

Eulogy for Paul O'Dwyer

BY FRANK DURKAN

Delivered at the Church of the Holy Trinity, 213 West 82nd Street, Manhattan on Saturday, 27 June 1998

Many great tributes have been given to Paul O'Dwyer but to my mind the most appropriate of all was delivered about one-half hour ago at the corner of 79th Street and Broadway. The kettle drums tapped out their cadence. The cortege moved forward to the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Emerald Pipe Band of the New York Police Department struck up the air *A Nation Once Again*.

He was the eleventh child born of the union of Patrick O'Dwyer and Bridget McNicholas. He was the youngest and the smallest and the family income consisted of his father's menial school teacher's salary and the fruits derived from a three-and-a-half acre "farm" composed mostly of Mayo bog-land.

His father Patrick O'Dwyer answered an advertisement in the newspaper in 1886 and with his worldly belongings in a cardboard suitcase, he took the train to Tuam, Co. Galway. From there he walked the thirty-five miles to the village of Bohola where the advertisement had informed him that a teaching position was available.

He received a strange and sinister welcome. A man with a full red beard and no shoes on his feet, stepped out from behind a hedge armed with a shotgun. In a loud voice he said: "Níl fáilte romhat san áit seo. As go brách leat." ("There is no welcome for you in this place—get out.") These words were uttered by a man who had no time for the foreign government which ruled Ireland and he identified a new visiting schoolmaster whose salary would be paid by that British government as an agent of the invader. Little did he know that the man who had arrived amongst them and who would labor in their midst for over forty years was one of the most ardent Irish nationalists ever to come out of County Cork.

Paul O'Dwyer, born on 29 June 1907, spent his formative years listening to his father

teach Irish history and instilling in his young mind the record of England's tyrannical rule over the Irish people. He was nurtured by the milk of Irish patriotism and from his father he developed his burning resentment of the discrimination against his people—the resentment that he later harbored against any people and



any nation which attempted to usurp the rights of its neighbors.

When Paul was thirteen years old he experienced one of the most devastating incidents in his young life—his father died suddenly, leaving his mother penniless. Their only possessions were the three-and-a-half acres, a pony and a trap.

During his lifetime, Patrick O'Dwyer and his wife knew that the most important weapon they could give this young lad was an education but in those days an education in an Irish secondary school had to be paid for and she didn't have the money for it. So she instructed Paul to harness the pony to the trap and she and he headed in the lashing rain for the town of Ballaghaderreen in County Roscommon where the closest school was located. She told the president of the school about her plight and about her ambitions for the future of her orphan son and that she could in no way come up with the annual fee of £15.

She must have been a woman of considerable eloquence because the annual fee for Paul was

NYIHR member Frank Durkan is the nephew of Paul O'Dwyer, a partner in the law firm O'Dwyer and Bernstein, and has succeeded his uncle as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Irish Institute of New York, Inc.

Photo: Sean MacBride, Frank Durkan and Paul O'Dwyer at "England on Trial," a symposium sponsored by the American Irish Unity Conference, Biltmore Hotel, New York City, 22 July 1981. Photo by Peter Dolan. Courtesy of the NYIHR.

*“The Irish,
he told us,
were the first
boat people,
and we had
an
obligation to
make life a
little easier
for those
who came
after us.”*

—Jim Callaghan on
Paul O'Dwyer, “One of
New York's Last True
Progressives,” *The Village
Voice*, 7 July 1998

reduced to £10, all of which would be supplied by his brothers in America and his sisters in England. But the price proved very high in another way because in his three years in the school, Paul was publicly reminded again and again that he was a “charity case” and that the rules were different for him than for the sons of wealthier parents who could afford to pay the £15.

Many years later when Paul had attained success as a lawyer in New York, he sat down and wrote out a check for the dollar equivalent of £15, plus a liberal rate of interest, to satisfy the debt that he felt he owed for his three years of education. The faculty in the school marveled that somebody so long gone should write to remember the joyful days he spent in the school, but the humiliation and degradation of the discrimination he had suffered burned deeply in his sensitive soul and lit in him the burning resentment that he carried throughout his life against discrimination whenever and wherever he saw it. The faculty never did really recognize the silent zinger that accompanied the check.

The [New York] papers correctly reported that Paul O'Dwyer and his late wife Kathleen Rohan had four children, Billy, Eileen, Rory and Brian. But the whole truth is that Paul had four hundred children or maybe four thousand children because he was a patriarch of a family that numbered not only a myriad of personal relatives—nieces and nephews by the score—but also the children and nieces and nephews of hundreds of other persons who flocked to his door seeking help, advice and guidance, and he never hesitated, no matter how late the hour or how busy his work was, to lend an ear and stretch out the hand of help to a confused and bewildered youngster.

He was a kind and generous man.

He was the shepherd of a flock in a field that had no boundary, and the comfort and guidance of his wisdom and his adherence to what he believed to be right, has been of enormous benefit to many, many people throughout the world.

He had his moments too when the greatness and gentility would be hidden behind a mask of feigned anger and wrath. Many a niece and many a nephew and many another unfortunate who had somehow failed to follow his instructions and his advice would sit quaking before his desk. Then the eyebrows would

crunch down, the glasses would come off and they would hop on the desk and the unfortunate recipient of a first class tongue-lashing would wish that he or she was a thousand miles away. But his criticism was always constructive—never destructive and in his political life he spared no one who, in his mind, was doing something less than was right and proper and he never hesitated to let that person know of his views on the matter.

He railed against the politicians of his day.

He started on Mayor LaGuardia and LaGuardia's successor, his own brother Bill, who received no more consideration than anyone else.

He landed on Mayor Impelliteri, and Mayors Wagner, Lindsay, Beame, Koch, and Dinkins.

And Mayor Giuliani, you should consider yourself very fortunate that he is not around today. I have no doubt you would surely be in his sights.

He died last Tuesday evening at about



10:00 p.m. We were all at a fundraiser for his wife Pat who is seeking to be elected to the New York State Assembly from the 95th Assembly District in Orange County. It may have been a surge of pride that finished him or a sense of frustration that he could not be with us. However, God's finger touched him and called him home—peacefully in his sleep.

Tonight his ashes go on an Aer Lingus

*Illustration: The
Advocate, 7 November
1966. Courtesy of the
Archives of Irish
America, New York
University.*

plane back across the three thousand miles of stormy ocean which bore such a prize to America in the year 1925. It is my wish that somehow the pilot of the plane could deviate from the flight plan to fly over the rocky fastness of the Connemara mountains, and over the bog land waste of Erris and on over Sligo, over Drumcliff Churchyard which holds the bones of William Butler Yeats whose verses Paul loved to quote; and on further over Enniskillin into Northern Ireland where recently the armored cars have reluctantly shifted into reverse, and the Union Jack no longer flaps as arrogantly as it once did in bygone times; southward over County Louth to Dear Old Dirty Dublin, where many years ago on a bright Easter morning men and women like Paul O'Dwyer stepped out with steel in their backs and a dream in their hearts to right an ancient wrong; southward even further to Wicklow and Wexford where maybe the pilot might dip his wings in tribute to the memory of the men and women of 1798.

Paul would surely like that.

Then westward over the fertile fields of County Cork from whence his father came and then northward over the silvery Shannon River, descending slowly—lower and lower—to gently touch down on the sacred soil of his native Mayo.

Home at last!

Home to the three-and-a-half acres where now stands the imposing edifice built by Paul O'Dwyer for the benefit of those less fortunate than himself. †

On Monday, 29 June 1998, exactly ninety-one years from the day he was born, his ashes will be spread over the three-and-a-half acres and I have no doubt that in time to come the grass there will grow stronger and taller and sweeter because of the inspiration it will surely receive from the ashes of Paul O'Dwyer.

Uncle Paul, we miss you.

Uncle Paul, we'll miss you always.

† *The O'Dwyer Cheshire Home in Bobola, County Mayo is a residence for handicapped adults.*

"I guess the last contract that Paul O'Dwyer drew up for me was for a large-print edition of a novel I wrote called Table Money. The amount paid was minimal, but O'Dwyer said, "You get two things out of it. Somebody who can't see well can read your book. Second, you'll be one of the first in large print. Someday you'll see an awful lot of this being done and you can embellish the matter and say you were there first."

—Jimmy Breslin, "No Way to See the Future When We Can't See Today," *Newsday*, January 1998

"As Council President O'Dwyer left at least one lasting achievement: the seal of the City of New York carried the date '1664' on the bottom, the date when the British had seized Nieuw Amsterdam from the Dutch and named it New York, but O'Dwyer quite rightly had the date officially changed to 1625, when the first colonists organized their first town government."

—editorial, *Staten Island Register*, 30 June 1998



Photo: Pat O'Dwyer with Liam Dunphy and Paul O'Dwyer at the McGraw Rotunda, New York Public Library for the launch of The New York Irish, 1 March 1996. Photo by Lisa Garcia. Courtesy of the NYIHR.