

The Irish Shop Around the Corner: Manhattan's Irish Import Stores

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

Prior to the aviation age, few Irish immigrants were able to make the return journey home. For most, while life in New York gradually became familiar, memories of the old country never completely faded. Often little things—a book or newspaper, some sweets or Irish marmalade—were all that was needed to remind them of the Ireland left behind. Retailers, sometimes fellow immigrants, soon became aware that there was a market for Irish products, and items such as Irish linens, woolens, or clothing of Irish style, were regularly advertised by New York firms. Department stores frequently advertised imported Irish goods.

On a smaller scale, grocery stores serving an Irish neighborhood sometimes carried incidental food products loved by immigrants. There was no need to advertise the availability of such items: word of mouth was sufficient in closely tied ethnic neighborhoods. This, however, didn't stop the advertising of special items like Irish-made furniture, Irish shoes, or religious goods by individual importers.

The Irish weeklies in New York often alerted readers to special offerings of Irish products. *The Gaelic American* advertised Irish willow chairs, made in Dublin, and sold by D. F. Higgins, 159th Street and Third Avenue in 1906.¹ In 1917 Irish dulse (dillisk), dried seaweed popular as a salty snack for many Irish, was offered by Quinlan's, 739 Eighth Avenue.² A more long-term product were shoes sold at John McHugh's Irish Shoe Store, 1659 Third

Avenue at 93rd Street. McHugh, an active member of the Gaelic League and Gaelic revivalist, imported from Ireland various styles of shoes his Irish-born customers were comfortable in. His shop was the only one in New York that featured an Irish-language trade sign over the door.³

But until the turn of the twentieth century, there was no such thing as a store where general Irish products could be purchased under one roof. Irish products were available from individual dealers



on a sporadic basis, but nobody seemed interested in gathering Irish products at a specific place and on a permanent basis.

Gaelic Revival

The Gaelic Revival in Ireland which flourished in Ireland after 1900 was not just a cultural movement, but also an effort to boost Irish exports abroad. In 1905 the Irish societies of the New York sponsored an Irish industrial exposition at Madison Square Garden. Thousands of visitors toured the exhibits of various Irish manufactures and foodstuffs. An opening parade on September 18 of the Irish Volunteers, an Irish-American independent militia company, began the opening ceremonies for the exposition that was to run until the following month. Both Mayor McClellan and Archbishop Farley were present and delivered addresses before the opening crowds of 5,000. McClellan pointed out that one of the purposes of the exposition was "to teach the younger

Illustration:

Manhattan's first all-Irish store opened in 1905 on West 23rd Street. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

John T. Ridge is the vice president for local history for the New York Irish History Roundtable. He is the author of several books and many articles on the Irish in the New York City area. He is a frequent speaker and regular contributor to New York Irish History. John Ridge's last publication was a profile of Father Donald Forrester, which appeared last year. ©2009. Published with permission of John T. Ridge.

Irishmen of the United States the capabilities, the possibilities, the necessities of the parent land." The president, Theodore Roosevelt, sent a letter of regret apologizing for his inability to



TOM ENNIS
LATE OF LARRY REILLY'S IRISH PLAYERS AND
"IRELAND A NATION"
NOW AT 15 COLUMBUS AVE.
Between 59th and 60th Sts.

With a complete stock of Phonographs, Records, Musical Instruments, Kodaks, etc. Accordeons, Chanters, Flutes, Harmonicas, Pianos, Player Rools, Reeds, Violins.

To Music Lovers who want real music and who want the very finest Phonograph made, a genuine Parlo and 24 selections of your own choosing, \$135 —\$5 Down, \$5 a month, or your own terms. Plays all records.

Exclusive selection of Irish Airs, Jigs, Reels, etc., on Victor, Parlo, Emerson and Columbia Records. Prices and mail postage solicited.

COME IN—Pleased to Demonstrate

TOM ENNIS
15 COLUMBUS AVE. Phone—Columbus 107

be present. He wrote in part:

*I greatly regret it is not in my power to be present at the Irish Industrial Exposition to be held at Madison Square Garden. Not only should I be interested in the display of industries of Ireland in the matter of laces, textiles, and other branches of industrial art, but I should be particularly pleased with the educational feature, which I am to understand, is to symbolize and interpret the "Irish Revival."*⁴

By December of 1905 an ad appeared for "The Irish Store" at 155 West 23 Street. The store proudly boasted it was "the only one in America" of its kind as it was unique in bringing a vast array of Irish products at one location. Many of the products from the exposition found their way here to be sold, so the shop was

not only in a sense a continuation of the exposition, but the beginning of the New York effort by the city's Irish to bolster industry in the old country. Although new Irish stores sometimes went through something of a metamorphosis, slowly the idea began to take root.

Some of the Irish stores that appeared in the World War I period were more record store than general Irish shop. Although eventually all the Irish stores sold records as well a general line of Irish goods, the music stores carried only a small stock of Irish food and manufactured products. Some were exclusively music stores and some of these mixed their predominantly Irish selections with offerings in other musical genres. In the 1920s Brady's Irish Record Store, 1323 Second Avenue near 70th Street and Tom Ennis' Music Store opposite St. Paul's Church near 59th Street were examples of the purely Irish music store. Ennis was himself a well-known musician who played several instruments including the uilleann pipes, his trademark. Flood's Music House, 953 Third Avenue near 57th Street, although carrying a large selection of Irish records and advertising regularly in the New York Irish weeklies, was also a music store for the general public offering a wide variety of music for all tastes.


THE IRISH INDUSTRIES DEPOT

In early 1915 a prominent Cork-born contractor, John D. Crimmins donated to the Gaelic League of Ireland a pretty little shop in which to set up a permanent depot of Irish art, crafts, literature and cottage industries. It featured an exhibition and sale of Celtic art and industries headed by Miss Nelly O'Brien, granddaughter of William Smith O'Brien. The new Irish store was located at 624 Madison Avenue near East 59th Street in the Emmet Arcade, a location named in honor of Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet, grandnephew of Robert Emmet. The shop was well placed in the central Manhattan where rooms had already been used for more than ten years for Gaelic Society meetings and lectures. The shop was called the Irish Industries Depot and featured Irish lace and crochet, linen, poplin neckties, embroidered items, homespuns, caps, gloves, books in Irish and English, pic-

Photograph:

Tom Ennis, a well-known piper, ran an Irish music store in 1919. This advertisement ran in the *Irish Advocate* during that year. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

The IRISH INDUSTRIES DEPOT, Inc.
 875 Lexington Ave. New York 21, N. Y.




THE CELTIC CROSS
 These crosses are designed from the old crosses preserving the interlacing and spiral patterns.

Reproductions
 2" High
 Silver..... \$ 6.50
 Gold..... 19.50

1 3/8" High
 Silver..... \$ 3.75
 Gold..... 12.50

(Add 20% Revenue Tax)
THE CLADDAGH RING
 (Claddagh—Seashore)

The Claddagh Ring is an ancient Irish design signifying Love and Friendship.



Sterling Silver.....\$4.50 and \$5.50
 Gold 10 kt.....From 14.50 to 17.50
 Gold 14 kt..... 24.50
 (Add 20% Revenue Tax)

Also—All the latest Books on Ireland—history, fiction, music, and all books by Irish Authors.
 Open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Phone: REgent 4-5549.

tures, hurleys and blackthorns, briar pipes, Celtic jewelry, bog oak, and Connemara marble for sale. It was very much in the spirit of the original Irish store on West 23rd Street.⁵

Initially, the Irish Industries Depot was run under the auspices of the Gaelic League. The shop's advertisements in the *Irish World* boasted that "If it is made in Ireland, you can get it here." The store was closely tied to the Irish

JOHN P. LYNCH,
 NEWSDEALER AND BOOKSELLER
 N. E. cor. 47th St. & 3d Ave., New York
 On Sale every week:

"Dublin Freeman" "Irish World"
 "Gaelic American" "Anglo-Celt"
 "Irish-American Advocate"
 "Cork Weekly Examiner"
 "Weekly Irish Times"
 All Foreign Newspapers to Order
 "Belfast Weekly News"
 New York "Irish Independent"
 BY MAIL POSTPAID FOR 8c IN STAMPS.

nationalist cause. J. L. Fawsitt of the Irish Industrial Development Board, who had been forced to leave Cork under the pressure of the British Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), delivered a speech in July, 1915 at the shop as another refugee in a long list of Irish political exiles. Although non-political the Gaelic League was one of many Irish organizations setting the political tone in the months preceding the Easter Rising.⁶

The Cross and Shamrock Store, founded by D. P. McOscar in 1917, was originally located at 771 Second Avenue near 41st Street. It differed from Irish Industries only in regard

to the religious goods sold. After ten years in this location it moved in 1928 to the northern edge of Yorkville to the ground floor of a tenement building at 1612 Third Avenue near 90th Street.⁷

The Irish Industries Depot eventually moved to 875 Lexington Avenue near East 65th Street. In its final years in the early 1970s, the shop presented a picture of slow decay. A portion of its stock of books was probably on the shelves for almost sixty years, and it took careful handling of many of the volumes to avoid instant decomposition. The depot filled an odd niche in the Irish retail community, balancing the sale of nostalgia with the faded ideals of the Gaelic Revival.

IRISH PAPERS
 NEWS FROM IRELAND!
 Subscriptions Accepted for the Following Irish Papers

<p>SIX CENTS A COPY</p> <p>6c a Copy 6c a Copy</p>	<p>SIX CENTS A COPY</p>
---	-------------------------

BY MAIL — 5 CENTS PER COPY
 \$1.00 for 12 Weeks—\$1.00 for 24 Weeks—\$1.00 a Year
 Subscriptions to The Irish World, Irish Echo and the Gaelic American Accepted at Office Rates—\$1.25 for six Months—\$1.50 a Year

USE ORDER FORM BELOW
 THE IRISH MUSIC HOUSE
JAMES O'BYRNE DE WITT, Inc.
 1260 3d Ave., Between 77th-78th Sts., New York

Customers: Please send me the
 for weeks. I enclose herewith \$.....

NAME
 ADDRESS
 CITY STATE

NEWSPAPERS FROM IRELAND

A mainstay of most of the Irish shops was the sale of newspapers from Ireland. But foreign newspapers, including ones from Ireland, were available in New York long before the first Irish shop made its appearance. The regularity of transatlantic crossings made newspapers from Ireland available for sale in New York about ten days or less after publication. While major publications from Dublin and Belfast were generally obtainable from a number of news agents specializing in overseas papers, weekly county papers were available by special order. A non-Irish distributor, the Schultz News Agency, sold every county paper at newsstands or delivered to any address in Manhattan as early as 1920, but two Irish news dealers offered at least some Irish papers

Illustration (top left): The Irish Industries Depot offered Irish-made products in 1945. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Illustration (right): Newspapers from all parts of Ireland were available at the O'Byrne Dewitt store in 1932. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Illustration (left): In 1910, some Irish newspapers were available directly from Manhattan news dealers. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



Photograph (above):
Mattie Haskins, the
Dublin tenor, in 1928.
Courtesy of John T.
Ridge.

Photograph (right)
Teresa McEntee Haskins
greatly improved her
neighborhood Irish store.
From a photo published
in 1932. Courtesy of
John T. Ridge.

a decade before this. In 1910 John P. Lynch, “Newsdealer and Bookseller” on East 47th Street and Third Avenue, sold weekly editions of the *Irish Times*, *Cork Examiner*, and *Belfast News*, but also at least one weekly county paper, *Cavan’s Anglo-Celt*. The Irish News Company in Duane Street supplied the “leading Irish weeklies” by 1911.⁸

The sale of Irish newspapers by the general Irish stores like the Irish Industries Depot, Mattie Haskins, and Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt (also called Irish Grafonola Shop and Irish Music House), was apparently not a feature until the late 1920s and early 1930s. At least it did not appear in their advertisements until that time. Gradually however, it was found that customers became regulars when they could purchase their local county paper. News from the old country also served as a conversation point with and between shop patrons, and in theory the longer customers lingered the more they purchased. Newspaper sales became good business for the Irish stores.

THE MATTIE HASKINS STORE

Mattie Haskins was a Dublin born popular tenor who regularly sang over old radio station WRNY from the Hotel Roosevelt. In an interview for *Ireland’s Own* magazine in 1928, he

claimed to have been the first Irish tenor to broadcast Irish songs over the radio. As a boy in Ireland he sang in churches in his home city and then with opera companies and soon graduated to his own concerts. After moving to America, he opened his first store in Brooklyn in 1923 opposite Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church on Fifth Avenue. In 1928 he opened another store at 1334 Third Avenue near East 76th Street, by which time he had recorded four records. He was the welcoming singer for Eamon DeValera when the Irish leader held a fund-raising event at the Mecca Temple on the Westside of Manhattan in 1928. He “had a grand obsession in the sale and distribution of everything Irish from high grade goods manufactured in Dublin, Cork, Drogheda, Dundalk and Balbriggan to cards, papers, books, toys and cheaper articles of Irish import. He had a direct connection with most Irish manufacturing



plants.” He met his wife Teresa McEntee while she was president of the Cavan Ladies Association of New York. In 1930, at age thirty, Mattie Haskins died of pneumonia contracted while swimming on a vacation in the Catskills.⁹

Teresa (Tessie) McEntee Haskins successfully continued both branches of the store. For a time the store slogan was an “Irish Store for Irish People.” In the 1930s she would travel every

summer to Ireland on a buying expedition and visit to Irish manufacturers. She arranged to have a large American car, like a Studebaker, shipped to Ireland before her arrival—which she used to get around the country and doubtless overawe the Irish population in then relatively traffic-free Ireland. The Mattie Haskins shop, unlike most others, managed to stay in the same location in Manhattan for more than sixty years, but the Brooklyn shop closed when the neighborhood changed ethnically.

THE SINN FEIN MUSIC & BOOK STORE

Mrs. Ellen O'Byrne DeWitt was the founder about 1916 of the Sinn Fein Music and Book Store (later E. Byrne DeWitt & Sons), 1398 Third Avenue at East 79th Street, which manufactured and distributed Irish records all over the world. She was prominent in support of the Irish Republican movement. She was born in Clontumper, County Leitrim and had been, according to her *New York Times* obituary, “an important influence on the development of real estate in Yorkville in recent years.” After several months of illness, she passed away in December, 1926. Her business was continued by her son, James O'Byrne DeWitt, but by the late 1940s the business shifted to a location in the Roxbury section of Boston. From Boston they continued to do business by mail order to the New York market.¹⁰

A LOOK AT IRISH STORES FROM THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT

An interesting look from the outside the Irish community at the Irish shops of New York occurred just before the outbreak of World War II in 1938, and was produced as part of the Federal Writers Project (a kind of Civilian Conservation Corps for intellectuals). In an article written by Alexander Kerr which has remained unpublished to this day, the writer made a number of visits to the Irish stores in Manhattan and reported these observations:

For Irish lace or linen, perhaps, the Irish Linen Shop, 655 Fifth Avenue is as good as any place in North America to visit. The same might be said of the Shamrock Music Store, 1334 Third Avenue, if music is wanted. These things are not

all the lines carried at the above stores, but are their specialties.

The assortment of Irish productions of all categories, to be obtained at the Irish Importers,



1375 Third Avenue, or the Irish Industries Depot, 780 Lexington Avenue, would fill a fair sized catalog. They cover athletic, musical, religious and ornamental articles, and things of common wear.

Unless the visitor hails from Ireland the black thorn sticks, bog oak ornaments, Beleek china and innumerable other Irish articles in these stores, will make up some of the most interesting things to be seen in New York.¹¹

MANHATTAN'S CHANGING ETHNICITY

The 1950s and 1960s brought an end to the large Irish neighborhoods that once were characteristic of Manhattan. Although a few Irish stores lingered on, it was the beginning of the inevitable end. In 1991 the *New York Times* recorded the death of the Mattie Haskins store on the upper east side:

For New Yorkers with brogues, the shop at 275 East 75th Street at Third Avenue for all its knick-knackery, Aran knit sweaters, Parian china, blood pudding, bangers and rashers—was a mecca. For others, there was a simple pleasure in shopping where they were known by name; some historians regard its closing, after sixty-eight years in the same locale, as another chip in New York's vanishing ethnic character.¹²

Illustration:
The Mattie Haskins' store in 1932 offered a wide variety of goods from Ireland. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

A new Mattie Haskins store, however, catering largely to commuters, opened for a time in a mall on Sixth Avenue in the garment district.

In 2001 the closing of the Tara Gift Shop on 207th Street in Inwood signaled the death of that one time stronghold of the Irish in northern Manhattan. The customers had just moved away in the 1980s and 1990s. The only ones left to purchase the Irish products were a diminishing number of Irish from the older generation. The *New York Times* described its appearance in somber terms:

*At Tara the shelves offer a sad assortment of things left over from another age: checkered Irish walking caps, Celtic crosses and green neckties bedecked with little Irish flags. One corner holds a selection of Irish snacks boasting of their blandness: Wheetabix, cream crackers, Irish tea.*¹³

Although Irish import stores today are more numerous across the country than ever, and are especially numerous in the suburbs around New York, their character is not quite the same as in the days of the old immigrant neighborhoods. Only in a few places like Pearl River in Rockland County, where Irish immigrants still abound, will you find such items as Irish newspapers for sale. While many other products on display are much the same as those found in the older shops, these import shops are decidedly more upscale if not trendy. Expensive items such as Aran sweaters and jewelry are what keep these stores in business – not boxes of Bird's Custard or copies of the *Kerryman*. Even the notion of what characterizes an Irish product has changed in Irish import stores. British or American manufactured products like Cadbury's Chocolates are more likely to be offered for sale than the Cadbury's version produced and exported from Ireland. Certainly, some of the more obscure Irish food products generally don't make it to the shelves of suburban Irish import stores.

Irish stores will long be with us in places far from the old Irish neighborhoods, but their wares will no longer be set by the demands of surrounding Irish immigrant communities, and some of old charm will unfortunately vanish. Still, there remains a personal amiability in

almost every Irish import shop that keeps at least a part of the legacy alive.

Notes

- 1 *Gaelic American*, February 24, 1906.
- 2 *Irish World*, February 8, 1917.
- 3 *Irish World*, March 17, 1917.
- 4 *New York Times*, September 19, 1905.
- 5 *Irish World*, May 15 and 26, 1915.
- 6 *Irish World*, July 3, 1915 and December 18, 1915.
- 7 *Irish World*, July 3, 1915 and December 18, 1915.
- 8 *Irish World*, June 3, 1911.
- 9 *Irish Advocate*, August 16, 1930.
- 10 *New York Times*, December 24, 1926, and *Irish World*, January 8, 1927.
- 11 Alexander Kerr, "An Irish Tour of New York," (unpublished) 1938, Federal Writers Project, New York.)
- 12 *New York Times*, February 11, 1991.
- 13 *New York Times*, May 6, 2001.