

Counting Board, Altar and Vista: The Bradys and Inisfada

By Richard Harmond

It was uncommon for an Irish Catholic to be welcomed into the highest economic and social circles before the 1920s. In the usual scenario, it would take several generations for such a family to gain admittance to the American upper class. Yet Nicholas Brady, a businessman and financier, who was the son of an immigrant father, attained entree to those circles well before World War I. In terms of economic influence, Brady may well have been the single most powerful Irish Catholic in the United States during the 1920s. When he died in 1930, the editorial writer in the Brooklyn Eagle was not indulging in hyperbole in comparing Nicholas favorably with John D. Rockefeller II, and the younger J. P. Morgan.

When, how and under what circumstances wealthy post-famine Irish Catholics were accepted into the American establishment are important issues--important both for the history of the Irish in this country, and for the history of the upper class. Nicholas Brady, if not actually forgotten, has not received his due from historians. It is hoped that this paper will, in some measure, restore Nicholas Brady and his wife to their rightful historical place.

The Elder Brady: An Early Entrepreneur

Nicholas Brady's path to affluence, power and social position was paved by his father, Anthony. The elder Brady, whose parents left Ireland for economic reasons, was born in 1841, in Lille, France. He came to this country as a child, and at the age of nineteen began his business career as the owner of a tea store in Albany. Other tea shops followed. Successful in one sort of endeavor, he branched out into others, including the construction, gas, electrical and traction fields. He signed contracts to build roads and sewers; acquired control of gas companies in Albany and Troy; was active in developing gas lighting in Chicago; and became involved in traction enterprises in Washington, Philadelphia, and Paris.

Subsequently, Brady, "a man of unusual financial courage," as a friend once described him, founded the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company. He also joined with the "Standard Oil Group" in a number of undertakings. By the time he died in 1913, Anthony

Brady, a very model of a self-made man, had placed his mark on the business affairs of the nation, and had acquired a personal fortune of well over \$70,000,000.

The Empire Expands

His son, Nicholas, was born in Albany in 1878. He received his preliminary education at the Albany Academy, and was admitted to Yale in 1895. After graduating from Yale in 1899, Nicholas became associated with his father's business ventures. His first position was with the Edison Illuminating Company, which was later merged with the New York Gas, Electric Light Heat and Power Company, to form the New York Edison Company. When his father died in 1913, Nicholas took over the direction of his father's business interests, and became head of the New York Edison Company, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Brooklyn and the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company.

By 1928, Brady was instrumental in bringing about the consolidation of the Brooklyn and New York Edison Companies with the United Electric Light and Power Company, the New York and Queens Electric Light and Power Company and the Westchester Lighting Company. With the completion of this merger, Brady was made chairman of the board of directors of the consolidated companies.

During his lifetime, Brady was also a director of nearly fifty corporations, including Anaconda Copper, Union Carbide, Chrysler and National City Bank. At the time of his death in 1930, a well-informed contemporary declared that Nicholas Brady was "one of the first five or six most influential financiers of America."

Public Service and Philanthropies

Despite his heavy entrepreneurial commitments, Brady, like other members of the American establishment, accepted the duty of public service. A quiet and reserved person, Brady never held an elective office, and apparently had no political ambitions, though he actively, if quietly, supported Al Smith in the 1928 Presidential Campaign. But Brady spent years on the Executive Committee of the influential National Civic Federation, an

organization which was formed by socially conscious big businessmen to advance the cause of industrial peace and, when called upon, to mediate strikes. Brady was also active in the Red Cross. During World War I, he served as a major in the organization, and spent almost a year on the Italian front.

Brady met his wife, Genevieve Garvan, while attending Yale. They married in 1906. She shared her husband's philanthropic instincts, serving on the World Committee of the Girl Scouts and succeeding Mrs. Herbert Hoover as chairman of the Board of the Girl Scouts of America. Because of her contributions to various French charities, she was elected as an officer to a prominent French organization. Closer to home, Mrs. Brady was for many years a member of the Social Service Committee for the City Hospital (then located on Welfare Island).

As Irish Catholics, the Bradys were further interested in religious charities. Patrick Cardinal Hayes called upon Nicholas Brady for his assistance in the formation of the Catholic Charities organization in New York. He became a member of its board, as well as the boards of other Catholic institutions in Greater New York. Mrs. Brady founded the Carroll Club for Catholic business and professional women, and contributed substantial sums to Catholic institutions, including hospitals, orphanages and homes for the aged.

The Brady's involvement in ecclesiastical affairs went well beyond the support of certain charities. In the 1920s, they spent their winters in Rome, where they owned a charming twenty room home, furnished in early Renaissance style, and named the Casa del Sole. Here in the midst of gardens, surrounded by mimosa, cypress and pines, and with St. Peter's in the distance, the Bradys entertained prominent churchmen, such as Cardinal Pacelli, the future Pontiff. They also befriended a young priest, Francis Spellman. He may have later rewarded his patrons. Nicholas Brady was granted the Grand Cross of St. Gregory (an honor usually reserved for royalty) and Mrs. Brady was named a Papal Duchess.

In one sense, the Bradys lived like very wealthy old-line New Yorkers. They engaged in philanthropic activities. They enjoyed their social status, and lived up to their large fortune. They were listed in the New York Social Register, as well as the Brooklyn Blue Book and the Long Island Social Register. Nicholas Brady belonged to the most prestigious clubs, such as Metropolitan, Yale, Piping

Rocks and Links. And yet the Bradys seemed able to maintain aspects of their own cultural and religious heritage. One tangible reminder of this is the Saint Ignatius Retreat House, located on the North Shore of Long Island. This was once "Inisfada"--the Brady's summer home--an extraordinary mansion and show of wealth and power.

Inisfada

Along with their residence in Rome, and a Fifth Avenue apartment, the Bradys maintained an estate on Long Island's North Shore. This estate, called Inisfada (which is Irish Gaelic for Long Island), was the couple's summer residence.

Precisely when the Bradys decided to establish a Long Island estate is unclear. But they purchased, probably in 1915, some 225 acres of land on Searington Road, in Manhasset. They also secured the services of the Philadelphia architect, John T. Windrim, who, in July, 1915, wrote to Nicholas Brady:

I am very glad to say that I have at last finished with the design of the house and am now about to start on the model...

I have never received from your real estate men the topography of your property; something that will show me where the property lines are, etc. Can you...see that this will be sent to me at an early date?

The house looks well to me and with the model you will have a very comprehensive and detailed idea of the structure...

Completion of the estate required roughly three years. Formally opened in 1920, the multi-colored brick, eighty-seven room structure was one of the largest of the Gold Coast mansions. A visitor to the estate in the 1920s would doubtless have been taken by the English lawns, the beautiful Italian, rose and Japanese gardens, and the orchards of apples, pears and peaches (all maintained by a score or more of mostly immigrant gardeners). But it was that great Tudor-Elizabethan mansion that in the final analysis commanded the visitor's interest.

The mansion, of long rambling outline, stretched (and of course stretches still) across the top of a low rise. Approaching the building, the visitor of sixty years ago might have been struck by such features as the thirty-seven chimneys, each unique in design and pattern, and the finely carved granite figures of nursery rhyme characters on the

sides of the mansion, or high in the gables.

Entering the mansion, the visitor passed through the foyer to a long oak-paneled hallway, which extended the length of the building. Opening off this hallway were a number of rooms. These included a formal breakfast room containing French and Flemish Renaissance furniture; a Jacobean oak-paneled sitting room with Chippendale needle point sofa and a Jacobean gate leg table; and a billiard room with Queen Anne furniture posed against a background of Jacobean oak and Cordova leather wall covering.

The most impressive of these first floor rooms, though, was the two-story high Great Hall. Over sixty feet in length, and with high-beamed ceiling and a massive stone carved fireplace, the Great Hall was provided with Jacobean and Queen Anne period furniture, and was decorated with Gothic tapestries (now part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection) and rare Oriental rugs. This room was at times used by the Bradys for secular affairs, as well as for ecclesiastical occasions. One such occasion occurred in 1936, when Cardinal Pacelli visited the United States. A splendid reception in his honor was held at Inisfada, and the guests, some seven hundred in number, were received by the Cardinal (and Mrs. Brady) in the Great Hall.

The second floor contained the master bedroom, and the guest rooms, each with its own bath. At the west end of the floor, the master bedroom was furnished with a sixteenth century Spanish forged iron canopy bed, a Spanish carpet of the same period, and walnut furniture--chairs, settee and benches--of the French Renaissance. In keeping with the costly surroundings, the plumbing fixtures in the adjoining bathroom were gold-plated.

The jewel of the second floor though, and of the mansion itself for that matter, was a private chapel named for St. Genevieve. Among the chapel's outstanding features were a marble floor, carved oak walls and ceiling, stained glass windows, an altar of Siena rose marble and a beautiful hand-carved crucifix. Needless to say, the possession of a private chapel was a privilege not often granted by Rome.

The Bradys summered at Inisfada in the 1920s. After Nicholas Brady's death in 1930, however, Mrs. Brady became an infrequent visitor to the estate. Finally in 1937 she gave the mansion and 150 acres of land to the Society of Jesus.

With the establishment of their sumptuous country estate - with a mansion that conveys more

the feeling of a museum than a home - the Bradys displayed their wealth and impressed their friends and neighbors. Inisfada which, at a conservative estimate cost \$4,000,000 was a convincing case of what Thorstein Veblen labelled "conspicuous consumption."

And yet, as we have seen, the Bradys were a genuinely charitable and deeply religious couple. Along with the handsome vistas and Great Hall, the expensive rugs and antique furniture, Inisfada also held a small, exquisite private chapel. Here the Bradys with other members of the household, heard Mass daily.

The huge imposing structure of Inisfada reflects two distinct commitments on the part of the Bradys. On the one hand, in terms of wealth and social status, the Bradys were solid members of the American establishment. And on the other, they were devoted, as well as devout Roman Catholics. It seems a fair conclusion from the available documentary and architectural evidence, that the Bradys had found a way to living compatibly in two dissimilar and conflicting worlds.

Notes on Sources

Biographical information was derived from The New York Times, Catholic News, New York Journal and American, Commonweal, Newsweek and Time. Several letters between Nicholas Brady and FDR dealing with the Al Smith campaign, were located in the Franklin D. Roosevelt MSS (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York).

We also wish to thank Father Vincent Hart, of the St. Ignatius Retreat House, for generously sharing with us his knowledge of the Bradys and Inisfada, and for permission to use manuscript material relating to the planning and construction of Inisfada. This latter material, contained in two steel trunks at St. Ignatius, consisted- aside from a few letters- of contracts and bills. The latter, numerous and detailed, offer rare and valuable information on the cost of building a Long Island estate at the time of World War I. (Among the bills, it might be noted, was one from the architect, John T. Windrim, who received for his services a fee of \$101,000. On the other hand, according to the records, the typical outside laborer earned \$3.00 a day).

For our description of Inisfada, we relied on Peter Kaufman, "Inisfada: The Story Behind the Estate," Long Island Forum, XLIX, 135, and the Catalog of the Public Sale of the Collections of Genevieve Garvan Brady (Mrs. William J. Babbington Macaulay) on the

Premises. Inisfada, Manhasset, Long Island, May 10-15, 1937 inclusive.

Finally for information on America's wealthy Irish Catholic families, we turned to Stephen Birmingham, Real Lace: America's Irish Rich (New York, 1973) and John Corry, Golden Clan: The Murrays, the McDonnells and the Irish American Aristocracy, (Boston, 1977). Though well-written and useful, both books are more anecdotal than analytical. Neither can compare to E. Digby Baltzell, The Protestant Establishment (New York, 1964), which is, in our view, the best study on the American upper class for the years covered by this paper.



"The Tenement:" A Living Museum

The Lower East Side Historic Conservancy is seeking funding for an unusual project which they are calling "The Tenement."

The plan is to turn an actual tenement on the Lower East Side into a "living museum", with six "households" representing Black and German families of the 1850s; an 1860s Irish Household; 1870's Chinese; 1880s Italian, and 1890s Jewish. The households will contain "reproductions of items commonly found in immigrant households. Sounds of language, home industry, music...smells of cooking, hair oil, perfume and the like combine with furnishings, household items, tools, papers, books...and a story to recreate a time. The selection of articles will be based on photographs, drawings and written and verbal descriptions of 19th century tenement interiors."

The press releases from the Conservancy are quite exciting: Ruth J. Abram, the project director, has assembled an impressive staff of historical consultants, including, (for the Irish "household"), Hasia R. Diner (Professor of History at the University of Maryland and author of Erin's Daughters in America); Kerby R. Miller, (Professor of History at the University of Missouri and author of Emigrants and Exiles); and Carol Groneman (Professor of History at John Jay College and co-editor of Gender, Race and Class: Sexual Division of Labor, 1780-1980). Ms. Abrams is the director of Paraphrase, a not-for-profit corporation which produces public programs based on history.



The plans for the program make clear that this is not an ordinary "museum." The six immigrant groups were specifically chosen so that certain questions might be addressed, issues such as prejudice, assimilation, and American immigration policies are just some of the possible focuses. The plans call for catalogs, an "Immigrant Heritage Trail", Study Guides, Changing Exhibits and Special Programs. Under the direction of historians, graduate students will assist in locating artifacts, immigrant sites, compiling bibliographies, etc.

The initial stages of research will begin in the summer of 1987, and by February, 1988, the Conservancy anticipates having the complete drawings and plans of the six households. This is an exciting project that deserves our support. For contributions and further information contact: Ruth Abram, Director, Lower East Side Conservancy, 12 Eldridge Street, New York, N.Y. 10002.