzGerald received honorary degrees from Saint Mary's, and Cyril was involved with organizing a public subscription in Halifax to raise \$14,000 for the purchase of one of the limited edition copies of the Book of Kells, the exquisite 1,200 year old illuminated Irish monastic manuscript, now in the Patrick Power Library. However, by the time I interviewed him for the article, when over \$1 million had been raised, he admitted that after being at it for twenty years, he was wearying. In fact, it was around then that he had his first bout of cancer. No-one is doing fund-raising

now. He was probably an impossible act to follow.

The man loved English literature and knew, whether instinctively, or through art, how to teach it. That day I watched him in action, lecturing on a sharply written contemporary short story set among the old bigotries of Belfast. He was firing up the class of third year young Hibernophiles to express themselves well. "Learn the skill of using the flexibility of language. It's like learning to skate and at some point you're no longer falling on your arse."

When I contacted John Shaw, a Gaelic scholar now teaching at the University of Edinburgh, who held the D'Arcy McGee Chair in early '90's, he commented about the Irish studies programme, "The approach and orientation was open and politically liberal. It was an exceptionally relaxed and friendly environment to work in." There was a similar reaction from Matt Knight, then a graduate student in Irish Studies – he has since started his Ph.D at Harvard – "One of the best things about the programme is its ambience."

A large part of that ambience was, of course, that warm, life-loving and larger-than-life man, Cyril Joseph Byrne.

*Heather Laskey is a journalist and the author of Children of the Poor Clares: The Story of an Irish Orphanage and Night Voices: Heard in the Shadow of Hitler and Stalin.*

---

---

# *Memoir* by John McGahern

*Reviewed by Brian Robinson*

John McGahern (1934-2006) is best known as a novelist. His portrayal of growing up in County Leitrim gave his early novels *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965) an intense claustrophobia that seemed too close to the narrowness of the times to be bearable. However, what is notable about his last novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) is how he managed to create a more open account of rural life in a county without large towns. As he says at the opening of what has proved to be his last book, County Leitrim's relative isolation has preserved a sense of locality that has made the place a source that McGahern could write from: "amazingly, amid unrelenting change, these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy." As the title *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) suggests, there is an accounting aspect that takes McGahern back to the early novels. This provides the reader with the kind of revelatory detail which scholars will find invaluable. Equally valuable however is how, in what McGahern must have known was to be his last published work, the writer goes beyond documentation to show what it means to write fiction rather than autobiography...

At the end of his *Memoir* John McGahern provides a coda which opens with some seemingly matter of fact sentences:

This is the story of my upbringing, the people who brought me up, my parents and those around them, in their time and landscape. My own separate life, in so far as any life is separate, I detailed only to show how the journey out of that landscape became the return to those lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes under the Iron Mountains.

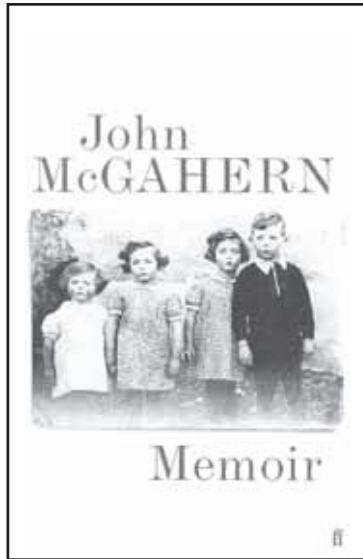
These words seem to promise little more than an appendix of loose ends (the children grow up, the father dies, the author manages to return to the place he came from). And this is indeed the case. But what these final pages also achieve is an astonishing rhapsodic conclusion which concentrates the desperately intense relationship between McGahern, his mother, and "those lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes." In contrast, McGahern's depiction of his father remains as unreconciled and bewildered as it has been since the beginning of the book when his father reacted to his son's return to Co. Leitrim with a typical cut: "my eldest son has bought a snipe run in behind the Ivy Leaf Ballroom."

There are several meanings of "return" here that are more potent than McGahern's reference to documentation. The first is that the book would not have survived opening so bluntly with his father's spitefulness if the reader had not

also been given some hints as to what lanes, fields, hedges, lakes and the Iron Mountains (where his mother had come from) meant to the boy growing up. And vice versa; the intensity of this relationship is also driven by the opposing opaqueness of his father's origins: "a life from which the past was so vigorously shut out had to be a life of darkness." Where his ex I.R.A policeman father had come from was as remote as the state he had helped give such a violent birth to. McGahern's "return" is therefore not a reconciliation with some abstract patrimony. In nearly every case where he might seem to be giving his father the benefit of the doubt, McGahern closes the discussion with a terse "but I think not." So, since throughout the book mother and father are separate genetic and geographical entities, the effect is to turn "return" into the reiteration of what McGahern's mother had imparted to her son concerning County Leitrim's "Lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes." Reiteration is therefore an essential aspect of the book's poetics of loss.<sup>1</sup>

The coda's apparent prosaic wrapping up serves to underline how the final paragraphs effectively return to the opening of the book. McGahern's conclusion is the return his calling as a writer enabled as he repeats what had seemed to be a naturalistic descriptive

setting of unchanging fields where he had run and played and worked as a boy. However, it is only at the very end of the book that the reader appreciates the necessary "detail" of the following: "the beaten path the otter takes between the lakes can be traced along these banks and hedges, and in quiet places on the edges of the lakes are the little lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young." In the book's final words this observation is transformed into what the reader could not have appreciated initially. What McGahern's risky life as a writer had held out the hope of was the cycle of returning in his imagination to remembrance of his mother in terms that take him



beyond beloved lanes and fields and hedges: "we would leave the lanes and I would take her by the beaten path the otter takes under the thick hedges between the lakes. At the lake's edge I would show her the green lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young." The changes from the opening are minor, but his final thoughts are a transformation that I cannot quite prepare the reader for in this short review: "the otter whistles down the waters for the male when she wants to mate and chases him back again to his own waters when



---

---

his work is done; unlike the dear swans that paddle side by side and take turns on their high nest deep within the reeds.”

I say transformation because there is more to it than the realisation that McGahern’s mother gave birth to her last child when she was dying of cancer. The child was the conjugal consequence of, presumably, one of the infrequent visits from her husband who lived 18 miles away in Cootehall, Co. Roscommon. Even more inexplicably her final days were spent virtually alone because her husband had taken their children back to the black hole of his Garda barracks in Cootehall. The final tragic disconnect is that her son is not allowed to attend his mother’s funeral, so the event is reported as imagined by the boy. Indeed, as one might have suspected, this is repeated in McGahern’s fiction as well. As Colin Burrow has noted, “self-plagiarism, a recycling of fiction back into his account of his life, is perhaps the only way to write about, or write down, this traumatic event which he was forbidden to witness.”<sup>2</sup> How McGahern represents the boy’s imagination is of more than cathartic interest however:

They’d carry her up the path of cinders to the hearse at the gate. The hearse would move slowly at first, gathering speed as it went by Brady’s pool and Brady’s house and the street where the old Mahon brothers lived, past the deep, dark quarry, across the railway bridge, and up the hill past Mahon’s closed shop to the school, the hearse halting at the school gate [where she had taught], past

the hall and the football field and up the small hill to the church, all the banks of the way covered with the small flowers she loved.

The conjunctions reintegrate the lanes and hedges and fields and lakes of her lifetime with her final journey. Equally significant is the remarkable fact that the reference to “Brady’s pool and Brady’s house and the street where the old Mahon brothers lived” has occurred, by my count, twelve times previously in the memoir. There is no intrinsic meaning in Brady’s pool itself. Instead, it is part of a mantra of associations that are specific to the relationship between McGahern and his mother as they made their daily journeys from his home to various places in the village. So the imagined funeral route is also a reiteration, a return and a recycling of McGahern’s life with his mother (as much as it is the writer rewriting and refining).

*Memoir’s* treatment of the daily journeys McGahern makes with his mother is worth reiterating because this specific itinerary is the emotive core of the book’s portrayal of Leitrim’s “maze of lanes.” From the very beginning of the book lanes assume a significance that makes them much more than mere topography:

There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while working in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live for ever. I suspect it is not more than the actual lane and the lost lane

---

---

becoming one for a moment in the intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss.

While the source of this loss has yet to be revealed, it becomes clear that it is derived from being secure and alone with his mother (without which the children would have found life with their father impossible). What has been sown here is the potency of a loss which is not attended to again until sixty pages later when the actual journey with his mother is described six times! It is from the poetic effect of repetition that the rending loss of his mother is built-up. So by the seventh reference, what had previously been nominally chronological (going past this, "Brady's pool", and that, "where the old Mahon brothers lived" and then on to various destination such as a farm for milk, school, and Mass), eventually turns out to be as allusive as the book's moving conclusion:

We went up the cinder footpath to the little iron gate, past Brady's house and pool and the house where the old Mahon brothers lived, past the deep, dark quarry and across the railway bridge and up the hill by Mahon's shop to the school, and returned the same way in the evening. I am sure it is from those days that I take the belief that the best of life is life lived quietly, where nothing happens but our calm journey through the day where change is imperceptible and the precious life is everything.

It is from this deep security that McGahern feels that it is inappropriate to

question his mother's faith in the church. Notwithstanding the fact that he was unable to pursue the vocation of the priesthood he had promised her, in substituting the life of a writer, he would "not have to die in life in order to circumvent death and the judgement and to keep the promise to her I loved. Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the god of a small, vivid world." Here is this world in this the book of how he came to return to Leitrim:

Why take on any single life – a priest, a soldier, teacher, doctor, airman – if a writer could create all these people far more vividly? In that one life of the mind, the writer could live many lives and all of life. I had not even the vaguest idea how books come into being but the dream took hold, and held.

To which I would only add that the most McGahern might have expected from the claustrophobic hierarchy of fears he grew up with was some form of absolution. Instead, what the world of books bought home to him was that there was less to be feared or ashamed of than he thought. The story is now the portrait of an artist who has acquired the tools that would enable him to do much more than either confront his father or escape Ireland:

I knew now that all true stories are essentially the same story in the same way as they are different: they reflect the laws of life in both its sameness and its endless variations. I now searched out those books that acted like



---

---

mirrors. What they reflected was dangerously close to my own life and the society that brought me up, as well as asserting their own differences and uniqueness.

In emphasizing McGahern's "journey out and return home" I have necessarily omitted the stories of how the other members of John McGahern's family coped. That these are an important part of the book is apparent from the acknowledgements where he thanks his four sisters for "their careful readings, corrections, their help with letters, and for bringing back into light two important scenes that had slipped my memory." Yes there is much more to this book than a portrait of the artist. But there is also an obligation to review how those "lanes and small fields and hedges and lakes under the Iron Mountains" could become so memorable, precisely to the extent that in writing this book McGahern has gone well beyond his deferential terms of reference.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> While this paragraph touches on such Irish themes as return from exile, the violence that resides in I.R.A. origins, and the part played by motherhood, this review can only acknowledge their presence in passing. What I am concentrating on here is what Margaret Lasche Carroll in her more comprehensive review refers to as "the lyrical and archetypal" devices of McGahern's work. Her review is in the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 31, No. 2, Fall 2005, pp 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Burrow, "No Way Out," *London Review of Books* Vol. 27, no. 20, 20<sup>th</sup> Oct 2005, p. 27. (This article is a review of McGahern's *Memoir*).

*Brian Robinson teaches Geography at Saint Mary's University.*

---

---

**The Inaugural Cyril J. Byrne Memorial Lecture**

# Wayne Johnston

The award-winning novelist from Newfoundland, one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers and author of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, *The Custodian of Paradise*, *The Divine Ryans*, and *Baltimore's Mansion*.

Friday, May 4, 2007

Saint Mary's University

Sponsored by the Atlantic Canada Studies Programme, the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies and the Department of English, Saint Mary's University.

To reflect Cyril J. Byrne's wide-ranging contributions to the entire Faculty of Arts and to celebrate and promote Saint Mary's University's long-standing commitment to interdisciplinary studies, the theme of the Cyril J. Byrne Memorial Lecture will rotate on a three-year cycle, highlighting Atlantic Canada Studies, Ireland and its culture, and English literature in successive years.

For information, please contact Dr. Alexander MacLeod,  
Department of English, Saint Mary's University  
(902.491.6222) or alexander.macleod@smu.ca

---

---

**The D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies is Cyril J. Byrne's  
Legacy to Saint Mary's University, Canada, and Ireland.**

*ANNasc*, the Newsletter of the D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, is provided free of charge.

We welcome financial contributions which will allow us to secure Cyril Byrne's legacy and to extend the activities of the Chair of Irish Studies.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

I enclose \$\_\_\_\_\_ as a contribution to the work of the Chair of Irish Studies.  
(A tax receipt will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00).

Comments and Suggestions:

---

An NASC  
The D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies  
Saint Mary's University  
923 Robie Street  
Halifax, NS  
B3H 3C3 Canada