

The Roundtable in Transition: A Fifteenth-Year Retrospective

BY ANN M. SHEA

Ann (Nancy) Shea joined the Roundtable in March, 1988. She is the co-compiler, with Marion Casey, of The Irish Experience in New York City: A Select Bibliography (1996). Currently she is the NYIHR's Vice President for Local History.

The New York Irish History Roundtable is now fifteen years old! During its existence it has progressed from a promising beginning to notable achievements. It all began three days before President Ronald Reagan won a landslide victory over Walter Mondale in November 1984. A small group came together on Saturday afternoon, November 3, in a meeting room of the Williams Club on East 39th Street in Manhattan for the first gathering of the Roundtable.

At that time there was no organization devoted to researching and preserving the varied experience of the Irish who came to the New York City area, even though the Irish had been in New York City since the seventeenth century.

Carter, owner of the Irish Bookshop (then known as the Keshcarrigan Bookshop) and William Griffin, professor of history at St. John's University and first president of the Roundtable, these individuals were gathered together so that they could meet and talk about their shared interest. John Ridge, one of the speakers at that first meeting, remembered that it was a thrill to be there and to find that the participants "were really nice people." To this day he finds that he learns something at each Roundtable meeting and that "there is never a meeting when I don't meet new people with interesting stories."

One objective of the New York Irish History Roundtable, as stated in the invitation to the meeting, was to compile a list of sources on the Irish in New York, including libraries,

*Illustration:
Detail from cover
page of what
would become the
first issue of New
York Irish
History, which
appeared in
March, 1986.
From the Archives
of the New York
Irish History
Roundtable*



© 1999. Published with the permission of Ann M. Shea.

But there were individuals who had pursued, formally and informally, one or another aspect of this experience. Through the efforts of Angela

archives, and private collections. The list would be maintained and added to at each subsequent meeting, and would be available to all people

engaged in New York Irish historical research. As the proposal to form the Roundtable stated, another objective was to form a group "with the aim of encouraging research into the history of the Irish in New York. This would be achieved by making members aware of sources of relevant material in New York area and elsewhere. Members would meet twice a year and visit a selected repository where a librarian/archivist/historian would give a lecture on the holdings of New York Irish interest and conduct a tour of the repository."

EARLY ROUNDTABLE ACTIVITIES

At this first meeting in 1984, there were three presentations. Archivists Lisa Hottin and Joan Gosnell spoke about several sources: the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections (a searchable data base now available on the internet through the website of the Library of Congress), the National Historical Preservation and Records Commission, and the Hayes bibliography of Irish history, a large format, multi-volume collection. Professor Griffin described the library and archives of the American Irish Historical Society, and John Ridge spoke on the archives of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. One participant recalled that there "was a lot of enthusiasm in the room" because of the presentations and because the twenty enthusiasts, about evenly split between men and women, found that they were no longer alone in their quest. Over coffee (apparently no tea) and cookies, they made friends and connections, many of which have lasted to this day. Thus began the extensive series of talks, library visits, slide shows, tapings, cemetery tours and other events meant to inform those interested in the Irish of New York.

There were at least two meetings or events in each of the following three years under Presidents Griffin, Ridge and the late James McHugh. The topics of the meetings included the Irish American press; the uses of a computer in historical research; the New York City Municipal Archives and its uses for Irish American research; information available in the records of New York Hospital-Cornell Medical College; the records of the County Cork Association; and the efforts of Father John

Drumgoole to secure a home for newsboys in the late 1800s. In 1986 Roundtable members visited the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia, and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. Finally, the Roundtable sponsored a 1987 panel on twentieth century Irish immigration at a regional meeting of the American Conference on Irish Studies.

In March of 1986, the Roundtable issued its first annual journal (in the size of a tabloid newspaper). It has been followed by twelve other issues (including this one) of *New York Irish History*, with the format modified to magazine size. Ever mindful of the Roundtable's objective of "encouraging research into the history of the Irish in New York," editors Susan

Illustration:
Detail from initial
proposal in 1984 for
formation of the
Roundtable.
From the Archives of
the New York Irish
History Roundtable

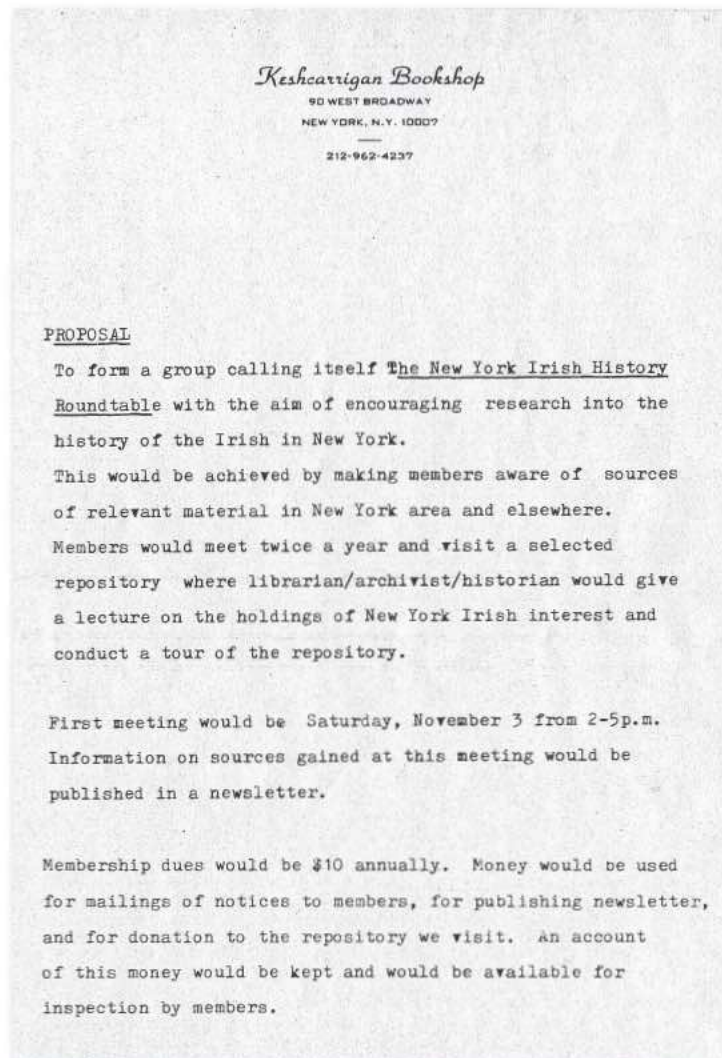




Illustration: Reproduction of ration cards used on cover of invitation to Famine remembrance meal on the Roundtable's tenth anniversary in 1994. From the Archives of the New York Irish History

Neill, Trish Taylor, Marion Casey, Linda Almeida, Joe Doyle and Frank Naughton have put together a mix of scholarly research on neighborhoods, sports, music, and family remembrances, among other subjects. *New York Irish History* also contains the winning articles from the Roundtable's scholarship competition (funded initially by the Irish Institute of New York), five articles over the last ten years. One of the most popular issues of *New York Irish History* is the one (vol. 9, 1995) commemorating the anniversary of the Great Famine and its impact on New York City. That issue included vignettes about members' relatives who had come to New York in the famine years. The journal was redesigned in 1998 through the efforts of Marion Casey and John Cavanagh of StrayLight Design. It is received by the New York State Library in Albany and the New York Public Library and at several university libraries. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Roundtable also began regularly publishing semi-annual newsletters for its members under the editorships of Susan Neill, Trish Taylor, Linda Dowling Almeida, Emmett Corry O.S.F., John Ridge, Leslie Shaw Dwinnell, and Marion Casey.

ROUNDTABLE EVENTS

Starting in 1988, there were up to four events a year, and the membership had risen to 140, mostly recruited by word of mouth, and through notices of upcoming events placed at

the Irish Bookstore and in the *Irish Echo* and *Irish Voice*. That year saw the first of our cemetery tours (one of the most popular Roundtable events), of Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx where we visited the graves of famous Irish and Irish Americans as well as the graves of other notables. Other cemetery tours followed: Green-Wood cemetery in Brooklyn in 1989, Calvary Nos. One ("Old Calvary") and Two in 1990 led by John Ridge, which included visits to the graves of Irishmen who had served in the Civil War; Holy Cross in Brooklyn led by Joe Silinonte; St. Raymond's cemetery in the Bronx in 1992 led by Bill Twomey and Bill Good; and a return visit to Old Calvary in 1993, led by John Ridge, Barney Kelly and Joe Doyle.

That year also saw the first of John Ridge's walking tours for the Roundtable, the first part of a tour of Irish landmarks in lower Manhattan; the second part followed in the spring of 1989. A tour of the Chelsea area of Manhattan was held in 1990, and a tour of the Lower East Side in 1991.

Other topics in the 1988–1989 period included Irish American sheet music for the 1850–1955 period; the Emmet family in New York; Irish genealogy resources at the Mormon Family History libraries; and the Irish in the Bronx. We also heard talks on the Irish Arts Center; the Irish American Heritage Museum; and the 28th Street Irish Carmelites as a cradle of Irish independence. And we held sessions on collecting oral histories, and indexing issues of the *Irish Echo*.

When the Roundtable was incorporated in late 1989 as "New York Irish, Inc." the more formal statement of its purpose was to engage "in activities to promote the study of the history of the Irish in the New York metropolitan area and surrounding region, and to ensure that the Irish contribution to the United States, especially to the New York metropolitan area, will be recorded and preserved." The Roundtable's constitution says this purpose will be accomplished through "periodic meetings, the exchange of information, the discussion and encouragement of research projects, and the dissemination of a newsletter." (The Roundtable received full tax-exempt status in early 1992.)

Who became Roundtable members? People from many walks of life, some immigrants



themselves, but more who were the children, grandchildren or great grandchildren of immigrants, and even some who had no Irish connections at all. There are professional scholars, independent and amateur historians of New York City, and genealogists, both amateur and professional. Their interests have included neighborhoods and parishes where their families lived, organizations to which their relatives belonged, companies for whom their ancestors worked, companies their ancestors developed, the history of their own families, and the music, sport and literature of their ancestors.

There have been many events in the years since 1989 under presidents Marion Casey, Emmett Corry, O.S.F., Walter Walsh and Frank Naughton, too many to list here. Some programs from these years were:

- visits to the New York City Police and Fire museums
- participation in the restoration of Matilda Tone's tombstone at Green-Wood cemetery
- "Keeping the Tradition Alive—A History of Irish Music and Dance in New York City," a two-month series of events at the Museum of the City of New York
- talks on fiddlers Michael Coleman and James Morrison
- talks on the history of the 69th Regiment and recruits to the Regiment at the time of the Civil War
- visits to St. Vincent de Paul Church in Bayonne to view the stained glass windows of Irish artist Harry Clarke, and to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the paintings of William Harnett;
- a program of Irish music from the American Civil War
- Irish religious orders and the education of Irish emigrant children in the New York City area, 1840–1890
- the Catalpa Rescue
- the Great Famine and the voyage and arrival experiences of famine immigrants
- new research regarding the "Five Points" area of Manhattan
- the 1798 rebellion and the prominent Irish exiles who settled in New York City
- Irish immigrant soldiers in World War I

- John Devoy
- Irish plays staged in New York City
- late twentieth-century Irish immigration to New York, including the arrival of the New Irish.

The first of our popular genealogical workshops, initiated by Trish Taylor, was held in



1992 at Adelphi University's Manhattan Center. Later ones were held at the National Archives in Manhattan (1993 and 1999), the Mormon family history center in Manhattan (1994), Holy Cross parish in Manhattan (1995), and St. Teresa's parish in Woodside (1996).

SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS

Among the highlights of our fifteen-year history was having Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland, as guest of honor at our special event on October 28, 1994, a symbolic meal and keynote address commemorating the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Roundtable and the sesquicentennial of the Great Irish Famine. More than 350 Roundtable members and friends attended the observance in the undercroft of St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan. The keynote address by John Ridge described New York City's response to the Famine, and a commemorative menu included an essay on the subject by Marion Casey.

The Gaelic Gotham Report: Assessing a Controversial Exhibition at the Museum of the

Photos: The Famine remembrance meal was held at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan, with proceeds going to its Food for the Homeless program. President Mary Robinson of Ireland is shown (opposite page) with Roundtable President, Brother Emmett Corry, O.S.F., and (above) with keynote speaker, John Ridge. Courtesy of Michael O'Rourke.

City of New York was published by the Roundtable in 1997. It reported on the troubled exhibition, "Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York City," which was assembled by the Museum of the City of New York and opened on March 13, 1996. "Gaelic Gotham" was to be the first large-scale exhibition on the history of the New York Irish and their descendants, but instead the exhibition became part of a bitter controversy between Museum officials and a significant number of Irish New Yorkers. The Report made assessments of the project and the process used to assemble it, and was circulated to museum professionals, historians, and other interested parties in New York and around the country.

A major highlight for the Roundtable was the appearance in 1996, with the assistance of the Irish Institute of New York in conjunction with the Roundtable, of *The New York Irish*, edited by Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher. This book is the first-ever history of the City's Irish population. In his foreword to *The New York Irish*, the late Paul O'Dwyer, a strong supporter of the Roundtable, commented that there were books about the Irish in Boston, Butte, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Lowell, New Orleans, Philadelphia, San Francisco and St. Louis, but none about the Irish in New York. With the year 2000 swiftly approaching he said there was an urgent need "for the Irish community to encourage professional historians to... document the Irish role in New York's history."

The book consists of essays summarizing what was already known about the history of the New York Irish, as well as original essays focusing on specific events, trends, movements or persons that illuminate the Irish experience in each period. The essays (several of which were written by Roundtable members) were chosen, according to the preface, "not because they fill in any grand narrative or fit into broad thematic categories but because they represent the best current original research on the history of the New York Irish." Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, *The New York Irish* received enthusiastic reviews.

Issued in conjunction with *The New York Irish* was a bibliography of non-archival sources

for information on the New York Irish, *The Irish Experience in New York City: A Select Bibliography*, compiled by Roundtable members Ann M. Shea and Marion Casey. The bibliography lists unpublished theses and dissertations, published sources, and audio-visual materials. Most of the more than six hundred entries are annotated.

The Roundtable entered cyberspace in late 1996 when we opened our web site, mainly through the efforts of James Bradley and Craig Landy. We hope to expand our membership (now 420) through our site, and to provide our members with useful information about meetings, resources, and other useful sites pertaining to the Irish in New York. Our e-mail address should also provide better communication with our members.

IN THE NEW CENTURY

Where should the Roundtable go from here? It was said best by former President Bill Griffin in his annual report in 1993. At that time he wrote that "our purpose must be to document and clarify the rich and varied historical experience of the Irish in New York," and although much had been accomplished, much remained to be done. He added, "the great achievement of the next decade must be putting this assemblage of talent to the best possible use in making known the true and profoundly important role of the Irish in the history of the region." The same challenges will exist for the years of the new century.