

THE IRISH-AMERICAN HERITAGE MUSEUM

By Thomas F. Harrington

Thomas F. Harrington is the first director of the new Irish American Heritage Museum. Originally from Queens, he is the son of Co. Kerry and Clare immigrants. A graduate of SUNY Oswego, Tom Harrington also has an MA from the University of Delaware. Mr. Harrington spoke to the NYIHR at the 4 March 1989 meeting.

Created in 1986, the Irish American Heritage Museum is a new institution with a clear mission, to preserve and better understand the contribution of Irish culture to American society. The Museum serves a unique role in the Irish American community by collecting the material culture of Irish Americans, preserving those things for posterity, and creating exhibits and educational programs that utilize and complement its collections. The Museum is open and growing.

The Museum is headquartered in Albany, New York. The city of Albany provides corporate office space in the downtown Arts District. If in Albany, look for the American and Irish flags flying on Clinton Avenue by the Palace Theater. The center of the Museum's Albany operation is, however, at the College of Saint Rose. A major research library in Irish and Irish American Studies is being assembled by the Museum's part-time librarian Mary Anne Lanni. This collection includes books and archival materials such as letters, diaries, and broadsheets. Photographs of every period are also being collected. Scenes of family and social life are as important to this collection as photos of major personalities and events. Sound recordings of Irish music in all its interpretations have found a place in the Saint Rose collection. A bibliography of the collection will be available through inter-library loan; books circulate directly to members of the Museum and the College of Saint Rose community.

The College also hosts a small exhibit gallery. A permanent exhibit of historic maps of Ireland is on display. Occasional travelling exhibits are also featured. In 1989, the Irish Georgian Society's "Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland," an exhibit on the Connecticut Irish community, and "Jill Uris' Ireland" (compliments of the Irish American Cultural Institute) were shown at Saint Rose. Stop by the Neil Hellman Library to visit the gallery or make an appointment for a tour of the St. Rose facility.

The Museum is currently ready to expand to its first major satellite. A landmark 1850s style residence is being renovated for use as gallery space in the Catskill village of East Durham. East Durham has long enjoyed the reputation of "the Emerald Isle of the Catskills" with its many resorts, shops, and pubs offering a congenial atmosphere for Irish entertainment and social life. The Museum building is located on the grounds of the Irish Cultural and Sports Centre. The Museum will be a forum for the history and culture of the Irish in America, while the Centre sponsors G.A.A. games, music festivals, and a variety of Irish cultural activities. Both organizations, with the recently dedicated Our Lady of Knock Shrine, represent a renaissance in the Irish Catskills.

The East Durham gallery building stands out already. The 1850 wooden frame structure has been painted to historically accurate specifications. The ornate cornice and cupola are sporting a nineteenth century four color paint scheme. The formerly white building is now coated grey with a lighter grey trim and green accent. The double doorway with its curved moldings features a dark terracotta red. The building is now a history lesson in itself.

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The Irish American Heritage Museum, however, is much more than its buildings. The Museum is people and collections. The whole project was the inspiration of members of the New York State American Irish Legislators Society. Their vision of a home for Irish American history and culture has been transferred to the Museum's governing Board of Trustees, led by Albany native Joseph J. Dolan. The Board consists of representatives from business and labor; leaders from major Irish American cultural organizations; regional representatives from New York State and beyond; and professional lawyers, accountants, and managers offering their pro-bono expertise. The Board has employed a director, a librarian, and an office manager to staff the fledgling organization. The hearts and minds of the Trustees and staff guide and serve the Museum's growing membership. Members receive free admission to the Museum's exhibit facility, use of the library, and a variety of invitations, discounts, premiums, and a newsletter. Membership is the best way to support the Museum's activities.

Museums have a unique role in our society—the collection and preservation of our material culture. Collections are the cornerstones of museums. The IAHM is building on its College of Saint Rose library collection. Starting with books and expanding to archival materials, photographs, and sound recordings, the Museum is now actively collecting art and artifacts. A well-defined collections policy has been established as a guide for the growth of the collection. A broad variety of objects, including but not limited to the following, are being gathered for exhibition and study:

1. The decorative arts including furniture, furnishings, and glassware, flatware, and ceramics made in Ireland, brought to America by Irish immigrants, or purchased by Irish Americans to furnish their homes and representative of the many periods of Irish immigration.
2. Tools and equipment used in the various trades, agriculture, housework, manufacturing, industry, and business made or used by Irish and/or Irish-American people to make their living.
3. Textiles including flat textiles for personal or household use and/or worn by Irish or Irish-American people.
4. Clothing made and/or worn by Irish or Irish-American people representing the costume of the many periods of Irish immigration.
5. Military objects including flags, uniforms, insignia, banners, and medals significant to Irish and Irish-American involvement in wars, campaigns, and other military actions of the United States of America or the American actions of Irish nationalist causes (e.g. the Fenians).
6. Objects significant to Irish and Irish-American involvement in American politics (e.g. campaign buttons, banners, sashes, and symbols).
7. Objects significant to Irish and Irish-American involvement in American labor unions and workers' organizations.
8. Objects significant to Irish and Irish-American social organizations (e.g. banners, awards, symbols, and costumes related to such groups as the A.O.H., Emerald Societies, or Irish county organizations).
9. Objects significant to the Irish and Irish-American role in the growth of canals, railroads, and other transportation networks in the United States of America.
10. Musical instruments for the performance of traditional Irish music.



The IAHM's East Durham, New York gallery.

11. Objects related to churches or religious organizations of any sect and of significance to Irish-Americans.

12. Sports equipment, uniforms, trophies, and prizes significant to Irish and Irish-American people (e.g. hurling sticks, baseball bats, footballs, boxing gloves, etc.).

13. Advertising media significant to Irish-American businesses and their products and services and to products manufactured for an Irish-American market (i.e. products given an Irish name).

14. Products and/or product packaging significant to Irish-American businesses and manufacturers.

The Museum welcomes academic scholars, popular researchers, and genealogical investigation. Scholar consultants and guest

curators are already being sought to bring current research to exhibits. Indeed the Museum will be a conduit for the preservation of new scholarship in the form of popular museum exhibits.

The library, the collection, and all exhibits will be accessible to the public. Accessibility is the key to the Museum's policy. The record of the Irish American past lives in our memory, on tapes and LPs, in books, in letters, and in the material things that made up the texture of everyday life in the past. Through its collections of art and artifacts, backed by a library and archives, the Museum plans to explore Irish-American culture in new and exciting depth.

For information on membership and programs, or to donate materials and books, write to the Museum Director, Irish American Heritage Museum, 19 Clinton Avenue, Albany, New York 12207. Telephone (518) 432-6598.



FOREVER FAMILY SECRETS

Dad,
Why wasn't I told the great tales
of the Sun Goddess Erie
from which Ireland took its name.
Of Mathgen the Sorcerer
or Great Queen Maeve,
Sovereign from Connaught.
Her court a medieval playground
for wizards and faerie magic.
This mighty Celtic civilization
never mentioned in my school books
or at family dinner tables.
A tapestry rich
in folklore, myth and fact
woven from one loom.
I grew up wondering why March 17th
shamrocks and wee green men
should mean something to me.
Searching alone, the fragments are gathered
I want my legends.

Why wasn't I taught the history?
Fleets of invaders at every shore
who never stopped marching.
Romans, Danes, Normans, then English
raped the tranquil farmland and the women
trying in vain to slay
our religion, language and dreams.
Cannon and artillery against shovel and pitchfork
Irish tears fell on the rubble
where castle, abbey, villages once stood.
Eight centuries of war with Brits
still butcher young lives in the northeast.
No thatched roof cottage left unscorched

Gravestones dot the countryside
like acres of forgotten sheep
Witness to millions who died proud.
My blood is splattered on these hills
I want my land.

Why didn't I hear the music
Echoing nightly from O'Reilly's Pub.
Phrases lilt from pipes and fiddle
in time with prancing feet.
Tradition's cadence kept sacred
in stamping, muddy shoes.
Fishermen's caps flip off
Chilled glasses set down
Weathered bodies rest on whiskey or a dark,
frothy brew.
Tunes from childhood set old cronies swaying
Back to a simpler time.
At home, a bonnie lass prepares the evening
stew
Her lullaby fills the cottage's damp corners
to soothe a restless babe
or call back a lover long gone.
The hearth crackles and spits
Melody touches memory
and carries it up to the cool night air
Mom, you sang me these songs, then left
I want my music.

Why wasn't I shown the misery?
1845, 6, 7 emerald fields gone brown.
Black, dead potatoes leave millions starved.
Those left standing flee poverty and English
oppression

To America.
Three months journey in a ship's stench belly
dumps its charges on land where
"No Irish Need Apply"
Forget Irish, learn English.
Forget O'Ceallachan, now you're Callaghan.
Forget farming, lay railroads, make beds.
Forget the hearths, peat bog fires aglow.
Go home to abandoned warehouses
under the Manhattan Bridge.
Damp, cold, barren - Brooklyn's Irishtown.
A home where your cradle never warmed in
winter,
did it Dad?
Ancestral voices call from crumbled alleys
They speak to me
of poor lives made grand
by music, poetry, children
and a survivor's spirit
I want my people.

For the moment the whys are still
Bulging handknit pockets securely keep
ancient pride now found.
I walk on
Hands warm in wool
Me Irish eyes are learning to smile.

Cait Eibhlin Walker March 1988
(Kathleen Helen Walker is a NYIHR member
who lives in Brooklyn.)