

WORLDS APART - THE GAELIC LEAGUE AND AMERICA, 1906-1914

ÚNA NÍ BHROIMÉIL

Tír na nDólar. This was the Gaelic League's perception of the United States when Douglas Hyde embarked on the League's first fund-raising mission in 1906. The League's finances were in poor shape and when an American lawyer and patron of the arts, John Quinn, offered to organise the rubrics of the tour, Hyde agreed to go.¹ And there was every reason to regard the United States in this light. The concept of a mission was not a new one. Parnell had travelled the United States collecting funds as had Michael Davitt and, as recently as 1903, W.B. Yeats.² Famous personages were not the only ones embarking on missions. According to Quinn in 1905, Douglas Hyde would be competing with "a travelling Irish band, a travelling Irish Ladie's choir, a priest collecting for the Irish national church at Spiddal and another priest collecting for the O'Connell Memorial Church."³

But for those already settled in America, the Gaelic League and the revival of the Irish language meant something other than providing funds for the home organisation. Irish classes and Gaelic societies had been a feature of American immigrant life since 1872. A Gaelic class had been founded by Michael J. Logan in Brooklyn that year.⁴ The first society in the United States, the Philo-Celtic

Society of Boston, was founded in April 1873 and was closely followed by the Brooklyn Philo-Celtic Society and others throughout the 1870s and 1880s. The teaching and speaking of the Irish language was an integral part of the work of these societies as were dances, picnics, balls and recitals. Though the numbers attending the society's meetings fluctuated, the average membership of each society was between 60-100 dues-paying members. Joining a Gaelic society provided an opportunity to learn the language and to use it in the company of like-minded others. According to many members the possession of an ancient and civilised tongue would raise the status of the Irish in their own eyes and in those of other immigrants.⁵ By 1884 it was claimed that there were over fifty "Irish schools" or societies in the United States.⁶ Logan also published a bi-lingual journal, *An Gaodhal*, which provided material for classes, songs, stories and enthusiastic exhortations from Logan to get organised and restore the language as the primary route to patriotism. "Celtic Departments" were published in five other newspapers in 1888.⁷ By the time the Gaelic League was founded in Ireland in 1893, there was already an admittedly small, scattered and disunited group of societies focused on the same goal in the United States.

The foundation of the Gaelic League in Dublin initially gave new impetus to the societies in America and *An Gaodhal* published lists of known language enthusiasts who could set up branches in their towns. If the language could be spoken in the United States according to Logan, it would "put the shoneens to shame" in Ireland. But as early as 1895, *An Gaodhal* published an appeal from the Gaelic League in Ireland to "the various and disconnected Irish language societies outside of Ireland". It asked for two types of assistance: to form a link with each other and with the Gaelic League to ensure strong and combined action, and to consider the best means of providing funds to sustain the movement in Ireland.⁸

From the beginning the Gaelic League intended to tap the resources available to the Gaelic societies in America. Appealing always to the "patriotism and generosity of the Irish race in America" for support, the Gaelic League regarded American money as vital to the language movement in Ireland. A decision by

the Knights of Columbus to donate money for a chair of American history at the Catholic University of America in Washington stunned and angered *An Claidheamh Soluis*. The writer grudged the money believing that American history was not in danger whereas the Irish language was.⁹

Yet when the *Irish World* organised an Irish language fund drive in 1899 to support the Gaelic League financially, John Devoy noted that the Irish language societies in the United States were not to the forefront of the fund-raising campaign. Subscriptions were acknowledged from private individuals, county associations, branches of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, but no concerted effort from the Gaelic societies.¹⁰

This same trend was clear during Hyde's mission to the United States 1905-6. All Gaelic societies perceived the visit as a recognition of their work in the States and looked forward to the mission with great anticipation. In the six months prior to the arrival of Douglas Hyde in America, the Gaelic societies in the State of New York reported an increase in membership of about 30% and the foundation of several new branches.¹¹ Hyde's stated aim was to explain the ideals and achievements of the Gaelic League to Irish America and to appeal to them for money to support and continue the League's work in de-anglicising Ireland. But John Quinn, the instigator and organiser of the mission, made sharp distinctions between missionary work, or morale raising, and the practical work of collecting as much money as possible for the Gaelic League.¹² Although *An Claidheamh Soluis* maintained that the reason for the trip was "to forge a bond with the Irish all over the world as one race and one group so that they may stand forever together,"¹³ Quinn measured the success of Hyde's mission in terms of dollars rather than in terms of hurrah and applause.

This led to misunderstandings and conflict during the course of the mission. John Quinn was not, and had never been, a member of a Gaelic society. His aim from the beginning was to secure as much money for Hyde's cause as possible and, to this end, wealthy people had to be wooed. The Gaelic societies were not patronised by the very wealthy¹⁴ and when they saw their president hijacked

by others who had never before deigned to put in an appearance at a picnic, ball or meeting they were understandably aggrieved. In New York, Hyde was visited by seven men who complained that the “proper” people were not in charge of the welcome and that the “tuxedo” crowd had never done anything positive for Ireland.¹⁵ Martin P. Ward, in Oakland, California, complained to Hyde that:

sir, your greatest enoyance on this coast is from an army of Bores who until you came had no more love or respect for the Irish language than the balled-na-m-borroge jack-asses has. And as soon as you lave (sic) it will be the same old tale.¹⁶

For his part, Quinn dismissed the Gaelic societies contemptuously stating again and again in letters to Hyde that “they, as you know, don’t give money”. A personal antagonism between Quinn and Hyde’s advance agent, Tomás Bán Ó Coicheanainn, centred on the work that the latter was doing with the Gaelic societies and local organising committees. Quinn maintained that Ó Coincheanainn was wasting time and rolling up expenses talking and setting up committees rather than starting fundraising. He was therefore “only fit to work among the Gaelic Societies and money doesn’t come from them.”¹⁷

The main business of the mission was collecting money in Quinn’s view. Lest Hyde be swayed by rapturous but cash-less welcomes, he kept reminding Hyde of business:

Cross (Hartford) also says that you ‘have captured all their hearts’. To hell with their hearts say I, unless they open their pocketbooks and contribute. Cross’ letter is full of what we here call “hot air” that is “fulsome gush”.¹⁸

And Hyde essentially agreed:

I had not come to the States to promote Irish and Irishness alone but to collect money also. As I needed money, I had to go to those who had money to give. This was not clearly understood by all my friends.¹⁹

Hyde himself measured the success of his tour in dollars. After expenses were deducted, \$50,000 [£10,056] was the amount returned to Dublin to further the work of the Gaelic League with a stipulation that no more than £2,000 was to be spent in any given year.²⁰ It was a successful tour on many levels. It gave the Gaelic League recognition at home and abroad and it swelled the empty treasury of the League. But it also allowed the League in Dublin to believe that America would come to their aid for the asking, and that the Gaelic societies in the United States were engaged in the same struggle as themselves. Hadn't the League's president been received with rapturous welcomes wherever he went ?

Although subscriptions continued to come from America after 1906, they were irregular and inconsistent. The various societies of the New England Gaelic League decided in 1906 to devote the first week in February every year to the raising of funds for the Gaelic League in Ireland. But in 1908, the secretary, Pádraig Ó hÉigearta, reported that out of thirteen branches in New England he had only received contributions from three branches.²¹ Despite an appeal for funds "to help the good work in the old land" by the Gaelic League of the State of New York and signed by notable New York figures such as Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet and Daniel F. Cohalan, the public was unresponsive. *Resolutions* of support were passed by the Gaelic societies regarding the League's campaign for Irish in the University, but little money was forthcoming.²²

According to the *Gaelic American* in 1910, this falling off in subscriptions could be remedied by sending envoys to the United States to organise the country on behalf of the League and to convey personally the need in Ireland for financial assistance.²³ Ultimately, this is what the Gaelic League decided to do in 1911. But it was not organisation alone which was lacking. Had the Americans received anything other than a warm glow for all their subscriptions in the past? Letters to Hyde from various sources suggested practical ways of maintaining American interest in the Gaelic League:

The American is always on the lookout for a quid pro quo . . . a certificate of membership, illuminated in the Irish style and suitable for framing . . . I should think that roughly speaking the

cost of premium and postage need not be more than \$1.50 per membership, which would leave \$3.50 of the \$5.00 contribution net. for the Gaelic league, and I am sure that it would not be difficult to have this special American fund yield \$10,000 per annum.²⁴

Other proposals included a "Roll of Honour" to be kept in a proper place in Dublin so that when Ireland would be free the names of these patriotic donors would be inscribed in Ireland's "National Temple of Honour."²⁵ Altogether the suggestions were a clear indication that the Irish-Americans wanted a visible and demonstrable recognition of their contributions. The knowledge that good work was being done in Ireland was not enough to ensure the flow of contributions from the United States.

This was reiterated by the envoys sent to the United States on the second Gaelic League mission 1910-12. Fionán Mac Coluim and Fr. Micheál Ó Flannagáin, veterans of the Gaelic League were not Douglas Hyde. Their brief was to demonstrate to Americans the type of work the Gaelic League was doing at grass roots level to Gaelicise Ireland, and the ultimate aim was to get financial assistance for this project from the American Irish. To this end, they travelled the length and breadth of the United States giving lectures, organising feiseanna and displaying an "Industrial Exhibition" of lace-making, carpet weaving and embossed leather work. This time the Gaelic societies were in charge of proceedings. John Quinn pledged \$250 and lent his name to an appeal for funds but was not actively involved in the mission. The envoys were well received with good attendances (1,000-3,000) recorded at public meetings.²⁶ But the proceeds were poor. When all expenses had been deducted \$15,000 (£3,000) was collected in eighteen months.²⁷

The envoys themselves were acutely aware of the paltry sum accumulated by them after all the hard work and diverse efforts that they had made while on the mission. Before he left the United States Fr. Ó Flannagáin rounded on the rich Irishmen and millionaires living there, accusing them of being token Irishmen who wore green waistcoats on St. Patrick's Day but who "spend their thousands in collecting wild birds' eggs in the South Sea

Islands or bugs in Madagascar.”²⁸ But they were not the ones to blame. Controversy over Synge’s ‘Playboy of the Western World’ had threatened the League’s primary sources of support in the Gaelic societies, and when Hyde dissociated the League from the play it ultimately cost them the support of John Quinn and in his opinion, that of “many cultivated people in this town”.²⁹ Other Irish issues intruded on the message of the Gaelic League, especially the issue of Home Rule.³⁰

The Gaelic League was only one of a number of movements with a claim on Irish-American time and money. To stake this claim the League had to maintain a constant presence in the United States. If not, other movements would gain precedence. If the Gaelic League did not maintain a presence in the United States, appeals for funds would be useless. This was the most important message the envoys believed had to be communicated to the Gaelic League in Ireland.

If funds were to be forthcoming the American Irish had to be treated properly. Yet when Mac Coluim returned to the United States in 1913 he found that subscriptions received in Dublin were not even acknowledged by the Gaelic League. In a scathing letter to the League’s executive committee in 1914, he castigated the members for failing to recognise the efforts of the Irish Americans. The names and addresses of all American subscribers had been sent to the Gaelic League by the envoys since 1911 with requests that letters of thanks, as well as newspapers or pamphlets containing articles on current affairs in Ireland, be sent to them to keep them in touch. While Douglas Hyde had done a good deal by writing personal letters of thanks to subscribers, the Gaelic League had not instigated any “keeping in touch process”:

The keeping in touch process however [has] not been properly carried out. Many subscribers whom I met on my second trip complained that they had never received anything . . . The weak point is that nobody seems responsible here [Ireland]: nobody seems to care whether [they] get recognition or not once their contributions are received. Apart from other considerations, this is bad financial policy.³¹

Again Mac Coluim reiterated the proposals suggested to Hyde on

his return in 1906.

There are thousands of too busy or too lazy, well-to-do, fairly patriotic Irishmen, “good fellows” who would never study Irish or attend meetings or do any organising work but who would subscribe if approached provided they feel we can give them some distinction and adequate recognition of their subscriptions, supply them with periodical reports as to what we do with their money and give them some quid pro quo in the line of journals and literature as free gifts. They would consider it a good ad to have their names appear on a distinguished list, international in scope, tastefully brought out each year.³²

Recognition was important to the subscribers. And they were not getting any from the Gaelic League. If they subscribed to the building of a church in Ireland (or in America) they had practical proof that their money was put to use and a plaque was usually erected to the subscribers in the building. Their financial assistance was acknowledged in a public manner, they were seen to be “involved” with the old country without having to make a huge amount of effort. How was Mac Coluim or any other envoy supposed to convince the American Irish of the worthwhile cause of the Gaelic League when the League in Dublin accorded so little recognition to the subscribers?

But the gulf between the Gaelic League in Ireland and the movement in the United States was a wider one than that of recognition alone. On the third and final Gaelic League mission to America 1913-14, one of the envoys, Tomás Ashe described the gulf that he perceived to exist between the two groups who were ostensibly at one as regards culture:

I often sing the songs I know over here and I must admit the Irish Americans enjoy them as well. But it is only in Ireland that there is a proper understanding of them . . . I shudder when I know that the next song that will follow will be “How did Rip Van Winkle’s Mother Pay the Rent” or some other such inane tango.³³

Certainly Ashe was extremely homesick in America and this may have contributed to his disillusionment. But although other reports

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of rousing concerts and entertainments were sent to Dublin by the envoys, the only reports on the American mission recorded in the minutes of the executive committee were those regarding money. When the envoys were recalled to Ireland upon the outbreak of World War I, the sum of \$4,500 was sent to the Gaelic League by the Treasurer for the Gaelic League Fund in America, Judge Keogh. Most of this money had been collected through a card system instigated by the second envoy, Diarmuid Lynch in contributions of \$5-\$25. According to the president of the Gaelic League, State of New York, very little of this money would have been realised had it not been for Diarmuid Lynch's previous connections with the Gaelic League when he lived in America:

If it were not for Mr. Lynch's personality, and his original connection with the work of the Gaelic League here, the recent mission of the representatives would have been an absolute failure, because, as you are well aware, the evident apathy of the Gaelic League at home, coupled with its unwise and persistent policy of sending delegates to America year after year, has had the effect of lowering the League's prestige, and of alienating a large part of its support.³⁴

The Gaelic societies were not the only ones weary of Gaelic League entreaties. John Quinn wrote to Judge Keogh in a rage in 1915 having been approached once again for support:

Damn Damn Damn the Gaelic Leaguers,
Damn the Parliamentarians too.
Damn Damn Damn the Clan na Gaelers
Damn all the Irish missions through and through.³⁵

The Irish-Americans' nostalgia for their lost Gaelic heritage made them one with their Irish counterparts at the turn of the century. But the empathy didn't last. In the eyes of the Gaelic League in Ireland the language movement at home and abroad had the same mission and the same agenda - the revival of the Irish language in Ireland. The League therefore expected the Gaelic societies to function as fund-raisers abroad and to finance the campaigns of the

League “at home”. But the American Gaelic societies provided a forum for the expression of ethnic pride and cultural conviction within the confines of the United States. The recognition by the Gaelic League in Ireland of a language movement in the United States gave that movement a role and status. The Irish language was recognised in the United States as an authentic cultural symbol, and it became a common “plank” in the programmes of nationalist organisations. The Gaelic societies did subscribe to the Gaelic League. But as societies, they concentrated on the needs of their members, whether that was a desire to learn the language of Ireland, the history of Ireland, to sing Moore’s melodies or to dance the rince fada. The fact that they were affiliated to the Gaelic League in Ireland gave an added impetus to their own endeavours. It did not necessarily mean, however, that their focus was solely on Ireland and on the problems besetting the League there. And if the Gaelic League realised this on their missions to America, they chose to ignore it.

The attention of the Gaelic League in Ireland was firmly centred on Ireland and on how to define itself as a movement in the midst of constant political upheavals and wars between 1916 and 1923. The American Irish were also taken up with politics. Although on a mission to collect funds for the Gaelic League in 1914, Tomás Ashe and Diarmuid Lynch also brought home with them the first instalments of the \$50,000 which Clan na Gael had collected for the Irish Volunteers.³⁶ Although there were numerous missions to America throughout this period, most notably that of Éamon De Valera in 1920, the missions of the Gaelic League were no more.

NOTES

¹ Janet E. Dunleavy and Gareth W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde-A Maker of Modern Ireland*, Berkeley, 1991, p. 244.

² F.S.L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, London, 1977, pp. 106-15; T.W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution 1846-82*, Oxford, 1981; Norman A. Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats--A New Biography*, London, 1988, ch. 8.

- ³ B.L. Reid, *The Man from New York: John Quinn and his Friends*, New York, 1968, p. 41.
- ⁴ Fionnuala Uí Fhlannagáin, *Micheál Ó Lócháin agus An Gaoth*, Baile Átha Cliath, 1990, p. 22.
- ⁵ *An Gaoth*, May, 1882.
- ⁶ *Irish World*, April 12, 1884.
- ⁷ *An Gaoth*, April 1898.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, April, 1895.
- ⁹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, April 5, 1899.
- ¹⁰ *The Gaelic American*, October 24, 1903; December 19, 1903.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1905; September 16, 1905.
- ¹² John Quinn to Douglas Hyde, October 27, 1905, Ms. 17,299, National Library of Ireland. [N.L.I.]
- ¹³ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, October 21, 1905.
- ¹⁴ Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, “An Ghaeilge i Meiriceá” in Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin, (eag.), *Go Meiriceá Siar: Na Gaeil agus Meiriceá: Cnuasach Aistí*, An Clóchomhar, 1979, p. 27.
- ¹⁵ An Craoibhín Aoibhinn, *Mo Thuras go hAmerice*, Baile Átha Cliath, 1937, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Martin P. Ward to Douglas Hyde, February 15, 1906, Ms. 18, 253, N.L.I.
- ¹⁷ John Quinn to Douglas Hyde, March 30, 1906, Ms. 17,299, N.L.I.; February 11, 1906, Ms. 24,992, N.L.I.
- ¹⁸ John Quinn to Douglas Hyde, December 6, 1905, Ms. 17,299, N.L.I.
- ¹⁹ An Craoibhín Aoibhinn, *Mo Thuras*, p. 6.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*; *An Claidheamh Soluis*, June 30, 1906.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1908.
- ²² *Ibid.*, February 12, 1910.
- ²³ *The Gaelic American*, May 14, 1910.
- ²⁴ Joseph Dunn to Douglas Hyde, undated but post 1906, Ms. 18,253, N.L.I.
- ²⁵ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, January 25, 1908.
- ²⁶ *The Gaelic American*, January and February 1911.
- ²⁷ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, August 17, 1912.
- ²⁸ Minute Book of the Executive Committee of the Gaelic League, 1912-1917, Ms. 9,770, N.L.I.
- ²⁹ Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, p. 322.
- ³⁰ Fr. Ó Flannagáin to the Gaelic League, published in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, November 18, 1911.
- ³¹ Fionán Mac Coluim to the Executive Committee of the Gaelic League, February 11, 1914, Ms. 9,770, N.L.I.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ An tAthair Seosamh Ó Muirthile, *Tréithe Thomáis Ághas*, Baile Átha Claith, 1967, p. 21.
- ³⁴ P. Kavanagh, President, Gaelic League, State of New York to Judge Keogh, December 14, 1914, published in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, January 9, 1915.

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³⁵ Reid, *The Man from New York: John Quinn*, p. 212.

³⁶ John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel - a Personal Narrative*, New York, 1929, p. 393.