

## President MacCracken's address to the Ulster-Irish Society of New York on March 24th, 1939



Annual Banquet of the Ulster-Irish Society of New York, 17 March 1934, at the Hotel Biltmore.  
(Empire Photographers original photographed by Marion Casey. Collection of the American Irish Historical Society.)

"Mr. Goudy, President Stitt and members of the Ulster-Irish Society, and friends:

"Forty-three years ago, in Harrisburg, PA, my father, then Chancellor of New York University, made an address before the Scotch Irish Society of America, on the subject 'The Scotch-Irish American, what manner of man is he?' To him I owe my interest and love for the Irish of Ulster, and my pride in their leadership in American life. To his memory I raise my glass, and in his name accept with gratitude your medal.

"The Scotch-Irish, or as you call him, the Ulster-Irish, has identified himself with his new country, America, more deeply than any but the first immigrant group. To begin with, he spoke the English language in its greatest purity, as it should be spoken, with strong, pure vowels, with an *l* that trilled and rolled on the tip of the tongue. His voice, clarified and fortified by a gargle of his own manufacture and of great potency in the stimulation of speech, rang full and true, not strangled at its roots by London fog.

"He brought with him not only his gargle, but his songs and dances, his lilts and reels, his myths and legends, riddles and

kissing games, weather wisdom and proverbs, his witches and charms; these are now the folklore of America, changed like his speech into the truest American quality. Though driven by oppression from his home in Ulster, he carried their memory with him, and planted them in the new soil. So we have Londonderry in New Hampshire and Antrim in Ohio, and Donegal and Armagh in Pennsylvania. In my own country, we have Hibernia, and I live on the old Livingston patent, while across the river are the twin counties of Ulster and Orange—no mistaking those names—flanked as they are by Sullivan and Montgomery Counties.

"The planting of the Ulster-Irish is an oft told tale familiar to this audience. I will not repeat it, except to point out that the Ulstermen sought the hills from Belfast, Maine, to Scottsboro, Alabama, that they bore the brunt of the Colonial frontier wars, that they fiercely resented the neglect of their needs by tidewater governments, and that they took part in the Revolution with a great determination to paddle their own canoe. Their chief line of migration to the west was down the Susquehanna, up the

valley of the Shenandoah, through Cumberland Gap, and down the Tennessee. I do not know how my own great-grandfather went from Sunbury in Pennsylvania, but I know you will find MacCrackens scattered all along this trail, in Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Kentucky, until at last the Tennessee River fronts the Ohio in McCracken County, at Paducah. I know, too, that there were McCrackens in the first shipload that landed in Maine, in 1735.

"There is nothing more remarkable in all history than this vast swarming from a few little counties in a tiny corner of a small island, unless it be the Greeks spreading over Persia and the Orient. But the Greeks were an army of conquest, the Irish of Ulster poor farmers. No wonder people ask and ask again: what manner of men were these that so multiplied and spread over a million of miles, to stamp their culture in succeeding generations of settlers?

"I will take a comparison from Ulster itself. On its north coast, a coast that is really wild and rockbound as Cape Cod is not, you come to the northern edge of County Antrim, and there you will find that wonder of the world, the Giants' Causeway. By some vast pressure of subterranean forces, ages ago, streams of lava were forced in jets to the light of day, and there under tremendous and regular pressure they hardened into marvelous columns. They are all six-sided piers, except for a few deviants of three, or seven, or nine; and there for ages they have stood, defying the waves and winds.

"Now the Ulster-Irish are like those columns of the Giants' Causeway. Their character was formed under the fire of suffering and starvation. Their resistance to tyranny created a terrible pressure, and the streams of families that survived lived in that pressure. When the light of day came, and passions cooled, the Ulster Presbyterians cooled off in hexagonal formation that has resisted every effort to change them. It is these six sides of their nature that have stood fast, and made them the men they are.

"These six sides or facets, or planes of power, are these: religion, education, government, industry, invention, philanthropy.

"Of religion I have no need to say but a word. The Ulster-Irish sent ministers to America in every family. In the very heart of the wilderness they planted their congregations. If their religion was a little stern and without art, let you remember the privations in Ulster from which these folks had come. Yet it was a real religion. My father in his speech quotes three epitaphs of a father and two sons: 'God, thou art my God; Jehovah first; I will go unto God, my exceeding joy. God shall save me.' There was pith and substance in such a personal religion.

"And with religion went education. Children learned Webster's spelling book, but they read McGuffey's Readers. The Irish schoolmaster licked the learning into the youth of the land. Even as late as my father's time, I recall his telling how, in what was then practically frontier in southern Ohio, he was confronted with rebellion in a village school. So he and the other teacher, a schoolmarm, divided up the whole school, and while he thrashed the boys, she thrashed the girls, until the whole school had been disciplined, and order restored. My grandfather had been a teacher, too, and taught school in a shed in his own backyard. My grandmother is credited with founding one of the earliest western women's colleges.

"At every stage along the Ulster-Irish trail, a college has sprung up, like the orchards of Johnny Appleseed as he journeyed the same way. The American college is of Scots and Irish origin, with its trustees, its chapel, its loyal alumni, and its emphasis on life and character.

"But the Irish Presbyterians were arguers, tough minded men. They wrestled over their sermons, and liked exhausting argument. They sat long over church government. And so dominie and minister and session governed the frontier with as strong hands as they could. Minister, elders, and sessions easily became President, Senators and Representatives, while the learned dominies sat as Supreme Court. Presbytery and Synod were synonymous with county and state, while the General Assembly was a very good model for the Electoral College. So, at least, some students of our Constitution have contended; though it is only a part of the truth. What is true is this, that the Ulster-Irish have furnished to the American government, in every office, groups of men of distinction out of all proportion to their numerical share of the people. Andrew Jackson and Stonewall Jackson, U.S. Grant and Woodrow Wilson, John C. Calhoun and Andrew Johnson, every state of opinion, but many strong men.

"Religion, education and government, on all these the Ulster-Irish laid strong hands and wrought mightily. But even more significant were the contributions to industry and to invention. No wonder that in his westward trek he stopped to invent the harvester that made the great western farms realities. No wonder that the heavy industries fell into his hands. His energy was really prodigious. The forests fell, the stumps were pulled, the rivers stemmed. For this his life at sea in herring fishing, his weaving and his hard work in stony fields had prepared him. But only the continuation of stern discipline, trained intelligence, and an outward pressure of opportunity equal to the repressive tyranny of eighteenth century Ulster could have brought it about.

"And lastly, philanthropy, that amazing trait of the American. The restless Ulster-Irish, whose energy and training had brought rich rewards in the early harvest from American soil, had nothing left of the close thrift of his forebears in Ireland, that made them count every penny. He scattered millions with lavish hand, for churches, hospitals, colleges, libraries, sided powerfully by his brother Scots.

"For two hundred years great waves of migration have beat against this six-plated column of basalt. Teuton and Slav, Latin and Jew have come. They have not essentially changed the nature of the American, as he crystallized from the Ulster-Irish mould under the pressure of the great settlement. He still believes that religion and education form the bases of government. Faced in Ireland to choose between state and Church, he chose the Church, but reserved his claim in government until he could assert it strongly in his new land. Inured to privation in Ulster, he did not shrink from the hardships of the frontier. Coming from a people not primitive, but on the contrary of standards of living high for the time, well-read in at least one book, the Bible, these frontiersmen demanded ministers of a metaphysical disposition, interested in debate and discussion. To keep up the supply in the next generation log cabin schools were founded that soon became colleges.

"Now, in all modesty, it is necessary to admit that the Ulster-Irish did not discover America, that the English settlers outnumbered them about eight to one, that others came from Ireland's center and west, from Scotland, Germany, Sweden, and Holland, to make up our population. The Ulster-Irish have no monopoly of any of the characteristics I have described. All honor to them. But, modesty aside, we celebrate tonight the Ulster-Irish Americans, and are proud of the manner of men that history records him to be. To the Ulster-Irish!"

(A typescript of this speech is in the collection of the American Irish Historical Society. MacCracken was President of Vassar College.)