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ADDRESS BY

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on Receiving the Gold Medal

of the American Irish Histocial Society

at

its 89th Annual Dinner

Waldorf-Astoria

New York, New York

Thursday, November 13, 1986

In one of the chapters of Walden Henry David Thoreau tells of being caught in a rainstorm one afternoon and taking shelter in the hovel of one "John Field, an Irishman, and his wife, and several children...." Field "worked 'bogging' for a neighboring farmer, turning up a meadow with a spade or bog hoe at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with manure for one year, and his little broadfaced son worked cheerfully at his father's side the while, not knowing how poor a bargain the latter had made."

Thoreau undertakes to explain to his host the error of his ways. It seems the wretch was partial to tea and milk and butter and beef in consequence of which he "had to work hard to pay for them and when he had worked hard he had to eat hard again to repair the waste of his system" and so through the cycle of thoughtless indulgence and ill-comprehended penance.

Given as he was to improving friends, neighbors, nations even, Thoreau even so had not much hope for Field doomed.

> A poor man, born to be poor, with his
> inherited Irish poverty...and boggy ways,
> not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity...

Well, here we are at the Waldorf-Astoria, which would not in the least soften Thoreau's disapproval, but might just alter his prophecy.

It is the work of the American Irish Historical Society to keep in mind such things. Our seal records the simple proposition "that the world may know." A torch illuminates a book.

I first visited the society's headquarters almost thirty years ago, at a time [Nathan] Glazer and I were writing Beyond the Melting Pot. As I think back it was rather like visiting a rectory of the time. Here is our description.

> Fewer and fewer need...[an Irish identity] in order to sustain their own....This is nowhere more evident than in the plight of the American Irish Historical Society...founded in New York in 1897 "to make better known the Irish chapter in American history." There was certainly a case to be made that the Irish had been slighted, and the society set out to right this imbalance with some vigor. But little came of it. The membership was basically not interested in history; it was the imbalance of the present, not the past, that concerned them. When this was righted, the purpose of the society vanished. Its journal, which had inclined to articles by aspiring judges beginning "while we know that an Irishman was in Columbus' crew on his first voyage to the New World...," has long ceased publication. The society continues to occupy a great tomb of a mansion on Fifth Avenue, with a fine library that few seem interested in using, and splendid meeting rooms where no one evidently wants to meet.

How much change a generation and Kevin Cahill have wrought. The society began, as have others for other groups, to

improve the present by celebrating the past. Its purposes in a large sense were political, and they had been served by the time of my visit in the 1950s. But now a new purpose arises, that of genuine inquiry into the whole experience of ethnicity in America, as witness our new journal The Recorder, now in its second year, and our lecture series. Scarcely a year passes without the appearance of important new work, much of it on the Irish, that protypical ethnic group. Thoreau, for example, was onto an early pattern of attributing sub-human physiognomy -- he described Field's "wading webbed bog-trotting feet" -- to a stigmatized group. Just recently Dale T. Knobel, in a brilliant work Paddy and the Republic, traces the steady simianization of the caricatured Irishman in ante-bellum American political cartoon. Social Darwinism with a vengeance!

Just as the ethnic reconstructions of the 19th century grew less urgent as time passed, so, or so it seems to me, true ethnic history and the analysis of ethnic conflict has grown more urgent as this century has stumbled across its blood-soaked decades. When Glazer and I set out to study the ethnic groups of New York we had in mind, or at least partially so, that we were seeking to falsify the Marxist proposition of class solidarity, especially of working class solidarity. This was and remains the central organizing principle of Marxism, and put plain, if we were right Marx was wrong. With the perspective of thirty years I would argue that others have since done more powerful work but that essentially we were right, and that over another thirty years this will hugely diminish the claims of

Marxism on intellectual adherence and quite destroy its political force.

But in the meantime we shall see, as we are seeing, the rise of ethnic conflict as the central source of instability and cruelty and danger in the post-imperial world.

It happens, of course, the Irish, at home or in the Diaspora, are not spared this agony, and I would wish to speak to the matter just a bit.

The events are well known. In the late 1960s, clearly in sympathetic reaction, as a physician might use the term, to events in the United States as a civil rights movement arose in Ulster where a Catholic minority had for half a century remained permanently disenfranchised, in terms of government office and power, by a Protestant majority. It happens a Westminister-type constitution will do that when parties are confessional and majorities do not change, but that is beside the point. In time violence arose on both sides and, in a pattern all too familiar in Beirut and New Delhi and Colombo and Johannesburg, extremes came to the fore and the nature of the conflict changed.

In Northern Ireland, on the so-called Catholic side a particularly violent group emerged possessed, as Bishop Mark J. Hurley has written, of an "assassination mentality," and given over to profoundly anti-Democratic methods and objectives. In the old tradition, but a very new circumstance, private American aid began to flow to this group.

The time came when someone here had to speak.

On St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1977, I joined with Governor Carey, Senator Kennedy and Speaker O'Neill in issuing a statement on Northern Ireland.

We said:

> We appeal to all those organizations engaged in violence to renounce their campaigns of death and destruction and return to the path of life and peace. And we appeal as well to our fellow Americans to embrace this goal of peace, and to renounce any action that promotes the current violence or provides support or encouragement for organizations engaged in violence.

On August 30, 1977, President Carter, who, I might add, thought of and thinks of himself as Irish, joined us, stating that

> the people of Northern Ireland should know that they have our complete support in their quest for a peaceful and just society.

He added that if a peaceful settlement were reached there,

> the U.S. Government would be prepared to join with others to see how additional job-creating investment could be encouraged to the benefit of all people in Northern Ireland. [My emphasis.]

It is hard to say and in any event not for us to judge, just how much influence we and the many members of Congress who joined us, and President Reagan who combined with us immediately on coming to office might have had, but it is the fact that last year the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland agreed to an

extraordinary enlightened and sensible set of principles concerning the future of Ulster. There are three in particular:

> Any change in the status of Northern Ireland would come about only with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.
>
> The present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland.
>
> If in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, (the governments of Ireland and the United Kingdom) will introduce and support in the respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish.

The agreement also established the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council to give the government of Ireland a consultative role in dealing with political matters, the administration of justice, and other affairs in Northern Ireland.

The day the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed, President Reagan applauded "its promise of peace and a new dawn for the troubled communities of Northern Ireland." He then promised to work "closely with the Congress in a bipartisan effort to find tangible ways for the United States to lend practical support to this important agreement."

On December 5, 1985, both houses approved a concurrent resolution declaring their "willingness to work with the President in supporting the Anglo-Irish agreement through

ago, the Cardinal Archibishop of New York was hooted and jeered on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral simply because he was a man of peace.

Now we have actually done something. If I may be allowed, some of us have done something. Might I suggest that others join in the effort?

If peace can be brought to Ulster by a process of understanding ethnic conflict, then a great gift shall have been given to the world.

And we are perfectly capable of understanding this conflict and easing it. It is not a conflict between Irish and English. It is between two frightened and deprived peoples who must somehow occupy the same land. I know Camus said the same about Algeria and was wrong. But it <u>is</u> true of Ulster.

First, might we hope that more private American aid might flow into that land, much as private aid has flowed to other parts of the world. President Kennedy started such an effort through the American Irish Foundation and it should continue.

Second, in this city and nation of ethnic alliances might we hope that some respect be paid by others to our concerns. We who would not support -- or claim not to know of -- violence in other native lands have the right to expect the same about ours.

Lastly, might we hope that the government of the Republic of Ireland will face up to its responsibility to tell the American Irish the true nature of their struggle and free <u>this</u> community to live in the present and work for the future.

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