

# Coming To New York: A Conversation



*Ed. note: In October, 2000 the New York Irish History Roundtable presented a program in which five members spoke with each other, and their audience, about what they experienced in leaving Ireland and coming to New York in the quarter century following World War II. The content of that conversation proved so valuable that it was decided to make it available to readers of New York Irish History. What follows is an edited version of the conversation, developed from a videotape shot by Denise Fontenelli and made available by Peggy Tanner, one of the five participants. Ms. Tanner is identified in the following text by her initials (PT). Also participating were (in order of their speaking) Charles Lavery (CL), Kevin Morrissey (KM), Rosaleen FitzGibbon (RF), and William McGimpsey (WMcG).*

*The original conversation among the participants was hosted and guided by Linda Dowling Almeida (LA), reviews editor for New York Irish History and author of Irish Immigrants in New York City: 1945–1995. She also reviewed transcript materials of the program and provided historical notes for this printed version.<sup>1</sup>*

**LA:** I'm going to make the introductions, and then I'm going to sit back and sort of guide the discussion. Thank you all for coming, and thanks to the participants too. It's great that you could join us. We have got a list of prioritized questions to be addressed, starting from life in Ireland, to the reasons why people came over, and what their experiences were once they arrived here in New York.

I'd like to introduce the panelists by starting with Kevin Morrissey. He came to New York in

1957 from a farm in County Galway. Initially he held a variety of jobs here, met a variety of people here, and served for two years in the U.S. Army. Currently he is an insurance executive. He lives on Long Island and is the president of the Irish Institute. Next is Rosaleen FitzGibbon, who emigrated from Ireland in the late 1940s. She has had a long and successful career in the restaurant business in New York, and may be best known as the creator and former owner of the Irish Pavilion on East Fifty-Seventh Street. She's a member of the Institute and a number of other Irish organizations, and we're happy to have her here. Charles Lavery is here. He arrived in the United States in 1948 from Moy in County Tyrone when he was eighteen. He lived in the Bronx, and has been a horse trainer, a soldier, an editor, and has stayed in the New York metropolitan area for the last thirty years. William McGimpsey is from County Down. He left Northern Ireland in 1969, later than the rest of the panelists, and eventually arrived in the United States via Toronto and Montreal (not unlike a lot of immigrants who took stepping stones to the United States in England or Canada or South Africa). He's been in the New York City area since about 1979 and has always lived just north of the City in Mahopac. Our final panelist, Peggy Tanner, actually was born in the United States. Peggy left with her family in the 1930s and went to Kilgarvin in County Kerry. She later worked in England as a nurse after WWII and found her way back to New York City in 1953. She raised her family in New Rochelle and is now living down in Bayville, New Jersey. Her family was close friends with Mike Quill, the labor organizer. His brother, John, and his wife, Kathleen, took Peggy as a new immigrant in New York under



*Illustrations:  
New York harbor  
and Times Square  
in the late 1940s.  
Photos by Andreas  
Feininger.*

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History Roundtable.

their wing while she got herself established. She's also the author in the last couple of years of two books of memoirs, *Tales of Two Countries* and *Joy of the Journey*, that recapture her life in Ireland and here in the United States.

So as you can see we've got a fine and varied panel. I want to sit down now and just start asking some questions. Let's start with Ireland.

What was life like in Ireland or Northern Ireland before you left for America?



**Illustrations:**

(Above left) Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Maureen O'Hara was a leading actress and appeared in more than a dozen motion pictures.

(Above right) Dwight Eisenhower, first elected in 1952, was one of America's more popular presidents.

(Below right) A 1947 New York license plate.

**CL:** There was a shortage of food, clothing, cigarettes—many such things.

**LA:** This is in the 1940s?

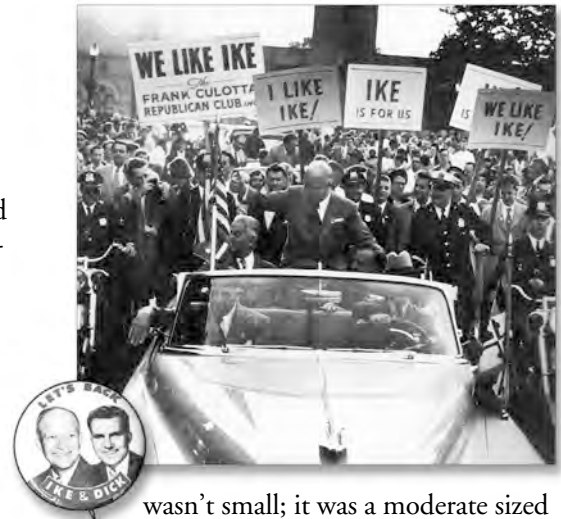
**CL:** Yes, around 1947 and 1948. The departure of the American soldiers left a giant void in our village. We had had troops all over the place. We had several units of Patton's army and the Eighty-Second Airborne Division.

**LA:** So there was a lot of black market?

**CL:** Yes, there was a black market. There was a shortage of clothing and other staples.

**LA:** Anybody else want to comment on Ireland when you left?

**KM:** I was born about two years after Frank McCourt, about eighty miles north of where McCourt was, and you all know what life was like according to him. But the circumstances were a little different for me. I was on a farm. It



wasn't small; it was a moderate sized farm. So we were never hungry. There was absolutely no money around. Cash was very scarce. I was employed by the civil service before I came. I had left school in the fifth year of secondary school in order to work in the post office, which was considered a wonderful civil service job to have at the time. But after five years working in mail I didn't think there was anywhere to go—and while the departure was traumatic I simply made the decision to get out, one of the best decisions I possibly could have made.

**RF:** I came in 1947 and had planned to come earlier but couldn't travel until the war was over. I was the first member of my family and



the only member of my family to come. I came in June, 1947 and stayed with friends. When I saw New York for the first time I said, "This is for me." I fell in love with New York City and haven't changed my mind since. It was a good decision for me. I've had a very good life. There was a lot I wanted to do. One of the great things about coming to New York is that you're left alone to do it. You could do things, as a woman or not. In Ireland there was a great emphasis on men being in charge.



**LA:** Where were you coming from?

**RF:** I was from east Galway, near Ballinasloe. My father was in the construction business in a small village. There was very little money because that's the way the economy was in those years, but we never felt poor. Everyone was in the same position. You just had to go along with it. It was a very happy childhood. It was very different from Frank McCourt's version of it. It was a nice village with lovely people in it. I could go around to every house in the village and be accepted. It was a great place for children.

**KM:** I'd just like to mention that when I came here, some years after Rosaleen, she was one of the big shots in town as the hostess at Jim Downey's restaurant. He was also from Galway, and at that time it was one of the most prominent steakhouses in the City. It was greatest of them all, and all the film stars went there. So getting to know Rosaleen and these people from Galway was quite important for this greenhorn.

**LA:** We will talk about that because it sounds important, the connections between individuals, the county associations, and the organizations and their goals of acclimating new people into the community. It is pretty critical.

**WMcG:** I came from County Down. I left in 1965 and came from what was a unionist, loyalist area of Northern Ireland. The society was very segregated, as you know. Where I lived there were about 110 houses on the street, and there was one Catholic family. There were the Reagans and Quinns next door to us, and they were all Protestant. Next, there was the only Catholic family on the street. At the time I left the society was under the Terrence O'Neill administration, and the standard of living in

Northern Ireland was rising rapidly.

Interaction with the Catholic community was increasing at a dramatic rate, so it's kind of tragic to think back to that and to realize the direction things might have taken if they hadn't gotten off the tracks. It looked like, under the O'Neill regime, that the problems were being resolved, and the society was knitting together and becoming a better place. I sometimes jest with my family and say that I should have stayed home, so all the problems wouldn't have happened.

**PT:** Like McCourt, I was born in the New York and returned to Ireland in 1934. I lived there from 1934 to 1947. A few other people I knew left in '47, but I went from Ireland to England and studied to become a nurse in London. I returned here to the States in 1953, and that's the story of my life. In Ireland, it was as everybody else said: you had no money, you did not realize you were poor because everybody else was poor as well, and I had a very happy childhood—totally unlike the childhood of McCourt.

**LA:** What was it that made you leave? Kevin, you expressed general dissatisfaction?

**KM:** There was no money and the hope was that here you could still make it. Cash was important, I always thought so.

**LA:** But was it the lure of America? Was America always special?

**KM:** I had a sister who went ahead of me and who had asked me to come out. But I had no notion of a going at an early stage. But it was pretty desperate there. Anything would have been an improvement. For instance I was being paid thirty shillings a week, which is about four dollars, at that time to work in the post office. It was a civil service job. But the digs where I

**Illustration:**  
Three scenes from  
the Bloody Sunday  
protest, Derry,  
January 30, 1972.



stayed cost two-pounds forty-shillings, so my parents who had no money, had to send me ten shillings a week to pay the difference, money they didn't have to spare.

**LA:** It wasn't a situation where you could live at home and go to work.

**KM:** No, it was twenty-four miles from home. I used to have to send the laundry home through the post office to be washed. And to go to the movies I had yet to come up with a few shillings here and there. But as a result of this kind of situation, of the fellows that I had worked with, three of them did time in jail for taking money from the post office.

**CL:** I may have painted a bleak picture of County Tyrone, but as a boy growing up I had no worries about those things at all. Ironically, during the war it was the greatest time of my life. Growing up among, first of all, British troops, then Scottish troops, and then Dutch and Belgians who had escaped from the Continent—and then the Americans. And I was the runner at the time, buying and selling newspapers, and cigarettes where I could find them. The troops would be marching through on maneuvers and asking for newspapers. I would go get them, come back, but they were gone because they had to keep moving on. And then we had endless football. And a horse fair every month. And tips, tips, tips, so it was a fun time. It was a utopia.

**LA:** So, you came to America?

**CL:** Why did I come here? The family said "Let's go."

**LA:** Oh, your family came, it wasn't just you by yourself.

**CL:** The whole family.

**LA:** And how old were you?

**CL:** Eighteen. And I had a seventy-year-old father. And he came.

**LA:** Wow.

**CL:** Yes, he came too.

**LA:** Now, why America? Why not, say, London?

**KM:** My brother was a foreman on the buildings in London and had been there right through the war. So he had a good job, and I went to him without telling him I was coming at all. About three months before coming to America, I said, I'm going to England in December for the Christmas holidays and to work in the post-office there to make money. But I stopped at my brother's door by surprise. Anyway, what he did was put me on a construction site that he was on, and I was tossing bricks for a whole day. My fingers bled because they were soft. But I had no intention of staying in England at all. America was always it. But like the others here have said, I want to mention that despite the fact there was no money we were very happy, very happy. But you know there was no future, so if you were intelligent at all about it you were going to move on.

**LA:** Right. Rosaleen?

**RF:** I came because I wanted to come to America. My family couldn't understand it. I had a very good school friend who visited New York, but by the time I could travel she had already come home. So I was on my own. I was really intrigued with New York the very first day I saw it. And I'm glad I came. I'd worked in Dublin for a while in the hat business—and I thought there would be more hats in New York. But I got sidetracked because Jim Downey had a restaurant here, and he was hiring women in 1947 and he needed help so I got a great job. It was a wonderful time there, and I learned a great deal. I remember the first time I handled a party there and afterwards a man handed me a \$50 tip, which was like getting \$500 today. I thought, if it is that easy this is the business for me. But that was the first—and only—\$50 tip. But I kept at it, and in 1964 I ran an Irish-coffee bar at the World's Fair, working seven days a week. The interest was wonderful, and that put new thoughts in my mind. So in 1968 I opened the Irish Pavilion restaurant on East Fifty-seventh Street. The Pavilion was great and kept me very busy. I put in so many long days for sixteen years. I was delighted that Tommy Makem was interested in it, and it was sold to him in 1982. The only change he made was to not keep the shop. I had set up a little shop

within the restaurant to sell Irish crafts when they were difficult to get. It went very well. The crafts people in Ireland were amazed at times because I would always be asking for more crafts. They would reply, why are you asking for more when we just sent some to you?

**LA:** Now, Peggy, you went to London, right? The reason I bring this up is for those who don't know that after the 1930s most people who left Ireland headed to England as opposed to the United States. In the nineteenth century most emigrants leaving Ireland came to the United States. So, I think it's interesting to figure out why one place and not the other.

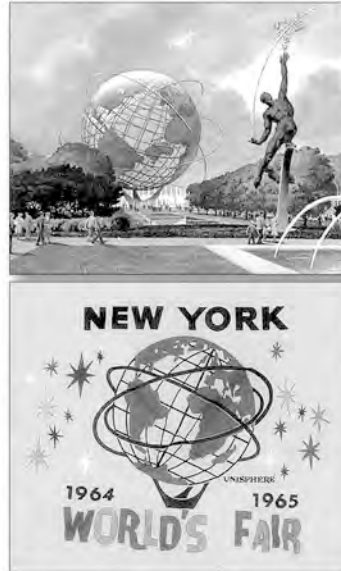
**PT:** Well, for me there was no secondary education unless you could afford to go away to boarding school. But a retired nurse came to the village. She had just retired from nursing and was planning to raise turkeys, so she had brought her lady turkey to be introduced to my aunt's Mr. Tom. Turkeys were very expensive in Ireland and turned over a good pound or two at the end of the year when at the annual turkey fair. She said to me, "Oh, I could just see how you'd make a beautiful nurse." And so she introduced me to the thought of becoming a nurse. Then she

wrote the applications for me to several hospitals in London, and I was accepted—and that was why I wound up in England. Also, it was much easier because the cost of passage to

America was out of the question, whereas the British National Labor paid our passage to go to England.<sup>2</sup> And it paid us return on the holidays, so that was all covered under their system. However, we became what I call "slave labor" because the London County Council used student nurses to staff the wards. They had "charge nurses" during the day, and they were what they call "sisters," or registered nurses. But during the rest of the day it was just the student nurses who ran things. It was great for experience but it was really "slave labor."

**LA:** And Bill, you went to Canada.

**WMcG:** Well, I was just reflecting. I had wanted to go to America, and I heard it was a little tough to be admitted in 1965.<sup>3</sup> So I decided to use as much charisma as possible and made an appointment to see the American Consul General in Belfast. I took a day off from work,



**Illustrations:**

(Above) Poster from 1964–1965 World's Fair held in Flushing Meadow, Queens.  
(Below) Nurses and nursing students in Great Britain at mid-century.



and I went to see him but he was too busy to see me. So I took another day off and went, but again he was too busy, he couldn't see me. Finally, on the third day I went, he said "Yes, I will see you today." And I went in and, when I sat down, he was busily writing and he never looked up. He said "You want to go to America." I said yes. He said "Do you have a relative, immediate family, there who would take you and embrace you as a member?" I said no. He said "Do you have an employer there who will guarantee you employment for at least one year?" I said no. He said "Do you have ten thousands pounds in the bank?" I said no. He said "Then I can't help you." And I was, like, shattered.

"But the good news," he said, "is if you go around the corner to the Canadians, I'm sure they'll help you." And I was so angry at this guy, but in hindsight I realized he must have done something to help. I think he phoned right afterward and set things up. Because I went around to the Canadian consulate, on the second floor, and just as I went to knock at the door, it swung open and the guy said "Can I help you?" So I said I wanted to see the Canadian Consul General. "That's me," he said "What do you want?" All the other people in the office were giggling and everything, and he said "What do you want?" I said "Well, I want to see if I can go to Canada." He said "What do you do?" I said "I'm an engineer." He said "We have a boat leaving tonight—can you be ready?" And I said "What time is it now?" So I ended up going to Canada.

**LA:** Just to footnote to what you're reporting about the question "Do you have an immediate family member?"—in 1965 the Immigration laws changed in the United States so priorities switched to family reunification which emphasized that if you had an immediate family member here to take you in that was the easiest way to get into the country. And through the 1960s into the 1970s a lot of Irish were returning to Ireland, so for people who came after 1965, they didn't have those family members left to let them in. So, just a little background. Okay, so most of you were single at the time that you

that you left?

**CL:** There was no such thing as a married Irishman!

**LA:** And did you have any other members of your family leave and go to the U.S. or to England or elsewhere? Did many of them stay at home?

**KM:** There were eleven of us. My sister was here, but none of the others came to the States. They were in England, four of them.

**LA:** But they left...they just didn't come here.

**KM:** They left, all but one who is still there running the farm.

**RF:** I didn't have anyone left. I was the last to leave.

**CL:** We had a brother here. Bob came here in 1939 and the war broke out. He was delivering horses to the ports of Boston, New York, and Baltimore. He jumped ship and settled in New York. His ship was sunk on the way back; fortunately, everybody was saved. But he was the foot in the door, and we all came right after World War II.

**WMcG:** In my case I intended to go back. I didn't really intend to stay. And I was probably the last of the generation that came by freighter. It was the cheapest way to come.

**PT:** I was dating somebody at the R.A.F., and he was shipped out to the Suez Canal back in the early 1950s. His assignment was six months, so I decided that I wanted to see the United States because my mother had spoken so highly about it. And it was a stalker actually that at the time was the last straw. I was being followed by a stalker in Kent, and I thought "I've got to get out of here." And that's what finally pushed me to come.

**LA:** Wow! How hard was it to leave? Emotionally....

**KM:** Yes, emotionally it really hurt to leave all the people you grew up with. I was twenty-three when I left in 1957. And for help, I had to write to a relative who died only last year. Although she was thirty years older than I, she

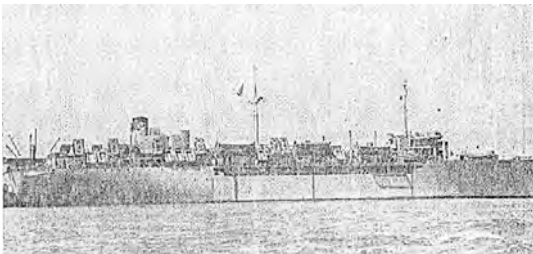
had been here since the beginning of the century and worked on the north shore of Long Island for a family. And she had scads of money, we believed anyway. And she kept everything. And she was a spinster.

**LA:** You told me a story once about an aunt who had come back to visit, and she was always nice....

**KM:** Yes, she was the one. She had the bucks, we thought. There were big doings when she showed up. I had to get the money from her to come here. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was everything to me then. She did get it back—and she took it.

**RF:** When I came over, it was a very long flight in 1947. Shannon Airport was just a few buildings then. I remember the DC-3 I flew over on. We stopped at the Azores and at Gander. I thought during all that flight—what on earth have I done? I was really terrified, and at that time going home was not an option. I had made a break, so I didn't want to go back and pretend everything had been honky-dory. But of course it was hard to leave my mother and everyone. I went back to see them very often.

**CL:** For me, there was no emotion really, because it was sheer utopia and then suddenly my sister announced that we were going to America. We had a brother here already. But of course we were all going. It was much easier. My father went first, after WWII. And then two sisters, then three brothers, all in all seven of us. I do remember the last person I spoke to, Thomas McKearney; he was the only one



who said goodbye. He said "I'd like to go to America." I said "You could take my place if you want." So for me the steps from Ireland to America were pretty ordinary and matter-of-fact.

**LA:** Did you come by boat?

**CL:** On a troop ship, a converted troop ship. We took train to Dublin and then to Cork. The



ship arrived at Cobh from Germany, packed with survivors of the War. It was called the *U.S.S. Marine Jumper* and had been simply painted over and made into a civilian ship. The passengers from Germany were either concentration camp survivors or displaced persons from camps around all of Europe. Over 2000 had been boarded at Bremen and Bremerhaven. There were, I think, only 215 of us from Ireland. We went aboard a small tender to the ship, which was at anchor in deep water near Spike Island. That was the first time in my life I had ever seen a shillelagh, the first time I had seen Irish kitsch.

**LA:** They were selling them?



**Illustrations:**

(Above) A DC-3 in flight. (Below left) photo of U.S.S. *Marine Jumper* taken over fifty years ago. (Below right) *Shillelaghs* on display.

**CL:** They were selling them...to us! That was very unreal. So, we went aboard that ship at water level. This was a ship that would normally have troops embarking through gang-planks at a pier. But it could also take on cargo at the water level, so we stepped off the small tender into a cavernous space below decks. As it turned out, I came back to Ireland two and a half years later in the same kind of ship in the U.S. Army, but that's another story. Leaving the tender, we stepped into two different worlds: the American world and also this Central European babble of thirty or so different languages on the ship. And of course on board all announcements were in French, the common international language at the time. We quickly learned "Invites de honneur á la salle á manger" meant that meals are being served in the dining room!

**LA:** Did anyone else come over on a ship?

**KM:** Yes, I came on the *Britannic*.

**CL:** I should point out one thing about ship arrivals. When you look at the *New York Times* on the day after we arrived it said "*Marine Jumper*, 215 passengers, February 12th, 1948." Not true. That ship left from Germany, then France, then Ireland. By that time they had about two-thousand people aboard that ship. So don't trust the *New York Times*!

**LA:** Anybody else?

**WMcG:** In my case I had thought I would be going back. But I recognized I might not. So I remember the feeling of sorrow. They had a big party before I left, all my friends. But when I got to the airport in Belfast my only surviving grandmother was there. And she was very frail and old, and I knew I would not see her again. So I remember the sadness of that. And then I flew to Glasgow where I caught the ship. And I remember the crowded bus going to the docks with my knapsack and all my bags. And just after the ship left I realized that I'd lost my wallet, with my ID and all my money, everything. And I thought I'd lost it on the ship. To my



eternal shame, that's what I told them on the ship, that somebody on board had taken it. So I arrived penniless in Canada. So I burst into Montreal, which I loved. And then I went to Toronto, which is where everybody in Northern Ireland goes and where I immediately could get a job. But I didn't like Toronto because it just looked like Belfast or sounded like Belfast. To finish that story of my wallet, I had actually lost it in the crowded bus in Glasgow. Two months later my wallet arrived. I was staying at the YMCA in Montreal, and it arrived there. I opened it up, and every single thing was still in it. But there was no notice of where it had come from. Someone had tracked down an address for me. A nice ending!

Maybe one more tidbit. When I was staying at the YMCA in downtown Montreal. St. Patrick's Day came. And everybody said "You have to go and see St. Patrick's Day in Montreal." So I went to see it. And if any of you ever get the chance to see it, it's worth a trip to see. The whole parade is done in French. I just stood there and laughed for a moment. And really it's not that they had anything but total respect for their Irish culture. They're Irish by heritage, but they speak French, and yet they're very Irish. It's incredible. Yes.

**PT:** Well, leaving Ireland, I was very enthusiastic about being accepted into nursing school. And it was very exciting for me. So I didn't mind leaving Ireland at all. But then coming to America I had misgivings. I thought, I'm leav-





ing all these people I know and get along with so well. And I don't know what I'm going to do when I get there. The first day out was Friday, November 13, and it was so stormy I was sure the ship was going to go down like the *Lusitania* off the south coast of Ireland. But it didn't. I had written to a cousin here whom I hadn't seen for twenty years. And I had also written to a friend here that I was coming in to Hoboken. And they were both there to meet me. And they fought, "She's coming with me." "No, no! I'm her cousin, she's coming with me." So I didn't know how to solve that problem, but finally I said, "Okay, I'll go with the cousin, and then tonight I'll come down to your house." And that's what I did.

**LA:** When you left Ireland in the first place to go to school, did you think that was a permanent departure?

**PT:** I was eighteen, and I didn't think much beyond eighteen and a half.

**LA:** Okay. Did anybody have wakes, you know, American wakes—the large departure parties?

**KM:** No, not for my departure. I'd always remember it because I watched through the years my parents say many goodbyes. There were eleven of us and all left at one time or another, except the one brother. And the heart-break of the departures and the joy of them coming back to visit. But a couple of my sisters went into the nuns and one brother into religion. And it used to be really hurtful very much so to the parents to watch them go—although there was no practical reason for them to stay around a small farm. When I left they took me to my departure point, which was a station called Ballyglunin.

By the way, Ballyglunin happens to be the station where Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne performed the scene in *The Quiet Man* where he opens all the car doors and finally pulls her from the train.

So that's where my parents said goodbye, and the train took me to Cobh from which I departed on the *Britannic*. But now I was contributing to their heartbreak, especially by leaving for America which was so far away.

**LA:** Yes, and to have that many children and have them leave home must be hard. When you go here, to the States, what was the biggest adjustment that had to be made?

**CL:** One of the things I noticed immediately was the emphasis on schedules and efficiency.

**LA:** So you had to have a wristwatch!

**CL:** Oh yes. And I remember that the immigration people came to meet us perhaps an hour or two outside the New York harbor. I thought that was a tremendous idea. Instead of going to Ellis Island. It apparently was an experiment. The people on Ellis Island told me about a month ago that they didn't really know exactly what was going on back then—but we were processed coming into New York aboard that moving ship.

**LA:** Oh yes?



**CL:** But the immigration-processing efficiency was something. It was very military-like. Everybody lined up in alphabetical order. You had to be at a certain point at a certain time to get baggage. That was a new world to me. Before it was all free—make your own decisions.

**LA:** Right.

**RF:** I think the adjustment was to the climate. I came in June or July. It was so hot, oh my goodness, it was hot. It took a few years to adjust. And the food was very different, more varied. I also missed my family. It was lonely for the first few months, very hard. But I had no option but to make the best of it.

**Illustration:**

*The train station at Ballyglunin in Galway. It is no longer an operating station.*

**LA:** What did you miss?

**RF:** I missed my mother, I missed my family, I missed my friends. We had a lovely dramatic society in high school, and I missed that. Life here was totally different. So, it was a very big decision to leave the land of your birth. But when you're busy working you get to put up with it.



**Illustration:**  
Elvis Presley served in the U.S. Army from March, 1958 until early March, 1960. He was discharged from active duty with the rank of sergeant (E-5) at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

After years here in New York, I've come to feel strongly that Ireland really is good for the Irish...for those who stayed. When I go back, they all look so satisfied to me. And the very first question people ask is, when are you going back to the States? No one asks, are you planning to stay? I returned to Ireland after two years. I was very impressed with New York by then and I didn't want to stay home anyway, but nobody asked me to stay. They just asked, when are you going back?

**KM:** I had a period of adjustment. It was initially unpleasant, and I made very little money in my first year here. Jim Fitzpatrick, whose brother was in religion with my brother, and I were to meet here. He was already established here and was a friend of Paul O'Dwyer, who had a lot of clout here in those days. So, Jim got me a job at the United States Lines. But it was out of the frying pan and into the fire where money was concerned. I was getting just \$57.00 week. I thought I was as poor off as I was with the post office. My sister had put me up in a room in Rego Park, and I didn't last long there.

Then I found out where the Irish dances were. Now in Ireland at that time ballrooms could hold a couple thousand people, and the big bands were famous in Ireland. And New York was doing the same thing at City Center. And you put a few thousand people in there. So

once you got to City Center and started to meet the Irish lads who were established, you could move ahead. I struck up a friendship with a guy who took me in.

But for a long while I wasn't making any money, and then I got drafted within a year. So I wound up in

Texas with Elvis Presley. Elvis was in a tank outfit right next door to my infantry outfit. And we were in at the same time, at the same age. I can't remember even what he looked like before the Army. Anyway, we all had our hair cut the same day at the central barbershop. And the female members of the sergeants' and officers' families were crowded around the shop, wanting locks of his hair, so the barber of course took any black hair that was around and gave it out. So we saw Elvis all the time. But while I wasn't in the same company as he was, a personal friendship developed. He was very well liked. He was a country guy, with no pretensions at all. He had already made a couple of movies and was a multi-millionaire by that time. But he didn't put on any airs. We were shipped out to Germany after boot camp, and I didn't see him again until we went on maneuvers there. He was sitting across from me, and we were all down in this area where they brought all the units together. And Elvis was taking the muck off his boots just like I was. He was driving a jeep for a colonel. The rest of us were grunts, as the name was later on, just digging holes and running up hills.

**LA:** I would imagine the Army was a big place for adjustment?

**KM:** Well, it really took the corners off me.

**CL:** I think another place of adjustment was through the football clubs.

**LA:** This is in New York?

**CL:** In New York. We were living in the Bronx. There were about nine minor football clubs in the different parishes, most made up of Irish American kids who were second and third generation, so the clubs were a way of integrating into the American scene. And then of course you graduate up into junior or senior ranks. But at these levels they were almost entirely Irish, probably ten percent Irish American.

Of course, then the army comes and says "you have to go." So, I served in the same regiment, the Sixtieth Infantry, with Vic Damone! But all I remember him doing was shining his shoes on the steps of his barracks while we were marching along. But the Army Americanized, I think, all Americans. In our unit we had Italians, Czechs, Filipinos. And they were not just from New York City.

**LA:** Now you were probably beyond it, but there was a period during the early 1950s where the Army offered you automatic naturalization. Right?

**KM:** You mean as part of Korean veterans' benefits.

**CL:** Well, it was not automatic as such. I had to apply. And I remember if the application was submitted close to the election period, they speeded up the process so as to enable us to vote. I saw some fifty of my former soldier mates making early-citizenship applications in the courthouse down at Lafayette Street. And so that was the process.

**KM:** I wasn't offered member citizenship as a result of serving in the service. In fact after I had served and gotten married, my wife who also had trained as a nurse in England, in Manchester, was pregnant. But because she came in what they called the "brain-drain" back then, she was allowed to come here for only two years. And then she had to go back and spend at least two years in England. And the United States government was trying to deport her.

**LA:** They were deporting her?

**KM:** Yes. In fact, it was Hugh Carey who actual-

ly got passed a single act of Congress in order to keep her here.

**LA:** Really?

**KM:** That's right. She was being deported. She was pregnant, and she was married to somebody who had spent two years in the U.S. Army. If it weren't for Hugh Carey, who was a congressman at the time, she would have been deported. That single act of Congress was passed just to keep her in this country.

**LA:** Now how did that come about?

**KM:** I met Hugh Carey through some Brooklyn relatives and had gotten friendly with him through the Cathedral Club in Brooklyn.

**WMcG:** If I could piggy back on this and tell a story about myself. I spent several years in Montreal and decided that I needed to get another job. So I applied through an ad in the newspaper to a place in Sarnia, Ontario. So I sent off a response to the announcement and was given an invitation to come for an interview. And they sent me a ticket. I went down and got on a plane, and it took off and landed. But when I got off the plane they said I had to go through customs. And I said "That's impossible. Why would I have to go through customs?" They said "Because you're in the United States." I said, "I must have gotten on the wrong plane." And then I looked. I had actually applied for a job in Syracuse, New York. I thought it was in Sarnia. But the guy that met me at the airport and drove me to the interview was the personnel manager, his father was from County Down and used to be an Orangeman. So that was like an inside track but, anyway, they offered me the job. However, the problem was I couldn't get a green card. And it was taking forever. Finally, I called from Montreal and the personnel manager said he'd been told by the management he'd have to terminate the efforts, because getting a green card was not working. Then he said "We're willing to make one last try. The congressman here in Syracuse is Jim Hanley. He's an Irish American, and if you like, on your behalf we'll make a phone call." And I said "Yeah. Please do." So they did.

Now I'd been working with a very kindly gentleman at the American embassy in Montreal. And he had been telling me, "Your chances of getting this card in time are nil. You'll never be able to get that job." One day I came back to my apartment. There was a message there. It said to come over to the embassy



immediately. So I went over there and he said, "Who did you talk to? What happened?" He said "In my twenty years here I've never had this happen. This package arrived top priority. We've got to issue you this card immediately." And that was my first exposure to Jim Hanley, the longest serving Irish American in all Congress.

I guess he just made one phone call and that was it.

**CL:** There is one aspect of that transition period that you should recognize. Where you work can depend, can make a difference in your integration into the American way of life. Irish guys going into the construction trades, for example, or driving buses, or for Con Ed or the telephone company, fall into a pattern. There's already a relationship established by the earlier Irish there. I worked for a publishing company where, I think, my brother and I were the only foreigners in the whole organization. So the integration in that situation began very quickly. Everything was American. There was nothing Irish American about it.

**LA:** I see.

**PT:** I had a difficult experience. I was born a natural born American citizen. But I could claim to be a British subject because I was born in 1929 and the Irish constitution was not drawn up until 1937. I worked in the British hospitals, which were taken over by National Health—which is the government. And because I could claim to be a British subject and I worked for a British government, I was denied a passport. I had registered with the American Embassy when I was twenty-one, and they said you can't have an American passport until you decide to return to the United States. So I went

to Holland-American shipping, and they sold me a ticket. Then I went back to the United States embassy. I said, "Here, I have my ticket." And they said, "No. You cannot return to the United States because you work for the British government!" So I went home very, very sad and disappointed. I had nothing to lose, so I wrote a very nasty letter to, I think it was, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State. And I told him that I had a good friend in New York whose his name was Michael Quill, and he was a big labor organizer, and he would be very



upset when I notified him. I addressed the letter to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. The next day I got a call at work saying to please send three pounds in the mail immediately to the American embassy. And I had my passport the following day.

**LA:** That's a great story. You people all have great connections!

**CL:** Was the letter intercepted or did it reach them?

**PT:** No, it didn't get to Washington, no, it was intercepted by the embassy.

**LA:** Well, thank you everybody for participating in this conversation about coming to New York. It has been important and very enlightening... and it has been fun! Thank you again.

**Illustrations:**

(Right) James Hanley served New York State in the House of Representatives during the 1950s and the 1960s.

(Far right) Michael J. Quill was a founder of the Transport Workers Union in 1934 and a nationally recognized labor leader into the 1960s.

## NOTES

- 1 The Roundtable expresses gratitude to the conversation participants, each of whom gave generously of their time to discuss their experiences and to review this record of the discussions. We are also grateful to Minna Krauss for her careful development of the original transcript from the videotape of this program.
- 2 Through the 1940s, Irish labor was heavily recruited to help England rebuild its economy after World War II. For example, in 1947, some 1,962 women were recruited on an assisted transfer scheme through the British labor ministry, 1,176 of whom went into nursing. See J.A. Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul; Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1963). At least one other study about Irish nurses and midwives includes anecdotes of young women emigrating to England to train in English hospitals where board and lodging were provided and where the employment brought them respect and independence. See Mary Daniels, "Exile or Opportunity?: Irish Nurses and Midwives in Britain," *Occasional Papers in Irish Studies*, No. 5, (The University of Liverpool: The Institute of Irish Studies), 22.
- 3 In October, 1965 Congress approved the Immigration and Nationality Act, which eliminated national origin as the basis for immigration and replaced it with a seven-preference schedule emphasizing family reunification and job skills as the primary standards for entrance to the United States. Among other restrictions, it limited migration to 120,000 from the Western Hemisphere and

170,000 from the Eastern Hemisphere, but immediate family members [and specifically defined "special immigrants"] were exempt from those quotas. The bill also required that visas would only be issued following "the affirmative finding by the Secretary of Labor that an alien seeking to enter as a worker will not replace a worker in the United States nor adversely affect the wages and working conditions of similarly employed individuals in the United States." (*Immigration and Naturalization Service 1992 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, [US Department of Justice, October 1993], Appendix 1, A.1-14, 15.) Synopsis of bill taken from Linda Dowling Almeida, *Irish Immigrants in New York City: 1965-1995*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 9-10, with references to David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 17 and the *1992 Statistical Yearbook*, Appendix 1.





# [ ... EXTRACTS ... ]

## *Selections from Primary Sources*

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**Ed.Note:** “Extracts” is a new section of this journal, which appears for the first time in this volume. “Extracts” presents material taken directly from primary historical sources. Each of these sections provides “raw data” or uninterpreted information—which is, we trust, in itself of immediate interest to readers of this journal. The introduction to this first “Extracts” selection has been written Roundtable president, Charles Laverty, who brought the selection to New York Irish History. The selection was one of five articles written by Robert Briscoe while serving as Lord Mayor of Dublin. The articles were requested by the Hearst publishing organization, owner of the New York Journal-American, the newspaper in which the articles appeared.

### Introduction

In late 1922 the downtown Manhattan offices of the Irish Free State Consulate were raided and occupied by three young members of the IRA representing the underground government of the Irish Republic. The leader of the team was one Bobby Briscoe, in later years the Lord Mayor of Dublin as well as an activist in the underground networks created across Europe to help Jews reach sanctuary in the Holy Land.

The months of 1922 brought civil war to Ireland, hard on the heels of the treaty that divided republican forces and the decision of the British to withdraw its forces from all of Ireland but six of the northern counties. Briscoe had essentially completed his underground missions on the continent for the republican government and had returned to Dublin only to encounter division in the ranks of the fighting men.

He didn't hesitate to take sides with the underground Sinn Fein government, rejecting the policies of the Free State forces led by Michael Collins and the government of William Cosgrove that declared for commonwealth status within the British system headed by King George V. As Collins and Cosgrove saw it, commonwealth status was but a stepping stone to ultimate Irish independence, a measure that would avoid further bloodshed and strife.

Briscoe was soon advised by his republican chiefs in Dublin to head for New York, lie low, and await further orders. There was a price on his head. —C.L.

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### Briscoe's Daring Raid in N.Y.

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*By Robert Briscoe, Lord Mayor of Dublin  
from the New York Journal-American, May 15, 1957.*

In the Autumn of 1922 the Irish Free State authorities had a “shoot on sight” order out for me, and the IRA sent me to New York to wait for further orders.

These were finally brought by Larry Ginnell, a fierce old man with a bushy beard, who told me to round up some help and seize the Irish consulate on the sixteenth floor of a building on Nassau Street.

With two friends, Paddy Codyre and Michael O'Brien, I went by night to the home of a consulate official and told him formally: “I am here on behalf of the Republican government. You have the keys to our offices and I want them.”

He handed them over when he saw we could take them anyway, and we hurried to the Irish Republican offices, as they were then called, and barricaded ourselves inside with desks and bookcases.

Jerry O'Leary, a famous Irish-American criminal lawyer, arranged to have food delivered to the offices of a friend on the twelfth floor of the same building, and for several days we pulled it up through the window in a bucket on the end of a length of strong twine.

Then the Free State representatives obtained a court order evicting us and, rather than risk a battle with police which might antagonize American opinion, we left quietly and filed a countersuit of our own.

The consulate was closed and placed under police guard because of the two court actions, and I then decided to re-enter it or padlock its doors if the locks had been changed so I could not get in.

### TAKES POSSESSION

Jerry O'Leary dressed me in a gray coat, broad-brimmed hat and dark glasses and powdered my hair at the temples. I entered the building by mingling with the morning crowds and hid in the office of Jerry's friend until the early hours of the next morning.

Jerry had predicted that the cop guarding the sixteenth floor would get bored during the night and go downstairs for a chat with his pals.

When this actually happened I raced up the stairs from the twelfth floor in my stockinged feet, found my keys would still open the door and once again took possession of the office, where Codyre and O'Brien quickly joined me.

By this time I had been told we had seized the offices to obtain a list of subscribers to the \$6,000,000 bond drive which had been held in America.

We wanted to write to these subscribers and ask if they intended the money to go to the Republicans or the Free State.

I turned the office upside down looking for that list and never found it; I learned later it was in a bank.

### THEY'RE THROWN OUT

We were carrying on consulate business, cheerfully using the stamps and seals, when the courts ruled against us and the police bomb squad under the command of Lt. James Gegan arrived to throw us out.

They made short work of us. Two huge cops lifted each man by the elbows and carried him out like a parcel.

In the confusion I got a bloody nose and the crowd outside the building, seeing my blood-stained face as I came out, believed I had been hammered and surged forward sympathetically.

I was carried to Columbus Circle where I delivered an impromptu speech about Irish freedom.

### DEFENDS DE VALERA

My first formal speech was made in Boston. I was furious about a pro-Free State article in an Ameri-



*Illustration: Robert Briscoe as Lord Mayor in the mid-1950s.*

can magazine which asked what right a man of "lowly birth" like Mr. De Valera had to set himself up as leader of the Irish people, and I began my speech by answering this question.

"Even if this were true," I said, "the Irish people have as much right to select such a man as their leader as you have to accept one born in a manger."

Codyre, O'Brien and I found a job in New York addressing envelopes by hand and pooled our resources to scrape a bare living and carry on Republican propaganda.

We even managed to put aside \$10 for a new suit and O'Brien won the toss to see who would get it. We all marched into a Canal Street store where a high-pressure salesman sold O'Brien an olive green suit. In it he was the best dressed of the three of us.

### BRINGS FAMILY

Later I started a small importing business and was able to bring my wife and two children to New York where we lived well, if not luxuriously. The Free State authorities had intercepted my cables to my wife and apparently thought I was returning.

Shortly after she left her home in Dublin detectives raided it, grabbed a Free State sympathizer who had moved in and kicked out his teeth to the tune of "we've got you now, Briscoe."

In 1924, the Republicans laid down their arms, the Free State issued an amnesty and we were able to go home. I was not sure what I would do next but I was sure of one thing—I was through with politics forever. ■■■